



SCARRED HEARTS

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Chapter One

Lorena, KY 1919

“Git yer tail out there, gal. Go on. Customers waitin’.” Ray Shatner’s whine pierced Lettie’s ears more than usual tonight. Lately, two words out of the man’s mouth made her grow a headache. But he was her boss, so she did as she was told, skedaddled into the main room of the tavern to plunk down food and beer in front of paying customers.

Lettie stiffened her spine and toughened her skin, ready to ignore the usual looks and teasing and grabbing. But nobody paid any attention to her as she moved from table to table. The tavern was too busy tonight, filled with rollicking folk eager to waste a week’s wages all in a night.

Shatner’s Shack was one large room full of rough-hewn wood tables and chairs. There was a small space for dancing when there was a fiddler handy, but most folks came here just to drink long and deep. In summer, the windows and door stood wide open to let in a bit of breeze and a lot of bugs. In winter, the place was boarded up tighter than Shatner’s wallet, keeping out little cold but most of the snow. Lettie reckoned she’d be trapped in these same four walls for the rest of her natural-born life. She had no place better to go.

This was supposed to be a dry county, but Shatner had a special license to sell his home brew. As for the illegal whisky that flowed here, the Robeson family controlled local moonshine manufacturing and paid the sheriff to look the other way. Federal agents hadn’t come sniffing around Shatner’s Shack—yet.

The roar of drunken men jabbering and the shrill laughter of their floozies grew louder as the night wore on. Lettie was at the tap, drawing more beer, when the clamor swelled into shouts of greeting. She glanced up to see the Robeson brothers troop in, stomping mud off their big boots and shaking rain out of their hair like a pack of mangy dogs. They all had the same shock of coal-dark hair and sharp-hewn features, and a similar rangy build, but there the resemblance ended.

First up was Cutter Robeson, the eldest and his daddy’s right hand. He wasn’t quite as tall as his brothers, and his shifty eyes reminded Lettie of a weasel, but he was clearly in charge. The others took their orders from him. Folks said if somebody crossed

the Robesons, Cutter would show the reason for his nickname, carving a cross and scythe into his enemy's flesh.

Second came Tommy, the joker. Back in school—when the Robesons had bothered to go—he'd been a hilarious prankster, tying the teacher to his chair and setting his desk on fire, or putting two cats in a burlap sack and taking bets on which would fight free first. Lettie thought red-faced, bull-necked Tommy might be the scariest Robeson of all.

The biggest, brawniest of the brothers, Pernell Robeson was as dim as a lamp running out of kerosene. Story was his daddy had got piss drunk and threw him down the stairs when he was a kid, knocking him out for a few days. When he woke, he'd lost his wits. Pernell was harmless enough—less'n one of his brothers sicced him on somebody, then he'd keep beating until they called him off.

Handsome Clay was smarter than most of his brothers. With little schooling and no degree, he'd read and learned enough to handle the family's legal troubles. He dealt with local law enforcement and any others who needed persuading to stay out of the Robesons' business. Bribes and payoffs backed by violence were his currency.

Last of all came Shadow Robeson, who'd been a quiet boy even before he went to war. He'd returned from the trenches mute and out of his mind, or so people said. In Lettie's opinion, Shadow seemed more normal than any of his crazy kin. He wore an eye patch since returning home, but his remaining eye looked around calm and steady, as if noticing details his brothers would never see. Lettie liked his silence, which seemed pretty peaceful compared to most of the men she'd been around in her life.

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?

Chapter Two

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.”

Chapter Three

Lettie stood in front of the woodstove that smoked from the joints in its chimney, and stirred the pan of grits with slow, thoughtful swirls. She was too stirred up herself to feel much like eating, but she would anyway. Couldn't risk fainting off her feet at work later.

The morning song of the mockingbird in the big pine tree outside her window filled the one-room shanty. Kind of like having a noisy old aunt come to breakfast. Not that Lettie knew what it was like to *have* an aunt drop by. There'd always been just her and Mama here in the shack after Grandpap died, till her mama died four years back.

"Okay, Old Rooster. You can shut your piehole. I'm up," Lettie hollered back at the noisy bird.

A moment's silence before the mockingbird started up its loud call again. Lettie rolled her eyes and concentrated on keeping the grits from sticking to the bottom of the pan. Then she thought about last night. Again.

Stupid girl to be playing those few minutes of talk with Shadow Robeson over and over in her mind. As if it meant something that he'd chosen to talk to *her* of all people. As if they'd become friends there in the dark with the fireflies flashing all around. As if one of those rich Robeson boys would want anything more than sex from Lettie Calloway. Last time she'd got this het up over a man, look where it had landed her.

Herbert Whitlow, that sweet-talking, good-looking, clean-smelling, suit-wearing storekeeper, had sunlight-blinded her. Fooled a little girl six ways to Sunday with his pretty gifts, soft lips, and stroking hands that made her feel like a queen. Lettie hadn't seen the trap till she stepped on the spring and it snapped on her foot. Any man she'd been with after that, she'd had her eyes wide open, knowing what they expected, what she was getting out of it, and not fooling herself it was more than feeling good for a bit. And *never* taking money or gifts, unlike her mama. That was the line she would not cross.

But all those things she'd done were in the past now. She'd stopped dallying with boys when she realized those few minutes of feeling good weren't worth the whole lot of feeling bad that came later. Besides, she'd had a close call when she missed her monthly

and thought her world was gonna come crashing down on her worse than usual. No more taking risks after that.

So she lived alone in the little shack she used to share with Mama. It might look like a stack of dog shit to most people, but the place was hers, and she was working hard to pay for a new roof. The Calloway land underneath her feet was hers too, for as long as she was able to pay the taxes. Owning the land reminded her that her family used to be more than a dirty joke around these parts. Her great-great-grandpap had settled and farmed it as best he could, and was buried out back alongside all Lettie's other kin. She was the end of the line and likely to remain that way. A crazy old spinster lady who people would always think of as a whore no matter how righteous she lived the rest of her life.

"Feelin' sorry for yourself, Miss Lettie? Stop yer wallowing!" She spooned a helping of grits into the dented tin bowl, added a drizzle of molasses, and carried it outside, where she sat on the front porch to eat.

The sun had broken the horizon at last, peeking over the high ridge and sending fingers of light down into Bullfrog Hollow. The valley between the looming hills spent a lot of the day in darkness. Some folks got melancholy in the shadow of the great hills, but Lettie felt safe and protected in the quiet green shade of her little valley.

Shade... Shadows. Shadow Robeson. Her mind completed the link that led her right back to daydreaming about a man she hardly knew. But truth was, she'd noticed the youngest Robeson long before last night. Years ago, whenever she spotted Shadow at one of the stores in town or in the tavern or walking the hills, Lettie hadn't been able to look away from the blue-eyed man whose quiet manner made him shine against the barnyard noise of his brothers. She'd always thought *there's a boy who thinks about things, not just everyday things, but deep things*. And she'd wished she could listen in on whatever went on in his mind.

Likely nothing more than *wonder if it's going to rain today*.

Lettie laughed at herself for imagining quiet meant special, and forced herself to start in on her bowl of grits. Yes, Shadow was fine looking with his straight back and wide shoulders, lean body and long legs, and that fine-as-spider's-silk dark hair that fell over his forehead. She admired the deep blue of his eyes—whether one or two—and the

full lips that looked made for kissing. But none of that added up to him being a nice man, a good man, or anything but a Robeson. One kind act of him sticking out his boot and tripping Tommy didn't make him Lettie's savior. Maybe he just hated his brother as much as most everybody else did.

Chuckling again, she scraped up the rest of her grits and went in to tidy her house. With hours to spend before she had to be at Shatner's, Lettie decided to hike up the hill to visit Widow Barrow. The old woman seemed weaker and more feeble every time Lettie saw her, so Lettie didn't like to let too many days pass without checking in on her friend. She packed a basket with a few of yesterday's biscuits and her last jar of persimmon preserves and started up the narrow track that wound around the hill before passing Agnes Barrow's place.

Lettie breathed deep draughts of the warm air, which would be sweltering hot by noon. Her muscles stretched like strong rope in her legs. She ran a little way just for the joy of the breath pumping in her chest and sang as she jogged along. A swift, hard climb left her short of breath and sweating by the time she knocked on Agnes's door.

"Come on in!" The old lady might be weak, but she could still bellow. And when Lettie opened the door, she added, "Well, hurry up afore the flies get in."

Lettie quickly shut the cabin door behind her. "Brought you biscuits and jam. Hope you're hungry."

Agnes sat in her rocking chair, which was worn to sagging, pretty much like the old woman. Lettie could see the remains of the big-boned, strong lady Agnes had once been when she'd run a busy household with a husband and a half-dozen children. But both husband and children were gone now, all dead and buried, some of the children as infants and others from the same influenza epidemic that had claimed Lettie's mother. Agnes was like the nub of a burned-down candle. She picked apart one of Lettie's biscuits, slathered it in jam, leaving crumbs on the plate and sticky preserves on her fingers. Lettie carefully wiped Agnes's hand clean while talking about people the woman knew.

Agnes irritably pulled away. "I don't know who the hell you're talking about. Tell me something else."

Lettie tried to find a soothing topic. “Well, the water’s high from the rain we been having. Springs are pouring down the rock and the creeks are foaming. I saw a pretty bird on the way here. Nothing like I ever seen before. It was red and yellow with a big beak. What do you suppose it was?”

She rambled on about beehives and bird nests, the mink she’d seen fishing in the fast water, and the fox that lived behind her woodpile—anything she could think of to interest the old lady who loved nature. She coaxed Agnes out of her bad mood, and by the time Lettie left, the cobwebs seemed cleared some from the old woman’s mind. But Lettie feared things would only grow worse and she missed the woman who’d given her comfort and advice when she needed it.

Less cheerful than she’d been on her way up the mountain, Lettie still whistled and sang her way back down. It was a fine, sunny day. No call for letting herself get blue. She launched into a jaunty tune, “My Johnny,” as she headed for home.

*“Now Johnny is a bonny lad, he is a lad of mine,
I’ve never had a better lad, and I’ve had twenty-nine.
And with you, and with you, and with you, my Johnny lad,
I’ll dance the buckles off my shoes with you, my Johnny lad.”*

She shouted louder every chorus, throwing her head back and letting out all the feelings she had to keep close as she went about her work, serving people and keeping her head down. By the time she reached the switchback bend just before the final steep descent into Bullfrog Hollow, Lettie was shouting the words and jigging down the path.

She danced around a big boulder and choked on the song in her throat. If it was possible for her face to burn up from the heat in her cheeks, that was probably happening, because Shadow Robeson stood on the path in front of her.

Her clomping feet stopped dead, and she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping he’d be gone when she opened them again. But, no, he stood right in front of her, smiling.

Smiling.

Smiling with a mouth that looked sweet enough to draw bees, his dark-stubbed cheeks lifting and little creases blooming on either side of those lush lips and at the corner of his good eye, which sparkled as blue as Coon Lake in the sunlight. Teeth so

white they nearly blinded her. If she could make him smile like that, she'd keep right on a'singing no matter how embarrassing it was.

Chugging down the steep path, Lettie had been breathing heavily, but now she lost her breath completely. What on earth was Shadow Robeson doing on *her* hillside? He could hardly walk, and this was a steep hike and... Good Lord, could he possibly be here because of *her*? No. Foolish thought. She shoved it out and slammed the door behind it.

He silently lifted his hand in greeting.

She did the same, though they were only a few feet apart. "Sorry I skewered your ears with my caterwauling. People who can't sing, shouldn't, my mama used to say."

His beautiful smile only grew wider. "You sing fine."

She shivered at the sound of his unexpected voice, deep and low and like the rub of cool moss against her skin. She thought she could listen to that voice jaw at her for hours if he'd a mind to.

"What are you doing out thisaway?" Lettie asked straight up. "Long way from home."

He shrugged. When he didn't say anything else, Lettie supposed that was all the answer she was going to get.

Chapter Four

Shadow knew he should be getting up to the still. That was the job Daddy had assigned him since he got back from the war. Kept him out of sight and put him to good use doing something uncomplicated and quiet. Cutter and Clay handled distribution, lining up new customers both locally and, recently, in Frankfort. Tommy and Pernell made deliveries and dealt with anybody who stood in the family's way. Shadow was the natural choice for running the still itself. He mixed the corn mash, monitored the fermentation and the temperature to keep from blowing the whole shebang sky high.

In fact, the only member of the family who didn't do much was Daddy. Without Mama to fight with, the man was lost. Since she'd died, he spent most days on the front porch drinking until he passed out. He still gave some orders, but his interest in the family business seemed halfhearted. Cutter and Clay were the driving force behind it now.

Shadow spent most of his days and some nights in the old shed where the distillery was housed. The work wasn't hard, and in between busy spells, there was plenty of time for the rest his body so badly needed right now. As he faced Lettie Calloway on the mountain path, he hoped she didn't notice the stench of sour mash probably wafting from his clothes.

She seemed embarrassed at being caught singing at the top of her lungs. Her face was bright red, as cute as a round, ripe tomato. He wanted to take a bite of her. The thought popped up, as surprising as the erection growing in his pants. He hadn't thought of sex in so long, he'd doubted his cock still knew how to react to a pretty girl. But his body's automatic response was nothing compared to the startling feeling of pure delight swelling in him at Lettie's sheer happiness. He'd forgotten what such joy felt like. Maybe he'd never known. It was this bubbling, fizzy feeling percolating inside him that made him smile like a fool as he gazed at her tomato-red face.

For a few moments, they both stood silent. Birds called in the trees, their twittering louder than the breeze rustling the leaves. All of a sudden, hundreds of wings beat together, and the flock lifted from the branches. Shadow and Lettie looked up, shielding their eyes against the sun to watch the huge flight of sparrows.

“Always amazes me how they all know at once it’s time to fly,” Lettie said. “I suppose the leader tells them, like in the army.”

Move out! Push ’em back. Go! Pressed into the mud at the bottom of the trench, Shadow had wanted to sink into the earth and stay there unnoticed, but Sgt. Ryker’s voice and the yells of other soldiers had spurred him over the top to charge across a field around barricades of barbed wire.

“Wish I could fly. Imagine how the world would look from up there, all the things you could see.” Lettie resumed walking down the path, and Shadow fell in beside her, accepting her unspoken invitation to walk her home. He didn’t even try to pretend there was some other business he had to get to.

“About halfway up the hill, there’s a meadow that goes right up to a sheer drop. When I was little, I used to charge across the grass, arms open, flying along right up to the edge. I’d stop at the last second and dig in my heels so pebbles went bouncing down into the ravine.” She shook her head at her childish foolishness. “Sometimes I felt like I could jump and I’d keep on flying. Almost worked myself up into believing it. ’Cause flying—even if it ended up in falling—had to be better than going back to my house.”

Shadow nodded. Growing up, he’d camped out in the woods a lot to avoid his home. The eerie sounds of a forest at night weren’t nearly as frightening as the yelling and hitting that went on there. He’d as soon have faced a mountain lion or black bear as his father when he’d tied one on.

“It don’t seem like livin’ with family should be so hard, does it?” Lettie glanced over at him, and the way her thick lashes fringed her eyes was about the prettiest thing he’d ever seen. “I ain’t had nobody to talk to this way except my friend Agnes Barrow. But now she’s gone clean out of her mind, poor old thing.” She smiled at him, and his heart stuttered. “You’re easy to talk to.”

After walking a few more yards in silence, she gestured behind them. “I just been up to visit Agnes. She’s all alone and needs somebody to check on her regular. Her family should take her down to live with them, but those Hutchersons...” She shook her head. “I don’t know if they will. Not sure what I should do about that.”

Neither was Shadow, so he didn’t say anything. The Hutchersons would be prickly if they thought Lettie was telling them their business where family was

concerned. People didn't welcome advice about personal business. Grudges and feuds had been started on less than that.

Lettie suddenly flung out her arm right in front of him, and Shadow almost ran into it. "See that dead tree over there?"

He stopped to look at the stark white tree, huge and full of holes with bees buzzing in and out. "Best honey around, if you can smoke out the bees long enough to steal a few combs. I got some back at the house, if you want to have a taste."

Her offer hung in the air between them, sounding like she meant more than golden honey on biscuits.

Lettie reddened again, and she stammered, "I mean I could give you a jar to take home. It's real good."

But now that she'd mentioned *a taste*, Shadow couldn't get the phrase out of his mind. Christ, he was as bad as Tommy, wanting to get a leg over this girl and half expecting to because everybody knew Lettie Calloway was easy like her mother.

Shadow dug the tip of his cane into the hard dirt of the path and took a hitching step forward. Going down this steep incline was harder than climbing it had been. His hip and knee screamed for morphine, but he'd stopped taking that. Whisky was a decent substitute, except he didn't want to be a drunk like everybody else in his family, so mostly he'd learned to live with the constant dull ache and the sharper pain that sometimes flared up.

"Your leg hurtin'?" Lettie asked. "You're frowning something fierce."

Shadow nodded.

"Whyn't you take a break? Sit on that patch of shade yonder and rest a spell." She led the way to a cool grassy spot in a grove of white birch trees, and he gratefully sank down beside her. It'd be quite a trick to get back on his feet again.

Shadow swatted away a swarm of gnats and one persistent deerfly. The comfortable silence between them began to feel a little awkward. He couldn't expect Lettie to carry on an entire conversation alone, and besides, he wanted to learn more about her. He opened the rusty hinges on his voice box and let out some words.

"How do you get on, living by yourself?"

If she was startled by him finally speaking, Lettie gave no sign. “Ain’t easy, but now Mama’s gone, I got only myself to provide for, and I don’t eat much.”

He scanned her wiry little body and figured she ate about enough to keep a hummingbird alive. All of a sudden, he was consumed with the desire to drive her up to Frankfort, take her to a nice restaurant, and have her eat until she couldn’t roll away from the table. Of course, since the trip took more than a day, they’d have to spend the night at a hotel in the city, and that brought up all sorts of thoughts he shouldn’t be thinking.

“It’s quiet living alone, a little lonely sometimes, but I got my cat for company,” Lettie continued. “House ain’t much to speak of, drafty in winter and hot as blazes in summer, and it needs a new roof, but at least it’s all mine.”

How nice to have a place that was all yours, Shadow thought. Nobody ever left his sprawling family homestead. They just added more rooms onto the crazy quilt of a house and brought in even more people. Carver, Tommy, and Clay all had wives and a couple of kids each, which didn’t stop them from screwing whatever woman took their fancy. Shadow’s only sister, Camilia, was back home too after a failed marriage. Her brothers had gone to Backwater Creek, stomped her abusive husband to unconsciousness, and returned her to the safety of the family compound. A haven or a prison? Depended on your point of view.

“You ever think of leaving?” Shadow asked. “Going someplace nobody knows you?”

Lettie leaned forward, chin propped on her knees as she toyed with a leaf in the grass by her bare feet. “What would I do for work? Nobody knowing anything about me would be nice, but at least here, I got my own place.”

Shadow dragged his gaze away from her dirty bare feet with the high arches and cute little toes. He looked at the scaly white bark of the birch trees and the green moss on boulders tumbled as if a giant had thrown them down any which way. He inhaled pine and honeysuckle and the faint earthy whiff of the woman beside him.

“I missed this country,” he said.

“What was it like over there in France?” Lettie asked. “Not the battlefield. I can guess about that—mud and blood and guns firing. Too awful to stand, and I wouldn’t

have you go back there even in your head. But when you weren't fighting, what was the countryside like?"

Shadow stopped to consider. His brothers had only ever asked how many Germans he killed, not what it was like in the trenches, let alone what the land had been like. "Mostly flatlands. Not hilly like here. Lots of fields and trees and streams. Different style of houses from what's around here, but not all that different. Wouldn't have guessed it was another country if they weren't all talking French."

Lettie twirled the stem of the leaf around. "I never been more'n a few miles from home. Can't imagine a place without hills, or taking a ship all the way across the ocean, or people talkin' foreign. That'd be something to see and hear."

Again the silence settled between them, but now it felt comfortable once more. Lettie plucked a long thick blade of grass and turned it into a whistle. Shadow followed her example, and they both puckered their lips and blew piercing squeals from the grass before grinning at each other in satisfaction.

A scarlet tanager swooped overhead from one tree branch to another, and Shadow pointed out the brilliant bird. Lettie watched it flit around, and Shadow lost all interest in the bird. He gazed at the lovely smile on her lips, the deep bow in the upper one and the generous plumpness of her lower lip. He imagined what that cushion might feel like against his mouth.

When Lettie looked at him again, he quickly shifted his gaze so she wouldn't know he'd been staring. "You ain't much like your brothers, are you?"

He lifted his shoulders.

"I always seen that. Like when we were kids at school back when we was little. Once the boys was burning bugs with a magnifying glass the teacher gave 'em to study things with. You didn't do that, and you got the other boys to quit too. Not just your brothers but all of 'em. Got their attention turned to something else."

Maybe he'd been nicer then, Shadow thought. But pretty soon, he'd gotten tough and learned to beat on people right alongside the rest of his clan, busting heads and breaking balls to keep control over their territory.

"I ain't that good," he mumbled. "If I was, I woulda popped Tommy in the nose for pawing you in the tavern and told him to leave you alone."

“He woulda bothered me worse just to spite you. I’m glad you didn’t.” Lettie straightened her legs and smoothed her homespun skirt that came to just above her slender ankles. “Anyway, I’m used to it. I learned a long time ago how to keep away from the really drunk and grabby ones.”

Anger rushed through him. “You shouldn’t have to. They should show you respect.”

“Why would they? Everybody knows about my mama and about me. Can’t bleach out a bloodstain,” she answered calmly. “I ain’t proud of some of the things I done, but I can’t change it nohow.”

Shadow thought of her with Herbert Whitlow, who’d moved away to live with his wife’s family in Tennessee. Then he pictured other faceless men kissing those pretty lips and putting their hands all over her and lying with her. The thought stirred him up, displeasure mixing with something dark and hungry and desiring. *He* wanted to be the one to do those things with Lettie.

What would she think if she knew he’d never done that with any woman? A half man who’d managed to reach twenty-one years of age without getting laid despite his brothers often dragging him along to whorehouses with them.

Lettie looked him square in the face. “But the things I used to do, I don’t do no more. You should know that right up front if you’re thinking I’m easy.”

Shadow shook his head. “No. I wasn’t expecting anything. I just...” God, all this talking wore him out. He wished he’d never let her know he could speak. “I used to notice you too, and I thought you were someone I could...” *Stand to be around*. That didn’t sound right, but he didn’t have any other way to express the unusual feelings she’d made him feel, so he broke off.

Lettie wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees. “It’s not easy to find someone you feel comfortable being with. I know that. So you can come talk with me anytime, Shadow Robeson.”

Chapter Five

Hoeing weeds in her garden was a fine way to let out some of the feelings bottled up inside her. *Chop, chop, chop* with a steady stroke that pulled on her shoulder muscles and stretched her back. One chop, and Lettie released some of her anger at Shatner for shorting her on her pay this week. Another chop, and she got past her humiliation at Brenda Whitley whispering rude things about her in the store the other day. Another chop, and she could almost forget the dirty suggestion Tector McGinty had whispered to her in the tavern last night, his sour breath curling her nostrils.

Chop, and Lettie let go of some of her disappointment that Shadow hadn't come round to see her since that afternoon four days ago. She'd thought they'd had a real heart-to-heart talk. Maybe not so much what they said, but the way it touched her inside—as if they were confiding secret feelings no one else would understand. But apparently it hadn't meant as much to Shadow, since he hadn't stopped by the tavern or her house all week.

His absence hurt her more than it ought to, more than she wanted it to. Lettie chided herself for going all mushy over some man. She thought she'd gotten past that moony phase when the mere sight of a certain boy could cause her heart to flutter. She'd gotten older and smarter and packed away any hopes that some man might want her for something more than a poke. She hadn't walked out with a fellow since she was sixteen, and here she was getting all mopey because Shadow didn't want to be her friend after all.

Chop! She growled at the memories of their afternoon together that flitted around her mind like a cloud of hungry gnats. The way he'd smiled at her with the sun making his single blue eye blaze. The soft, low rumble of his voice when he finally spoke had her believing she was the only person he could talk to at all.

After they'd sat and conversed a bit, Shadow had trouble getting to his feet again. Lettie had grabbed his arm to help him up and felt the strong muscles underneath his shirt.

Then he'd come back to the shanty with her and sat on the porch. She'd given him ice-cold well water, wishing she had a lemon to float in it to make it special. They'd talked a while longer about the mountains and things they'd seen—a fox with her kits trailing behind her, a black bear stealing honey from a bee tree, old sites where Indians

had lived and the bits of pottery or arrowheads to be found there. They talked about people they both knew and Shadow's sea voyage to Europe on the troop ship. Lettie's calico kitty, Bathsheba, had taken to stalking Shadow's boots, rushing out from her hiding place to pounce on them before scurrying away. Both Lettie and Shadow had laughed over that, and, oh, the sound of his laughter was like distant thunder. It made her skin prickle and parts of her body tense.

After a while, Shadow had said he better get on up to his family's still since he had work to do. Before he left, Lettie gave him a jar with a couple of combs dripping honey. Shadow thanked her and paused on the dirt in front of her shack as if about to say something, or maybe kiss her. Instead, he'd given her a quick nod and walked away with the uneven hobble of an old man. She'd watched his broad shoulders till he disappeared around the big pine tree at the bend of the path.

Would Shadow have stayed longer if she'd invited him to kiss and touch her? Would he be eager to come back if they'd fondled a bit, or she made it clear she'd open her legs for him next time? *CHOP!* Lettie cut off those treacherous thoughts. She wasn't that girl anymore, the one who'd do just about anything not to be alone and on the hope that some man might fall in love with her. She was stronger than that, better than that, and she was just fine on her own. *Chop!*

But she couldn't deny being sad Shadow hadn't come around. She would've liked to at least been friends with him. God knew she had few enough of those.

Sweat poured down her face and body, and her arm muscles trembled from all that hoeing. The position of the sun in the sky told her it was time to get cleaned up and start walking to Shatner's. If she was even a little late again, he might hold back more of her pay. She couldn't stand the man, but he held all the power, and she had none. Shatner could easily replace her with another girl willing to wait tables, while Lettie had few options for earning money.

Curse of the poor, her granddad used to say. *Dealt a bum hand from the start and no matter how hard you work, you can't turn a pair of twos into a full house.*

After she'd cleaned up, put on her other dress, washed the sweat-soaked one and hung it to dry, Lettie ate a mess of turnip greens. They weren't too filling, but they were fresh and free and took the edge off her constant hunger. She had a little extra time before

she needed to start to work, and thinking of her granddad sent her to the graveyard a ways up the hill. All her kin were buried there, great-grandparents, grandparents and some aunts, uncles and cousins. Those who carried the Calloway name and who'd stuck around Lorena long enough to die were there. Other family members had ended up in all sorts of places Lettie would never see.

She pulled weeds off her mother's grave and rubbed her hand over the name carved into a wood cross. Already the weather had worn Mama's name almost as smooth as those that'd been there for years. Soon there'd be no sign of her at all. Lettie wondered who'd run a hand over *her* gravestone someday, or if there'd even be anyone to put up a marker for her.

She knelt by the row of three little crosses that marked the babies' graves. These would have been her sisters and brother if they'd lived. Mama had told her they were stillborn, but as she got older, Lettie had her doubts. She swore she'd heard the last baby give a weak mew like a kitten, but when Mama had called her into the room, handed her the blanket-wrapped bundle and told her to bury it, there was no sign of life in the blue-faced infant. Lettie thought maybe Mama had tried to make their hard life a little easier by getting rid of another mouth to feed, and she'd began to think maybe she was lucky to have been spared herself. Crazy imaginings, she told herself sometimes, but in dark moments, she believed it might be true. Not like any local man would have stepped up claiming to be the father or offering to help out. Easier for those babies not to live at all.

About the time Lettie put all that together in her head and had the close call where she'd feared being pregnant was when she stopped lying with men. At age sixteen, she'd already lived what felt like a lifetime of heartache and disappointment. Deciding she could at least take control over what she did with her body, Lettie had buttoned up her drawers, and focused on earning money, trying to get a little bit ahead. Now she was nineteen years old, lonely as hell sometimes, but she stood on her own land and nobody could touch her here. That counted for something.

Back at the house, Lettie petted Bathsheba before setting out along the trail that snaked around her hill and another before reaching Shatner's Shack. She worked hard to feel happy. The day was sunny. Her garden crops were doing well. She had everything she needed to get by and her little cat to keep her company. Life could be a whole lot

worse. She didn't need to be dreary because some man decided not to give her the time of day.

But underneath her forced happiness, a dark blue ribbon wove. Lettie couldn't stop thinking about Shadow's solemn face and his quiet voice saying *I thought you were someone I could...*

*

Shadow added another sack of sugar to the mash in the big metal boiler. He'd already done two runs with this mix and could squeak out one more before he had to stir up a new batch.

Cutter and Clay stood beside him, watching him work, making him nervous. They always had some advice to give, but this time Cutter just clapped him on the shoulder. "Looks good. Pretty soon we're going to have to put in a second boiler. Even with the four-hundred-gallon tank and three or four runs from a mix of mash, we ain't producing enough. We gotta make even more."

Shadow didn't answer. He secured the cap on the huge container made of sheets of galvanized metal welded together, weighted the cap down with a chain, and made sure the coils leading to the doubler barrel were solid. The cheap mash beer contained in that barrel combined with the alcohol vapors from the boiler and ran through a water-cooled condenser to become liquid again. This produced a smoother whisky—although still strong enough to singe your hair off.

But the process was tricky. The mash made of corn, barley, sugar, and water had to be mixed just right, the temperature of the boiling needed to remain steady and the condenser cooled properly. It wasn't true that any fool could make shine. Or maybe they could, but it might taste like battery acid and induce a coma.

A hand smacked Shadow in the back of his head. "Hey, nod once if you can fucking hear me," Cutter said. "Would you stop moving around and listen? I'm trying to tell you something important."

He'd finished what he was doing, so Shadow wiped the sweat from his forehead and turned to face Cutter and Clay. It was hot inside the shed jammed full of the still and all the supplies that went with it.

"This place is like hell. Can we move outside?" Clay complained.

The blazing-hot day wasn't much better. Shadow glanced at the large wooden shed, well hidden from prying eyes by the wild kudzu vine that grew all over it. It was located in the midst of a stand of trees for extra camouflage. Federal agents might ignore small stills, but bringing down the Robesons's booming operation would be a big feather in their caps.

"All this was fine in the old days," Cutter said. "Daddy had that little turnip still, a one-man operation. But times have changed, and they're about to change even more. Clay and me been laying groundwork in Frankfort, and we gotta be ready to fill the orders. You're going to be in charge of expanding the still, Shadow."

Maybe you're biting off more than we can chew. Maybe we're going to end up dead or in prison.

Cutter's eyes lit up like a true believer's. "Soon as Prohibition kicks in, this is gonna be huge. Bigger than anything Daddy ever dreamed of. The old man's time is done. This business belongs to *us* now. You get a second still running and train up some of the cousins to run it. I already talked to Uncle Duke and his boys. We'll need them to make deliveries too." He turned his shining eyes on Shadow, sending a chill down his spine. "Clay and me *need* you to make all this happen. Crazy Tommy and Pernell ain't good for much, but you got a level head, and you're good at production."

Shadow swallowed. His brothers had no idea he planned to walk away from all this. The family was an undertow pulling him deeper. More than ever, he needed to kick free and swim away.

Clay stood by, arms folded, saying nothing as Cutter put his hands on his hips and rocked back on his heels. "We all appreciate you fighting for our country, representin' the family and all. But you gotta get past lickin' your wounds. We can't count on you if you get laid low for days at a time by headaches like some woman. Pull yourself together."

