

“Readers will enjoy this emotional exploration of a soldier’s journey as he returns home to his family’s farm after fighting a war in the Pacific. This story examines not only the traumatic impact on his own psyche but on the lives of all who love him most. With alternating points of view, Tromp weaves a complex historical tale incorporating love, suspense, hurt, and healing—all the elements that keep the pages turning.”

—Julie Cantrell, *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author of *Perennials*

“