Never mind that his latest setback had been because Shadow had worked round the clock to fix something that went wrong with the still the other day. After twenty-four hours on his feet, he'd dropped like a sack of bricks and slept for another twenty-four. He'd woken up with his missing eye pounding as if someone was drilling into it with an awl. He broke down, dosed himself with morphine, and slept for another full day and night. Now, he was back on task, but that wasn't enough for Cutter.

Clay unfolded his arms and stepped forward. “Let me talk to little brother for a while.”

Cutter grunted in annoyance and spit a stream of tobacco juice on the ground before walking off to check on the wagon Donnie Baker was loading. Donnie helped Shadow with the bottling and carrying barrels and supplies. Strong as a mule and fiercely loyal, the man would sooner cut off his own arm than betray the Robesons to the feds.

After Cutter left, Shadow breathed a sigh of relief. Cutter was too loud to listen to so early in the day, and though Shadow’s headache had subsided, it wasn’t gone. The army doc had told him he could expect the headaches to lessen over time, but he’d never be completely pain free—not in his head or in his leg. As for the battle nightmares, time would tell if they’d fade.

Clay wore a silk vest over a clean white shirt, despite the heat. He was a dapper man who pomaded every hair into place and wore enough cologne to choke a horse. A thin moustache perched on his upper lip like a well-trimmed caterpillar. He stroked it with one finger now.

“You and I aren’t like the others,” he said suddenly. “We’re smarter, better educated—school or no school—and we got dreams for the future. Expanding the business to earn more money ain’t enough. We’re still hillbillies living in an overgrown farmhouse. No style. No class.”

Shadow was so astonished by Clay talking openly to him he almost blurted *and what is it you want?*

“Trouble is, around here we got no model for how to live like civilized folk. But I been traveling, and seen how some people set themselves up, build big houses and decorate them with good taste, maybe have a couple of servants. We should be spending time with wealthy, important men. I plan to enter politics. Maybe a state senate seat to start, and eventually governor of Kentucky. I’m going to *be* somebody, even if I have to divorce Katie and marry some Lexington socialite to help me get there.”

Shadow stared at his brother. He’d known Clay was ambitious but never guessed at the strength of his drive.

Clay stabbed a finger in the air to make his point. “What Cutter don’t get is, it’s not about the money. It’s about power, prestige, and bringing our entire family up a few

pegs. But I know you're smart enough to understand me." He lowered his voice. "So I'm asking, if push comes to shove and Cutter wants to do things one way and I want to do them another—you throw your lot in with me. I'll bring you up along with me. Having a war veteran for a brother will help when I'm campaigning."

Shadow nodded to signal his understanding, if not his agreement. But Clay took it as solidarity and flashed that brilliant smile that made all the ladies swoon. "Good. I'm glad you're on board."

He strode away, leaving Shadow feeling as if he'd fallen into some crazy dream. He, who'd always been a shadow sticking to his brothers' heels, was suddenly an important part of their plans. And he didn't want any of it. Not their sudden desire for his help or the heavy yoke of family weighing down his shoulders. He'd been raised to think being a Robeson was an inescapable destiny. But since he'd been so far away from these mountains and seen so many things, his view of the world had shifted. He wasn't shackled to his family forever, no matter how much it sometimes felt like he was.

It was past time he made a move, before he got even more entangled with the family business. By his reckoning, he'd have a sufficient amount saved by the end of the month to make a new start. That would also give him time to train the cousins and Donnie to run the still and to get larger-scale production running smooth. Hell, the family had gotten along without him while he was overseas—though, by all accounts, the quality of the hooch had gone down. They would be just fine without him again. By fall, he'd be stronger, richer, and ready to light out into the world to make his own way.

But there was a new stumbling block in his plan, an unexpected complication that made him want to stay. Lettie Calloway was like a beacon shining in the dark and drawing him to her.

Chapter Six

Lettie knew some folks were afraid to walk alone at night on mountain roads. Wild animals were busier then, and it wasn't only raccoons and possum searching for food. There were mountain lions and black bears. But more dangerous than animals were the sorts of men that roamed under cover of night. Bootleggers would likely be more concerned with their business, but drunken carousers might think a woman walking alone was fair game for sport.

But though Lettie was always cautious, she didn't feel any fear walking home from Shatner's. When the moon was full, her way was lit almost as well as daytime, but on cloudy nights, she knew her path just as well.

Her feet hurt from wearing her ill-fitting shoes for hours at the tavern. The moment she got outside, off they came, and, oh, the grass felt cool and damp beneath her hot, aching soles. Even sharp pebbles or sticks didn't bother her. She softly sang as she walked, something her mama used to sing to her when she was small.

*“Slumber, my darling, the birds are at rest,
The wandering dews by the flow'rs are caressed,
Slumber, my darling, I'll wrap thee up warm,
And pray that the angels will shield thee from harm.”*

She was so caught up in the song and in memories of a gentler, happier version of her mother that she reached her house almost before she knew it.

Lettie stopped stock-still, the hairs on her nape rising like sharp blades of grass. Some dark shape was on her front porch, stirring from the rocking chair, and rising... A man lying in wait on her doorstep.

She took hold of the knife she kept in her belt. Her first instinct was to run away, but damned if she'd let some hobo drive her out of her own place. Lettie drew the knife, braced her wobbly legs, and shouted, “Who's there? Get off my porch.”

The dark shape put its hands up. “It's me, Lettie. Shadow Robeson. Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.”

Heart pounding, forgetting this was the very person she'd been longing to see, Lettie yelled, “Then what the *hell* are you doing hovering in the dark in front of my house like a ghost?”

He stepped down from the porch onto the front yard. "I came to see you, but you weren't home. I was tired from the walk, so I sat down and guess I fell asleep. How late is it?"

"Shatner's is closed, so sometime after one."

Shadow lowered his hands, and Lettie tucked her blade back into her belt. Terror stopped thumping in her chest like a dog's tail, replaced by a warmer feeling as she realized he'd come to see her like he'd promised.

He took another step toward her. "I wanted to come earlier. But I had a bad spell, and I've been laid up for a few days."

That thought hadn't even occurred to her. Poor man's injuries had been giving him pain, and she'd been cursing him for ignoring her.

"Well, come on in and set a spell. Sorry I ain't got coffee. Sometimes I drink chicory brew, but it don't taste the same. Anyway, I don't want to heat up the stove on a hot night like this. But I can draw you some nice cool well water to drink."

She was babbling, nervous as a fox in a room full of hound dogs as she led him inside her little shack. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a visitor. Not since right after Mama died and a couple of neighbors dropped by to give her food. Now, as she looked around, Lettie was embarrassed by how poor her place was. At least she kept it neat and clean, her bits of chipped crockery lined up in a row on their shelf, the pots and pans hung on the wall over the stove, the floor clean and swept with a braided rag rug hiding the worst of the uneven floorboards.

"Watch your step there," she warned Shadow as she pointed him to the one chair pulled up to the tiny table. "Floor's a little weak. Some of the boards need replacing."

Shadow tested the spongy wood with his foot before he sat. "I could do that for you."

Lettie didn't know how to answer. He was being polite. If she said *that'd be nice*, it would seem like she really expected him to do it, so she kept quiet and pumped water at the sink. Every day she thanked her grandpap for installing indoor running water. It was the one luxury her little shack boasted.

There was no fireplace or a proper sitting area for entertaining guests in the single room, only the table and the chair where Shadow sat. Underneath the window that looked

out into thick pine branches was a wide bench that used to be Lettie's bed. She'd tried to fix it up to look more like the sofas other people had. The lean-to off the back of the house had been her mother's bedroom, Lettie's now, and that was the whole of her house. She didn't know what the Robesons's place looked like but guessed it was a far sight fancier than this.

"We used to have a bigger house my great-granddad built on the land," she explained away the pathetic shanty. "Two story with plenty of rooms upstairs for all the kids. But when it burned down from a kitchen fire, my grandpap built this little place for himself, since grandma had died a while before. After he passed, my mama and me moved in."

"What about all those aunts and uncles? They don't help you out?"

She shrugged. "Most moved away. The couple of cousins still living near here like to pretend we ain't related."

He looked around. "So you've been living here alone since you were a kid."

"Almost sixteen. Old enough to do for myself, I reckon." Lettie crossed her arms and leaned her back against the kitchen sink. She didn't like the note of pity in his voice. It made her prickle like Bathsheba's fur when stroked the wrong way.

"Looks like you keep the place up fine. It's real neat and pretty." He added after a moment, "And quiet. Wish my house was this quiet. But there's too many people around."

Lettie tried to picture a home with a bunch of folks and their kids all living together. It sounded real cozy to her. But then she remembered it was the Robesons, so maybe not so nice after all. Must be like hell for a man who liked quiet as much as Shadow did.

She got tin cups from the shelf, and even with her back turned, she felt the man filling up her house with his long legs and big shoulders. His presence made her itchy and aware of her body in ways she hadn't been in a long time. The throbbing between her legs, the tingling in her breasts was her body telling her it missed being touched by a man. The two of them alone in this shack... It'd be too easy to go from talking to other things. And the more Lettie thought of those other things the more she yearned for

Shadow's hands on her flesh and the feel of his manhood filling her. She grew wet between the legs trying not to think of it.

Panic made her heart beat too fast. Not fear of Shadow pushing her to do something she didn't want to do. But fear of her own body betraying her and giving in to needs she'd denied for so long.

"Here you go," she said too loud, plunking the water on the table in front of him.

Shadow suddenly rose, and Lettie moved away, afraid he was going to reach out for her and she'd melt against him like hot mush. "Take my seat."

"No. You're the guest, and your leg is... You go ahead and sit." The hard edge of the kitchen sink digging into her back grounded her. "Tell me about your family," she said to fill the silence.

Shadow sat again. "Got my four brothers, who you know. Maybe you've seen some of their wives and kids round about. My sister Camilia's back home. Things didn't go so well with her husband. And there's my daddy."

"And you all live together?" She tried to picture the quarrelling, noisy pack.

"Different rooms added on to the house, but we gather for meals."

"Y'all are rich, so why not build separate houses?"

Shadow's smile lit up the shack. "That's a real good question. I think mostly 'cause my mother wanted everyone around her so she could keep her thumb on 'em. She ruled the roost. Now she's gone, things are starting to change."

"If you hate the clamor so much, what's keepin' *you* there?"

He shook his head slowly. "After I got back, I needed time to recover, and now, well, I spend most my time up at the still. Got a cot where I can rest between runs."

"Runs?"

"Of hooch. Sometimes I mix up fresh mash in the boiler, but we can get a few runs out of a batch by adding more sugar and freshening the doubler barrel."

Lettie laughed. "I got no idea what you're saying. I've poured whisky for years but got no idea how it's made."

Shadow got real chatty, explaining the process of brewing and condensing the refined alcohol, then bottling it. She could tell he took pride in his work and wondered

what sort of person he'd be without his family dragging him down. One thing was certain—he'd talk more if he didn't have to live in his brothers' shadow.

"I don't mind the work," he finished. "It's a process you can control if you follow directions and do things exactly right."

Unlike the messiness of people, Lettie thought. They never reacted the same way twice, and you sure as heck couldn't count on them.

"So you plan to keep working at your family's still?"

Shadow went quiet for so long, she thought he wouldn't answer. "If I could," he finally said very quietly, "I'd be a doctor. I watched the medics on the battlefield and the docs in the field hospital and wished I could help people like that. But..." He shrugged.

"You can't get shut of your family so easy."

"They got big plans for the business, and they're counting on me to be part of it. They don't know I got other ideas. When they find out... They ain't going to be happy."

"Can't choose our families, can we?" Lettie shifted, trying to find a comfortable position. The sink was digging into her back now, and her feet hurt from a long night's work.

Shadow noticed her discomfort, braced his hands on the table, and stood. "I should go. Let you get some rest."

"No!" The word was out of her mouth, and it was too late to reel it back in. Truth was she didn't want to be alone another night in her silent house. She wanted her guest to stay longer.

"I mean, we could sit a spell." She gestured toward the bench beneath the window. "Just sit and talk some more."

Shadow studied the bench still dressed like a bed complete with a quilt, then his gaze slid back to Lettie. His look was so heavy she felt its touch. His eye was darkened by lust. She stared back, knowing if they sat side by side on that cot, it wouldn't end at talking. Her body burned with a fever, and she could already imagine what his hands would feel like on her skin. His lips. His mouth on hers, and his cock pressing against her seam...

She swallowed hard. No, no, no. She'd sworn this wouldn't happen again. After Lettie began having boys come by the house and took them into *that* room in back, she'd realized she was becoming her mother. "Or maybe it's better if we—"

"I'd better leave now," Shadow said at the same time.

She sighed with relief. She needed him out of her house before she did something she'd regret.

"Thank you for the tea and the visit." Shadow turned and walked stiffly toward the door.

Lettie followed him out and stopped on the porch. "Glad you came by. You're welcome here anytime you need a little quiet."

He looked at her, his eye gleaming faintly in the moonlight. "That's good to know."

Then all of a sudden he lunged at her and pressed his mouth hard against hers. Before she had time to react, Shadow was hurrying away across her yard.

Lettie touched her fingers to her tingling lips and watched him go. The kiss had been awkward. Her teeth nearly cut the inside of her lip from the force of it, but it was about the best kiss she'd ever received. She'd felt Shadow's desire for her reined in so tight and desperate to break free. She wanted to let him run.

No use denying it. Sometime, and probably soon, the simmering attraction between them was going to boil over. She could stir it down for a time, but not forever. The thought frightened her and made her crazy with excitement. She hadn't felt this charged up and alive for a long time.

Chapter Seven

The big oak table that filled the Robeson dining room was made from hewn planks bolted together. Long benches rather than chairs stood on either side of the table. Shadow, his brothers, and their families sat side by side on the benches, while Daddy presided in his king's throne at the head of the table.

Camilia set a pot of grits on the table to go along with the platters loaded with steak and eggs and hotcakes already laid out. She moved to take her seat at the foot of the table—Mama's chair. Serving fourteen people three meals a day must feel like working at a boarding house with a bunch of loud, cantankerous renters. Shadow studied his sister's permanent scowl and figured she was about as fed up as he was with life in this house. But she had even less likelihood of ever getting free of the family, especially since her brothers had rescued her when her marriage went to ruin. With Mama gone, no doubt she felt beholden to tend to the menfolk here.

Shadow glanced across the table at Tommy, who sported a black eye today and Pernell, whose lip was swollen. They'd either been fighting each other again or one of their many enemies. Right now, Tommy was busy laying down the law to his wife, Susan, who'd dared to ask him for money for their two kids' shoes. He hollered that he wasn't made of money and she needed to learn to make do. Couldn't she sell more eggs from her flock of chickens? Susan winced and stared miserably at her eggs.

Daddy's shaggy white head was bent over his plate as he shoveled in his breakfast. He seemed to ignore all the talking around the table, until he suddenly jerked his head up and glared at Tommy with a crackle of fire in his faded blue eyes. "Chrissake, boy. Quit buying gewgaws for your whores and git your kids some damn shoes!"

On Shadow's left, Clay was having a quieter but nearly as intense conversation with his wife, Katie, about the way she dressed and her rude manners. Katie's bawdy brazenness had once attracted Clay, but now, apparently, he dreamed of marrying a debutante who might ease his way into society. Katie just laughed at her husband and pushed her tits up in her tight dress to create even more cleavage.

On Shadow's other side, Cutter's boys Luke and Paul progressed from flicking food off their forks to shoving each other. Their mother, Annabelle slammed a fist down

on the table in front of them hard enough to shake their plates, and the boys sat still for the moment, though they'd be back at their horseplay soon enough.

"Don't know why you're so dead set against it," Cutter, sitting on his father's right, continued an argument that had begun yesterday and spilled over into this morning. "The speakeasies will be a gold mine for us once they can't get their booze legally. We want to be their number one source. We're ready to grow past a few counties and be the top supplier in the state."

Without looking up from his stack of hotcakes, Daddy grunted. "Ready to get thrown in prison or shot up by some big-city gang that's a sight tougher than Tommy and Pernell here."

Shadow winced as Cutter plowed on. He'd never learned when to back down with their father. "You're not seeing the big picture. Easy money's going to be raining down. All we have to do is—"

Daddy loudly cut him off. "Stay small, and the feds'll hunt bigger game. Get too big, and they're bound to come after us. I done told you already, we *ain't* expanding into Frankfort."

Cutter leaped to his feet, braced his hands on the table and shouted, "It's already done. Clay and me been lining up more distributors, and Uncle Duke and the cousins will be helping too. We're planning to buy another delivery truck. No more turnip stills or horse-drawn carts, Daddy. The old ways are dying along with ignorant old jackasses like you. We're doing this with or without you."

Shadow braced for his father's reaction, sure to be swift and violent. Sure enough, Cutter had barely turned to stalk away from the table when Daddy sprang to his feet and whipped out his Barlow knife. The old man was still quick as a weasel when he wanted to be.

"Whoa!" Shadow shouted, as the blade flew from his father's hand to stick in Cutter's shoulder. Cutter yelped and reached over his shoulder, knocking the loosely embedded knife to the floor. He clapped a hand over the oozing wound.

Daddy stabbed a finger at him, the frail old man gone and the towering giant Shadow remembered taking his place. "Don't you cross me, boy. Don't you *ever* try to

cross me. You think I don't know what you been up to? That my brother Duke wouldn't come tell me what's going on? You think you can cut me out of my own business?"

Shadow bolted up from his seat, hoping to intercept as Cutter roared and dove for the knife, but he didn't have a prayer of getting there first.

"Pernell, get it!" their father called.

Like a faithful guard dog, Pernell launched himself off the bench and across the table, sending platters of eggs and meat flying. He fetched the knife and held it out of reach, pushing Cutter back with one big hand. Tommy hurried to help restrain Cutter, while the women and kids screamed and yelled.

Shadow remained frozen for a moment. Then Cutter's sons started to jump up from the bench, ready to fight for their daddy. Shadow grabbed the shirttails of both the eight- and ten-year-old, holding them back.

Clay moved to stand over his punching, cursing brothers rolling on the floor. He raised both hands and spoke above their noise. "Cutter and I weren't trying to cross you, Daddy. This is a smart business plan. Can't you choke down your pride enough to consider it?"

Shadow hung on to his nephews, who kicked and squirmed. While his brothers continued to fight, he got awkwardly to his feet and dragged the struggling boys out of the dining room, kicked open the front door, and propelled them outside. Kids shouldn't have to see a scene like that at their breakfast table. He wished he could get little Vern and Rosie out of here too, but he had all he could handle with Luke and Paul.

Shadow held each boy by a wrist. "Settle down now. Your daddy's going to be all right."

"Grandpa's a damn bastard!" the older boy, Luke, yelled. "He's a drunk, crazy old bastard."

"Yeah," Shadow agreed. "He's always thrown fits when he gets mad. Best to stay out of his way. Let your Uncle Clay smooth things over."

What terrible advice to give a child. These boys should be taken far away from here before they grew up as vicious and prone to temper tantrums as their father or grandfather.

Cutter's wife, Annabelle, came storming out of the house. She was a formidable woman, wide across the hips, with biceps like hams. She grabbed Luke's and Paul's hands much harder than Shadow had. "Come on, boys. We're going to visit Grandpap and Grandmaw Pritchett. Luke, go hitch up the buckboard. Paulie, come help me pack."

"But what about Daddy?" Luke protested.

"Aunt Camilia's already binding up his cut, and he and your grandpa and uncles are having a sit-down. He'll be fine. But *we're* going visitin' for a spell." She looked at Shadow. "They'll be wanting you in there too. You can tell my husband where we're at. Maybe I'll come back when things settle down." She scowled. "Or jest maybe I *won't* this time."

Annabelle booted Luke in the rear to get him moving toward the barn and dragged Paul toward the part of the house where their family lived.

Shadow watched them disappear inside, then stared at the front door. He'd as soon have all his teeth pulled without nitrous oxide as go back in and spend another second with his family.

Hefty little Luke had kicked him hard in his bad leg, and it hurt like blazes. Shadow sat down heavily on the ground. "I live in a fucking loony bin. I gotta git out of here," he muttered.

There were only two places he could think of to go—up to the still or down to Bullfrog Hollow. He knew which place he'd rather go, the place he wished he'd stayed last night. But would Lettie want to see him again after he'd plastered his face on hers like he was slapping on a coat of paint? He'd kissed her as clumsily as if he was no older than his nephew Luke. The memory of that awkward kiss made Shadow want to do it again so badly his body ached with wanting. Only he'd do it right this time.

But he couldn't skitter off like a rat jumping ship. With a sigh, he climbed to his feet and headed back inside.

Daddy and the boys were gathered in the big living room, Daddy in his wingback armchair, Pernell standing behind him, and Tommy sitting in a chair on his right. A smile of satisfaction played over Tommy's mouth. He'd been wanting that seat for a long time. Clay and Cutter, with his shoulder wrapped in a bandage, sat side by side on the sofa facing Daddy, like prisoners before a judge.

As Shadow drifted into the room and dropped into a chair in the corner, Clay outlined the expansion plan in detail, as if repeating what had already been said would drill the sense of it into Daddy's hard head. That was like plowing a fist into rock. Daddy was deaf to reason if it didn't suit him to hear it.

Cutter's expression was as dark as a thundercloud. It was pretty clear he wanted to jump up and kick the shit out of their old man, but Clay's calmer voice kept his older brother in check. "Let us give it a try. Even after outlay for a new still and paying the cousins and Uncle Duke and any other men we have to hire, the profit will be worth it, I promise." Clay really did have a politician's flare for soothing ruffled feathers. Although he offered the same information as Cutter, he made it sound better somehow. Wouldn't be a surprise if he really did become a state congressman someday.

"What do you think, Shadow?"

Daddy's voice actually addressing him startled Shadow. He never had a say in these family meetings. Usually they boiled down to their father commanding and everybody bowing to his wishes. Were they suddenly in a democracy and Shadow's opinion actually carried some weight?

Did he even give a shit whether the family business folded like a bad poker hand? It turned out he did care a little. At least he didn't want the operation to blow up in their faces and have all of them sent to prison or worse.

"Talk, son. I know you can talk when you want to," Daddy ordered.

All eyes were on Shadow. He licked his lips. "An expansion *would* require a big investment for more equipment, trucks, and men. Getting the quantity of grain we'd need will be hard, and, as you say, a bigger operation makes a bigger target."

Cutter's eyes shot bolts of lightning at Shadow from across the room.

"But Cutter and Clay have made these contacts and set up channels for distribution. Seems to me we could do a limited run, an exploratory mission rather than charging in full scale." He'd learned a little about battle tactics in his time in the army. "We'll make no agreement on how much product we can deliver and won't invest in more equipment until we can all agree to go this route."

He exhaled a long breath. This was more than he'd said to anyone in his family since he'd got home. He hoped his advice might bring about peace for at least a little while and keep things manageable.

For a few seconds, there was no sound in the room except the creaking of floorboards and murmur of women's voices from the dining room.

At last, Daddy nodded. "A trial run I can agree to."

Clay spoke up quickly. "We can too, can't we, Cutter?"

Cutter made a growling sound, still way too mad to dare open his mouth. Clay's hand clamped down on his good shoulder, keeping him in check.

Daddy picked up his pipe and began to fill it with tobacco. "All right, everybody git back to work. Pernell, bring me up a jar."

Pernell plodded off to fetch a jar of whisky from the cellar.

Tommy stood. His satisfied smile had disappeared. Shadow guessed he'd hoped something drastic would happen, like their father throwing Cutter and Clay out of the house or the family business. "What do you want *me* to do, Daddy?"

The old man scowled at Tommy. "I don't know. What do you usually do with your days? Knock somebody's teeth in? Git to it."

Shadow didn't wait for any marching orders. He started to slip silently out of the room, but his father's voice stopped him.

"Shadow, you got a level head on your shoulders. I can see soldiering made a man of you."

It was the closest thing to a compliment his father had ever said to him. Shadow didn't know quite what to do with it. Should he say thank you?

Daddy's dark eyes, red-rimmed and nested in wrinkles, gazed hard at Shadow. "There's a lot of your mother in you, boy, and she was a woman who knew how to manage people. I'm counting on you to keep your brothers in check and report back to me if they start doing what they shouldn't ought to. You hear me?"

Shadow dipped his head. "I hear you."

But he wouldn't be falling in line with his father's wishes. Only a little while longer, and he'd be gone, not sneaking off to enlist as he'd done last time, but

announcing straight up to all of them he was leaving. It wouldn't be a pretty scene. He dreaded and looked forward to it in equal measure.

A bigger concern now was what to do about Lettie. He didn't want to leave her when they were just getting to know each other. Was it worth it to put up with his family and stick around for her?

The pendulum swung between going and staying and time pressed around Shadow like a choking hand. He didn't understand his sense of something bad about to happen, but felt it in his bones.

Chapter Eight

Lettie adjusted the cloth sack of groceries she wore strapped across her body. The weight of the bag on one hip pulled at her opposite shoulder. She'd saved her pay for a month for basic necessities that would last several months, dry goods and sundries she couldn't grow or make for herself. The weight of the heavy pack was satisfying and spelled the sort of security she'd never had until she lived on her own. Now she had control over where every penny went, and not a speck of it went toward liquor.

She strode along the county road, glad to leave the stores and houses of the little town behind her. Even when people weren't looking at her or whispering, she felt like they were. Not to say all folks judged her or were mean when they talked to her, but there were enough that she preferred to keep to herself.

Far down the road behind her came the distant growl of a gasoline engine. At first she thought it might be farm machinery in some field, but as it grew closer and louder, Lettie's ears identified a motor car. Not many of those around these parts. These roads were graded too steep and were often washed out by rainwater or snowmelt flowing down the hills. Unless it was some stranger passing through, Lettie knew exactly who the vehicle belonged to. The Robesons owned a Ford Field truck for hauling their whisky. Tommy liked to ride roughshod across the countryside. She rarely saw the other brothers driving the truck, and the roar of the automobile getting closer made Lettie walk faster.

Being spotted alone on the road by Tommy Robeson was asking for trouble, but right now there happened to be a thicket of blackberry brambles in both ditches that'd tear her hide off if she dove into them. She'd have to move faster to get past the thorny growth to a spot where she could head out cross-country. Lettie began to trot, her bag bumping against her hip.

The growl of the truck engine sounded like some big animal chasing her down. Lettie's heart beat fast as a rabbit's hind foot and her trot turned into a jog even as she told herself there was probably no cause to fear. Likely Tommy wouldn't even notice her by the side of the road, let alone stop. He was on his way about some mysterious Robeson business. But just in case he was feeling devilish, Lettie kept up her pace.

The truck horn shouted a loud *aa-oooh-ga*, lighting a fire under Lettie's heels. Almost to the edge of those damn bramble bushes, and then she could plunge into the

ditch and the trees beyond. She hated giving a man like Tommy such power over her, but being brave wasn't the same as being smart. Better to keep herself safe than try to fly against the way things were.

The truck was almost on her now. Best to ignore it and keep her eyes forward. Then the truck stopped, and a door creaked open.

Run. Just run, her gut clamored. But she couldn't outrun Tommy, and it might be better if she didn't show any fear. She continued to move quickly but didn't run.

"Lettie! Wait up." The voice that called out wasn't Tommy's nasal twang but Shadow's deep rumble.

Lettie stopped walking and spun around, hand pressed to her chest to keep her heart from pounding through it. "You scared me half to death."

Shadow approached her, leaving the truck idling. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd be afraid of automobiles. I know some people are."

"Not that," she started, then decided maybe it was best if he didn't know quite how much his brother scared her. "I just don't like the loud noise of them engines. Ain't used to it."

"They're pretty loud." He stopped a few yards away from her, and his hands went into his pockets. "I, uh, was hoping to stop by and see you today, and now, here you are."

"Yep." His shyness and the memory of him kissing her made Lettie shy too.

He glanced at the bag on her shoulder. "You been shopping?"

"Yep."

Shadow moved toward her. "Can I give you a lift home?"

"In *that* contraption?" Lettie stared at the purring truck that looked a lot like a big black monster. "Don't think you could get anywhere near my place. No road for it."

He took a hand from his pocket to rub the back of his neck. "Well, I could drive you close and then walk you the rest of the way, carry your bag for you."

The way boys in school used to carry the books of girls they liked. She'd always wished some boy would do that for her, but they never did.

"That'd be right nice. But you must have some place to get to. I don't want to cause you no trouble."

“Wouldn’t be any trouble.” Shadow squinted up at the sun with his one eye. “I *am* supposed to be up at the still right now.”

He met her gaze at last. “Maybe you could come along with me. I got a lunch we could share and a place in the woods I’d like to show you. I can’t take you to the still, but if you don’t mind waiting for me while I check on things there...”

Lettie thought of the sack of groceries that needed to be put away. Nothing that would spoil. Then she considered the sweet man who wanted to whisk her away to share a picnic lunch. Was there any question how she was going to spend her afternoon?

“Sure. I’ll come along with you. I never rode in one of these things. Never expected I’d get a chance to.” She eyed the growling monster on the road.

“I promise not to drive too fast.” Shadow held out a hand to take her sack.

Lettie felt funny handing it over. Kinda thrilled by his gentlemanly ways but also a little scared to let go of the precious goods she’d worked so hard to buy.

He led the way to the truck and opened the passenger door for her. All of a sudden, Lettie was terrified again. The machine was too loud and scary, and that was just when it was holding still. She couldn’t imagine being inside it while it was moving.

Shadow held her elbow and helped her up the running board and into the cab. She settled on the horsehair-stuffed seat as the beast vibrated around her, setting her teeth to chattering. She studied the knobs, levers, and gauges on the dashboard. It all looked so complicated, she couldn’t imagine daring to touch anything. She clasped her hands tight together in her lap.

Shadow climbed in the driver’s seat, lifting his game leg with his hands and positioning it before he closed the door. He took hold of the wheel, did things with the pedals on the floor, and the vehicle rolled forward.

Lettie grabbed on to the edge of her seat as the truck moved faster and then faster still. Trees and bushes moved past in a green blur. Air rushed through the open side windows and blew her hair around her face. She dared to loosen her grip on the seat with one hand long enough to push the strands that had escaped her braid behind her ears, but in seconds they were whipping her face again, stinging her eyes.

The truck bounced over ruts that made her teeth click together. Her stomach began to roll, and she felt like she might be sick.

Shadow noticed the state she was in and eased off the gas. “You all right? You look a little peaked.”

“So...fast,” she gasped.

“Her top speed is forty miles an hour,” he boasted proudly. “But we don’t dare let her rip on these bad roads.”

Thank the Lord. Whatever speed they were going felt like what she imagined a runaway horse would be like. For someone who’d only ever relied on her own two feet to carry her around, the speed was breathtaking, and not in a good way.

“You’re really scared.” Shadow frowned and slowed the truck to a crawl.

“Told you I never rode in one of these before,” she said crossly.

“How’s this?” he asked as they putted along.

“Better.” At least the countryside wasn’t a blur now, and her stomach began to settle despite the bumps in the road.

“I’m going to park the truck near this place I want to show you. Can’t take it no farther up the hill than that anyway. I have to walk the rest of the way to the still. Hope you don’t mind me leaving you alone for a little bit.”

She shook her head. “That’s fine. You got work to do.”

Now that Shadow wasn’t driving too fast and she’d gotten used to the motion of the truck, Lettie began to enjoy watching the world pass by at a fast clip. It was exciting to be able to travel more than halfway up one of the biggest hills around in a fraction of the time it would take on foot.

After turning off the main road, Shadow brought the truck to a stop at the end of a rough track. Lettie’s ears were ringing when he turned the motor off. The whisper of the wind in the leaves felt like a soft caress after all that loud clatter.

Shadow climbed out of the truck, and before Lettie had time to do the same, he’d come around to help her down to solid earth again. He held on to her hand a little longer than he needed to, and her mind went back to that kiss the other night. She’d plumb forgot she’d didn’t mean to encourage him. Coming along today to this private place was practically the same as saying *I like you and I want to do some more kissin’*.

But after a second, Shadow let go of her hand, much to Lettie’s disappointment, and pointed. “The place I want to show you is right over there.”

She noticed he leaned on his cane quite a bit as they climbed the hill. Lettie lingered behind him, enjoying the fine sight of his wide shoulders beneath his blue cotton shirt. The sleeves were rolled to the elbow, showing off his tan forearms. Lots of muscle there, and she could imagine how strong those arms would be wrapped around her.

They walked single file on a path not much wider than a deer track, through a tangle of underbrush. When the land opened up to a natural clearing, Shadow stopped. Lettie came up beside him. On the other side of the clearing, the land dropped away steeply. With no trees to block the view, they could look out over a wide stretch of valley below and folds of blue hills fading into the distance. A body couldn't live in these hills without seeing plenty of such pretty views, but this was something special. And when Lettie glanced at Shadow's face, she could see the place meant something to him.

"I used to camp here when I was a boy. Good place to get away from home for a while. There's a stream nearby, good for fishing. And for some reason, the bugs ain't too bad here. Maybe the breeze blows them away."

Lettie noticed a charred circle on the ground with a couple of large logs scooted up beside it. She imagined Shadow as a kid, sitting by a campfire all on his lonesome, thinking his deep thoughts.

"Used to think I might build a cabin here some day." He shook his head.

"Why not? It's as good a place as any. No one would bother you away up here."

He snorted. "My family would. Our still's only a little piece from here. Besides, I couldn't cut and haul the timber and stone for building a place. Not anymore." He smacked a hand against his leg. "Can you see me in the dead of winter trying to walk through the snowdrifts?"

Lettie nodded. Uneven ground and bad weather weren't friendly to a man with only one good leg. "Well, it's a pretty spot anyhow. Glad you showed it to me."

"Feel bad leaving you, but I've got to tend to business."

"I don't mind waiting. I'll close my eyes and nap in the sunshine like Bathsheba."

Shadow smiled, and the way the sunlight glinted on his eye, it was as blue as his shirt. Even bluer. She studied the black patch he wore over the other socket and wondered about what lay beneath.

When he saw where she was focusing, Shadow's pretty smile disappeared, and he ducked his head. "Better be going, then." He walked from the clearing, heading farther up hill.

Lettie understood why he couldn't bring her along. The location of a man's still was a secret shared with few. The more people knew, the more chance the secret might get out and the revenuers come a'calling. Hill folk were never supposed to squeal on each other to the feds. But sometimes out of spite or to get the agents looking away from that person's own illegal business, or sometimes even for money, a body might betray an enemy or even a neighbor. Illegal moonshine was big business and about to be bigger when that Volstead Act went into effect.

Shatner was scared about his business. Even the home-brewed beer he sold would soon be illegal. If he was going to stay open, he'd have to pay big bribes or else hide the beer and the whisky he bought from the Robesons and pretend to sell sarsaparilla and lemonade instead. Shatner's Shack might get raided and closed down. Where could Lettie find work if that happened?

The idea of moving someplace where there was factory work to be had scared her worse than riding in that truck. She'd never been away from her home in the hills. And she really didn't want to leave behind the first friend she'd made in years. The more she talked with Shadow, the more she liked him and wanted to be with him. No. She couldn't bring herself to leave Lorena. Somehow she'd find work and get by.

But that was a worry for another day. Lettie stretched out in the tall grass and closed her eyes against the bright sunshine heating her face. How good it was to be in this pretty place on this pretty day, about to have a picnic with a feller who was kind and sweet and handsome. She couldn't wish for anything more.

Chapter Nine

Shadow left Donnie in charge at the still, trusting him to tend the fire the way he'd been taught and finish the run all by himself for the first time ever. Donnie had helped often enough that the steps should have sunk into even his thick head.

Shadow hurried back down the slope, tripping over a root and nearly falling flat on his face in his hurry to get back to Lettie. He could hardly believe he'd come across her on the road when she'd been the top thing on his mind. He'd been imagining what he might say next time they met, how he'd apologize for his fumbling attempt at kissing her. *Sorry I grabbed at you the other night. Sorry I'm awful at kissing. Sorry I showed up on your doorstep like some miserable stray.*

She'd taken pity on him, letting him in and giving him her time, and he'd started to think he felt some kind of heat building between them. But why would a pretty woman like Lettie be attracted to a man with one eye and one good leg? Just because she'd been kind and talked with him a few times didn't mean she wanted him to keep coming around bothering her.

Then suddenly, there she was on the road in front of him, sunlight glinting along the plait of her hair so it appeared more gold than brown. She'd been nearly running from the truck, and Shadow was desperate to stop her and calm her fear.

Although if she actually feared him or didn't want to spend time with him, she wouldn't have gone riding with him, would she? Perhaps there was hope after all.

Shadow broke from the underbrush into the clearing like a bear crashing through the woods. Only grass and purple wildflowers waved in the empty meadow. Lettie was gone. Disappointment speared him like a bayonet.

Then Lettie popped up from the long grass, rubbing her eyes. "Guess I fell asleep. It's so peaceful here."

Enormous relief rushed through Shadow as he went to her. He lowered himself to the grass, crushing the long stalks beneath him, and massaged his stiff knee.

Lettie nodded at his leg. "You haven't told me about that. What happened?"

"A grenade went off in the trench. My leg got blasted with shrapnel and some hit my eye. Lost a little hearing too."

Her soft brown eyes offered sympathy, not pity. A fine line between the two, but Shadow felt the difference. "I shouldn't have brought it up. You probably don't much like to think about all that."

No, he didn't, but still it felt good to tell her. No one in his family had asked much about his injuries. They just accepted that he'd been wounded and moved on, expecting him to do the same.

"Or maybe it's better to squeeze on those memories a little, like getting pus from a wound," Lettie went on. "It's up to you. You can tell me more about it or not."

The noise, terror, and utter confusion of the moments both before and after the grenade exploded blotted out the sun-filled meadow and the pretty girl. Shadow shook his head. "No. I got nothing more to say."

"All right." Lettie nodded, and her understanding gaze moved from him to the army pouch Shadow had packed his lunch in. "Are you hungry? I shore am."

She took out the waxed-paper-wrapped pieces of chicken and handed Shadow a boiled egg to peel. She exclaimed over the big purple grapes and immediately popped one into her mouth. Her eyes closed as she sucked the sweet juice. Shadow's gaze riveted on her lovely throat as she swallowed. As Lettie started to devour a fried chicken leg, Shadow thought he'd never seen a woman take so much enjoyment in a meal, or one who seemed to be so very nearly starving.

He thought of her bleak shack that made his family home seem like some rich man's mansion in comparison. How hard her life must be, eking out a living and completely supporting herself. Made him want to feed her this way every day and to surround her with comforts and luxury.

Shadow liked watching Lettie take pleasure in the meal, but he could hardly eat, he was so excited at being with her. Hard to believe they'd shared the same piece of the world but never talked in all these years. Now he couldn't imagine *not* having her to talk to. When he'd seen Lettie as a girl, he'd thought she was pretty. Now her beauty stole his breath away. He couldn't stop dwelling on her day and night. He wished he could be content with the friendship she offered, but in truth he wanted much more than that.

There was no way he could ask for what he wanted, partly because he was too shy, but mostly because he knew Lettie had been used and discarded by too many men.

He didn't want her to think his friendship came with expectations of what she might do for him, or with him. Although Lettie acted matter-of-fact about her sexual experience, there was sadness in her eyes as if she hid bruises underneath her tough skin. She should be treated kind and gentle, and he'd be the man to do it.

Besides, he feared if they actually did get physical, she'd take one look at the gnarled flesh of his leg or his empty eye socket and turn away in disgust.

In less time than it had taken Camilia to pack the lunch, Lettie finished it off. She licked her greasy fingers and wiped them on the skirt of her dress. Shadow thought he'd be happy to suck those fingers clean for her. He could imagine their thickness in his mouth and the taste of salt and oil. His body reacted with a slow burn in his groin and a stiffening of his cock.

Lettie looked up and caught him staring. Bright red bloomed in her cheeks as it had the other day. "I ate too much. My manners ain't so good."

"No. I was just looking at you because you're so...pretty." There. He'd admitted out loud that he admired her looks.

She smiled and blushed more. "Well, ain't you nice."

Shadow supposed she'd heard it before. He wondered about those others she'd been with, the ones all the rumors were about. Only they weren't rumors, because Lettie admitted to them. How many men? Who? Probably some he knew, because strangers didn't often come around these parts. He didn't like the idea of Lettie smiling like this at other men. It made him upset, though he had no right to be. Lettie didn't belong to him then. She didn't now for that matter. He had no business judging things she'd done.

Lettie pressed her fingers against the corners of her mouth to smooth away the curve. "You make me smile too much."

"Ain't possible." He wished he could put happiness on her face every day. Shadow got carefully to his feet. "Come on. Let's get out of this sun awhile."

He led the way to the stream that flowed in the woods at the edge of the clearing.

"Pretty back in here," Lettie said, and the woods appeared even lovelier because they pleased her.

It was cool and shady by the water's edge. They knelt and scooped handfuls of water to drink. Though Shadow didn't exactly kneel. Instead, he sprawled on his belly.

After drinking his fill, he rolled onto his side and propped his head on his arm. He watched Lettie splash water on her flushed face and neck. The droplets rolled down her chest and disappeared into the neckline of her dress. He'd love to see where they went next, to trace their path over the hills of her breasts and the plane of her stomach. To see Lettie naked... Heat flared through him and settled in his groin.

He blew a frustrated breath and reached down to adjust himself in his trousers while Lettie was watching an oriole perching on a tree branch.

She turned toward him again and frowned. "You feelin' all right? You look a mite uncomfortable."

"Fine, just thinking about some trouble in my family."

"Sometimes seems like family's made to plague us, don't it?"

"There's always bad blood and fights going on. Right now it's my daddy and a couple of my brothers wanting different things for the business."

"And you caught up in the middle," she guessed.

He shrugged. He'd talked too much, something that had never been a problem for him before but with Lettie things spilled out like he was a broken dam. Still, family business wasn't something he should be discussing.

"Closest I got to a family is Widow Barrow," Lettie said. "I'd bring her down to live with me if I thought her people would have it. But I don't know how I could manage to feed both of us through a winter, or even if I'm going to be around."

Shadow sat up. "Why? Where would you be going?"

She bit her bottom lip. "Don't know. Maybe nowhere. Depends on what happens with Shatner's tavern after Prohibition starts. If he closes and I lose my job, I don't know what I'm going to do for work."

Shadow hadn't really imagined Lettie might move someplace else, but why shouldn't she light out and look for a better life? What if she disappeared one day, left before he had a chance to say... "I like you, Lettie." The words shot out of his mouth like a groundhog popping up from its hole.

But Lettie's smile grew wider and brighter than ever. "I like you too, Shadow. That ain't your real name, is it? What name did your mama give you?"

"Samuel. But from the time I could walk, I'd be trailing after my brothers, so..."

“Shadow,” she finished. “Well, maybe I’ll start calling you Samuel. You ain’t no shadow to your brothers in my eyes.”

The warm way she said it made him glow inside. “I expect I’d forget to answer if you used my given name. Not used to it. Shadow does me fine.”

“Shadow, then.” Lettie reached out and rested her hand on his forearm. “I like you too,” she repeated. “Been thinkin’ of you a lot these days.”

“Me too.” He leaned toward her, and his gaze shifted from her eyes to her lips and back again.

“The way I feel about you scares me some.” She moved closer, inclining her face toward his. “I been keeping to myself for quite a long time now. There’s nobody I’ve wanted to…”

Kiss. She wanted to kiss him. His eye patch didn’t scare her away. She *saw* him as no woman had bothered to in the past. She thought he was more than a shadow.

He closed his eye as her face filled his vision and her mouth settled on his, soft and warm as a mourning dove’s breast. This was so much better than the rushed, too-hard kiss he’d pecked on her lips the other night. Long, slow, and lingering, her mouth savored his, and just as he got used to that soft pressure, her tongue swept lightly over his lips. Heat flared through him, and his cock went from hard to granite in two seconds flat. He feared the wetness of her tongue probing into his mouth would make him come.

He groaned and parted his lips, allowing her exploration of his mouth and following her example. He’d seen his brothers plunge a tongue down some woman’s throat often enough to know people kissed openmouthed like this sometimes. But he hadn’t imagined how it would *feel* to have his tongue coiled around someone else’s.

If he hadn’t been such an awkward idiot, he would’ve tried this kissing thing a long time ago. But now he didn’t mind that he never had. No girl would’ve compared to Lettie. They would have been something to fill a basic need. She was much more than that. She opened him up in ways he hadn’t thought possible.

She caressed his cheek and slid her hand around the back of his neck to rest warmly there. As their kissing grew more penetrating, her fingers threaded into his hair and moved up his scalp. She bumped the tie of his patch, making it shift out of place.

Shadow jerked away from her to adjust the patch above his cheek. The scars began on his cheekbone, wrapped around his temple, and continued on to their terrible conclusion underneath the black leather patch. He could never let her see the crater there.

Lettie sat back on her heels and watched him. “Does it hurt?” she asked quietly.

“Not much anymore,” he lied. There were times when headaches would come in as unexpectedly as a powerful summer storm.

“Losing your sight must be awful.” She frowned. “Once I got punched in the face, and my eyes swoll up so I couldn’t see for a few days. Made me feel scared and helpless. Used to have nightmares I went blind.”

Shadow had his share of those. If he ever had to depend on his family to look after him because he lost sight in both eyes, he might as well shoot himself dead.

“You scared for me to see it?” Lettie focused her gaze on his. “However it looks, I won’t mind. You can trust me.”

Shadow hesitated. The last thing in the world he wanted was to have Lettie pull back the patch and see his injury. But she’d shared hard truths about herself without flinching. She’d just now admitted someone smacked her hard enough to make her eyes swell shut. She was a tough woman who survived no matter what. He could be that brave too.

He stopped adjusting the eye-patch tie and nodded. “All right, then.”

Shadow held absolutely still as Lettie went up on her knees and reached for the patch. She pulled it up, taking the strings along with it. He felt that tight binding leave his head. Lettie ruffled her hand through the hair where the laces had flattened it, and then... she traced a careful finger around his ruined eye socket.

“Not so bad, you see,” she said.

“No, I don’t,” he joked.

She laughed, then leaned in and kissed his cheek, right on one of the scars from which the battlefield surgeon had pulled a piece of metal.

Shadow froze. The gentle press of her lips and the puff of her warm breath against his face stopped his heart from beating. And then it began again, fast and fluttering in his throat.

Lettie hadn't recoiled at the sight of him. She wasn't pretending when she said she liked him and she wanted to touch and kiss him even more.

Relief and joy sang like a church choir in his soul as he reached out and pulled her close.

Chapter Ten

This wasn't what Lettie had expected to do this afternoon...or maybe it was. When she got into Shadow's truck, she'd known in her gut there'd be more kissing before the day was through. But she'd meant to stop it at that. Now, here she was with Shadow lying half on top of her, pressing her body into a crunchy drift of dead leaves and grinding against her with the hunger of a man who hasn't lain with a woman in a very long time.

And here she was, running her hands down his back and grabbing for more of him, pushing her hips up into him with the hunger of a woman who wants exactly the same thing. Lettie knew how quick it could go from pushing against each other in their clothes to peeling those clothes off. Already she wanted more of him, more of his skin sliding against hers and the soft hair of his groin tickling her belly. She *needed* it.

That hunger woke her right up. She dragged her mouth off Shadow's with a gasp. "Wait up now. We can't."

He nuzzled the side of her neck and murmured, "No. I know that." But his hardness still pushed into the place where her legs met with the determination of a farmer trying to get his ten acres plowed before the rains came in. And, oh, that demanding thrust made her ache with pure pleasure.

Lettie forgot about common sense and pawed at him some more, pulling his shirttail from his trousers and running her hands up the warm skin of his back. He shivered under her touch and, with a soft groan, went back to kissing her mouth. Next thing she knew, the front of her dress was unbuttoned and his hand inside it, cupping her breasts and squeezing as carefully as if they were peaches that might bruise.

Lettie broke off the kiss with a smack and reached to pull aside the camisole that covered her breasts. They popped up over the neckline, white as dumplings. Her brown nipples were so tight they ached, and she craved Shadow's touch. "You can put your mouth on 'em if you want to."

Wonder lit his eye as he slowly lowered his head. His hot mouth pulled and tugged at one nipple, then the other, making her pussy clench. Lettie closed her eyes and grabbed a fistful of his soft dark hair, letting it sift between her fingers before cupping the

back of his head. She sighed and gave in to the needs of her body, the quickening of her pulse, and the steady throb between her legs.

Before she lost her mind entirely and let nature take over, Lettie said, "I can't let you inside me, but there are other things I can do to ease your ache. Want me to?"

He lifted his head to look at her with that one beautiful blue eye, and it nearly tore her heart out to see the ruin of the other. Hard not to wince, but she would not let him see that on her face. Never. She kept her smile steady.

Shadow nodded. The way he'd looked at her tits as if he'd never seen a pair got her thinking he hadn't done much with a girl before. That made her feel powerful and in control. She gave him a gentle push onto his back and set to work on his buttons.

Shirt first, because she wanted to see his chest and stomach and run her hands up and down them. She pushed up his undershirt and feasted her eyes on his body. Not a lick of fat, only muscle and bone and a stomach so tight she could bounce a coin off it if she'd a mind to. Lettie bent to kiss and lick and nibble at the small brown discs of his nipples and all over that fine chest and stomach.

Meanwhile, her hands got working on the buttons of his fly, freeing his cock, which sprang up like a sapling shooting out of the ground in spring. She took his erection in hand and slid her fist up and down its solid length. It was a pleasure to watch Shadow's eye close and his lips part as he gave a choked groan. Oh yes, he liked this well enough. Lettie smiled smugly and rubbed harder on the thick column that filled her hand. She wished it was filling other places and reminded herself sternly that wasn't going to happen.

Poor Shadow was so starved for her touch it didn't take more than a dozen strokes to bring him trembling to the edge and over. His seed spurted onto her hand and his belly. Lettie gave a few more strokes, finishing him off before she set his cock on his stomach. She slid her hand up to his chest again. The beating of his heart under her hand reminded her of a moth hitting against a lamp, struggling to get at something it could never reach.

Lettie snuggled against Shadow's side, her leg on top of one of his and her sex pressed to his hip bone. She rocked a bit, trying to soothe her own need, but only making it worse.

Sunlight pierced between the leaves overhead, dappling Shadow's skin with light and shadow. Lettie watched the shadows move with the swaying of the branches until at last, with a sigh, Shadow opened his eye and came back to her.

"That was... I never... Thank you."

Those last two weren't words she'd often heard from a man. So polite Shadow was. Considering his family she wondered how he'd learned such manners.

Lettie smiled. "You're surely welcome."

"Can I... Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked.

More words she'd heard far too little of, and they made her smile wider.

"Well...if you'd put your hand right down here." She guided his hand to her pussy and showed him where to stroke.

"Wouldn't it be better, um, underneath your skirt and petticoat?"

"I don't wear no petticoat, only my drawers, but yes."

While Shadow cleaned up the stickiness on his belly and tucked his cock away, Lettie hiked up her dress and pulled down her drawers. Chills ran all over her skin like tickling ants and her insides trembled, she was so het up about him touching her.

And looking at her too, because Shadow wasn't content with reaching between her legs and rubbing hard and careless like some men might. He parted her legs and gazed on her private parts, the awe in his eye making her burn and shiver at the same time. Lettie's body yearned toward him, lifting at the hips.

"Beautiful." Shadow's whisper was a caress. He put out his hand and touched her seam, trailing a finger along it until he found the little nub from which pleasure came.

When she responded by moaning, he rubbed lightly. "Like this?"

Lettie moaned again. "Just like that." *And more, more, more!*

She settled in to enjoy the slow build of tension that would end in a shower of sparks. Nothing she hadn't experienced before, except this time she was with a man she cared more for than anyone she'd ever met. He looked at her and listened to her when they talked, as if he respected her opinions.

It'd be easy to float away on pleasure in the darkness behind her closed eyes, but Lettie forced hers open to gaze into Shadow's face, so serious. With every coaxing stroke of his finger on her bud or into her wet cleft, he checked her face to make sure he was

pleasing her. He was connected to her and aware of her, unlike most of the men she'd been with.

She met his gaze, not closing her eyes even as she began to lose herself in the motion of his circling finger. She was only dimly aware of the woods around them, the soft breeze tickling her skin, the bed of leaves beneath her backside, the bubbling water of the stream nearby.

He bent toward her as if he'd kiss her, then stayed poised over her and looking into her eyes. Lettie pushed herself into his hand, wanting even more. And he understood her silent message, because he stroked faster and pushed his fingers deeper within her.

The yearning grew beyond bearing, then burst—like sourdough yeast rising too high and collapsing. A powerful river of feeling rushed through her, and Lettie groaned as she was washed away.

When she came back into her mind, she was gasping like a landed fish beside the rushing stream, and Shadow was smiling wide at her reaction.

“Guess I did it right,” he said.

“Guess all men is roosters who need to puff themselves up and crow,” she teased.

He pressed his palm flat against her stomach and rubbed little circles while the quakes of her climax died away. She wished they could do more, wished she could feel his cock moving inside her, but for today, at least, that wasn't to be.

Lettie pulled her camisole and drawers into place, buttoned the bodice of her dress, and pulled her skirt down. After she'd put herself to rights, she glanced at Shadow, who was hiding his empty eye socket with the patch again.

This part after sex was always uncomfortable, wondering what the fellow was thinking and waiting for him to make an excuse to be rid of her. Lettie had lived it too many times. But after he was dressed, Shadow didn't seem in any hurry to leave. He didn't claim he needed to go back to the still or ask if she could walk home on her own. Instead, he rose and pulled her up to lead her back to the clearing.

They sat and looked at the view some more and talked about so many things as the sun moved slowly lower in the sky.

At last, Lettie had to be the one to end their day. “‘Spect I'll be late for work and Shatner will dock my pay.”

“I’ll drive you there. You won’t be late,” Shadow promised.

Pride and happiness warmed her as he squired her down to the truck like a man a’courting. He swung by her house so she could drop off her sack of groceries, and he would have delivered her right in front of the tavern, but Lettie suggested he should park down the road a ways.

“Best people don’t see us together. It’d get back to your family, and they wouldn’t like it.”

Shadow frowned. “There ain’t no shame in us bein’ together. I care for you and I don’t care who knows.”

Lettie loved him for that but still insisted he drop her off around the bend from Shatner’s. “Life’ll be easier for both of us if we keep it quiet.”

She flew the rest of the way to the tavern on winged feet and continued to float through the evening, smiling so much the customers commented on it.

“What’s gone and cracked that granite face?” Buster Kitterling, one of the regulars, asked as she set down his glass of beer.

“She’s got a secret, and you can bet that secret’s got a swinging dick,” his pal, Harvey Waite, sneered. “Who you spreading ’em for, Lettie?”

That night, not even their crude teasing could erase the smile from inside her.

Chapter Eleven

One sweet taste of Lettie only made Shadow crave more. Thoughts of her filled the rest of his day as he returned to the still. He replayed their time together in detail over and over, pausing often on the part where she'd kissed the scar around his eye socket and hadn't flinched.

As he and Donnie bottled whisky, Shadow grew hot and hard all over again, almost feeling her hand on his cock. He ached for more of her palm wrapped around him. After a while, he let Donnie keep bottling while he went into the woods and rubbed one off. But his own rough strokes were hardly satisfying when all he wanted was more of Lettie.

What he desired more than anything was to push inside her and feel her surrounding him in her heat. But he wouldn't ask for that. There were enough of his brothers' by-blows running around the county to remind him of the risk of getting a gal pregnant. He'd never put Lettie in that position, not unless they were...

It was far too soon to be imagining marriage. He and Lettie barely knew each other. What had happened between them was too new to begin planning a future. And yet, as Shadow returned to helping Donnie load a wagon and start a new mix of mash, he was already thinking that way.

"You go ahead and add the grains," he told Donnie. "Someday you might take over here. You know Tommy isn't too good at getting the recipe right. I'd only trust you to run things."

"Me?" Donnie's eyes lit up. The dimmest bulb in his family, probably no one had ever had any expectations of Donnie.

"Yeah, you. You never forget a step, and if we start another still, somebody's going to need to run this one."

Maybe if he trained his replacement, Shadow's family wouldn't hate him quite as much for leaving. He sure as hell wouldn't bring Lettie into this life. The Robesons would never accept the whore's daughter as his wife, and even if they did, the thought of Lettie suffering through a Robeson family dinner and Tommy's leers was unbearable. If they were to have a future together, it must be far away from Lorena.

The only question was would Lettie be willing to go with him? He wasn't ready to ask her yet, but in the meantime, he would continue to prepare.

*

Summertime was made for lovers, Shadow thought as he followed Lettie down an overgrown path through the woods, an empty pail in each hand. Plenty of places to meet without cold weather keeping them indoors, and the sweltering summer days only added to the heat constantly simmering inside him, ready to erupt at Lettie's slightest look or smile or touch.

"Patch is just yonder," she said. "Hope you don't mind getting scratched up."

So long as he was with her, he didn't mind any discomfort, not the annoying whine of mosquitoes or the muggy air that made his shirt cling to his body like a second skin. Sure it was hot and buggy and brambles grabbed at his legs, but watching Lettie's hips sway as she walked in front of him made the journey worth it.

"Don't know why they call wild raspberries 'red' when they get black before they're ripe." Lettie glanced back over her shoulder at him. "You keeping up all right?"

Shadow nodded. "Just fine." Actually, he was lurching along like a three-legged dog, but she'd never hear him complain.

"Here we are." She stopped short, and he ran into her, which was fine because it gave him an opportunity to slip an arm around her, kiss her sun-warmed hair, and inhale her earthy scent.

Lettie turned in his arms to wrap her hands around his neck. Standing on tiptoe, she gave him a long, hot kiss. "Don't you get us fooling around now. We've got work to do," she scolded when she finally pulled away.

Shadow clanged the empty metal pails together and held them up. "I'm ready."

"Then let's get to pickin'." Lettie waded into the canes sporting green leaves and clusters of red and black berries.

Shadow followed her, struggling to get through the thorny stalks. But once he found a spot, he was surrounded by clusters of berries so ripe they easily fell from the bush into his hand. He tasted one of the berries, crunching down on seeds and swallowing sweet-tart juice. He concentrated on picking until he'd filled a pail two inches deep with berries before moving to a new spot in the patch.

Gnats floated around his nose and eyes, while vicious deerflies and mosquitoes attacked. He spent more time swatting at them than picking raspberries. Sunshine bore down on his head like a giant's hand pressing on him, and sweat trickled down his sides and back. His pail was only half-full, but he felt all done.

He looked over at Lettie, who'd tied a red calico kerchief round her head to keep the sweat from her eyes. She wasn't slowing down one bit, working her way steadily from cane to cane and stripping them clean of ripe berries. She would've made a good soldier, Shadow thought. She'd have slogged through mud, snow, or heat with a fifty-pound haversack on her back and a rifle in her hands without taking a rest.

Her relentlessness inspired him to work harder, and he got picking again until his pail was nearly full. Deciding to set the full pail out of the way before he started filling the next one, Shadow retraced his steps out of the raspberry patch. But a bramble wrapped itself around his leg and clung with all its thorns, tripping him up. He dropped the pail as he fell, and his hard-won berries went flying.

Shadow cursed and scrambled to his feet, rubbing at a scratch across his cheek. He was thirsty, his head ached, and sweat stung the scratches on his face, hands, and arms. Summer heat was *not* for lovers, and goddamned berry picking wasn't romantic.

Lettie looked over with a smile on her shining red face. "You okay?"

"Sure. Having the time of my life." He scooped up the bucket and as many berries as he could salvage from the ground.

"It'll all be worth it when I make you some raspberry cobbler," she promised. "Tastes like summer on a plate."

She popped another berry between her purple-stained lips, and Shadow's aches and pains faded away—all except the one in his pants. He needed to taste the sweetness of those berries on her mouth, not on a plate.

He started picking with a dogged determination inspired by his need to get Lettie out of the thin cotton dress that molded to her body. Good Lord, he swore he could even see the outline of her nipples through the sweat-damp material. He grew so focused on the task that Lettie's voice startled him when she spoke again.

"Whew! I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get cooled down. I say we've picked enough."

“But I didn’t fill my second pail.” Was he crazy? Shadow almost bit his tongue for mentioning it.

Lettie laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ve got more than I need to make the cobbler, and these berries ain’t much good for drying. You got to eat them while they’re fresh.”

Again she led the way—out of the berry patch and the woods and down the slope to her place in the hollow. Shadow grew more excited with every step, and it wasn’t because she’d promised to cook him a meal tonight.

They washed up at the pump in the yard. First Lettie, dunking her head under the water and sloshing it all over her chest and legs until her dress was soaked and clung even closer to her body. Then Shadow.

The ice-cold well water sluicing over his face, neck, and chest brought his temperature down to near normal. He combed his hair back with his fingers and took off his shirt to squeeze the water out of it.

Lettie watched him with such hunger in her eyes it got him flustered and hot all over again.

“Don’t put that shirt back on. Whyn’t you come on in the house.” Her voice was low and husky.

Shadow nearly dropped his shirt and the pail of berries right there in the yard to follow her. He was her good dog, not even fighting the invisible leash she had him on.

Once inside, their clothes came off faster than a greased pig in a chute. Between kissing and hugging and touching each other all over, they stripped down to their underwear.

Shadow leaned into Lettie, kissing her so deep he forgot to breathe, and letting his hands slide through her damp hair which she’d freed from its kerchief to tumble down her back. When she stepped away, he stumbled toward her.

She took his hand and led him back to the lean-to off the main room. A built-in wooden bed frame took up most of the space. Lettie’s few dresses hung from hooks on the wall, and that was all she had. It pained him that a woman so generous in spirit had so little to call her own. He wished he’d brought her something today, a gift to show how much he appreciated her.

She stood at the foot of her bunk, arms folded across her breasts barely concealed by a thin chemise. She wore a raggedy pair of drawers that ended above the knee. Shadow had never seen anything so beautiful as this woman in her threadbare undergarments. Abundant brown hair swirled around her face and shoulders and he could hardly wait to plunge his hands into that hair again. But her expression was tense and nervous, so he held back, though what Lettie had to be nervous about he couldn't imagine. *He* was the one with no experience.

"I want you to know..." She fell silent, rubbing at a mosquito bite on her shoulder.

"What?" he prodded gently.

"I ain't done this in a long while, and I want you to know this"—she gestured back and forth between them—"means something to me. I hope you feel the same."

"I do." He took a step toward her, hands outstretched. "I've never been close to a woman before, not talking to one like how you and me talk together, and not physically neither. This means everything to me."

Lettie looked into his face. He tried to reassure her with his gaze that he wouldn't use then abandon her as others had done. At last, she nodded, and her tense mouth relaxed. She held out a hand, and Shadow took it.

His heart beat so hard he swore he could feel it in his throat as Lettie climbed onto the bed and he heaved himself up beside her. The old wooden frame groaned, and the corn-husk-filled mattress sank beneath their combined weight.

With his leg the way it was, Shadow couldn't kneel over her, so Lettie straddled him instead. She sat across his groin, the pressure of her sex against his erection making him gasp. She stroked her hands from his shoulders, down his chest, and over his abdomen. Her hot palms on his skin made him shiver, and when she drew across him with her fingernails, his stomach twitched.

"I've dreamt of you here with me," she murmured. "Hoped it would happen."

He nodded. If she only knew how many times he'd dreamed the same thing, how he'd worked himself to climax while thinking about her. "I have too."

Lettie bent over him, the tips of her breasts brushing against his chest through the chemise as she kissed him. He had to see and feel them naked, cup them in his hands, and

take them into his mouth again. He pulled at the chemise, and Lettie dragged it over her head and tossed it aside.

Now he could feast his gaze on almost all her body. Sunburned arms and neck ended where her dress normally covered her. The rest of her body was pale like a lily. As she sat above him, he trailed his hands all over her arms, her shoulders, her rib cage...her lovely breasts. He weighed one in each hand, flicking his thumbs over the rosy tan nipples and smiling when Lettie sucked in a breath. Only after he'd explored the peach-size globes completely did he finally pull her down so he could take one into his mouth. Mm, it tasted of sweaty woman, and, in his mind at least, the sweet-tart flavor of raspberries.

The weight of her body filling his arms and pressed against him was solid, no longer a fantasy but real. Shadow reveled in the flavor of her skin and the tight little buds of her nipples against his tongue. He could almost be satisfied with this and nothing more. But then Lettie began to rock her body, grinding on his cock, and he nearly lost his mind.

As she moved to pull off his drawers, Shadow tensed, afraid about her seeing the mass of scar tissue like bark on his injured leg. His kneecap had been shattered and the leg pieced back together as best as could be expected. His leg would never bend right again. But Lettie didn't even hesitate at the sight of his leg. She seemed more focused on getting him naked and taking hold of his cock. Once she did, Shadow forgot all about how his leg looked. The pleasure of her hand wrapped around his erection blew everything else out of his mind.

Crouched between his spread legs, Lettie rubbed his length for a bit, then bent over it. She looked at him, her lips parted, and Shadow knew what she was about to do. He took a breath and braced himself, afraid his climax would come roaring through him the moment her mouth touched his cock.

But he was able to hold on as she licked him as delicately as a cat sipping milk. He clutched the homespun sheet and groaned when her lips wrapped around him. His length disappeared into her mouth until he was completely engulfed. Heat and wetness, sweltering as the summer's day, consumed him. Her tongue swirled around his shaft, and he nearly lost his mind.

Shadow lay back against the pillow, forcing himself to relax. Like he'd done during battle, he removed himself a bit from what was happening. As a soldier, that discipline had kept him from running, screaming, in the opposite direction from the mortar rounds. Now it kept him from coming too soon. Through half-closed eyes, he watched Lettie's head bob up and down. He reached to touch the crown of her head and play with a lock of her soft hair. A powerful feeling took him, and he wanted to cry out that he loved her. Instead, he cried out in pleasure as his climax rushed through him.

His loud groan and the tensing of his body must have warned Lettie he was coming, but she didn't let go of him. She swallowed what came from him and only then drew back, releasing his glistening wet length. She placed his cock on his belly and petted it once as he'd seen her stroke her cat, then she squirmed up to lie beside him on the bed, head propped on hand.

Her brown eyes gleamed as she smiled. "So what do you think?"

Shadow shook his head. She'd struck him mute again. He had no words for the ecstasy she'd given him or the emotion that swelled in his chest. Sometimes silent appreciation was best.

Chapter Twelve

Lettie had collected all the herbs she needed for her concoction. Some grew wild. Others she'd gleaned from Widow Barrow's herb garden. The recipe she'd also gotten from the widow back when Agnes had first taken Lettie under her wing and advised her about planting, harvesting, canning, soapmaking, and more private business.

"If you're a'goin' to keep sparkin' with fellers, you'd best take care," Agnes had warned her. "Don't want to end up in a family way, do ya?"

Lettie had listened closely, committing to memory Agnes's recipe for a tea to help prevent babies.

"It ain't guaranteed. Only keeping your legs locked is a sure way to keep from hatchin' out chicks you ain't ready to raise. Be smart, gal. Don't make yourself more trouble than you already got."

Taking Agnes's words to heart and shaken by that one missed cycle, Lettie had stopped inviting men home soon after. She'd had no need to drink the special tea in years, but now... Well, there was only so long a girl and her fella could hold off on sex once they'd started foolin' around, and she wanted Shadow with an itch that wouldn't ease.

In her kitchen, she sorted juniper leaves, pennyroyal, and wild carrot root and hung them to dry in bunches. She remembered the taste of the tea as being bitter and bringing on some cramping, which she supposed meant it was doing its job.

As she cooked herself a meal of collard greens and a sliver of fatback, Lettie lost herself in memories of the other day when she'd had supper with Shadow in this kitchen. He hadn't sat back on his chair waiting for her to serve his meal like most men would, but asked if there was a potato he could peel to help her. Once he'd started hacking away at the potato, he'd admitted to never doing a lick of work in a kitchen before.

"The womenfolk in my family do all the cooking, and in the army, there was a mess hall cook. I haven't fired up a kitchen stove in my life, but I *have* roasted wild game over a campfire, and I'm a dab hand at heating a can of beans."

Lettie laughed and showed him how to peel the potato without wasting half the good parts. Preparing the meal together made the stew taste better than when she only made it for herself. They'd laughed and talked the whole time they were cooking and eating. Lettie could hardly remember why she'd ever thought Shadow was silent. She

wished everyone could see this side of him and then was selfishly glad he only showed it to her.

The only fly in the ointment that night had been when Shadow tried to give her some money right before he left—to help out with whatever she needed, he said. Lettie had flashed back on times she'd seen her mama taking men's money, and she about blasted Shadow's ears with her shouting. "You don't *pay* me. I never took no money from a man in my life."

Shadow's eyes went wide. "No. I didn't mean it like that. I just thought... I mean, I just wanted to help..."

"Well, you just keep your thoughts and your helping to yourself," she snapped. "I don't need nothing from you. I'm fine on my own."

"I'm sorry." He approached her with his hands raised in surrender. "Sorry, Lettie. I didn't mean anything by it."

Her ruffled feathers had smoothed right away at the quiet petting of his voice, and she'd apologized too for yelling. Then Shadow had taken her in his arms, and they'd gone on to show each other with kisses how sorry they both were.

At the smell of smoke, Lettie started from her memory of that night. Her collard greens were burning in the fry pan. She took the pan off the stove, then picked up a bucket to fetch water from the pump outdoors.

She opened her front door, and, for the beat of a hummingbird's wing, her heart leapt with excitement because she thought the man standing on her porch was Shadow come to see her. He couldn't keep away from her!

But then the man turned around, and her stomach dropped to her soles. It was Tommy Robeson. Other than the shock of dark hair, he looked nothing like Shadow.

There were very few things she could think of he might want from her, and she wished to hell she had her knife handy.

He tipped his hat like a gentleman come to call. "Miss Lettie, ain't you a sight for sore eyes. Ain't seen you lately."

"I'm at the tavern every night. You can see me there." She started to close the door, but Tommy braced it open with a foot.

“You’re too busy there. Don’t have a minute to spare on me. So I thought I’d come a’callin’.” He bared his teeth like a wolf. He made her skin crawl, yet there was a tiny hint of Shadow in that smile. It was bewildering to see a glimpse of the face she loved most in the face she hated most.

“I’m busy.” She stared at his foot, wondering what she’d do if he didn’t move it. She charted her course to the carving knife on the kitchen counter and calculated whether she could get it before he grabbed for her.

It was a surprise Tommy hadn’t come bothering her before now. Because of her reputation, there’d been a few uninvited male visitors she’d had to drive off. Tommy wouldn’t be the first, but he was just the one most likely not to take “no” for an answer.

Bathsheba came running across the yard, meowing a welcome. She headed for the open door, unafraid of the stranger standing there. But before she reached it, Tommy scooped the cat up and held her in his arms.

“Sweet pussy,” he crooned as he stroked her fur. “Soft as a muff. She’d make a nice pair of mittens come winter.” He rubbed between her ears, grasping her neck in his big hand. The cat grew irritated and began to squirm.

“Put her down!” Lettie ordered, as if she had a voice Tommy might listen to.

“Bad-tempered pussies gotta be taught a lesson. Need their claws pulled, and if that don’t work, sometimes you just have to drown ’em.”

Lettie swallowed, terrified for Bathsheba. With one twist of his wrist, Tommy could kill her. “All right, we can talk a little, but put her down.”

“I like the look of you, girl, and I believe we can come to an arrangement. You give me something I want, and I bring you presents. I’m not tryin’ to take something for nothing.”

He’d moved his foot from the doorway, but now he held her cat captive, forcing her to listen to his offer. Inside, Lettie cursed him up one way and down the other and pummeled him with her fists, but outside she kept her expression so cool butter wouldn’t melt on it.

“Sorry, Tommy. I don’t do that.” Though her body quivered, she kept her voice from shaking.

Tired of being held, Bathsheba began growling and squirming harder. Her claws raked across Tommy's hand, and when he let go, she sprang from his arms and streaked past Lettie into the house.

Before Tommy could stop shaking his torn hand and cursing, Lettie slammed the door and slid the bolt.

"Aw, come on, now. You can't stay in there forever," his muffled voice came through the door. "You know I could break this down if I'd a mind to."

Lettie darted across the room and snatched up her knife. She didn't know if she could drive it into a man's flesh if push came to shove, but she was willing to find out.

In the end, Tommy proved to be more bluff and bluster than anything else. He huffed and he puffed like the wolf in that old story, then, after a few more threats, he went away, throwing a last "You'd better watch out" behind him.

Lettie leaned against the door, breathing as hard as if she'd run to the top of the mountain and back down. Now that Tommy had turned his eyes her way, would she ever be safe again? And what did this mean as far as her friendship with Shadow went? Tommy was his kin. She could hardly tell Shadow his brother was hounding her and to please keep him away. It'd come to blows between the brothers. If Shadow had to choose between his kin and her, Lettie couldn't guarantee which way that tug-o-war would go. Blood usually trumped everything.

She wasn't ready to sour this sweet thing she and Shadow had growing between them, so she decided to keep what had happened to herself. Tommy probably wouldn't say anything, and Shadow need never know. Meantime, if Tommy kept pestering her, she'd figure out some way to handle it.

*

Over the next week, Lettie kept her knife on her almost all the time. When she walked home from Shatner's late at night, she took different routes from the main road. But nobody bothered her. Tommy didn't come into the tavern, and she hoped he'd found some other gal to pester.

With that bit of darkness put to rest, Lettie found plenty of time to enjoy the sunlight with Shadow. They spent every free minute together.

One blazing-hot day, they swam in the old rock quarry, diving down as far as each could hold their breath, trying to plumb the bottom. But it was forty feet deep, maybe more in parts, so of course they never reached it. The rush of cold water over bare skin made Lettie feel like a fish, or maybe like a bird that could fly underwater. She could have spent another hour swimming, but Shadow's bad leg cramped up, so they swam to shore.

She ignored his protests and massaged the scarred flesh. The warmth of her hands eased his cramp and the pain in his knee. He practically purred like Bathsheba, eyes closed and a quiet groan coming from between his lips.

"I'll do this every day if it helps," she promised.

"It helps. Your hands feel so good."

"Do they now?" Lettie massaged higher, and a little higher still, until her fingers brushed his sac and his cock grew stiff. The sight of that hard rod with its ridges of veins and dark flushed head made her long to climb on top of him and bury him inside her. But today wouldn't be that day. Not here. Not quite yet.

Instead, she took him in her hands and brought him off that way again, and afterward he did the same for her. As she squeezed her eyes shut against the sunlight and bucked beneath his touch, Lettie thought she would show Shadow how to use his mouth on her—if he didn't mind. In her experience, most men did. In fact, one of the few who'd done that thing with his tongue was the very first man to make love to her, Herbert Whitlow.

Memories of the storekeeper who'd kept her a dirty secret from his wife humiliated Lettie now. She'd been so young and proud that such an important and rich man was interested in *her*. He'd told her he loved her, and she willingly believed, convinced he'd leave the wife who didn't understand him. He'd whisk Lettie off to someplace exciting like Frankfort, where they would live happily ever after.

"Lettie?" Shadow's voice brought her back to the present. She opened her eyes to look at him. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. It was good. I just..." Did she dare share her past with him? She'd never talked to anyone about what had happened, not even Agnes Barrow. Would Shadow really want to hear about her time with another man?

“Tell me,” he said firmly, taking hold of her hand and lying beside her. His gaze was so concerned and loving that Lettie’s fear of driving him away with talk of her past eased some.

She took a breath. “I was remembering Mr. Whitlow. You heard about all that, I suppose.”

He nodded. The excitement of the shopkeeper being called out on his cheating in front of a store full of people by his wife, who then pulled Lettie out in the street by her hair was not something Shadow could have missed hearing about.

Lettie’s cheeks began to burn. “I really was a dumb kid. I hardly thought about his wife, and I was sure he’d love me forever. Makes me cringe how green I was.”

“You *were* a kid,” Shadow pointed out. “That man took advantage of you.”

“I was a long time getting past that,” she admitted. “He hurt me real bad. And I kept trying to take away the ache with this man or that one, till I got smarter and quit all that. I hope it don’t bother you too terrible much what all I done.”

Shadow frowned. “I don’t blame you. I feel sor— Not sorry. I feel sympathy for you. It must have been hard, not only to have that man break your heart, but to have everyone for miles around know about it and judge you for it. A horrible thing to happen to a girl. You must’ve been real lonely. I sure can understand that feeling.”

Lettie’s throat tightened. She couldn’t swallow, and her eyes blurred. The one thing no one had *ever* offered her, including her mama, was sympathy. Even Agnes Barrow had clicked her tongue and said something about lying in the bed she’d made for herself. Shadow’s kindness when most men would scorn her for her easy virtue touched Lettie so much she couldn’t stand it. She threw her arms around him, burying her face in his neck and kissing it.

She didn’t need to say anything. Shadow didn’t either. He just held her in his arms until her tears ended.

Chapter Thirteen

More and more, Shadow left Donnie in charge of the still. The nights he used to sleep in the shed to avoid going back home, he now spent in Lettie's shack in the hollow, sleeping beside her. He could hardly bear to be apart from her, and if he had to miss seeing her for more than a day, he grew irritated and anxious. Luckily, his brothers were so caught up in their own business, they hardly noticed he wasn't around much. Useful to be the ignored younger brother sometimes.

But one day, as Shadow headed out from the still to go to Lettie's, Tommy, loading up a delivery, called out to him. "Hey, Patch, where you off to in such a hurry? You been cutting out of here a helluva lot lately."

Shadow threw him a glance. "Tired. I'm goin' home."

"Oh yeah? From what I seen, you ain't been comin' home at all lately. You dippin' your wick in some purty young thing? Some gal who ain't too particular."

"No." The hair on his neck lifted. If he were a dog, he'd growl at Tommy. The man could never keep his big mouth shut or mind his own business.

Tommy hopped off the bed of the truck and swaggered over. "Son, if you ain't gettin' laid, you need to. You're 'bout as tense as a cat walkin' a ridgepole. Sarah Jane's real friendly, and if I tell her to, she'll do you."

"Don't need your castoffs." Shadow resumed walking, but Tommy trailed behind him.

"Aw, come on. Brothers should be able to talk about this. I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours," Tommy pressed. "Got my eye on that sweet little piece in Bullfrog Holler."

Shadow stopped stock-still, his body freezing up at Tommy's mention of Lettie. His hands curled into fists, and he half turned, ready to plow one into his brother's smug face. He managed to hold back. Tipping Tommy off that he cared for Lettie or that she was the girl he was seeing would only bring trouble to both of them. This wasn't the time to reveal his hand. Not yet.

"Biding my time, but I'll have her someday," Tommy added.

Shadow uncurled his fingers and stopped biting the inside of his cheek. "Best tend to your wife and leave off messing with other women."

Tommy scowled. “Best tend to your own business and leave off telling me what to do.” He turned and stalked back toward the wagon.

Shadow hurried as fast as his legs would take him down the hill and over to Lettie’s place. He reached there shortly after the skies opened up and a rainstorm swept down into the valley.

“You’re soaking wet!” Lettie greeted him. She helped him out of his clothes and into her bed. Although Tommy’s words worried him, he didn’t want to bring mention of his brother into their private time together. He’d warn Lettie about Tommy before he left.

The day grew dark as rain clattered on the roof and dripped through the cracks. He and Lettie lay side by side, fingers entwined, not fooling around since Lettie was on her monthly. Shadow didn’t mind. It was a pleasure simply to lie there talking together. His feeling for her grew stronger and deeper than ever, and he knew it would destroy him if anything bad should happen to her. He’d kill Tommy before he’d let his brother manhandle her in any way.

But it would be better if it didn’t come to violence at all. Maybe it was time for him to ask Lettie about leaving with him. Would she say yes? Did she care for him that much? He formed the question in his mind and licked his lips, ready to ask it, but before he’d screwed up his courage, Lettie interrupted his plan.

Measuring the length of her hand against his, palm to palm, she asked, “Do you believe in haints?”

Another time. He’d wait for a better time. He answered, “Did as a boy, but I grew up.”

Lettie laced her fingers through his. “Oh no. They’re real. There’s so many stories, they can’t all be made up from nothin’. D’you ever hear the one about Octavia Hatcher from over Pikeville way?”

Shadow had, but she was so excited, he let her tell it.

“In 1891, the lady took sick after having a baby and fell into a deep sleep. She died, and they buried her. Pretty soon more people fell ill with this sleeping sickness, except they woke up from it. The doctor started thinking maybe Mrs. Hatcher weren’t so dead after all. So they dug her up.” Lettie’s voice grew hushed so he could hardly hear it above the pelting of rain on the tin roof. “They say there was claw marks all inside the

coffin, and the face of the dead woman's mouth was open in a scream. She'd fought for her last dyin' breath! To this day, if you walk certain places near where she lived, you can see the misty form of a woman a'walkin and a'wailin, probably searching for her baby." She shuddered. "Don't that just chill your blood?"

"Awful," Shadow agreed, but he was enjoying cuddling Lettie so much that it was hard to feel much horror.

She was so caught up in the thrill of ghost-tale telling that he offered her one. "When I was a boy, I was climbing in the rocks up on Jasper Peak. The ones where they say Indians used to live. I was digging around in the dirt and come up with a few arrowheads. Then I found this big long bone knife. It was pearly gray and brittle, but still sharp on one edge. The moment I grasped the handle, I got a weird feeling, but I was so excited, I took it home to show off to my brothers."

Lettie gasped. "Oh no! Everybody knows not to touch Indian things. That's like askin' to bring a haint home with you. What happened?"

"Tommy said it was likely made from a human bone. Said he'd heard about such cursed weapons, and I should put it back. But I figured that was 'cause he wanted it for himself, so I hid that bone knife under the bottom of my wardrobe where none of my brothers would find it."

That part of the story was true enough, but now Shadow added on a flourish of ghostly trappings to give Lettie a chill.

"That night, I was lying in my bed sleeping when I heard a voice a'calling in some foreign tongue, an Indian tongue, I reckoned. I woke up and stopped breathin', because in my doorway was the dark figure of a man standin' there looking at me. I tell you I came close to wetting my bed."

Beside him, Lettie's body was as tense as if she was balancing a wasps' nest, and she clung to him even tighter. "What'd you do?"

Shadow brought his voice down low. "Well, I was scared out of my life. Threw the covers over my head and prayed to God to save me. Then I took another peek out, and the thing had moved closer to my bed. Just standin' there. I kept staring back because I feared if I covered my head again, it'd get me right there where I lay."

She propped herself up, and her eyes were as wide as saucers. “But it just kept moving closer.”

He nodded. “Every time I’d so much as blink, it’d be a leetle closer and a leetle closer, until it was at the foot of my bed.”

“Why didn’t you scream for somebody to come help you?”

“I knew my brothers couldn’t help. This thing come from beyond the grave, and it was after me. I could feel the evil oozing from it. The voice started talking in that foreign tongue again, echoing like it come from far away. I barely blinked, and the haint moved again, so it was right beside me, a shadowy shape sort of floating there in the darkness,” Shadow whispered. “And I said...”

Lettie leaned close to hear.

“Take back your old knife!” He shouted and seized her.

Her scream about deafened him, and she slapped him in the chest. “You’re not funny. I could’ve dropped dead from fear.”

He laughed and squeezed her in a hug, feeling the rapid beating of her heart against his side. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Yes, you did.” Her voice was muffled against his chest, and she bit him lightly in punishment.

Shadow chuckled. “Yeah, I did.” Because it was sweet having her shivering against him as they told each other ghost tales on a rainy afternoon.

“Lettie, I need to ask you something,” he said after they’d lain for a while in silence, listening to the rain on the roof. “Has my brother Tommy ever bothered you since that one time at the tavern?”

He felt her heart beat beneath his palm. Three beats before she answered. “No. Not really. I’m used to handling men like Tommy.”

“If he ever says or does anything you don’t like, let me know. I’ll handle it for you. I’ve been thinking...” More than thinking, and now it was time to ask her the big question. “I been making plans about leaving here and going someplace far away from my family.”

Lettie pulled back to look up at him. “You’re gonna leave?”

He nodded. "Within the month. All my army pay went to doctor bills, so I need to save up first. I've been wondering for some time how you might feel about going with me."

"You want me to go with you," she echoed.

"I'd marry you, a course. I wouldn't ask you to keep doin' what we been doin' without a ring on your finger." He'd done this all wrong. Should be down on one knee asking her.

"Well, we ain't really done the main thing yet," Lettie pointed out, then hurried to add, "I ain't saying no. I'd be pleased to marry you, but..."

Shadow guessed what she was going to say. "I know we ain't been stepping out for very long, but sometimes when you find a thing that's right, you just *know*. I knew from that night you talked to me outside Shatner's. Even before. I'd see you around and think, *if I wasn't such a chicken shit, I'd talk to that gal. She's something special.*"

A lovely smile lit her eyes. "Never thought I'd get me no proposal ever. I'd be right proud to say yes. But we should keep on being a secret till we go. Your family wouldn't like it."

He kissed the back of her work-worn hand. "I wish it didn't have to be that way, but you're right, my family would make trouble. Soon as we can, we'll light outta here and never look back."

She cocked her head in that birdie way of hers and studied him. "You gonna be able to just walk away from your kin and never see them again? Not many could stand to cut off their own blood that way."

"You know my brothers. Trust me, it ain't that hard. I look forward to the day."

Shadow pulled her to him for a long, sweet kiss, while the rain continued to hammer on the roof, falling down all around them and leaving them untouched in their warm cocoon.

*

Summer was waning, cicadas drilling their song into Lettie's ears and making the trees seem to shake with it. There was a cold chill in the air most mornings laying a low mist over the ground. Birds flocked, getting ready to fly farther south. As Lettie climbed the hill to visit Agnes, the restlessness she always felt this time of year stirred her blood.

The wind rushed up from behind her, making her feel she could fly away with it. And soon she would—fly right away with Shadow Robeson to someplace she'd never seen before. The thought had her grinning like a fool.

Over the past couple of weeks, Tommy hadn't bothered her again, but she never stopped looking over her shoulder. She couldn't wait to be free of the worry and darkness that surrounded her and Shadow here.

Lettie reached Widow Barrow's shack perched on the side of the hill like it was about ready to slide down the slope. She knocked on the door but didn't wait for an answer before hoisting up the heavy basket of food and entering the house. The moment she entered, she knew Agnes was dead. It didn't take seeing the body to smell the sickly odor.

Lettie hurried to the bedroom, where she found her friend lying peacefully with her hand curled up by her cheek on the pillow. The pang of sadness was tempered by relief. No worries now about Agnes living alone or fighting against her decaying mind. There were worse ways to pass away than while sleeping.

She pressed a kiss to the old woman's forehead, covered her face with the blanket and trudged back down the hill. In the blink of an eye, the day had turned from sunny to cloudy. The line between life and death was fine. *Snap*, and the journey was over. Who knew what really lay on the other side. Such gloomy thoughts pestered her as she walked the long way to give the Hutcherson family the news.

Agnes's brother, Louis, the dour-faced head of the clan sat on his front porch, whittling and occasionally sending a stream of tobacco juice out onto the yard. His wife, Mabel, shelled peas and stared at Lettie with icy eyes.

"Howdy," Lettie greeted them. "I got some bad news. Went up to visit Agnes today, and she'd passed away. In her sleep, real peaceful-like."

Louis nodded once, his expression unchanged. "Much obliged." Just the two words and nothing else.

"Your sister was always real nice to me, a real kind lady. I'll miss Agnes."

The pair on the porch only stared at her.

"Well. Good-bye, then." No wonder Agnes would rather have died alone than have any truck with her own family. Lettie wondered if they'd bother to tell her when the

funeral was. She'd like to go, but then she supposed she'd already said her good-bye to Agnes this morning.

As she walked, she wrapped her arms tight around herself, wishing they were Shadow's arms. She needed to see him right now, wanted him to hold her, and couldn't wait through a whole day for it. If she started now, she had time to go up to the still. It wasn't far from that clearing he'd taken her to, so she figured she could find it. Shadow wouldn't mind her going there, even if the location was supposed to be a secret.

She started hiking the trail up Jaspers Peak.

Chapter Fourteen

“Can’t make it any faster than what I’m doing. Still’s already working round the clock,” Shadow explained to Cutter for the fourth time.

Cutter cursed and kicked an empty bottle across the ground. It crashed into a rock, shattering. “We got this one chance to prove to Daddy we can grow our business without things fallin’ apart. And we got one chance to prove to those Frankfort speakeasies we can supply what they need. I want the goddamn shipment ready now.”

Shadow pulled hard on the reins of his temper and repeated, “I can’t make this go any faster.” He packed jars in crates and noticed that for all Cutter’s jawing about the need to hurry, he didn’t lift a finger to help.

Cutter stalked back and forth with dollar bills dancing before his eyes. “Nashville! That’s the jackpot. Once we get things going in Frankfort, then Lexington, we’ll start pushing into Nashville.”

You think them Tennessee boys are just going to let you? You’ll get all of us shot. Shadow only grunted and kept on working.

Cutter scooped up the neck of the bottle he’d broken and hurled it against the side of the shed. “Damn that drunken old bastard. Wish he’d hurry up and die. Now he’s gone and scared off Annabelle. I ain’t got the time to go after her right now, but she’s not keeping my boys from me forever.”

Cutter slapped a hand against one of the crates, making the glass jars rattle. “I’ll send Pernell and Tommy up here in a few hours to start out with the load. You’ll have it ready.”

“Think so,” Shadow muttered.

“That wasn’t a question.”

Cutter left, and Shadow listened to the blessed silence as he worked. Nothing sweeter than the air without Cutter’s voice in it.

After a while, Donnie took over the task, and Shadow straightened, pressing kinks out of his back and letting his stiff leg loosen up before heading toward the shed.

A movement in the woods caught his attention. Human movement, not animal. Could be one of his other brothers or cousins, but Shadow pulled the gun he wore on his hip. He hadn’t drawn his army service revolver against a German soldier many times,

mostly using his rifle. But on occasion, the smaller weapon came in handy. And now he was ready to use it in peace time against an officer of the law if need be. Sweet Jesus, he needed to get away from here soon.

“Who’s there?” he called.

“Me! It’s me, Shadow.” Lettie walked out of the trees with her hands raised.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have come here.”

He holstered his revolver and hurried to her. “How did you know where to find me?”

She lowered her hands. “The clearing you took me to warn’t far. It was pretty easy to track down the place. There’s a sour smell coming from the shed. But I shoulda knowed better ’n to come less’n you asked me to.”

“No. It’s all right.” Shadow glanced at Donnie, who’d stopped loading crates to watch them.

Donnie glared at Lettie and called out, “Shouldn’t ought to be here. Them’s the rules. Next time you might get shot. Better skedaddle.” Donnie tried to sound threatening but didn’t quite pull it off.

“Don’t worry about her. Just keep loading the wagon,” Shadow ordered.

He put his arm around Lettie and steered her toward the main path rather than the deer track in the woods she’d used. “Once Donnie learns a rule, you can’t shake him from it. I know you wouldn’t tell anybody where the still is. It’ll be okay, so long as he keeps his trap shut and don’t tell any of my brothers.”

Shadow stopped walking and turned her to face him. “Anyway, I’m glad to see you.” He dipped his head to kiss her lips, and they tasted as fine as always. He kissed her deeper, and by the time he let her go, Lettie was pink cheeked and breathless.

But her eyes were glittering with tears.

“Sorry if I scared you, pulling a gun like that. If I’d da known it was you...”

She wiped at her eyes. “It ain’t that. It’s Agnes Barrow. I found her dead in her bed this morning.”

“I’m sorry. I know she was a good friend to you.”

“Better this way, what with her mind goin’,” Lettie said. “But I can’t help remembering how she used to be, and it makes me sad. I had to go tell her kin. Them

folks is hard as rock and stared at me like I killed her myself.” She bit her trembling lower lip.

“Aw, sweetheart.” He hugged her to him, wishing he could erase the pain from her face. He’d do anything to keep her always happy and never hurting. Shadow kissed her sunshine-warm hair. “We’ll be away from here real soon, away from folks who look at you like they was better than you. Things’ll be better, you’ll see.”

She threw her arms around his neck and gave him a long kiss that left *him* breathless. “I’m ready for it. Found somebody who’s interested in buying my land. S’pose they’ll tear down that ole shack. There’s nothing keepin’ me here, that’s for sure. Shatner’s planning on closing soon, so I’d be out of a job anyway.”

Shadow nibbled underneath her jaw and murmured, “He is? The boys won’t like that much.”

Lettie pulled back and frowned. “Don’t tell your brothers. Shatner thinks they’ll force him to keep open to sell their hooch. I think he’s plannin’ on scooting out of town before that happens.”

“I won’t say anything. But he’d be smart to do it that way.”

What about himself? Would it be wiser to skip out of here quietly? He’d like to state his case, tell his family exactly how it was going to be, and accept the consequences. If he did that, he could expect a beat-down and a strong suggestion he’d better keep right on working at the family business. He could take that kind of violence in stride, but announcing his intentions might also cause a threat to Lettie. That was a chance he wouldn’t take.

He put his arm around her and walked her farther down the path. “Honey, I wish we could go tonight. Got to get this big shipment sent, and at the end of the month, I’ll see my share from it. Until we got enough cash to leave, we gotta be careful.”

She nodded. “Do you think that Donnie Baker will keep his mouth shut?”

“I’ll make sure he does. He listens to me.”

She snuggled up even closer to his side as they walked. “I suppose you ought not to come to my place too often. Like tonight.”

The warmth of her little body pressing against him had his cock stirring like a rooster ready to crow up the sun. Not being together until they left town was impossible.

“Nobody pays much mind to my coming and going, and I’m always watching out behind me. I’ll sneak down to see you.”

“All right then, I’ll leave a light on for you.” Lettie bumped her hip against his, before pulling away from his arm. “It’s getting late. I best get on to work.”

Shadow grabbed her wrist and hauled her back. He stroked his hands down her back and molded them around her backside. One more passionate, blood-pumping kiss before he drew away. “Gonna think of you every minute till then.”

Her eyes shone with a light that set his heart to aching. *She loves me.* He knew it as clear as if Lettie had shouted it, and the feeling pouring through him nearly carried him away.

“You’re a sweet gal, Lettie Calloway,” he told her.

“You’re pretty sweet yourself, Samuel Robeson.”

He smiled as he watched her walk away, her backside twitching on purpose to drive him crazy. Shadow whistled his way back up the slope to the still, looking forward to the sun setting with the anticipation of a man about to get lucky.

More than lucky. He was experiencing a miracle firsthand. The possibility that a man who never talked would meet the one woman in the world who made him want to share everything with her was one in a million. And the fact she felt the same way about him was about as likely as flying to the moon.

Chapter Fifteen

Lettie felt like a horse that wanted to run but had been harnessed to a plow and forced to plod through muddy fields. She waited on customers, cleared and wiped tables, washed dishes, and poured pitchers of beer and glasses of whisky while the minutes of the evening slowly dripped past.

Near midnight, Cutter and Clay Robeson came into the tavern. Lettie was glad Tommy wasn't with them and sort of relieved Shadow wasn't either. She didn't know if she could serve him without giving away their secret by smiling too much. She went over to the Robesons' table to see what they wanted.

"Tell Shatner to meet me out back," Clay ordered. "And bring us a coupla plates of whatever the cook's making tonight."

"Kitchen's closed. But I can bring you out some leftovers if you don't mind cold biscuits and ham gravy."

Clay clicked his tongue. "You can't heat it?"

Can, but don't really have time to. "Sure." No reason to get on the Robesons' bad side over such a small thing.

She hurried to the kitchen, giving the message to Shatner behind the bar on the way. Hard to believe Shadow was blood related to the Robeson brood. Maybe those apes had stolen him from another, better family at birth. She made up a story about the kidnapping to entertain herself as she heated the gravy. At the end of her story, the Robeson villains were in jail and Lettie told Shadow what she'd learned about him actually being a prince. Naturally, she joined him in his long-lost daddy's palace.

As she finished slopping food on two plates, Cutter's raised voice outside the kitchen caught her attention. Lettie moved close to the screen door to listen.

"You're gonna stay right where you are, doin' exactly what you're doin', got me? You're beholden to us, Shatner. Don't you ever forget it."

"But, things are gonna change next year," her boss whined. "When I can't even sell beer legal no more, what am I supposed to do? I ain't risking jail time."

"I don't give a damn if you serve sody-pop," Cutter snapped, "just keep pushing our hooch under the table. We'll keep the law off your tail like we always done."

Shut up now, Shatner. Pretend to go along, Lettie silently warned him.

But the stupid man got pigheaded. “I just don’t know, boys. My joint’s popular. The feds’ll want to make an example of me. You boys may be able to pay off local law, but—”

The hard smack of flesh hitting flesh was followed by Shatner’s grunt of pain. A few more punches and cries floated in from outside. Lettie winced at Shatner’s scream. Her gut told her to go help him, but she knew better. Shatner had to take the beating the Robesons saw fit to give him. There wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it.

In a moment of silence, she heard the small, chilling sound of metal snapping against metal—Cutter’s switchblade opening. She’d only heard rumors about the cross and scythe Cutter marked his enemies with to teach them a lesson. She’d almost decided it was a tall tale, but Shatner’s howl of “*No! Please, no!*” went some way to convincing her.

Shatner kept a baseball bat and a pistol behind the bar, but Lettie grabbed the first thing that came to hand—a large cast iron skillet—and headed out the door. Her heart pounded in her ears. Shatner lay on the ground, Cutter standing over him a silver blade in one hand. Clay watched from nearby.

“Hey! Let him be,” Lettie yelled.

Never let a man know you’re a-scairt of him, Agnes Barrow had told her once. Bullies get to lovin’ that kind of power, and it makes ’em crave more.

Cutter spun around, his blade glinting in the light from the kitchen.

Lettie planted her feet and raised the heavy metal skillet with both hands, ready to bring it crashing down on Cutter’s head if she had to. “Go on now. Get on outta here. We don’t want no trouble.” Her mouth was so dry she could hardly speak, but her voice didn’t quaver.

Cutter’s knife hand dropped by his side, and he took a step toward her.

Lettie tightened her grip on the skillet, arm muscles tensing. If he took a swipe at her with the blade, she’d bang solid iron down on his wrist. After that? Well, her plan didn’t go much further.

Cutter stared at her with calculating eyes for a few seconds before nodding. “All right. Point’s been made.” His eyes swept back to Shatner huddled on his side in the

grass, arms wrapped around his big belly. “You know what we expect—business as usual. Now git your ass up off the ground and pay me.”

Cutter jerked his chin at Clay, who took hold of Shatner’s arm and helped him to his feet. Still groaning, Shatner shuffled toward the building. He gave Lettie a slight nod as he limped past her. Everybody in the joint would go bug-eyed at the sight of Shatner with that bloody face, so he went into the kitchen to clean himself up. The screen door screeched open and slammed shut behind him.

Meanwhile, Clay disappeared around the corner of the building toward the front. She lowered the skillet but still clung tight to it. She didn’t want to turn away from Cutter, imagining his hand falling on her shoulder and pulling her back, so she waited for him to leave first.

For a second, they both waited for the other to move, then Cutter took another step toward Lettie. He’d closed his switchblade, but it was still ready to snap out in the blink of an eye.

“You’re pretty uppity for such a little gal. Maybe somebody should put you in your place.”

“I don’t want no trouble with you,” Lettie repeated. “I was just protectin’ my boss best I could. I need this job, mister. I need him to stay in business as much as you do.” She tried to sound respectful. Important to let Cutter know he was in charge but she was no punching bag. Hard to do when she wanted to spit poison at him.

At last, Cutter pocketed his switchblade, “Live and let live, I always say.” He started to walk by her, but at the last second, fainted toward her and stomped his foot to startle her. Lettie couldn’t help flinching and letting out a little squeak of surprise.

Cutter grinned and stared into her eyes, practically nose to nose. Suddenly, he seemed *much* scarier than Tommy. “Just remember your place, girlie. Whore’s daughter shouldn’t cross a Robeson.”

Lettie gripped her frying pan harder than ever. What she wouldn’t give to take one good swing at him, but that’d be stirring up a nest of hornets bound to sting her to death. She nodded once and waited for Cutter to follow Clay around the side of the building. Only then did she let go of her breath and the tension in her shoulders.

She leaned against the side of the building and waited for her legs to stop shaking. Now she had to go back inside and finish her shift as if nothing had happened, even serve food to those sons of bitches and act polite.

The fear still boiling in her gut turned to anger now that she wasn't in danger. She hated the Robesons—all of them at the moment, because how had Cutter and Clay learned about Shatner's plans if Shadow hadn't told them? He'd promised Lettie he'd keep Shatner's secret, but blood won out and he'd shared the news with his brothers.

Men were made to break promises, Lettie's mama had always said. She shouldn't be so surprised. What other promises would Shadow fail to keep? This afternoon, Lettie had felt his silent promise of love and believed with all her heart he truly planned to run away with her. Now she wondered if all the time they'd spent together and his sweet talk was false. Wouldn't be the first time she'd fallen for honey words from a man who made her feel like she hung the moon when they were together but didn't mean a word he said.

Herbert Whitlow. Every detail of that man suddenly came to her in sharp focus: his pomaded hair slicked back from his handsome brow, the little moustache that tickled her upper lip when he kissed her, his soft grocery man's hands that touched her body until she shook with delight. Oh, and his voice so kind and his manners so nice when he come a'callin' on her. She'd believed all that claptrap about him leaving his wife and taking Lettie away somewhere, right up until Grace Whitlow had shrieked like a harpy and gone after Lettie with her fingernails clawing. And Herbert had yelled out all sorts of things: "*Just a whore. Didn't mean anything. You're my wife!*"

Each word hit Lettie like a blow, and she'd scurried away, no bigger than a cockroach, while everybody in town watched.

She'd been so quick to trust Shadow Robeson. His quiet, gentle way had fooled her into thinking he was different from every other man. But now doubt crept in. Would he leave her alone and lonelier than ever?

Lettie shook off her sadness and cloaked herself in anger instead as she returned to the kitchen. She'd take the Robesons their damned food, but not before she gave them a little present. She leaned over the two plates on the counter, worked up a good wad of spit, and delivered it evenly onto each gravy-laden biscuit.

Chapter Sixteen

Shadow had made a mess of Lettie's kitchen. While he waited for her to get home from work, he'd decided to cook a meal to surprise her. Thought he could handle fried eggs and grits even though he'd never cooked before. Women made such simple fare for breakfast every day. How hard could it be?

Turned out the answer was "very." Lettie had an old woodstove, and he had to fire it up. Boiling a pot of grits sounded simple, but he forgot to mind the heat. Water and grain gushed over the top of the pot and burned onto the hot stove. He was so busy cleaning that mess, he forgot about the eggs till they were smoking in the frying pan. After scraping the egg mess into the garbage, he decided he'd better wait for Lettie to get home first, since eggs didn't seem to take long to fry. About that time, Shadow realized he could've gone to meet Lettie and walk her home. But now he was caught up in this cooking and had no choice but to wait for her.

He dreamed about the night ahead and the future they'd have together. He hadn't felt this hopeful since the day he'd enlisted in the army. But a young man's fantasies of being a war hero didn't take into account what a muddy, bloody business fighting was. Shadow wallowed in about two seconds of reliving mortar rounds, rifle fire, and cold, drizzling rain before he returned to wiping the counter.

A light footstep on the porch made him face the door with a welcoming smile. But when Lettie entered, her mouth was a straight line and she scowled at him. "It's hot as blazes in here. Why'd you light the stove?"

"I let myself in. You said it would be all right...I thought you might be hungry after working, so I made you something. It's, uh, grits and eggs. But I was waiting for you to get here to fry the eggs." He remembered to use a cloth this time so he wouldn't burn his hand when lifting the lid off the grits. "I guess I shoulda taken this off the heat. Seems they're scorched on the bottom."

Lettie looked from the smoking pot to the eggshells on the counter. "Those eggs have to last me all week. How many did you break?"

Shadow clapped the lid back on the pot. "A few. I kept getting shells in them, and they stuck to the pan."

She snatched up another cloth. “Good. Now I have another mess to clean up.” She bustled around, sweeping the broken shells into the pot of ruined grits, and then scrubbing at the stove.

Shadow hadn’t seen Lettie this angry since the time he’d offered her money without thinking about what it might suggest to her. He silently watched her work, afraid to speak lest he say something else to upset her.

“Maybe I should go. Don’t seem like you want company tonight,” he finally dared to say.

Lettie slammed the scorched pot on the counter and whirled to face him, arms crossed over her chest. “You promised not to say anything to your brothers about Shatner’s plan to close the tavern.”

“I didn’t.” He shook his head. “I didn’t say a word to them. Why would I?”

“Because it’s your family’s business. I suppose you thought you’d better let them know they were losing a pretty big customer.”

He was so relieved, he almost laughed. “Lettie, do you think I care about that? I don’t give a damn about the business, and I’d never break a promise to you.” Shadow sobered as he realized something had happened to set her off. “Why would you think I told them?”

She threw up her hands. “Well, somebody did! Cutter threatened Shatner tonight, telling him it’d better be business as usual, so I thought... I thought you must’ve told him.”

“I haven’t even seen Cutter since I talked to you this afternoon.” Shadow frowned. “But you know Ray Shatner’s got a pretty loose tongue. I ’spect he’s spouted off to a lot of people about him moving on.”

“The whole county knows by now.” Lettie rubbed a hand over her forehead. “A course. I’m real sorry I thought that of you.”

He was sorry too. It bothered him she didn’t trust him better. “Honey, you can always count on me to keep my word. And I’m sorry my brother came around threatening Shatner. Did he say something to you too?”

She shook her head. “Not much, but he was plenty mad at Shatner. I thought he was going to carve him up with that knife of his.”

Shadow blew out a breath and rubbed his chin, the stubble rasping against his fingers. There was no excuse to be made for Cutter, but somehow he felt he had to apologize. “I’m sorry about my brother. He *has* cut people to prove a point, but with Shatner I doubt he’d do more than show him the blade to give him a scare.”

Lettie shrugged and changed the subject with a neutral “Anyways... So, you tried to cook me something? That’s sweet of you.”

“It wasn’t as easy as I thought it’d be.”

Lettie’s laughter filled Shadow up better than any grits could’ve done. “Men in the kitchen is about as useful as a plow horse with three legs.” She reached out to touch his hand and looked up at him. “Thanks, but I ain’t really hungry. Not for food anyways.”

A pang of lust shot to his groin at her flirting tone and the promise in her eyes. He curled his hand around hers and rubbed a thumb over the calluses on the pads of her fingers and palm. Lettie was a hardworking woman who spent her days scrubbing and toiling for others. Made him want to care for her now, gentle and sweet like she deserved.

Shadow cupped the side of her face and tilted it up to his. He settled his mouth over hers and brushed his lips on hers. Then he slicked his tongue between them. She opened for him with a soft sigh that made him ache. Threading his fingers through her thick hair, he clasped the back of her neck and kissed her deeply. She filled all his senses. In that moment, she was all he knew, all he ever needed to know or have. Lettie was everything.

She slid her hands up his back to grip his shoulders and wiggled her body against his as if trying to get closer. But there wasn’t an inch to spare between them. Only way they could be any nearer would be skin to skin—or for him to be inside her. The thought of that set alarms clanging through his entire body. They hadn’t gone that far yet. But as Lettie took his hand and led him to her room, Shadow believed tonight would be the night.

She stopped beside the bed and began to unbutton the bodice of her dress. “Sorry I got all mad about Shatner. Shoulda knowed you wouldn’t break a promise to me. It’s kinda hard for me to trust men. I ain’t had much reason to up till now.”

Shadow watched her fingers move, exposing one little bit of skin and another. “I understand. I don’t have a lot of faith in people either. Except for you.”

He didn't know why that was true. He hadn't known Lettie for long, and yet he felt completely confident she'd never lie to him. There wasn't the possibility of deceit in her eyes.

She smiled. "Guess we both gotta learn to trust. I want to. I'm tired of having nobody I can talk to about things." Her fingers slowed, then stopped on the last button in the row. "Used to have Agnes, but not since she hasn't been in her right mind. And now she's..." Her voice broke.

Shadow had almost forgotten about the Widow Barrow's death. He'd selfishly been thinking only about being with Lettie. But the woman was the nearest thing she'd had to a mother, and Lettie was hurting.

The hot beat of desire eased some, and all he wanted was to comfort her. He moved to take her in his arms and hold her, rubbing her back and rocking her a little as her tears wet his shirt. The poor wee thing, so delicate in his arms. He kissed the top of her head and crooned useless words: *She's at peace now. She's with God.* Words he'd stopped believing by the end of his first battle when the field around him was littered with fragments of men he knew.

After a while, Lettie gave a little snuffle and pulled away from him to wipe at her eyes. Shadow offered her a handkerchief from his back pocket, hoping it wasn't too dirty. She blew her nose, then stared at the kerchief before tossing it on the floor.

"Guess I'd better wash that." She gave him a weak smile.

Love and protectiveness and lust and other things he hardly had a name for washed through him. He hadn't known it was possible to feel so strongly about anyone or anything. Body and soul, he belonged to this woman now.

"Come on. Let me put you to bed." He helped her finish taking off her dress, her undergarments, and then lifted her off her feet and laid her down on the thin mattress that barely protected a body's bones from the hard planks beneath. Lettie's grandpap had built this bed to last, and since it had been made for him and his wife, it was wide enough for two. *Good thing*, Shadow thought. He needed room to maneuver.

He stripped bare—even taking off his eye patch, for he no longer feared letting her see his flaws—and climbed into bed beside Lettie's warm body. He lay beside her, looking at her and trailing his hand up and down, caressing every little curve. Her breast

just filled his palm, and he loved the pointy nipple that pressed into his hand. He plucked it until Lettie moaned and wiggled.

Satisfied, he did the same to the other, then pressed his hand flat against her chest to feel the thudding of her heart. He smoothed his palm down the bumps of her rib cage to her flat belly and imagined it swollen with child beneath his hand. The idea shocked him. He'd never thought he would be a father. Since his experience with his own had been so bad, he feared he couldn't be a good one himself. But the brief thought passed, and Shadow moved on in his exploration.

He let his hand drift over the tangle of curls that marked her sex and down the wet cleft. Again Lettie stirred, restless and rising into his touch. Ah, he loved how she wanted him. It made his desire for her even stronger. His erection pressed against her hip. He thrust against soft flesh and ached to be inside. But first he would show Lettie all the pleasure he could give her.

Shadow moved down between her legs, positioning himself awkwardly with his injured leg angled off the end of the bed. He pushed her thighs farther apart and faced the pink folds of flesh, leaning close to inhale her musk. He hadn't done this before, but he was ready to learn.

He licked lightly, sampling her flavor, before plunging his tongue into her and drawing it slowly up to her bud. He worked his fingers in and out of her soaking pussy while he lapped, and her moans grew louder, her restless shifting turned to writhing.

Lettie twisted her fingers in the sheet, and her body arched up. Shadow gave one last lick, making her cry out. He was thrilled by how simple it was to bring her so much pleasure. And the sound made his lust grow stronger. He kissed her quivering thighs and moved to lie over her, distributing most of his weight on his good leg.

Arms propped on either side of Lettie's head, Shadow enjoyed her contented smile. Her eyes fluttered open and looked back at him. His cock bumped against her entrance, so ready and open for him, and he couldn't wait to be inside her at last.

Shadow nudged inside a little, then paused. "Is this all right? I can pull out before..."

She nodded. "It's all right. I've got something to take afterward should stop a baby from growin'. Go on ahead." Her hands clasped his rear and pulled hard at the same time she lifted her hips. With one swift motion, he was in her.

The tight heat surrounding him was so powerful he feared he might come right then, but he forced himself to calm down and act like this wasn't his first time. He held still until he'd got himself under control, then he pushed even deeper.

Lettie gasped.

He froze. "Is this wrong?"

"No. It's right. *Real* right." She wiggled a little, showing how much she enjoyed having him inside her. Shadow couldn't have been more puffed up with pride. He drew out some and thrust again. He moved out and in, pistoning faster as the pressure inside him grew. Control? Who cared! He had to have more, more, and even more of this. The pure pleasure of that friction on his cock was beyond anything he could have imagined.

But then his inner voice cautioned, *this is supposed to be for her, making her feel good. Slow the hell down.*

Shadow paid attention. The inner voice had saved him more than once when he'd listened to it in the past. He was pretty sure it was wiser than his cock, so he corralled his raging lust and opened his eyes to look into Lettie's face again. He wanted her to know he saw her and wasn't using her body as some had. She was special to him, and he told her so with a silent look. He regretted having only one eye to see her with, because he couldn't drink in enough of her with only half a glance.

Time seemed to slow, and the urgency that drove him receded slightly. He moved more carefully, though just as deeply, concentrating on every thrust and appreciating the sensation of her body around him. This was more than a physical act. He and Lettie were joined in this moment together, and, for right now, the rest of the world was a million miles away.

Sweat slicked their bodies as they moved in unison. Their breath mingled and their gazes never faltered until the very end, when Shadow closed his eyes at last and spent himself with a hoarse cry of release.

Lettie clung to him as he moved slower and finally stilled, breathing heavily against her shoulder. She stroked his hair, a gentle touch he'd rarely felt in his life. He relished the feeling of her fingers sifting through his hair and rubbing his head lightly.

"You're a little heavy," Lettie grunted after a while.

"Sorry." He rolled off her, his bad leg twinging as he moved it across her body. Next time she'd have to be on top. He couldn't do it with ease. Excitement filled him at the thought of different positions they could try.

He rested his head on one bent arm. "Was it all right for you?"

She exhaled a long breath. "Oh yes. Don't you worry none about that."

Shadow grinned, as tickled with himself as if he'd won a prize at the county fair. Now that he'd done it once, he wanted to do it again—real soon, as soon as his cock caught up with his eager mind.

A breeze blew in the open window, cooling his hot skin.

He got out of bed and went outside to relieve himself and fetch a tin cup of water for Lettie to drink. After she took it, he stooped to pick up his eye patch, lying with the rest of the clothes. Although he didn't mind Lettie seeing him without it, part of him still felt too exposed with his ruined eye on display.

"You don't have to wear that thing. Can't be comfortable to sleep with it on." Her head lay against the pillow, hair fanned around her face like a brown halo. "Are you gonna stay?"

"I have to be up at the still early tomorrow, but I'm yours till then." He climbed back into the tangled sheets and cuddled close to Lettie, resting a hand on her rising and falling chest. The rhythm was so peaceful, he started to drift off.

"I remember a song my mother used to sing." Lettie's voice vibrated into his hand. "Something about the moon... I can't remember. But there was another one." She hummed a tune that sounded almost familiar to Shadow. He didn't remember his own mother ever singing, but maybe she'd done it when he was a baby. Mothers did sing lullabies, didn't they?

"Go on," he urged. "Sing the words."

Lettie hesitated then began to sing:

*“Slumber, my darling, the birds are at rest,
The wandering dews by the flow’rs are caressed,
Slumber, my darling, I’ll wrap thee up warm,
And pray that the angels will shield thee from harm.”*

*

Late in the night, or maybe it was almost morning, Lettie woke from a dream in which her arm was crushed under a rock. It took her a second to recall what heavy thing had taken over her bed and pushed her right up to the edge. After she remembered, she didn’t even mind that her arm was trapped and losing feeling in the fingers. She gave Shadow a poke in the side, and when he rolled over, she hauled her arm out from under him.

She padded naked into the kitchen to stir up the fire and set the kettle to boil. Agnes had told her to drink the special tea right after lovemaking and also recommended a vinegar douche. As Lettie scurried to the outhouse to relieve herself and dose with vinegar, she hoped the old wives’ remedies were true. Last thing she and Shadow needed was to start out their life together with a baby on the way. It’d be hard enough to pull up stakes and settle someplace without another mouth to feed.

When it came right down to it, would Shadow really forsake his kin to be with Lettie? She could hardly reckon it.

She finished her business and hurried from the outhouse toward the lit windows of her cabin. A pang of sadness shot through her as she imagined leaving the only home she’d ever known, but her fear of loss was chased away by a powerful gladness at the thought of her and Shadow together.

She was almost to the door when something shot out of the darkness, making her screech in surprise. Bathsheba coiled around her ankles, meowing a loud howdy.

“Crazy cat.” Lettie bent to stroke her arched back. “What am I gonna do with you when I go? Don’t know if I can take you along. Need to find you a new home.”

Bathsheba streaked ahead of her to paw at the door. She’d finished her hunting for the night. Lettie obliged her and followed the cat into the kitchen. The kettle was shrieking loud enough to wake Shadow. She took it off the stove, and put in the herbs she’d collected.

Waiting for the tea to steep, Lettie sat smiling to herself and reliving her evening with Shadow. She'd been with enough men to know it was a rare one who took his time. The way Shadow had slowed down and then just *looked* at her like that...well, she'd never felt anything like it before. His one eye held more feelings for her than most men had had in two. That loving look made her heart ache.

She shivered though the cabin was hot from the stove and wrapped her arms around her naked body as she poured a cup of tea. *Goose walked over my grave*. But the truth was, all these loving, wonderful feelings between her and Shadow scared her. She'd never had luck with love before—or much of anything else either—and she feared something would go wrong.

Don't borrow trouble. Another of her mother's sayings flashed in her mind. Now did that mean don't poke around where you shouldn't, or don't fear trouble till it lands on your doorstep? She wasn't sure which.

Lettie drank the green-tinted tea as fast as the hot water would allow. She grimaced at the taste and chased it with a drink of well water from the bucket. After dousing the kerosene lamp, she padded back to the bedroom.

In the doorway of the lean-to, she paused to study the dark form filling her bed. Enough moonlight came through the window so she could see Shadow's profile on the pillow. His hair was a dark tumble over his forehead, and his handsome nose was as straight and jutting as his chin. The lashes of his good eye lay thick against his cheek, and his lips were parted to let a whistling breath flow in and out. Sleeping was the only time he appeared relaxed and young, just a few years older than her.

Both of them had done a lot of hard living in their short lives, Lettie thought. Maybe it was time for things to get better.

She shooed Bathsheba from her pillow down to the foot of the bed and climbed in. Too wide awake now, she stroked her hands over Shadow's body, feeling the hard muscles of shoulders, arms, and chest. All that solid man flesh made her hot inside, and the more she touched him—his hard, hairy belly and the thick length of his cock—the more her insides felt like a kettle working up a head of steam. She grinned at the thought of letting loose with a high screech.

Pushing back the covers, Lettie moved down and went to work on Shadow. She grasped his already half-stiff erection and began to rub. He shifted and groaned. She brought it to her mouth and began to suck, and Shadow gasped as his hips lifted.

“Ohh,” he sighed.

She licked up and down his length, tasting his salt, then swallowed him deep. When the bobbing of her head had brought him right up to the edge, Lettie moved to straddle him. She placed his cock at her entrance and lowered herself onto him nice and easy.

His hands went around her waist, gripping her tight and guiding the pace of her riding up and down. His eye glittered as he gazed at her bouncing breasts. “So beautiful,” he mumbled.

Lettie nearly burst with pride. Men had told her she was pretty before, usually on their way to getting what they wanted, but she’d never before *felt* beautiful as she did right then. It was the way Shadow said it, like he saw something in her nobody else could.

She moved up and down, harder, faster, driving him closer to climax with every clench of her body. Having him filling her so deep, was like eating a meal after nearly starving for lack of food. He was hers, all hers for as long as they were together this way.

And afterward, when she fell forward onto his chest and listened to his heart pounding in her ear, he was *still* hers. Shadow held her so tight she could barely breathe, and he told her words she needed more than food.

“I love you, Lettie.”

Chapter Seventeen

Clay sat in the idling truck on the road beside Shadow. "I'll give you a ride on up the mountain. Get in."

Shadow would rather walk the distance from home to the still, reliving the other night with Lettie, but he couldn't refuse the ride. He climbed into the truck and slammed the door that drooped at the hinges so he had to haul it up, then in.

Clay put the truck in gear, and the truck leaped forward, bouncing hard over a rut.

"Wanted to talk to you," Clay said. "You know Cutter and I've been trying to convince Daddy to let go the reins and give us a chance to run things. Except Cutter sees himself doing it, not the pair of us. I been thinking, you and I have the level heads in the family. Together we know how to get things done. By all rights, we should be the ones running things. But no matter how Cutter and Daddy squabble, he'll always be the oldest and stand to inherit."

Shadow nodded to show he was listening, though the last thing he wanted was to hear some mutiny plan.

"I can convince Daddy to see the wisdom of bypassing Cutter. Tommy's too crazy, Pernell's dumb as a bag of rocks, and that puts me next in line to run things. If Daddy taps me to take over, I want you beside me. But first I have to know I can count on you." Clay slowed the truck to a crawl and squinted at Shadow. "I know about you and Lettie Calloway. I've seen you heading her way more than once."

Shadow stopped breathing. His whole body tensed.

"I know a man's got needs, and she's probably pretty good at taking care of 'em. But if you got some sort of feelings for her, you'd best end it quick."

Clay stopped the truck and swiveled to face him. "I got sucked in by Katie's sassy ways, and now I regret it. You don't want to make the same kind of mistake."

Shadow clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached, but he didn't say a word. If he started defending Lettie the way he wanted to, he'd only make things worse. Better to play along.

Clay clapped a hand on his shoulder, the too-sweet odor of bay rum making Shadow's nostrils twitch. "Listen to me, little brother. I got plans for us, but I need you there at my side. No distractions, right?"

The last mile up the steep grade, Clay continued to ramble on about his big plans, while Shadow kept quiet and waited it out. At last, they reached the point where the truck could climb no farther, and Clay stopped both the vehicle and his mouth.

Shadow opened the door and jumped out.

“Hey, you keep quiet about this, and I won’t say anything about you and the Calloway girl. But I’m telling you, end it,” Clay advised.

The rest of the hike up to the still, Shadow’s wheels spun on the thought that he couldn’t wait any longer to make his move. Over the last few days, things had started closing in, first with Cutter threatening Shatner, and now with Clay planning some offensive against Cutter. It was like thunderheads piling up, waiting to bust loose in a big storm.

Why not leave today? The words wafted through his mind like a fresh breeze. He’d collect what he could, and forget the big pay-off at the end of the month. Pack up his stuff, and, if Lettie was ready and willing, they’d simply leave. Maybe he’d take the truck to get them farther down the road. The family owed him that much after all the work he’d done.

Caught up in his plans, blood pumping at the thrilling idea of dropping everything and leaving, Shadow was whistling by the time he reached the still. The weathered gray walls of the old shed seemed mostly held together by the kudzu vines that climbed over it. The shed blended right into the woods around it. Only the telltale smell of sour mash and wood smoke suggested it housed a still. When they expanded to a larger building with two stills and more men coming and going, it would be harder to hide. They should have several locations, so if one got raided, they’d have another operational.

Shadow frowned. None of it was his concern anymore. This business and his family were about to become part of his past, something to look back on with an occasional pang of regret.

He stopped his whistling as he entered the shed where Donnie was showing Shadow’s cousins Greer and Wilson how to run the still. Uncle Duke’s boys were in training, but Shadow wasn’t so sure Greer and Wilson were the right men for the job. Greer was almost as hot-tempered as Tommy and Wilson about as slow as Pernell. As

Donnie explained how important it was to keep the tubes clear and the vapor flowing, they both gazed around at everything besides what he was showing them.

Donnie got mad. “Listen up! You gotta keep the heat even and the steam moving. If there’s a block in the coil and the steam builds up behind it, the whole damn place could blow.”

That got Wilson’s attention. He stared at Donnie with his slack mouth open and a spark of interest in his empty eyes. Shadow remembered Wilson had always loved bonfires and burning things. Definitely not one who should be trusted around fire and flammable alcohol.

“Shadow, you want to come over here and explain to these fool cousins of yours how the bottling works?” Donnie called.

Shadow came forward and said howdy to pig-nosed Greer.

Greer rolled his eyes. “Don’t know why Cutter’s sticking me here. I should be on the road making deliveries. You know I can handle a truck and any kinda trouble that might come up.” His fists clenched by his sides as if itching for a fight. “I’m ready to pound some heads if need be. Some customer don’t pay on time and *bam*.” He smacked a fist into the other palm.

Years of experience dealing with Tommy made Shadow know how to keep cool. “We don’t want to threaten anybody unless there’s no other way. Plan is to keep our heads down, deliver the whisky, and make money, not to stir up fights.”

Greer paid no attention. “If any other crew gets in our way, I’ll show ’em who the Robesons are. Gotta defend our territory. Frankfort is gonna be ours and nobody else’s.”

Shadow gave up talking and began to show the boys how to fill mason jars and screw the lids on tight. This simple job he felt pretty safe assigning to his cousins, though they were likely to sample while they filled. Shadow left them to it while he went to the back of the shed to check on the stock of ingredients.

It was too easy to drift off into another daydream about Lettie’s smooth skin, sweet mouth, and the flow of her thick brown hair. That was why he never heard the feds approaching through the woods. The instincts he’d developed as a soldier had grown dull, and he never really expected an enemy to come creeping up on him here.

It took Greer's shout—"Revenuers comin'! Git your guns."—to startle him from examining mold growing in the corn bin.

What gun? Shadow had forgotten his pistol at home today. It was on the bureau in his room. He cursed and went to a window, pulling aside a curtain of vines outside to take a look. The ass end of a man with a shotgun was sneaking around a corner of the shed.

"Everybody here's under arrest," someone yelled.

Shadow ran toward the rear exit. During a raid, it was expected everybody would flee however they could. They couldn't defend the still from a team of armed agents—though a man alone could be shot and disposed of—and it wasn't worth getting into a standoff or arrested.

But it *was* possible the feds might take a bribe and go away. Shadow halted in his tracks. Clay would negotiate. Shadow supposed he could do the same. He turned around, intending to head toward the front of the shed with his hands up.

Just then Greer pulled a pistol from his hip like some Western gunslinger and started firing at the revenuers entering the shed. The men dove right and left, hiding behind whatever cover they could find. One man fired from his position on the floor, and the shotgun blast took the top of Greer's head clean off, spattering it against the wall behind him like a ripe pumpkin.

The agents kept on firing, though nobody was shooting back. Glass jars shattered, and the strong bite of whisky filled the air. A ricochet bullet set a puddle of alcohol on fire. In seconds, a trail of flames reached the tinderbox wood wall and licked up it.

Wilson started hollering and caught up the pistol his brother had dropped. He shot wildly, hitting one agent in the shoulder and dropping him. The other three turned their weapons on Wilson. Before the kid had a chance to duck, they drilled through him ten ways from Sunday, leaving his body twitching on the ground.

Over by the vat, Donnie held up his hands, yelling, "Don't shoot. I surrender."

All this action took less than a minute. Shadow lay belly down on the floor he'd hit when bullets started flying. Now he crawled forward, thinking he'd join Donnie in surrendering. One of the agents was approaching Donnie with handcuffs, so it seemed they weren't going to just kill him too.

Shadow opened his mouth to announce his surrender when the fire devouring one wall of the building reached the still. The fire under the brewing vat flared. Heat plus pressurized flammable vapors equaled explosion.

Shadow could see what was about to happen. He clambered to his feet as one of the agents spotted him from across the shed and turned a shotgun his way.

“Get out!” Shadow yelled. “She’s gonna blow. Run!”

He aimed for the back door nobody ever used. The door was swollen into its frame and nearly sealed shut with vines on the other side. Shadow pushed, and the door didn’t budge. A bullet thudded into the wood beside his head, sending splinters into his face.

He rammed his shoulder into the door with all his strength, then clawed his way through the tangle of vines on the other side. Another shot roared from behind, and something jolted the hip of his bad leg. *Not again!* But his leg continued to support him as he staggered out of the shed. He stumbled over roots and through thorny brambles that grabbed at him.

A roar came from behind him as the still blew. A blast of heat hit his back like a hand and propelled him off his feet, over the edge of the ravine behind the building.

Shadow hit the ground partway down the slope with a jolt, his shoulder slamming into a log. For a second, he thought he’d be all right clinging to the side of the hill, but then the earth gave way, and he plunged down the steep incline, rolling and tumbling through undergrowth.

Killed by the still. That’s justice was his last thought before something sharp hit him in the head. He continued to slide, unconscious, to the bottom of the ravine.

Chapter Eighteen

As she walked back to her cabin from Shatner's, Lettie cursed Ray for the weak, mealy-mouthed bastard that he was. Instead of being grateful to Lettie for saving his hide the other day, he'd fired her! Claimed she was on the Robesons' bad side so he didn't want her around anymore, setting them off.

Lettie arrived at the tavern to find Betty Jean McGee had taken her place, wearing her apron and carrying her serving tray. No amount of arguing with Shatner was going to move him, so Lettie swallowed her anger, turned around, and started back home.

She told herself it didn't matter. She'd expected the job to end soon anyhow, and anyway, she and Shadow were going to be leaving.

Are we? Will he really take me with him? Lettie shushed the whisper of doubt that kept on badgering her. When she was with Shadow, she believed in him completely, but when she was alone, doubts crept in to pester her. Herbert Whitlow had made big promises too once. And now, Shatner's stabbing her in the back made her feel about that low again.

But Shadow wasn't Whitlow or Shatner. She could trust his promises, she reminded herself. He'd said he loved her, and she believed him.

The sun was already behind the hill, bringing early twilight to Bullfrog Hollow by the time Lettie reached home. Bathsheba was there to greet her. Lettie caught the cat up in her arms and pressed her face into earthy-smelling calico fur. She didn't even mind the dirt from Sheba's rolling on the ground, it felt so good to hold her purring body. After a few moments, Lettie set her loose, and she bounded off through the grass.

Before opening the door of her house, Lettie paused, listened, and looked through a window. She didn't have a door lock—nobody she knew did, just bolts a person could slide once they were inside. Neighbors mostly trusted each other around here, and most had nothing worth stealing. But ever since Tommy Robeson had threatened her, Lettie had been careful to check first before going in. Finding Shadow waiting was a nice surprise. Finding Tommy would be a nightmare.

The house was dark and as quiet as she'd left it. She went in and right away slid the wooden bolt and lit the kerosene lamp. She started looking around at her things,

deciding what she'd pack and what she could get rid of. Most stuff she used every day. There were few useless items, except for...

Lettie picked up the one bit of folderol she owned, something that had belonged to her mother. The porcelain angel was as fragile as bird bones and painted up pretty. The tips of her wings shone with a thin rim of gold. Lettie recalled how Mama had hardly ever let her touch the precious angel. Only once in a while, when Lettie was sick or Mama was pleased with her for some reason, could she hold it for a bit.

As a kid, Lettie used to believe the angel could make miracles. Just the touch of it had made a sore throat feel better. Now, she saw how cheaply made the statue was, and remembered one of Mama's men had given it to her—the one Mama had sworn was there to stay and would be Lettie's new daddy.

She set the angel back on the shelf. When she left, it could stay here in this house. She didn't want it.

Outdoors, Bathsheba started yowling up a storm at another cat, a stray dog, or maybe a raccoon sniffing around. Before the fight could get too serious and Sheba end up bit, Lettie went to call her inside. She stepped out on the porch, singing, "Here, kitty, kitty."

Tommy Robeson walked out of the shadows in the yard with Bathsheba in his arms. He looked Lettie dead in the eye and grinned as he twisted Sheba's neck till it snapped and tossed her body onto the porch at Lettie's feet.

For the time it takes to spit, Lettie stood frozen, but then she turned to run inside. She'd bolt the door and pray Tommy didn't kick it in anyway. But before she took a step, Pernell was there beside her, grabbing her and pinning her arms against her sides. He'd been waiting on the porch beside the door.

Lettie didn't waste breath screaming as she fought against his strong arms. She was in big trouble, the kind of trouble there was no way out of.

From the other side of the porch, Cutter walked toward her like he was taking a Sunday stroll. "We know what you did, whore, and we come for justice."

Lettie about fainted against Pernell, she was so scared. What had she done other than be with their brother? Was that enough to make them this mad?

“Goddamned snitch.” Tommy came up the steps and kicked Bathsheba’s body out of his way. There was little room in Lettie for horrified sorrow as the limp body fell into the flowers by the porch. All her focus had to be on figuring some way out of this.

“What do you mean?” She could hardly squeeze out the words, her throat was so choked with fear. “I didn’t snitch on you to nobody.”

“Get her inside,” Cutter ordered.

Tommy threw open the door, and Pernell hustled Lettie in and plunked her down on the chair. She calculated her chances of dashing past both men and out of the cabin, but Cutter was coming through the door.

The three big men filled every bit of space and seemed to suck up all the air too, because Lettie couldn’t breathe right. She swallowed a lump of terror and asked, “Whaddya think I done?”

Tommy braced his hands on the table and leaned over her. “Don’t act dumb. We *know* you tipped off the feds.”

Lettie frowned and shook her head. “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“Our still got raided, two of our cousins shot dead, and only Donnie got away,” Cutter said. “He come to tell us and said *you* were up there a few days ago to see Shadow. You was mad about Shatner. Pretty clear who gave the tip.”

Lettie continued to shake her head, her hands gripping each other so tight the nails dug in. “No, I didn’t. I would *never* do anything against your family. Is Shadow all right? Did they arrest him?”

“Donnie says he got blowed up along with the still,” Tommy said flatly, as if his brother’s death bothered him no more than killing her cat.

Now Lettie couldn’t breathe at all. She covered her cheeks with her hands and gasped for air as the room around her began to spin and the Robeson boys’ voices echoed from a distance.

When she didn’t answer his question quick enough, Tommy shook her by the shoulders. “What else did you tell ’em? We know you been passing along everything that dumb shit heel Shadow told you about our business. If they come to arrest all of us, there won’t be no hearsay witness to talk against us in court.” He gave a bruising squeeze of her shoulders to make his point.

“I didn’t do it,” Lettie said again. “Never talked to no revenue agent in my life. Don’t even know how I’d go about doing that. Not like they come knockin’ at my door.”

While part of her kept trying to convince the Robesons she was innocent, the rest of her heard Tommy’s words echoing over and over: “*Donnie says he got blowed up along with the still.*”

She pictured a fiery explosion and tried to think of a world without Shadow in it. She couldn’t believe it. Not less’n she saw his body, or what was left of it, with her own two eyes. Shadow *couldn’t* be gone just like that.

Cutter shoved his brother aside and flipped open his blade. “What all did Shadow tell you? He talk about our plans for Frankfort? Did he mention any names or places?”

“No! We never talked about the whisky business at all.” No point in pretending she hadn’t been with Shadow. “I got no beef with your family. Was hopin’ to be a part of it someday. Shadow and me was in love.”

Tommy snorted. “Keeping a hot piece like you right under our noses. The boy had more to him than I thought. That’s why you didn’t want to—” Tommy threw a glance at Cutter, maybe thinking it best not to mention how he’d come to see her that one time.

Lettie focused on Cutter. He seemed like the one she’d best work hard at convincing since he was the one with a knife in his hand. “I swear to God Almighty I never said nothing about your still to no one. I loved Shadow, truly loved him, and I wouldn’t risk his life like that. I *swear*.”

And then, because she couldn’t stand that she’d said “loved” instead of “love,” Lettie asked, “Are you *sure* he’s gone? When did this happen?”

“This afternoon. Took some time for Donnie to get to us and for us to get to you,” Tommy glared at her with those thick eyebrows drawn together into a ridge above his eyes. “After you get what’s comin’ to you, we’re gonna go up mountain for a spell.”

There were plenty of places in the backwoods to hide when the law came around. Many folks had places where they’d camp out when they needed to.

Lettie didn’t know what more she could say to convince them. She looked from one brother to another, searching for any sign of mercy. Cutter’s eyes were so similar to Shadow’s, they nearly broke her heart. But there wasn’t an ounce of softness in them. Tommy leered at her like a horny dog. And Pernell just stood staring so dull eyed she

didn't know if he even understood what was going on. Poor Pernell was a big ole hammer his family used to smash things with.

"I loved Shadow," Lettie repeated one last time. "I would never have done anything to hurt him or his kin, and I'm sorry to hear about your cousins too."

"Maybe you didn't backstab us, so I won't gut you. But it's time I taught you a lesson to remind you to keep your head down and your mouth shut." Cutter commanded his brothers, "Hold her."

Lettie started to bolt up out of the chair. It was now or never for making her move. But Tommy grabbed her and ripped open the front of her dress with one swipe of his hand, sending buttons rattling across the floor.

Lettie flailed her arm, clawing at his face and kicking as best she could with an ankle-length dress on.

"Grab her arms," Cutter yelled at Pernell.

But the big man stood like a rock. "No. Shadow wouldn't like it."

His refusal was so shocking that not only Cutter and Tommy stared at him. Lettie stopped struggling too.

"I said hold her down!" Cutter flashed that evil blade like a butcher about to carve up a haunch of meat.

"Shadow wouldn't like it," Pernell repeated dully.

"Dumb as a box of rocks," Tommy growled. "When he gets stuck, it's like trying to pull a wagon out of mud."

Lettie took advantage of the distraction to kick again, the toe of her shoe hitting Cutter hard in the shin.

"Goddamn it, Pernell. Grab her legs!"

The big man shook his head. "Nope. Not gonna. Shadow wouldn't like it."

"Told ya," Tommy said. "Stubborn as a mule when he wants to be. Just send him off somewheres. He can go seek out where the hell Clay's got to."

"All right," Cutter growled. "Go find Clay—he's probably at Annie's—and tell him about the still. You remember what happened to the still, Pernell?" Cutter paused. "Never mind. Just tell him there's been trouble and to meet us up at the huntin' cabin."

While he gave Pernell orders, Tommy manhandled Lettie onto the table, throwing her back against it hard enough to drive the breath from her. He lay over her, pinning her arms and pressing her legs tight against the table so she couldn't move. Tommy peered into her eyes with a hungry gaze she knew too well. Whatever revenge Cutter might want, Tommy wanted something else from her. He reached between them and grabbed her crotch, squeezing till it hurt.

"You been giving it out to Shadow, but you think you're too good for me," he muttered low enough that Cutter, who was repeating directions to Pernell, couldn't hear.

Lettie didn't waste her breath arguing. A man like Tommy could never hear when a woman talked. She stopped struggling and held real still, saving her energy for any slim chance that might come along to break free.

She stared into Tommy's eyes, refusing to drop her gaze or let him know he terrified her. She heard the door close as Pernell left the cabin. One gone. Only two to fight against now. That was a little hopeful.

"Get off the girl, Tommy. We ain't here to rape her. Jesus Christ, can't you never keep your cock in your pants?" Cutter sounded disgusted, and for a second Lettie loved him for that, but his next words chilled her through. "Just hold her still so I can leave my mark."

With a grunt, Tommy moved out of the way without letting go of Lettie's hands. He slid around the side of the table, and Cutter took his place pressing her bent legs against the table so she couldn't kick. He pulled the bodice of her dress open and pushed up her camisole to reveal her bare stomach.

Cutter held his blade up where she could see it, letting her imagine the pain of it entering her flesh before he actually drove it in. Lettie's spine pressed into the hard tabletop as she sucked her belly in. She gasped as Cutter lowered the knife and began to slice.

This ain't so bad. No worse than times I've cut my finger on a kitchen knife was her first thought as he drew the blade over her skin. He wasn't digging deep, just drawing with the tip of the knife, probably making that cross and scythe symbol she'd heard so much about.

But as Cutter kept slicing, the pain began to increase. Now it felt like bee stings. She winced and tried to hold more still. If she wiggled, Cutter might accidentally—or on purpose—cut too deep, but if she took her punishment without complaining, he might let her go after making his point.

Lettie glanced at Tommy's face upside-down above her. He stared at what his brother was doing as if it made him hard. She was sure it did.

At last Cutter pulled back. Her belly was on fire, and she felt the warmth of blood trickling down her rib cage. Cutter took hold of her thighs and squeezed. "I ain't gonna stab you since I doubt you're the one who squealed to the feds. But let this remind you what'll happen if you ever do."

"That's all?" Tommy exploded. "We gonna just let her go with a warning? Our brother might be dead because of this bitch. You don't *know* she wasn't the one to talk. I say we teach her a real lesson."

"You want to slap her around some, go ahead." Cutter wiped blood off his blade and flicked it closed. "Hell, fuck her for all I care. I know you're gonna sooner or later anyhow. But try 'an remember, we got more important things on our plate right now. Gotta get up to the cabin and figure out our next move."

Lettie continued to lie limp as a dishrag, though her body was so tense she felt she might explode. Tommy's words about teaching her a "real lesson" sent a new spike of fear through her. And then Cutter gave him permission to do whatever he wanted. This was the moment, her one chance to make a move, since both men seemed to forget she was there at all as they argued.

Tommy had let go of her hands, and Cutter had stepped away from the table so her legs were free. Lettie reached around the table and found the only object in her reach—the pepper shaker. She drew a deep breath, gathered all her strength and will, vaulted up from the table, and threw the heavy shaker at Cutter's head. Luck blessed her. It hit him square between the eyes. He yelled and grabbed for his face, at the same moment Lettie jumped off the table, putting it between her and Tommy.

Tommy got over his surprise and leaped around the table toward her. Lettie couldn't make it past Cutter to the door, so she ran the other way and snatched up the butcher knife from the kitchen counter. She held it in front of her as Tommy rushed her

like a charging bull. He was moving so fast he couldn't stop. Lettie grunted and her arms shook as two-hundred-some pounds of man was impaled on the knife gripped in her hands.

Tommy had been reaching out for her, but now his hands dropped to his stomach, his eyes wide with shock.

Lettie let go of the knife and skipped backward, away from his body, as it toppled forward. She hit her arm and hip hard on the corner of the cast iron stove, but she was too keyed up to feel any pain. She felt as if she were outside her body watching as she dodged around Cutter and ran for the door.

His hand landed on her shoulder and jerked her back, exactly the way she'd feared it might that night with Shatner.

Lettie stomped down on his foot with the heel of her shoe and drove her elbow into his gut with all her might. Then she wrenched away from his grip and banged out the door. She bounded off the front porch and into the shadows of the nearest trees, sure she heard the Robeson brothers pounding after her. But the blood was rushing in her ears so loud she couldn't be sure.

The woods were as familiar to her as her own cabin. Lettie darted between trees and around boulders, heading uphill all the time. She heard no one crashing through the underbrush behind her, so maybe the Robesons had given up on chasing her.

Maybe Tommy was even dead.

If they didn't chase her now, they'd come for her again sooner or later. She could never return to her cabin to gather anything, not even the little bit of money she'd managed to put aside. She'd have to flee the hollow with nothing but the clothes on her back—and the buttons of her dress were ripped clean off.

Where could she go? Where could she hide while she figured out what to do with herself and took a moment to mourn Shadow?

Suddenly, she knew. Only one place she'd ever felt safe or welcome. Lettie climbed the hill, staying in the darkness of the woods and heading toward the only sanctuary she could think of.

Chapter Nineteen

It took Shadow until late afternoon to wake from the blow to his head and then limp all the way home. The bullet had only grazed his hip, but his entire body was banged up from falling into the ravine. Every breath made him wince. He shambled along, leaning on a thick branch for a crutch. When he finally reached his house, he'd never been so happy to see the place.

There were no lights on and no one home when Shadow opened the front door and called out. He doubted every member of the family had been arrested and guessed they'd gone to the camp in the backwoods. Another long hike lay before him to reach the hunting cabin and cluster of shacks hidden deep in the hills.

But first he needed to see Lettie. Clearly his family knew about the still, so he could check in with them later, maybe even try to convince them it was time to quit making shine. Then he'd say his good-byes and leave this place for good.

Shadow washed up, treated all the scratches and torn skin, and cleaned his head wound and the bullet graze on his hip. He changed his clothes and packed a bag with clothes and provisions, putting his service revolver in the waistband of his trousers where it should have been during the shootout. But if it had, he would've probably drawn on the agents, men who'd only been doing their job. He was glad he'd left the weapon at home.

The truck and the horses and the wagon were all gone, so he started toward Lettie's house on foot. Though he was bone weary and depending heavily on his cane, he was so eager to see Lettie, his footsteps felt light. He made the distance between his place and hers as fast as his aching legs would allow.

The first sign that something was terribly wrong was her front door—wide open and hanging crooked on its hinges. Shadow limped faster across the clearing, calling Lettie's name. Fear seized him like a giant hand squeezing his heart.

He stopped in the doorway, and time stretched out dreamlike. The room was lit by a kerosene lamp Lettie would never have left burning if she hadn't fled in a hurry. The wooden chair lying on its side and the table pushed crooked suggested a fight had taken place. Something red was smeared on the counter and tabletop.

Strawberry jam or tomato preserves. Shadow's mind tried to explain it away. But there were more dark red splotches on the floor and a large puddle with men's footprints leading away from it.

Lettie hadn't accidentally cut herself with a knife while working in the kitchen and gone for help. Someone had been here with her—maybe attacked her! Shadow slammed his mind closed on that thought. If he started imagining all the awful things that might have happened to Lettie, he couldn't function. She *had* to be all right, had to have run away from whoever was in this shack.

Tommy, the inner voice stated flatly as if it were fact. Again Shadow wanted to shut down a thought he couldn't bear, but Tommy had made it clear he wanted Lettie, and once Tommy put his mind to having something, he didn't let go.

Shadow searched for an alternative, anyone else who might have come to Lettie's place. What he came up with was worse—Cutter knew Lettie was angry about his threatening Shatner. He might think she'd tipped off the feds, causing the raid. Shadow could imagine Cutter coming here to threaten Lettie or even...

A thought so terrible it stopped his heart sent Shadow across the creaking floor toward Lettie's bedroom. The door filled his vision like a nightmare. In his head, he could already see her bloody body lying in a tangle of sheets. Would either one of his brothers really have done something so unspeakable?

He took a breath before pushing the door open.

The bed was made, covers drawn up neatly the way Lettie always left them. There was no space in the tiny room for anything but the bed, no body sprawled on the floor.

Shadow exhaled in a rush, but his relief lasted only a second. He still had no idea what had happened to Lettie. His brothers might have had nothing to do with her disappearance, but right now they were the only possibility he could think of. With no idea where to search for Lettie, Shadow had a good idea his brothers were at the camp. If he had to beat the truth out of one or both of them, he would.

Before Shadow left, he took a last look at those big red footprints and searched for any clue Lettie might have left behind. There was nothing but blood and signs of a struggle. He turned down the lamp and hurried outside.

As he started down the steps, he glimpsed something pale in the darkness among the flowers Lettie had planted in front of her cabin. He stooped to see what it was, and another punch hit his gut. The still body of Lettie's cat, Bathsheba, lay there.

Tommy, his mind insisted. The times in his life he'd tried to stop Tommy from torturing some small animal sprang to mind. This was exactly the sort of thing Tommy would do to intimidate Lettie. Whatever had gone on in this cabin, Shadow now felt almost certain Tommy had something to do with it.

He started off again, the sickness in his stomach growing with each step and the dull ache in his head beginning to swell into something that diminished every other pain in his body. *Not one of those incapacitating headaches. Not now.* He didn't have time to be struck down by pain. He had a mission to accomplish, and if he weren't too late, he might still be able to save Lettie.

By the time he reached the road near his house, every step felt like pulling his feet out of sucking mud, and he still had to walk the three miles up the hill to the camp. He didn't know if he could make it there under his own steam and thought of borrowing a neighbor's horse, even if it meant waking Ned Blight, who hated all Robesons.

Just as he'd decided he'd steal the animal from the man's barn instead, Shadow heard the rumble of a motor coming from behind him. He knew the Ford truck's particular voice. This was some other vehicle, and nobody who lived around here had an automobile.

He began to move faster. The feds had taken some time, but now they were coming to arrest anyone from the family they could find at home.

The roar of the engine grew louder as the vehicle came around up behind him. Shadow had about a half second to decide whether to keep walking as if he had nothing to hide or tear off across country. Who was he kidding? He couldn't outrun anything, the condition he was in.

Headlights hit him, a horn honked, and Pernell's voice called his name. Shadow looked back over his shoulder. The approaching automobile gleamed in the moonlight, and Pernell's head was stuck out of the passenger-side window. He waved at Shadow and called his name again.

The car stopped beside Shadow. Pernell leaped out and lifted him off his feet in a bear hug. “Shadow, you’re alive! Donnie said you got blowed up.”

Shadow gasped for breath as Pernell squeezed him, then set him back down.

“I’m glad you ain’t dead. Donnie didn’t know what he was talking about.”

“They didn’t arrest him? He got away?” Shadow glanced past Pernell at Clay, who’d left the motor running and the driver’s door wide open as he hurried over.

He looked Shadow up and down with steely eyes like Daddy’s and clapped a hand to his shoulder. “Glad you’re all right, brother. What a fucking disaster.”

Overwhelmed by the shock of meeting with his brothers on top of everything else that had happened, Shadow’s reaction was to point at the automobile. “What’s this?”

Clay glanced over his shoulder. “Told you I was tired of living like trash. I bought this beauty today in Frankfort. An Oldsmobile touring car, fresh off the lot. Didn’t expect a disaster to happen while I was gone. How’s the family?”

“I don’t know. I got knocked unconscious for a while, and when I got home, nobody was there. What’d you do with the truck?”

“A friend rode along with me and drove the Ford back. He’s probably dropped it at our house by now. I stopped by Uncle Duke’s, where Pernell told me what happened. Uncle Duke went to collect Greer’s and Wilson’s bodies. The man looks about a hundred years old.” Clay shook his head and repeated, “Damn, what a fucking mess!” He eyed Shadow and the turnoff to their house. “If you already been home, what you doing this direction? Why didn’t you head straight up to camp to join the family?”

Shadow didn’t want to mention being at Lettie’s. “Hoped I’d get Blight to lend me his horse so I wouldn’t have to walk all the way.”

Clay snorted. They’d been disputing the land boundary with Ned Blight for years. No way the man would offer a hand if a Robeson was drowning in front of him. “Well, climb in my new automobile and ride in style.”

Pernell supported Shadow when he stumbled on the way to the car and helped him get in the front before taking a seat in back.

From behind the steering wheel, Clay looked over at Shadow. “What do you think?”

On a day he'd nearly gotten blown up, fallen down a ravine, gotten knocked unconscious, and found his darling Lettie missing, discussing Clay's new vehicle was the last thing Shadow wanted to do. But he ran a hand over the leather seat cover and muttered, "Nice."

This crazy nightmare rambled on, none of the parts connecting or making any sense. It didn't help that his head hurt so badly lights danced in his vision. The socket of his missing eye throbbed. And above all the pains in his body, his fear Lettie had been stolen from him forever clamored like a firehouse alarm.

"Feelin' poorly?" Pernel's big hand landed on Shadow's head and gave it a rub.

"Not too great." He winced as the Oldsmobile flew over a pit in the road and landed with a teeth-clicking thud. Clay's shiny new vehicle wasn't going to stay looking good for long on these country roads. It was a city man's car. Anybody except Clay could tell it didn't belong here.

Shadow distracted himself thinking about the damned car because he couldn't figure out what he was going to do if it turned out his own flesh and blood had hurt Lettie. *Or killed her*, the inner voice whispered. Would he have to shoot his own brothers?

Shadow lost a bit of time and opened his eyes again when Clay stopped the car behind a stand of trees. The family wagon was also parked there. The path to the campsite was so steep, it had to be climbed on foot. The family would have packed all they could on horses and transported things that way.

It had been years since Shadow had been up to the camp, not since before he left for his stint in the army. Now the roof of the main cabin was sagging, and the other shacks were falling apart. Nobody had expected to abandon the main house and retreat up here, or they might have kept it in better shape. Smoke rose from the chimney as Shadow and his brothers walked toward the cabin. Vern and Rosie, running around in the dark chasing fireflies and each other, came racing toward their uncles.

Rosie blurted, "Did you hear Daddy got hurt?"

"Stabbed," Vern corrected. "Aunt Camilia's stitching him up. They made us wait out here, but I wanna see."

"Tommy's been stabbed? Who did it?" Clay asked.

“A bad lady. We heard Uncle Cutter tell how she did it,” Rosie answered eagerly. “And they said *you* was dead.” She pointed at Shadow.

“Nope.” Shadow brushed past his little niece and nephew to hurry inside. Clay and Pernell followed.

The hunting cabin was one large room with a couple of doors leading off to several bedrooms. Tommy’s wife, Susan, stood over the stove, stirring something in a pot. Tommy lay on the kitchen table with Daddy and Cutter holding him steady while Camilia sewed a wound in his stomach. Donnie Baker leaned against a wall, watching and flinching at every stitch. Everyone, except unconscious Tommy, looked up and gaped at the sight of Shadow.

Camilia froze in the midst of pulling a length of thread through Tommy’s flesh. “You ain’t dead!”

Cutter’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head, and Daddy’s lips twisted in what might have been a smile. “Glad to see you alive and kicking, son.”

“How’d you make it outta there?” Donnie asked. “I was sure you were in there when it—”

Clay interrupted. “What in blazes happened? I leave for one day, and everything goes to hell!”

Daddy glared at Clay and tightened his grip on Tommy’s arms as Tommy groaned and twisted. “You shoulda been here. What the hell were *you* up to?”

“None of your damn business.” Clay glanced around. “And where’s Katie?”

“Your *wife*”—Daddy sneered the word—“decided to go visit her kin. Skedaddled at the first sign of trouble. You and him”—he nodded at Cutter—“sure know how to pick ’em. Fine pair of men I raised that don’t know how to control their women.”

“Hold him, Daddy!” Camilia snapped. “I can’t do this if you and Cutter don’t hold him steady.”

Tommy’s groan filled the cabin as she jabbed her sewing needle again.

“I can’t say this is gonna work,” she added. “He was cut deep, and I can’t sew up no organs. He might bleed inside.”

Shadow stood inside the doorway where he'd stopped to take in the scene. It seemed Lettie had stabbed Tommy in the gut. Probably with good reason, but still, it was a shock to find his brother bleeding to death while his sister stitched him up.

"What happened?" Clay repeated before Shadow had a chance to.

Gripping Tommy's legs, Cutter answered, "Tommy and me figured out who told the feds where our still was. That gal Lettie Calloway, who works at Shatner's, was mad we threatened him and wanted to pay us back."

"How did she know the location?" Clay moved closer, watching Camilia take another careful stitch.

"She's been up there." Cutter jerked his chin at Shadow. "Ask *him* why."

Again everyone looked at Shadow, who still hadn't moved. Their chattering voices seemed far away. All he could focus on was that, whatever she might have done to Tommy, he must protect Lettie.

"No way Lettie would do that," he said as cool and calm as he could manage. "Y'all misjudged her and went to her cabin to threaten her, didn't you?"

"Yeah. And she stabbed Tommy near to death," Cutter shouted.

"Because he tried to hurt her," Shadow shot back.

"Would the pair of you shut up?" Camilia bellowed over them both. "This ain't the time or place for a family squabble. Let me work on saving Tommy, *then* you can kill him if you've a mind to, Shadow."

Chapter Twenty

Lettie couldn't stand the thought of lying on the same mattress where Agnes had died, so she took an old quilt from a chest and laid it on the floor, making herself a little nest to curl up in. For the first time since the Robeson boys had entered her house, she took a deep breath and felt like her heart wasn't about to bust loose from her chest.

Her running had led her to the one place she figured those boys wouldn't think to look for her. Nobody else was likely to come around either. Not tonight, anyway. She could rest, patch up the cut on her stomach, and figure out what to do next. But before she even cleaned the blood off her, she needed to lie still for a spell.

She wrapped her arms tight around her body, pulling her legs up so she lay in a ball. With every breath, she calmed down a little more. Still, her mind kept running. She couldn't stop thinking about Shadow. Gone. Dead. Not even a body to bury, from the way it sounded.

She closed her eyes, and tears trickled down her cheeks as she prayed he'd died fast and felt no pain. But Lettie herself was feeling plenty of pain, and for a while, she let herself wallow in it. The two people she loved in this world, Shadow and Agnes, gone within days of each other, both snatched away from her as if to remind her not to count on nobody but herself. Seemed every time she got close to grabbing a tiny bit of happiness in this life, it got taken away.

Why'd she even keep on going? Right now it seemed it'd be easier to keep lying here on this floor until she stopped breathing. Wouldn't nobody miss her anyhow. Not even Shatner. She'd worked for him three years, defended him against Cutter, and he'd treated her like a canker that needed removing.

Lettie cradled her stomach and whimpered. Her belly hurt both inside and out, a big lead weight of sadness filling it and the marks Cutter had scrawled on her skin burning like lines of fire.

I ain't worth nothing to nobody. It had been easier to accept that fact before Shadow came and she learned what having someone love her actually felt like. Shadow had made her look forward to each new day and every moment spent with him. It was like someone had switched on a big bright light in her life and she could see everything clear. Now the light was doused, and she was in darkness again.

Lettie moaned and rolled over to her other side to cry more tears into a dry patch of quilt.

Never did nobody no good to feel sorry for theirselves. Agnes's voice sounded in her ears as clear as if the old lady spoke to her.

Lettie's eyes flew open, and she sat up to stare around the cabin. No shadowy figure hung over her, but damned if she didn't *feel* Agnes Barrow's presence. Lettie took a breath and pressed a hand to her chest, listening.

Git on up, little gal. You ain't gonna lie there and just die.

Lettie scrambled to her feet, shivering though the shack was hot and stuffy. She hadn't lit a lamp when she entered, so she shuffled around the unfamiliar space lit only by a little moonlight coming through the windows.

Agnes had a basin on the kitchen counter. Lettie took it outside and pumped water into it. She carried it back in, found a rag, and washed the crust of dried blood from her skin, which got the cuts oozing again. Agnes had taught her some about what herbs were good for different ailments. Lettie sprinkled dried goldenrod and yarrow on a folded wet cloth and bound it to her middle with a longer strip.

Her dress was ruined, so she searched among Agnes's clothing for something that would fit her. The family had taken Agnes's body away but left everything else untouched. Lettie had all she needed to make herself clean and comfortable, and though she wasn't hungry, she opened a few jars and made herself eat.

Afterward, she felt a little better—or at least capable of doing more than lying on the floor wishing herself dead. Not that her mind didn't keep returning to the thought of Shadow and sniffing at it like a hound dog. The ache of loss was huge and heavy. It would be with her for a long time to come. But she wasn't ready to give in to the pain and die along with him. Not today, anyhow.

She had a life in front of her, and she couldn't live it here. There could be no going back to her shack for anything in case the Robesons were watching for her. She would walk away in the borrowed clothes on her back.

Lettie shuttered the windows so no light would leak out and lit a candle. Then she moved around the cabin, packing everything she could use. After she was done, she paused and looked around Agnes's cabin. It was the dead of night and probably the best

time to leave without a chance of anyone spotting her. If she stayed off the main road and went by the trails she knew, she could get a long way before dawn.

But she'd been through a very long day even before the attack. Her body was exhausted, hurting, and needed to heal. She should rest before beginning her journey. The chance Cutter might track her down here was slim. He didn't know anything about her friendship with Agnes.

Just to be on the safe side, Lettie bolted the door with a crossbar and pushed the table in front of it. Then she curled once more on the wedding-ring quilt and tried to sleep. She pictured Agnes Barrow on her wedding day, starting a new life with her husband and a hope chest in which this quilt and other household goods were stored. A happy bride—something Lettie was never destined to be.

She exhaled, blowing away all the sad thoughts that tried to crowd into her mind. *Never did nobody no good to feel sorry for theirselves.* Lettie clung to Agnes's words, as wise and practical as the woman herself. She let her sorrow go just enough to drift off to sleep.

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Camilia was right, the middle of an operation was no time for Shadow to get into an argument with Cutter. But he couldn't wait to know what Cutter had to tell him about Lettie, so he nudged Pernell. "Will you take over holding Tommy down?"

He raised his voice. "Cutter, come on outside with me. I wanna talk to you."

Cutter hesitated. He seemed almost nervous. But then he gave up his spot at the foot of the table and followed Shadow outdoors. Clay, Donnie, and Susan all went with them.

Vern had lit a campfire in the pit, so the clearing was well lit enough that Shadow could see Cutter's face while they talked and know if he was being lied to. Vern and Rosie ran over, full of questions about how their daddy was doing.

Susan grabbed their hands to hustle them off to one of the shacks. "Come on, kids. Your daddy's sleepin' and you need to be too."

Shadow folded his arms and began asking questions. "What did you do to Lettie?"

"Question is, what have *you* been doin' with Lettie? Donnie said you two were lovey-doving in the woods up by the still."

Shadow glared at Donnie. "Donnie should've kept his mouth shut."

"But she *was* up there," Cutter said. "Who else knew where the still was?"

"Lots of people. Do y'all know where Tunney's still was or Mathis's or the Forests's?" Shadow demanded. "There are no secret places around here, and most everybody hates us for pushing them out of the whisky business. Any one of them might have been looking for payback."

Cutter shook his head. "We all know the code. Hill folk settle their own business and never bring in outsiders."

"Lettie knows that too. What makes you think she'd do something like that?"

"Cause she was real mad about Shatner." Cutter narrowed his eyes and took a step toward Shadow. "And because of *you*! Don't you see she was using you to get information? Girl is desperate for money, and they probably paid her for the tip. They looked for a weak spot and found it. You and that bitch."

Shadow couldn't contain his rage any longer. He lunged forward, fists up, ready to go. But Clay caught hold of him and held him back. And then his common sense kicked in. Before he started beating on Cutter, he needed to find out what had happened to Lettie. "So what'd you do to her? Did you...?"

Firelight flickered over Cutter's face so he looked like the devil himself. "God's sake, we didn't kill the girl. She ran away."

"But you beat her, or Tommy did."

Cutter shrugged. "I only threatened her, but Tommy hurt her a little. She twisted away, got hold of a butcher knife, and stabbed him."

"Wait a minute. You two let one little girl get the better of you?" Clay said.

"She was quick. Besides, we only wanted to put the fear of God in her, and we did that. I had to help Tommy, so I couldn't go after her. Don't know where she went after she ran out of the cabin."

Lettie had gotten away. She was all right. For the first time in the past hour, Shadow could breathe again.

"Blame yourself for bringing her up to the still," Cutter went on. "You hadn't done that, we wouldn't have had to go after her. By all rights, we should've killed her for what she done, the still destroyed and our cousins dead!"

“He’s right,” Donnie chimed in. “Never bring nobody to the still. That’s the rule.”

“Shut up, Donnie,” Clay said. “Keep out of this. It’s family business.”

Donnie slunk away to stand near the fire.

Cutter moved close to Shadow and looked him in the eye. “I swear to you, I didn’t hurt your girl. But you gotta face up to some truth. She don’t really like you. She’s a whore. She’ll go with anybody who gives her things. She played you, and you couldn’t see it. But I’d swear on a stack of bibles she’s the one betrayed us to the feds.”

“Cutter’s got a point.” Clay’s quiet voice sounded so reasonable. He really would’ve made a great lawyer. “What do you think that girl saw in you? Look at yourself. She wanted something from you, and you walked into her trap. That’s how women are.”

Cutter nodded, and Shadow wanted to punch him. But someplace deep inside, flickers of doubt popped up like dandelions in the pure green field of his feelings for Lettie. Why *did* she like him? He’d never quite understood that. Was it possible what Cutter suggested was true? Had Lettie got information from him to pass on to the revenue agents, or used him in some other way, maybe as her ticket out of Lorena at last?

These doubts winked out faster than the embers from the fire popped and fizzled. Shadow *knew* Lettie and knew what she felt for him was as real as what he felt for her. They were in love. None of his brothers’ fork-tongued words would shake him from that belief.

“Cutter.” Shadow moved a step closer and leaned in as if about to confide a secret. “You’re full of shit.” His bent arm shot out like a piston, and he slammed his fist square into Cutter’s face. The sound of bone cracking and the sight of spatters of blood flying from Cutter’s nose sent a swell of satisfaction through him.

It felt so good, Shadow drew back and popped a second punch into Cutter’s gut.

His brother doubled over, coughing and holding a hand to his nose, blood trickling between his fingers.

“Hey now,” Clay said but didn’t make a move to stop Shadow.

Cutter snapped his head up, glaring. The mask of red covering the lower half of his face made him look more like a devil than ever. “Son of a bitch,” he howled and threw himself at Shadow. Cutter’s shoulder in Shadow’s gut knocked the wind out of

him. They both landed on the ground and rolled in the dirt, punching, kicking, clawing, and biting—fighting as dirty as a Robeson knew how.

Shadow straddled Cutter, grabbing his head and slamming the back of it into the earth. His brother twisted and rolled until he was on top and Shadow pinned beneath him. A hail of blows landed on Shadow's face, snapping his head to one side, then the other.

Shadow snaked his arms between them, pushing against Cutter's chest while he brought his good leg up and kneed him in the balls. Cutter collapsed on his side groaning, giving Shadow the upper hand.

His knuckles split as he punched Cutter in the mouth and hit teeth. Shadow was aware of other people around. Daddy and Pernell had come out of the house, and Donnie and Clay stood by, shouting words Shadow couldn't make out. Nobody pulled the fighters apart, though.

Cutter took a swipe at Shadow's blind side, then pushed off the ground, throwing all his weight at Shadow and knocking him over. When Shadow landed on his bad leg, it buckled. Cutter reached into his pocket, and when he crouched over Shadow again, he held his blade.

"Whoa!" somebody yelled.

Cutter lifted his arm to strike, and Shadow braced for a slice across his face. Suddenly, hands grabbed hold of Cutter and pulled him off. Someone else—Clay, Shadow saw when he looked up—took hold of Shadow and hauled him the opposite way.

Daddy roared, "Enough, boys! Settle down."

Shadow stopped struggling. He was at the end of his strength anyhow, and a freight engine was charging through his head. Cutter was limp as a dishrag too, in Pernell's arms.

"We got some real problems to talk about. You two boys can settle up with each other later." Daddy glared at Cutter and Shadow before commanding his other sons, "Take these two over by the fire and sit 'em down."

Upended stumps and a couple of sagging benches someone had cobbled together long ago circled the fire. Shadow jabbed Clay in the stomach with an elbow, and when his brother released him, he sank onto the grass instead of one of the hard seats.

“Listen up.” Daddy strode back and forth in front of the fire. “Told y’all it was a bad idea to stir things up, expanding outside our own area. Told you it’d cause trouble, and I was right.” He stood in front of Cutter, hands on his hips, and stared down at him. “Two of your cousins—*dead!* Our whole operation up in smoke. We never had a lick of trouble with the feds till we sent the first shipment to Frankfort.”

“I’m telling you, Daddy, it wasn’t Tennessee boys or any other crew. If they wanted us out of business, they would’ve wrecked it themselves and tried to shoot all of us dead. You know that!” Cutter wiped a hand across his face, smearing blood, and he glowered at Shadow. “It’s this girl of his—”

“Shut up!” the old man thundered. “Point is we got to start over and fast. We’re losing money even while we’re jawing here. So where are we going to set up?”

“Right here,” Clay suggested. “Get equipment together for a new still and start tomorrow. Throw a shed over it when we’re able. After things die down, we can salvage something from the old location.”

Cutter mopped at his nose with his sleeve and mumbled, “We have stuff from folks whose stills we shut down. Copper tubing and such.”

Daddy nodded. “Good thinking.” His pacing stopped in front of Shadow. “How about you? Any ideas?”

Shadow ran a tongue over the inside of his teeth, poking at one that was loose and tasting blood. He turned his head and spat red.

“Speak up. The family’s counting on you. Anybody can build a still, but you got a gift for making good whisky. I want your opinion on this.” Eyes like shiny agates drilled into him.

Shadow got his legs under him and slowly pushed himself upright so he could look his father in the eye. “Here’s what I think.” He cleared his throat and spat another mouthful of blood. “The family had a real close call today. Two dead and Donnie almost arrested. There’s no evidence that still belonged to us. No solid connection to us. It wasn’t even on our land. Anybody could’ve been running it. We can deny any knowledge. Right, Clay?”

The closest thing they had to a lawyer nodded.

“I think it’s best to walk away from all this right now. Take the money we got hidden away and start up a new business, something legal. Maybe a seed company or hardware store or, hell, invest in a railroad or something. I don’t care. Anything but goddamn moonshine!”

Before Daddy could interrupt, Shadow rushed on. “Also, I won’t be here to brew for you anymore. I’m leaving, so whatever the family decides to do next, I won’t be a part of it.”

Daddy stepped close and took hold of his shirtfront. His gaze bored into Shadow, and for the first time, Shadow realized how much shorter than him the man was.

“You listen to me. You can *never* walk away from family. We’re your blood and always will be. Nothing’s more important than responsibility to your kin.”

Shadow laughed. “Responsibility? Like drinking yourself blind drunk and throwing your kid down the stairs? Do you even remember doing that to Pernell? How ’bout keeping your boys out of school so they could work for you? Or letting your wife die because you were too cheap to get her a doctor? Far as I can tell, you’ve never done a responsible thing in your life.”

Fast as a rattlesnake striking, Daddy shot a hand out and slapped him across the face, snapping his head to the side.

Shadow rubbed his stinging mouth and cheek. He spat another mouthful of blood and backed away, one slow step after another. He stopped to take a long last look at his family gathered around the fire. Lifting a hand, he gave them all a salute before he turned and walked off into the darkness.

He thought someone—Clay, maybe, would come after him and try to wrangle him back to the group. But they let him walk away.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lettie bolted wide awake at the sound of approaching footsteps. She jumped up and scurried to a window to peek out between the shutters. One hand slipped down to rest on the handle of Agnes's carving knife. A dark figure moved across the clearing toward the cabin. She caught her breath when the man tried the door and found it barred.

They'd come for her. She cursed herself for thinking she'd be safe here.

"Lettie," a familiar voice called. "Are you in there?"

Shadow! For a second, her belief in haints and spirits seized her, and she thought it was his ghost. But a ghost wouldn't be rattling the door handle; it'd ooze right on in. This truly was Shadow. He hadn't blown up with the still.

Lettie pushed away the table she'd put up as a barrier, lifted the crossbar, and threw open the door. "You're alive!"

She launched herself toward him, ready to hold him in her arms and squeeze his solid, living body. But at the last moment, she thought Shadow might not be feeling so loving. After all, she'd stuck a knife in his brother.

Lettie stopped inches from him and looked up into his face. It was too dark to make out his expression. "How's Tommy?"

Shadow shrugged. "All right, I guess. Camilia stitched him up. How are *you*?"

Tears stung her eyes and tightened her throat. Of all the times to go all blubbery so she couldn't talk! "Thought you were... I thought I'd die of sadness, and then Cutter... And Tommy..." She sobbed and spoke in wet bursts. "I had to... I'm sorry."

Shadow pulled her up against him. His strong arms wrapped around her, and Lettie melted against him like a wilted lettuce leaf. He didn't hate her. He forgave her for sort of stabbing his brother.

"What did they do to you? Did they hurt you?"

Lettie had almost forgotten the itching burn on her stomach where Cutter had carved his mark. It wasn't that deep and could've been much worse. "A little. Not too bad. Mostly I was scared."

She let go of Shadow long enough to look up at him. "I didn't tell nobody nothing, I swear. Why would I do that when I knew you might be up there? Even if you weren't, I'd never say a word. I'm no snitch."

He brushed her hair back from her face, and she thought her hair must be sticking up like a crazy woman's.

"That's what I told them," he said. "I don't give a damn who did it. I'm done with all that." Cutter dipped his head a little and took a breath. "I'm done with my family. I told 'em so tonight. You and me are leaving here together, just like we said."

It was the middle of the night, but bright shiny beams of light burst through Lettie at his words. "I'm ready. Let's go right now!"

Shadow smiled. "Honey, I'd love to, but if I don't lie down for a bit, I'm gonna fall down. Can we go inside?"

She slipped an arm around him, and he leaned heavily into her as they went into the cabin. "How did you get away? And how did you know where to find me?"

"I know you and Agnes were close. Checking here made sense." He put one foot slowly in front of the other, shuffling like an old man.

Lettie eased him down onto the quilt. "Sorry it's so hard here on the floor, but Lettie died in her bed, so I didn't want to sleep on it."

"Don't care, just so's I'm off my feet." Shadow grunted as he landed on the floor.

While he stretched out, Lettie shut and bolted the door. Then she pulled his boots off for him. "Nobody's going to be looking for you—or me?"

"We're safe here. You don't need to worry no more."

She almost believed him. The dark cabin felt warmer and safer when she lay cuddled up next to Shadow's side. But nervous moths still fluttered inside her when she thought of the rest of his family. Cutter claimed to believe she hadn't betrayed them even as he carved her stomach, but it didn't sound like he'd told Shadow that. And if Tommy died from his wound, the Robesons would have another reason to find her.

Lettie studied Shadow's shadowy profile and wished she'd lit a candle so she could see him better. Though she didn't need to see his face to know he was worn to the very bone. She should let him sleep, but first she had to know what happened at the still.

She rubbed a hand down his shirtfront, feeling the comforting beat of his heart. "How did you get away?" she asked again.

“There was some shooting. Jars broke, and whisky was everywhere. The shed caught fire, and steam pressure was building from the extra heat. I shouted a warning and dove out the back door. Fell into the ravine and knocked myself out cold.”

“Is your head hurt?” Lettie reached for it in the dark, feeling his soft hair.

Shadow guided her hand to a lump on the back of his head and hissed through his teeth when she touched it. “When I came to, I went home, but nobody was there. Then I went to your place and...” His throat clicked as he swallowed. “All that blood. I was sure somebody had murdered you. But it must have been Tommy’s.”

“Well...” Lettie hesitated to tell him, but he’d see the carving on her belly eventually. “Maybe a little was mine. Cutter left his mark on me.” She pressed Shadow’s hand against the padding on her belly. “Not too deep, though. I’ll be all right.”

“He *cut* you? That son of a bitch!” Shadow’s whole body tensed as if he’d jump up and go flying out the door to find and attack his brother.

Lettie pressed her hand against his chest again. “Let it be. You know they thought I squealed to the law. He could’ve slit my throat and been justified given what he believed. But he didn’t, and it’s all over now. Besides, Tommy stuck himself on the knife I was holdin’, so I guess we’re even.”

Shadow touched the bandage on her stomach through her cotton dress. “I’d still like to carve Cutter up some. At least I punched him hard enough to knock some teeth loose.”

Lettie rolled her eyes since he couldn’t see it in the dark. Men and their hitting each other as if it’d fix things. She’d had enough of that. There were fights at the bar at least a couple of times a week. It seemed men never got tired of punching each other. And when they couldn’t get enough of that, they beat on their women or kids too.

“How’s your leg doing?” she asked.

“Imagine it’ll be pretty stiff by morning. I’ll get by.”

Her hand traveled up his neck and the side of his face to feel around his temple. “And your head?”

“Hurts worse than my leg.” Shadow yawned.

Lettie took the hint and stopped talking. Her man needed to rest now. Time enough for more questions tomorrow. She smiled. A whole future full of time for them to

talk about things together. She closed her eyes and snuggled into Shadow's heat like a cat finding a comfortable spot. The thought of Bathsheba made her smile dim.

There were a lot of bad things that had happened that day to be upset about, but there were more things to feel good about. She had Shadow back from the grave and in her arms. Maybe there was hope for their luck to take a turn for the better at last.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Shadow woke to a ray of light piercing his eyelid. He eased his eyes open and squinted with his good one at the slit in the shutters through which the sun was trying to enter. Midmorning or maybe even midday. Time to get moving.

That was the last thing his body wanted to do. Lying with only the thickness of a quilt between his body and a wooden floor didn't make for good sleep. But it had been peaceful enough because, whenever he'd startled awake during the night, nerves jangling, Lettie lay breathing deeply beside him. He could drift off again, knowing she was safe.

Now, he was wrapped in the quilt alone. Lettie had got up and gone outside.

Shadow eased up to his feet, grabbing the post of Agnes's bedstead to support himself. He took a step without holding on to anything to see if he could do it. His leg held, even though Cutter had given it a good kick in the kneecap during their fight.

Shadow limped to the door and stepped outside. A glance at the sun told him it was earlier than he'd thought. Good thing, since he was anxious to get on the road and put as much distance from Lorena as possible before sundown.

After limping down from the camp, he'd taken the Ford truck—parked at home where Clay had said his friend would leave it. Walking away from his family last night had felt like a period at the end of a sentence. Finished. Although Daddy might not be as clear about that as Shadow was.

Lettie wasn't in the clearing, and for a heartbeat, Shadow grew nervous. But then she came around the corner of the shanty, probably on her way back from the outhouse. He greeted her with a smile, and she returned one so bright it dazzled his eye more than the sun.

"Morning. You as hungry as I am?" she asked.

He hadn't eaten since yesterday's breakfast and realized he was starving. "Yeah. But we can find a store on the road and buy something to eat. We should get on our way now."

"Just like that." Lettie spoke softly, more to herself than him. She looked around at the trees and the sky, the view of the familiar valley and folds of blue hills as if saying good-bye, then nodded. "All right, then. Let's go."

As they made their way down the steep trail to where he'd parked the truck, Shadow told her more about his parting from his family. "After I got into that fight with Cutter, Daddy gave a speech about the family pulling together. I told 'em they should try a new line of work, then I left."

"You don't think they're going to be missing their truck?"

"I think they owe it to me. Besides, the shape I'm in, we wouldn't get too far without it. They got the horse and wagon, and Daddy can afford another truck."

Lettie stepped over a rock in the path. "Sounds about right to me."

They reached her place and paused at the edge of the clearing like deer searching for danger. The clearing appeared empty, but Shadow pulled his pistol before they approached the shack. Inside, it was exactly as it had been last night.

While Lettie quickly packed her few clothes, he went out with a shovel to bury her cat—one more thing his brother Tommy had destroyed without a thought. As Shadow dug into the dirt among the flowers, he thought about his brothers, both the good and the bad in all of them. He couldn't find one positive about either Tommy or Cutter. He had a hard time caring whether Tommy survived the stabbing. The only reason it mattered was because the family might come after Lettie for payback if Tommy died.

After settling Sheba's stiff body into the hole he'd dug, he covered her over. He hoped Vern wouldn't grow up to be like crazy Tommy. If Susan had any gumption, she'd do like Katie and Annabelle and get herself and her kids the hell away from the Robesons. But Annabelle would eventually return to Cutter with his sons. She always did. And Susan would probably never dare leave Tommy. It was a sad thing but none of Shadow's business. All he could do was make sure he treated his woman the way she deserved—with the care and respect every woman deserved.

His woman. He liked the sound of that. It made him smile as he tamped down the last layer of dirt on the little grave.

*

Lettie hadn't counted on how being back in her own house would make her tremble. Every time she caught a glimpse of the bloodstains out of the corner of her eye, another quake would set off inside her. Memories from yesterday hit her like blows: Tommy snapping Sheba's neck; Pernell's hard arms seizing her; Cutter flipping open his

knife; her body being dragged, shoved, pinned down, and cut, all control out of her hands. She'd hated that feeling of helplessness. Made her want to stab Tommy all over again, and Cutter too, for good measure.

But she didn't have the time now to get the shakes or relive something that was over with. Lettie hurried to get the bit of money she'd hidden under her floorboard. She'd saved the coins in the little cloth wallet to pay for a new roof. Now she was going to leave her home, and she had to admit the idea scared her. She'd never been more than a few miles from here in her whole life.

In the kitchen, she avoided looking at the blood as she gathered a few things they could use on the road. *They*—she and Shadow together. She was half of a pair now, and that made her want to sing. There was nothing at all to miss about this place. Plenty of equally pretty spots in the world and she and Shadow would find one where they could start over as fresh and clean as a newly washed sheet.

Lettie gathered all that was worth saving and could fit into one carpetbag. One last look around, and a glint of light on the porcelain angel's wings caught her eye. At the last minute, she wrapped it in one of her stockings and tucked it deep in the bag. If it ended up broken, so be it, but she'd at least bring the angel along. It was the only tie she had to her mother.

She stepped out on the porch to find Shadow replanting one of her flowers on the grave he'd dug for Bathsheba. How many men would bother about a little detail like that? How many would even bother to bury a cat when it was easier to toss the body off into the woods and let the coyotes take it away? A swell of love so big it choked her swept through her.

As Shadow brushed dirt off his hands, Lettie dropped her bag and threw her arms around him. "Thank you."

After a couple of deep kisses, Shadow pulled away and adjusted his eye patch. "Whew. Wish we had time for that."

"Me too." But soon they'd have all the time in the world. Lettie picked up the satchel again. "Got one more thing to do before we go."

She went to the corner of the yard where all her kin were buried, including the little graves of the brother and sisters she'd never had a chance to know. She bowed her head and said a prayer for them and asked them to pray for her too.

"Your mama had other children?" Shadow asked as they walked to the truck. "I didn't know that."

"All three died when they was born. But sometimes..." Lettie paused. How much should she tell? Some family secrets needed to stay secret, didn't they? "Sometimes I wondered if that was true, or if Mama just couldn't take having another mouth to feed."

She slanted a sideways look at Shadow. He frowned, and she rushed to explain. "I ain't sayin' that's what happened. I just wonder about it sometimes."

Shadow nodded slowly. Then he stopped walking to pull her close again, hugging her and kissing her forehead and not saying anything. He didn't need to. His comfort was all Lettie needed after throwing off the burden of a secret fear she'd carried for years.

When she was done sniffing and clinging, Lettie stepped away and wiped her eyes. Shadow offered her his hand, and they walked to where he'd parked the truck well hidden in the trees.

"Can we make one more stop?" Lettie couldn't do anything about her land sale right now but at least she could collect her overdue pay. "Shatner fired me yesterday before all that business with your brothers. He owes me a week's pay. A couple of dollars probably don't sound like much to you, but I earned it, and I'm tired of having to cow down when some man does me wrong."

It sounded dumb. They should be driving far away from here as soon possible. But Shadow seemed to understand.

"I told my daddy off before I walked away. Best feeling I've had in a long time. Other than bein' with you, of course." His smile set her heart to beating like a drum. "We can take a minute to get what Shatner owes you."

The truck skimmed over the road like a cantering horse but with more bumps and jounces. Lettie enjoyed looking out the window this time. Each field or stretch of woods they passed, she'd think *this will be the last time I ever see that*. And instead of the earlier ache she'd felt, her spirit grew lighter with every landmark left behind.

They pulled into the yard in front of Shatner's Shack. Years of wagon wheels and horses' hooves had churned the mud into a rutted mess. The tavern was closed this early in the day, and Shatner sat on the front porch, chair tipped back against the wall, a mason jar in his hand. Filled with the very whisky Shadow had brewed, Lettie thought.

The truck door gave a squawk like a crow's call as Lettie opened it. She hopped out and walked toward Shatner. The front legs of his chair hit the floorboards. He sat up straight, staring back and forth between her and Shadow as if trying to make sense of them being together.

"Lettie, what are you doin' here? With him?"

"I come to get the pay you owe me for all last week." Lettie stopped in front of him and folded her arms. Her dander was up and her mouth started running away on its own. "And also an apology for the way you cut me loose without a word of warning."

Shatner set down the jar and wiped his mouth. He looked terrible, as if he'd been up all night. His eyes were fiery red and he hadn't shaved in a few days at least. He rose unsteadily from his chair and stole another look at Shadow standing just behind Lettie.

The expression on Shadow's face must have been pretty grim, because the old man nodded. "Yeah. Sure. I can get that for you." Instead of going into the tavern for the cash, he fished his wallet out of his pocket and tried to remove a couple of dollars with shaking fingers.

"Wasn't tryin' to be mean," he muttered. "Thought I'd keep you safe. You been a real hard worker, a good girl no matter what anybody says. I wanted you out of here before..." He offered her a couple of bills. "Before anything happened."

Lettie took the one and the five dollar bill he offered—far more than he owed her—and looked into Shatner's red-rimmed eyes. He meant what he said. What sort of "anything" was he talking about? The tavern being raided? Maybe the old man really was looking out for her.

"This is too much," she told him, thinking he was too drunk to count right.

Shatner waved a hand and shook his head. "No. You take it." He leaned close to her, and the alcohol on his breath about got her reeling too. "What you doin' with that Robeson boy?" he asked as if Shadow, standing a few steps away, couldn't hear. "You don't want to get mixed up with them. They're trouble, Lettie. You know that."

“Yeah. Seen it firsthand,” she said. “Shadow ain’t like his brothers. And me and him is leavin’ these parts, so I guess this is good-bye, Mr. Shatner.”

Before he could reply, a truck came roaring up from the road, bumped over the pockmarked lot, and men with shotguns began jumping off the flatbed.

Shadow pulled his revolver and pushed Lettie. “Get inside!”

She took one step before someone yelled at her to freeze. She imagined she could already feel a bullet hitting her between the shoulder blades and did as she was told, raising her hands for good measure. On the porch, Shatner collapsed onto his chair as if someone had knocked his legs out from under him.

Shadow stepped between Lettie and the guns and shouted, “Uncle Duke, what are you doing here?”

“This is the gal works for Shatner, ain’t it? Lettie Calloway?”

Lettie turned so she could see the face of the man stalking toward Shadow. His hair and beard were peppered with white. His nose was long and straight like Shadow’s, and his eyes burned with the fire of a preacher talking about sin. He was here to kill her. Her blood froze and her legs trembled so bad she thought she might collapse like Shatner.

“Cutter told me she’s the one that snitched. She’s the reason my boys are dead!”

Shadow reached back with one hand, making sure Lettie stood protected behind his back. With the other, he leveled his revolver at his uncle. “Cutter was wrong. Lettie didn’t do it. Somebody else did.”

Lettie peeked around Shadow’s arm. Duke Robeson was drunk and mad and needed to take a life to make up for the ones he’d lost. He craved revenge and had three other men to back him up. Lettie recognized Jefferson Tunney from Parson’s Peak, and a couple more Robeson relatives. All the men looked eager to crucify anybody in their path. Duke probably wouldn’t listen but she had to try.

Still hiding behind Shadow, Lettie piped up, “I never talked to a revenue agent, I swear, Mr. Robeson. Why would I tell about your family’s still when I knew Shadow might get arrested? I love him.”

Duke swayed but kept his shotgun aimed right at them. If he pulled the trigger, the bullet would blow through Shadow and into her, killing them both. He snorted at the

mention of love. “Whores make money screwing men over. Shadow, step away from her and let justice be done.”

The click as Shadow cocked his gun made the hair on Lettie’s neck rise. She knew how fast violence could flare and men wind up dead on the ground.

“Lettie had nothing to do with it. I’m not letting you have her. You’ll have to come through me.” Shadow’s voice was granite hard and his body so tense, Lettie could almost feel it vibrating.

All hell was about to bust loose, and she didn’t know what she could do to stop it, except maybe come out from behind Shadow and let his uncle do what he was gonna do to her. At least then Shadow would be safe. She gathered her courage, ready to make a move, when all of a sudden, Shatner gave a loud belch.

“Hold on there, Duke. Lettie wasn’t the only one knew where the Robeson still is. Everybody around these parts knows, and a lot of ’em are mad enough they might’ve done it. Joe Mathis, for one. Robeson boys destroyed his operation and took all his old customers. And there are plenty more like him.”

Duke cut a glance at Shatner and the end of his shotgun dipped slightly.

“Besides, Lettie was workin’ here every afternoon and night. I never saw her talking to no strangers,” Shatner added.

“And when she wasn’t here, she was with me,” Shadow said. “I’m sorry about Greer and Wilson. Your boys was brave enough to try to fight off the revenuers, and it got ’em killed.”

“What about you?” Duke thrust at Shadow with the shotgun. “Why weren’t *you* shooting? How’d you make it out alive?”

“I forgot my revolver at home so I couldn’t shoot. I made it out the back way just before the still exploded. I’m sorry I couldn’t help your boys, but killing Lettie ain’t gonna bring no justice.”

“*Somebody’s gotta pay,*” the long-haired, bearded cousin, who looked like he was itching to pull a trigger, yelled. “Maybe we should go see Joe Mathis.”

Duke squinted at Shadow. “I hear you’re cutting ties with the family. You even wanna know how your brother’s doin’—the one this gal *stabbed*? I just come from there,

and Tommy's still alive. What the hell's the matter with you, boy, throwing over your own kin for a whore?"

Shadow's jaw clenched so tight it looked like bone would cut through skin. "She's not a whore, and she was defending herself from Tommy and Cutter."

The cousin wearing a tattered rebel cap shot a stream of tobacco between his teeth. "You talk a helluva lot for somebody who cain't talk. Maybe best if you go back to being mute."

Duke sneered. "Pathetic bastard. Fallin' for some no-account bitch and putting her above your own kin. Go on, then. Get the hell out of here and don't never come back. You're a shame to our family name."

Lettie considered the ragged cousins, drunk uncle, and all Shadow's crazy brothers, and thought nobody'd want to claim being a Robeson.

Duke lowered his shotgun, and Shadow brought his revolver down by his side.

Duke waved an arm at the truck. "Boys, back in the truck. We'll go up to Mathis's place."

The younger men jumped in back while Duke's pal Jefferson climbed in front. Duke stabbed a finger at Lettie. "If I find out later she's got anything to do with this, I'll hunt you both down. Don't matter how far you go."

Duke got in the passenger side of Jefferson's truck, and the man gunned the engine. The truck took off, leaving Shadow, Lettie, and Shatner choking on dust.

Lettie pressed a hand to her chest to ease the wild thumping of her heart. Everything had happened so fast, she hardly had time to think about being afraid, but now her legs wobbled. She sat down hard on the edge of the porch and Shadow sagged against one of its posts.

"Poor Mathis," Shatner said. "He's in for a bad day."

"But he didn't do anything, did he?" Lettie looked up at the white-haired man, who looked older today than he ever had. "What you said about strangers coming around... I never talked to none, but I served a man who came in a coupla times over the past few weeks. And I saw *you* talking to him."

She immediately wished she hadn't spoken. If Shatner was guilty of snitching, Shadow might feel beholden to pay him back. It was a matter of honor and pride to take revenge on anyone who hurt family. But old Shatner didn't deserve to get shot.

Shatner didn't say a word, just picked up his mason jar of whisky from the porch floor and stared down into it."

*

Shadow was still reeling from the close call with his kin. He leaned against the post, staring at the dust settling behind the vanished truck and catching his breath. Suddenly, Lettie's comment hit him. *I saw you talking to him.*

Shatner.

He straightened and slowly turned to look at the old man with his face buried in a jar of hooch.

Of course. He was the obvious culprit, who Cutter should have considered first. Who had the most to gain by bringing the Robeson family down, and who was the least likely to give a damn about any code of silence?

Shadow stepped away from the post and drew his gun once more. He held it down by his side as he took a step toward Shatner. "What did you do?"

The old man lowered the whisky and set the jar down on the floor, his hand trembling. He looked up at Shadow with bloodshot eyes. "I didn't... It wasn't on purpose. He threatened me."

Lettie rose and put herself between Shadow and her ex-boss. Her gaze implored him to show mercy, but she didn't say a word. This was his business to settle as he saw fit. She must know that was the code. Lettie stepped aside and Shadow moved toward the back-stabbing tavern owner.

"Tell me," Shadow commanded.

"He came in for the first time a few weeks back. Took me aside. Told me he could arrest me that very night for the booze I sold under the table. Said he'd bring in agents who'd smash up my place and put me in jail. I *had* to give him information, or he would have..." Shatner gulped a sob.

"And how'd you know where our still was?"

Shatner laughed darkly. "*Everyone* knows. It ain't no secret."

Rage roiled in his gut and spilled through him. This old fool had touched off a powder keg that killed several people and nearly killed Lettie. Now he'd set Duke after poor Mathis, who had no clue what was storming his way.

The grip was warm and smooth against his palm, the weight of the gun comfortable in his hand as he leveled the barrel at Shatner and cocked the trigger.

A barrage of memories bombarded him, images and sensations from the bloody disaster of the battlefield, through fistfights and beating men senseless in the name of the Robeson clan, all the way back to his childhood and the violence that was part of daily life. Always violence as long as he could remember. And now, would he take a life simply for revenge?

Shatner spread his arms. "Go on. Do what you gotta do. Don't suppose I can stop you."

Revenge for what? Shatner had merely told the truth, and the federal agents had been doing their lawful job. If it went horribly wrong, that had started with Greer shooting at them.

Shadow lowered the muzzle. "Here's what you're gonna do. Get a piece of paper." He shot a look at Lettie and nodded. "Get a piece of paper and pencil."

She hurried inside to do as she was bid.

"You're gonna write down what you done, leave the note on the bar where it'll be found, then you're gonna pack up and take a train as far away from here as you can." He holstered his sidearm and straightened his jacket over it. "If I learn later you did anything different or that Mathis or anyone else suffered because of your lies, I'm gonna find you and make you pay. Got it?"

Shatner nodded so hard the hair covering his bald spot fell down over his eyes. He pushed it back with a trembling hand. "Yes. Yes, sir."

After the old man had printed out his confession and weighed down the note with a glass on the bar, he packed his things. Shadow gave him a ride in the back of the truck to the nearest train station miles away, and he and Lettie watched him until he boarded the train.

Lettie slipped her arm through Shadow's and leaned her cheek against his shoulder. "You did right. He's an old fool, but he didn't deserve to die for it."

“I’d have liked to hurt him for putting you in danger. But I guess it was my own brothers who did that. My family.” He spat the word that tasted like blood in his mouth.

“And you showed again you’re not like them. I’m proud of you, Shadow. You should be proud of yourself. You’re a good man.”

Hearing her sweet voice say those words and looking into eyes that saw him as some sort of hero made Shadow feel better about himself than he ever had in his life.

He kissed his girl—soon to be wife—and took her hand. “Come on. Let’s get on our way.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Shadow sat on the front porch of his and Lettie's house on the side of a hill watching the stars come out. The building wasn't so different from Lettie's shack in the hollow or the house Shadow had grown up in before it had been added on to like a crazy quilt. But this place was full of so much love, it practically glowed.

There was no reputation hanging over either of them here. The neighbors were nice, though they held back some, the way folks did with strangers. In these hills, where a family stayed put for generations, you could live an entire life someplace and still be considered a newcomer.

Shadow leaned back in his chair and propped his heels on the porch rail. The clatter of dishes coming from the open kitchen window ended, and a few seconds later, the screen door screeched as Lettie came out, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "Want another cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks. Come sit a spell." When she walked past, he grabbed her hand and trailed a finger up her wrist.

Lettie leaned to kiss him and scraped her palm along the stubble of his jaw. "You thinkin' about going to bed early?"

"I spend most my days thinkin' about going to bed with you. Lucky I don't fall into the saw, the way I daydream all the time."

She gave his chin a squeeze. "Don't you ever say that! That saw scares me enough as it is."

"Safe as can be. I don't get too near the blade. You've seen her run."

"And helped stack the wood," she reminded him as she sank into the chair beside him. "Got splinters to prove it."

They held hands across the space between them and listened to the rush of water.

"Sounds like music," Lettie said.

"You gonna sing along?"

"Don't know any songs with a sawmill in, but there's one called 'The Miller's Daughter.'" She sang in her reedy voice:

"Once there was a little tailor boy about sixteen years of age.

My father hired me to a miller that I might learn the trade.

*I fell in love with a Knoxville girl, her name was Flora Dean.
Her rosy cheeks, her curly hair, I really did admire.
Her father he persuaded me to take Flora for a wife;
The devil he persuaded me
To take Flora's life."*

The song went on to describe how the miller's apprentice drowned his new wife and covered up the murder, and ended on a haunting question mark of a note. Silence followed Lettie's song but for the rush of the stream and night birds' calls.

"Well," Shadow said. "That was cheery."

Lettie rubbed her arms. "Fairly gives me the shivers."

"You like your murders and hauntings, don't you?"

"Guess them's the stories and songs my mama was interested in—eerie things."

She gave a little shake. "Now, tell me how that boy is working out at the mill."

"Gavin's a handy lad, willing to work, and bright. Too bright to stay for long. I'm guessing he'll move on to something more challenging than cutting logs into boards. I think his daddy made him ask for this job."

"Too bad you couldn't get Pernell to come here. He would've been a big help."

Shadow's disappointment over that was still fresh in his mind. "He won't never leave the family. Can't imagine no other life. I tried to talk him into it when I went back to settle your land deal, but when Pernell's mind's set, you can't budge him."

"Poor thing. I wish he'd have listened to you." Lettie drew the shawl draped over her chair around her shoulders against the breeze. Soon it would be too cold to sit outdoors of an evening. "We were sure lucky to find this place, a house and work already set up for you."

Shadow nodded. It seemed God had guided them to this town right when Samuel Jonas was ready to move to Ohio. Woodcutting was seasonal, and this rush wouldn't last, but for now they were sitting comfortable heading into winter. It wasn't the medical career he'd once thought he'd like, but he was satisfied to run his own business. A legal one at last.

Lettie tilted her head back and sighed. "I do love it here. Feels like a real home."

“It is. Not like what you and me grew up with.” He let the front legs of his chair hit the floor and stood. “It’s too cold out here. Let’s go give that bed something to groan about.”

She laughed, and the happy sound felt like a skylark winging over a field inside him. The strength of his feelings for her frightened him. Having so much gave him so much more to lose.

Inside the cozy house, Lettie had dressed the main room with calico curtains at the windows and a colorful rug on the floor. Two almost-new armchairs gathered like neighbors chatting in front of the fireplace. After they’d taken possession, Lettie had scrubbed and scoured every inch of the house. When Shadow handed her fifteen dollars and told her to buy anything she thought their new house needed, her joy was a pure pleasure to see as she nested like a busy sparrow.

Now Shadow reeled Lettie in to him, her back to his front, and nipped her earlobe. “You’ve made our place real nice. It’s so clean and pretty, I feel guilty every time I tromp in mud on my boots.”

“Yet you keep doing it. Just can’t get the hang of leaving ’em at the door.” She wiggled her bottom against the growing interest in his trousers.

Shadow nuzzled the nape of her neck below her piled-up hair. She’d taken to wearing it fancier now and he kinda missed the single braid down her back, but he’d never tell her so. Her neck smelled like fresh-baked bread, making him want to gobble her up. He kissed her there until Lettie squealed and jerked away.

She danced ahead of him to the bedroom, another room she’d fixed up nice, though the bed could’ve been covered with a feed-sack blanket instead of a flowered quilt for all he cared. It wasn’t the covering but the woman beneath it that made the room warm and inviting.

Lettie looked at him beguilingly over the shoulder she’d bared. “You want to take off these clothes, or should I?”

“You go right on ahead.”

Her fingers flew down the buttons, and the blue dress puddled around her feet. Lettie wore no corset, and the sight of her camisole, barely concealing her breasts set

Shadow's heart pumping blood to every part of him. He swallowed hard as she loosened the hooks on her new lace petticoat and let it drop past her hips in a flurry of white.

Every time he saw Lettie half-naked was as exciting as the first time. He couldn't get enough of gazing on her body as she revealed it. Good to see her plumper now that she had enough to eat at last. There was a new fullness to all her curves, and even her breasts were no longer dainty. Shadow's hands itched to hold them, but he waited patiently while she finished the undressing ritual.

The thin red scar marring her stomach made him frown. Cutter's scythe and cross branded her forever. Shadow wished he could erase the scar along with all the bad it stood for. He would never have contacted his family again, except he'd wanted to make sure Shatner's note cleared Lettie's name.

Soon after they'd settled, he'd sent a letter to Clay, and weeks later received a reply saying Tommy was alive and wouldn't seek revenge on Lettie for stabbing him. Uncle Duke had sworn to find and kill Ray Shatner. The moonshine business was going stronger than ever, and Clay was running for county commissioner. "Good luck, little brother. I recommend you don't come back to Russell County."

The letter had set Shadow's mind at ease, stopping him from looking over his shoulder. And he had gone back to Lorena, just long enough to see to the sale of Lettie's land for her. He refused to take her with him, would never bring her anywhere near his family again.

Shrugging off the past, Shadow concentrated on his wife, who wore a half smile and nothing else as she moved toward him.

"Your turn."

He remained still while she unfastened buttons and stripped off shirt and undershirt, kissing his skin as she bared it. Her hands lingered on his trousers, taking time with uncovering his erection. She grazed her fingers lightly over hard flesh and raked her gaze over his body, teasing Shadow until he could hold steady no more.

With an animal growl, he grabbed her at last. She laughed as he took her into his arms and covered her with kisses—mouth, neck, breasts, stomach. He'd like to follow that path down to the brown curls and soft, damp folds, but although his leg had

improved over the past three months, he'd never kneel on a floor again. Hard enough to crouch over Lettie on a mattress.

Shadow spent some time on her breasts, plucking at those wonderfully taut nipples and drawing the rosy tips into his mouth.

Lettie threaded fingers through his hair and moaned. "Don't know why, but lately my teats is tender as a sunburn."

Immediately, Shadow stopped sucking so hard, but Lettie tugged at his hair. "I didn't say to quit."

He stopped only long enough to tumble her onto the bed, a large, sturdy one he'd reinforced with boards. He climbed in beside Lettie, and stroked his hands slowly up and down her soft body. Only after she was sighing and shifting restlessly did he reach between her legs to slip a finger into her hot wetness. He dragged it along the seam to the little nub of flesh that gave her pleasure. His stroking finger soon had her arching her hips, seeking more contact.

Shadow knew exactly how to please her, listening to every sigh and watching every expression on her face and the movements of her body. Women weren't such a mystery as some men claimed. Everything Lettie felt was right there for him to see if he only paid attention. And not just in the bedroom. He knew her moods now—when she was irritated even if she wouldn't say it, or when she was feeling sad.

Right now her glittering eyes were telling him to either bring her to climax with his finger or climb on top of her.

Shadow urged Lettie onto her side and faced her. He guided his cock to her entrance and...pushed. Christ Almighty, he could never get enough of being sheathed in steaming velvet. Her hot gaze enfolded him as tightly as her pussy, and spoke silently of her love.

Their connection was beyond anything he'd ever imagined. In their months together, they'd shared their deepest secrets and fears. When Shadow woke in a sweat from battlefield nightmares, Lettie coaxed him to tell her what being a soldier was really like. And she'd confided in him how one of her mama's men had gotten drunk and grabby when she was a young girl, and she'd had to hide in the woods every time he

came over. They'd both suffered in very different ways, but now had someone to share their burdens.

He looked into her eyes and moved slowly inside her. One thrust—two—three, in measured beats like those of his heart. Lettie gripped his backside and wrapped her leg around him, encouraging him to go deeper.

Sometimes it was good to go at it fast and furious, up against the side of the millhouse, or on the kitchen counter with bread flour rising in the air around them. But tonight every moment lasted and every thrust was a return home.

Tension mounted inside Shadow, until it seemed impossible not to release. Only when Lettie began to squirm did he finally allow it to peak. He thrust harder and faster until she cried out, then unleashed his own desire, letting it race through him and carry him away.

Afterward, he panted into the pillowcase and clung to Lettie's hot body.

"That was a good one," she muttered. "A Shadow special."

She grinned, and he began to laugh.

This part was nearly better than sex. He loved to laugh and joke with her. There was very little about Lettie he *didn't* love. Even when they argued—he wanted to improve the mill, and she wanted repairs on the house—he loved her. Those minor squabbles only made it more real.

Her smile ended and a little frown creased her forehead.

He rubbed his finger over the furrow. "What is it?"

She shrugged. "Something I ain't sure of yet, so I been waiting."

"Tell me," he demanded, getting a little worried.

"Don't know if you're gonna want to hear it." She studied his eyes. "Don't know if we're ready for it."

Ready. Immediately his gaze shot down to the slight curve of her stomach. Fuller because she was eating well or for another reason? "You think you're...?"

She nodded. "I might be. How would you feel about that?"

Emotions galloped through him like a herd of wild horses. Surprise, since for a long time he'd never thought he would have a family of his own. Fear he'd be as horrible a father as his had been. Wonder and pride at bringing a child into the world. Happiness

—and then more fear and doubt. But he didn't want Lettie to question for a single moment whether their child was wanted and loved by its father.

“That’s the best damn news I ever heard.” He hugged her close. “And if it turns out you ain’t with child, that’s fine too. I love you, Lettie Robeson.”

*

Lettie hadn't meant to tell Shadow her maybe news until she was sure it was true. But when he asked, it just came shooting out of her mouth. Now it seemed all her fretting about how he might take the news had been pure foolishness. He was *happy*, which made her real happy.

She clung to him and burrowed her face into his shoulder. Her man smelled so good. The scent of his skin mingled always now with the smell of fresh-cut wood. She washed sawdust from his clothes nearly every day, but every shirt or pair of men's trousers she hung to dry was a flag announcing *I got a man in my life, and this one's here to stay*.

With her thumb, she twisted the gold band around her finger. Speaking those wedding vows in front of a preacher and having Shadow put that ring on her finger had been one of her happiest days.

“Lettie, are you crying?” Shadow pulled back to look into her eyes.

“N-no,” she sniffled.

“Yes, you are. Why?”

“Because I'm h-happy.” She croaked like a frog, and cried harder when he gently stroked her hair. She'd never been one to shed a tear, and now choked up at every little thing. Here she was content as a polecat with a nest full of eggs to suck, and she still felt like bawling. Was it possible to be *too* happy? “Don't know what's got into me. I'm thinking maybe I for sure am going to have a baby, 'cause I feel strange inside.”

“Me too. It's a lot to think about—being a daddy. I want to do everything right.”

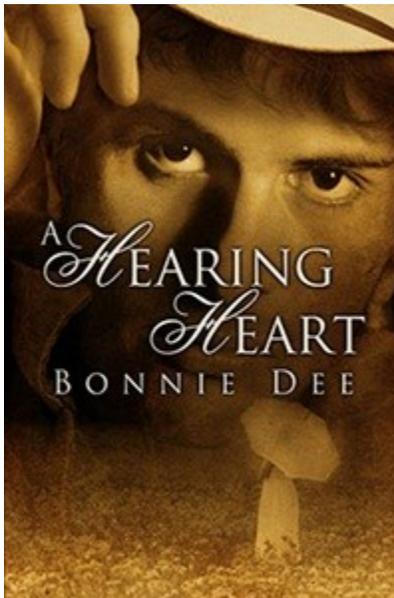
“You will. I ain't worried about that. I just wonder what kind of mama I'll be. Didn't have the best example.” She pictured those little graves all in a row.

“Then do everything the opposite. That's what I'm plannin' to do.” He tapped her lower lips with a finger. “But keep the songs. Be sure to teach our kids those. I want to hear singing around our house.”

Lettie grinned. “Even if they got voices like crows, I’ll have ’em singing,” she promised.

The End

A Note from Bonnie: If you want to stay informed about new releases, please [SIGN UP FOR MY NEWSLETTER](#) by clicking on the link. You can learn more about my backlist at <http://bonniedee.com> and find me [on FB](#) and Twitter [@Bonnie_De](#). And if you want to help spread the word about my books, I’d love to welcome you to [my street team at FB](#). If you enjoyed **Scarred Hearts**, you may also like **A Hearing Heart**.



The heart conveys messages beyond what ears can hear.

After the death of her fiancé, Catherine Johnson, a New York schoolteacher in 1902, travels to Nebraska to teach in a one-room school. When violence erupts in the sleepy town, Catherine saves deaf stable hand, Jim Kinney from torture by drunken thugs.

As she begins teaching Jim to read and sign, attraction grows between them. The warmth and humor in this silent man transcends the need for speech and his eyes tell her all about his feelings for her. But the obstacles of class difference and the stigma of his handicap are almost insurmountable barriers to their growing affection.

Will Catherine flaunt society’s rules and allow herself to love again? Can Jim make his way out of poverty as a deaf man in a hearing world? And will the lovers

overcome a corrupt robber baron who has a stranglehold on the town? Romance, sensuality and adventure abound in this heartfelt tale.

Excerpt from *A Hearing Heart*:

Broughton, Nebraska, 1901

Catherine Johnson stepped out of the general mercantile onto the wooden walkway, adjusting her mesh shopping bag on one wrist and the brown paper-wrapped parcels in her other arm. A stiff breeze cut through the fabric of her dress and twisted her long skirt around her legs. Grit scoured her cheeks and stung her eyes. At least the road wasn't muddy, but she faced a long walk back to the McPhersons' farm carrying all her purchases. She'd be glad when her stay there was over and she moved in with the Albrights in town. Shuttling from home to home was one of the more unpleasant aspects of teaching in a one-room schoolhouse.

Sometimes she wished she'd never left New York to come to Nebraska. On a Saturday afternoon in White Plains she'd be strolling along a brick path in the park with fountains and flowerbeds gracing the way. Here in Broughton she fought the ever-present wind and choking dust while her shoes tapped an uneven rhythm on the warped boards of the sidewalk.

The town was quiet for a Saturday, the street nearly empty. She was almost to the last building on Main Street, where the dusty road became prairie, when several men erupted from the saloon in front of her. The swinging doors crashed against the wall.

Catherine stumbled backward, dropping one of her packages, heart pounding

A raw-boned man with no chin and his stocky, black-bearded partner dragged a man between them. Behind them staggered a burly fellow with heavy-lidded eyes. He was shouting curses, using words Catherine had never heard. The only man in the group she recognized was the one the others gripped by the arms. He was Jim Kinney, the deaf-mute man who worked at the livery stable.

Jim glared at his captors through a fringe of dark hair. The burly man moved in front of him and plowed a fist into his stomach. The stable hand doubled over with a whoosh of air.

The skinny man hauled him upright and the bearded one punched his jaw, snapping his head to the side. Jim cried out, a hoarse, wordless sound. Bracing himself

against the pair holding his arms, he kicked out with both feet at the man who'd hit him, landing a solid blow to his chest.

"Tie him up," the droopy-eyed man slurred. "Teach him some respect."

Catherine stood rooted to the spot, horrified but too shocked to react as one of the men grabbed a rope from his horse's saddle at the hitching post. When he began tying Jim's hands, she finally found her voice.

"Stop it! Stop!" She dropped her parcels and bag on the sidewalk and ran toward them. "Leave him alone!"

For a second, Jim's dark eyes met hers, and then the men dragged him out to the street, whooping in drunken glee and ignoring Catherine as if she was voiceless.

"Stop!" she yelled in frustration, her hands clenching helplessly at her sides.

The black-bearded man blocked her way, and she pushed past him, the sour stench of sweat and alcohol wrinkling her nose.

The leader mounted his horse and wrapped the end of the rope around the pommel of his saddle. Jim struggled to free his hands until the rope stretched taut and jerked him forward, forcing him to keep pace with the horse. The rider kneed his mount and it moved from a walk to a trot.

Jim ran behind, stumbling as he tried to keep on his feet.

Catherine screamed for help. A few men came from the saloon while others stepped out of stores along the street.

"Help!" she cried again, panic swelling in her chest. "Somebody help him."

Jim couldn't keep up with the speed of the horse. He tripped, fell and was dragged along the ground. Spooked by the creature on its heels, the horse whinnied and plunged ahead. A cloud of dust from its hooves concealed the body bumping over the ruts behind it.

The rider pulled the horse's head up, turned and rode back toward where his companions stood laughing and shouting encouragement.

People emerging from the barbershop, the mercantile and feed store all stood watching. No one was going to interfere, risking the drunken men's anger.

The horse cantered toward Catherine. Without a thought beyond stopping the stable hand's torture, she ran into the road, waving her arms and shouting. The animal

reared on its hind legs, dumping its rider to the ground. For a moment all she could see was hooves flailing and the chestnut body rising high above her. How very tall a horse was when standing on two legs. The inane thought flashed in her mind before the animal came down on all fours.

She seized the bridle and her fingers grazed its warm jaw. The horse blew hay-scented breath into her face with a soft chuffing sound.

“Sh. Easy. Easy,” she crooned, stroking its neck. She moved alongside and reached for the rope tied to the pommel. Even standing on her toes with her chest pressed against the horse’s heaving flank she could barely reach it, and the knot was so tight she couldn’t loosen it.

Catherine glanced at Jim’s dusty body sprawled in the road, and the horse’s rider staggering to his feet, cursing as he brushed off his clothes.

Now that the crisis was past, a couple of men from the feed store came out to the street and grabbed the leader of the thugs, while someone else ran to get the deputy. A few patrons of the tavern collared the other two roughnecks. Mr. Murdoch, the saloonkeeper knelt in the road beside Jim and untied his wrists.

Catherine walked over to the prone body of the stable hand and watched Murdoch feel his limbs for broken bones.

“Is he alive?” She squatted beside the dust-covered body, her skirt pooling around her. The man’s eyes were closed and blood seeped from abrasions on his dirt-streaked face.

“He’s unconscious, but I think he’ll be all right. Damn! If only he’d kept out of their way,” Murdoch said.

“He needs the doctor.”

“Already sent someone to get him.”

Catherine pulled her handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at the blood on Jim’s forehead. “What happened?”

“Drunken fools called for another round. Shirley was tending another table so they shouted at Jim to get their drinks. Of course, he couldn’t hear ’em. He’s there to push a broom, not wait tables. They started yelling, grabbed him and dragged him outside.”

Catherine bit back her question of why it had taken him so long to come to Jim's aid. Pushing back a lock of the man's dark hair, she examined the wound at his temple. "I thought Mr. Kinney worked at the livery stable."

"Works there too. Has a room back of the stables. Christ! Where's the damn doc? Pardon the language."

A young woman ran up to them, her skirts held high enough to show striped stockings all the way to her knees. Her red hair straggled from the bun in back to frame her round, red-cheeked face. The neckline of her dress revealed most of her bosom, which rose and fell as she panted. "Doc's out on a call, Mr. Murdoch. Is he okay?"

"Damn! Hope to hell there ain't anything broken. Guess all we can do is carry him back to his room."

Several men had gathered around, and three of them lifted Jim's body. He groaned, and his eyes opened, his gaze focusing on Catherine.

She smiled. "It's all right. You'll be all right."

He blinked, but she didn't know if he'd understood. She'd only seen the man once or twice since she'd moved here. People said he was slow as well as deaf and mute.

Walking beside the men carrying him, she kept her gaze locked on his in an attempt to offer encouragement. The eyes that stared back at her were focused and intelligent. She could almost see his thoughts busily flickering in them, but with no voice to give substance those thoughts remained locked inside. Catherine realized he wasn't mentally impaired at all.

The men carried him through the doors of the livery stable, and Catherine lost eye contact with Jim. Her stomach churned and her nerves jangled, unsurprising since a rearing horse had nearly trampled her. The deputy would probably have questions for her as the main witness of the altercation, but for now she was intent on seeing what she could do to help Jim Kinney. She followed the men into the livery.

* * * *

His body ached in a thousand places. Every bone hurt. Every inch of exposed skin was shredded. He felt like he'd been dragged down the street behind a horse. Jim smiled at the sarcastic thought, then groaned as one of the men carrying him jarred his right side.

Three faces hovered above him. Murdoch frowned. His mouth moved beneath his handlebar moustache as he said something to John Walker from the hardware store. Jim recognized the third man from the feed store. Their faces were strained with the effort of carrying him and their fiercely gripping hands hurt like hell. He wished they'd set him down and let him get himself back to his room. Even if he had to crawl it would be less painful.

Jim glanced past Walker, who was carrying his legs, and tried to catch another glimpse of the schoolteacher. She must've left.

He wondered if any of his bones were broken, wondered if someone was getting the doctor, and how he'd pay the man. How soon would he be able to work again? If his body failed him, he was in trouble. That's why he always took good care of himself, careful to keep healthy and steer clear of dangerous situations. From a lifetime of practice, he'd become adept at avoiding drunks or bullies who wanted to show their manliness with their fists and found him an easy target.

But today he hadn't been alert. He'd been thinking about Shirley Mae and what she'd done for him the previous night. He'd only paid for a hand job. It was all he could afford, but he was desperate for something more than his own touch. Shirley had given him a blowjob for free. She'd pointed to the rhinestone comb in her hair, the one he'd found one day while sweeping the bar and returned to her, then she'd bent her head and taken his cock in her mouth. With that memory in mind, he hadn't even been aware of the three drunken men until they grabbed him.

Now Walker and the other men were maneuvering Jim through the narrow doorway of his room. He gritted his teeth to keep from crying out as they jostled his body. When they laid him on his cot, he exhaled in relief.

His small room was crowded with bodies, but soon all of the men left except his two bosses, Murdoch and Rasmussen, the livery owner. They spoke together a moment. He couldn't see their lips and was too tired to read them anyway. His eyes drifted closed.

They opened again at the pressure of Murdoch's hand on his shoulder. He explained slowly that the doctor was out on a call, patted Jim's shoulder and left the room.

Mr. Rasmussen sat on the edge of the bed, pushed his glasses up his nose and frowned, a sure sign he didn't know what he was doing. He might be able to wrap a horse's strained leg, but what did he know about people? Jim inhaled a deep breath and pain pierced his side. Something was wrong with his ribs. He gestured to his side, letting Rasmussen know. The man nodded and began unbuttoning what was left of his shredded shirt.

A movement in the doorway caught Jim's attention. The schoolteacher stood framed there in her blue and white-flowered dress with her daffodil-colored hair. A faint scent of lily-of-the-valley perfume wafted to him. She was like a flower garden filling the dark, stuffy room.

She looked at Rasmussen before entering the room. Only a few paces brought her to the edge of Jim's bed.

He couldn't stop staring at her like the idiot everyone thought he was. The sight of her fresh, feminine form in his dingy room was unbelievable, besides which he was dizzy and near passing out from the pain throbbing in his head. His gaze fastened on her lips.

"What can I do?" she asked Rasmussen.

The stableman turned toward her so Jim couldn't see his reply. Miss Johnson nodded and left the room. He felt pain that had nothing to do with his injured body as she disappeared from view.

Rasmussen lifted Jim's torso, peeled off his long-sleeved shirt and undershirt, and lowered him back onto the bed. Colors and lights flashed in front of his eyes and the edges of his vision grew dark. Oh God, his worst nightmare was coming true. He would be blinded from the blow to his head and left totally helpless. His pulse beat wildly as panic surged through him. He gasped for breath and could see again. Rasmussen was frowning at him.

"Where does it hurt?"

Jim indicated his head.

"You'll be all right. I'll fix you up."

How the hell do you know? You can barely tend the horses! Jim nodded, his jaw clenching at the pain.

Suddenly the teacher was back. She carried a bucket of water in one hand and some clean rags from the tack room in the other. Offering them to Rasmussen, she glanced at Jim. Her eyes widened at the sight of his bare torso and she quickly looked away.

Rasmussen rose, indicating she should take his seat and wash the blood and dust from Jim's face and body. He was going to get liniment. The teacher looked after Rasmussen as he walked from the room, her mouth open as if to protest, then she closed it and turned back to Jim. Her smile was tense.

"You. Read. Lips?" She shaped each word carefully.

He nodded.

"I'm going to clean you." She sat on the cot next to him, her warm hip pressed against his. She dipped one of the rags, squeezed it out and leaned over him to sponge off the blood at his temple. The cloth was cold but it felt good.

He let his eyes drift closed and submitted to the pressure of the wet cloth dabbing his face. She held his chin in her other hand as she bathed his forehead, cheek and neck. Her skin was soft and the scent of lilies much stronger with her so close. Beneath the flowers, he could smell her body, a secret, womanly aroma.

Jim opened his eyes, watching her bend to rinse the rag in the bucket. Her sun-colored hair was pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Tendrils of hair curled around her face. Two perfectly arched, light brown eyebrows were knitted in a frown of concentration over sky-blue eyes. Her tongue darted out, wetting her lips, and his heart jolted in his chest.

Turning back to him, she began patting again, this time on the bloody abrasion on his shoulder. The pink blush rising in her cheeks told him she was uncomfortable touching him. A lady didn't do such things to a strange man. He couldn't stop watching her eyes even though she refused to meet his gaze. He'd never seen eyes so blue.

All he knew about her was that she was the new teacher. He'd seen her around town a few times. Once, at the mercantile he'd watched as she laughed and talked with a little girl. Her smile and the sweet affection she'd shown the child had made him smile. He'd also seen her walking to and from the schoolhouse. But he didn't know her name. No one had said it in front of him and he couldn't ask. There was no reason for him to

know it. Yet now he was desperate to have a word for her, a shape of the lips that meant *her*, even if he couldn't imagine what the word sounded like.

Jim touched her hand and she finally looked at him. He pointed at her and raised his eyebrows, requesting her name.

“Catherine Johnson.” Her hand touched her chest and her lips moved slowly over each syllable.

Mimicking her, he felt her name with his thrusting tongue and moving lips. Without knowing the sound, he'd never forget the shapes. Memorization came easy to him.

Jim nodded and smiled, accepting the gift of her name.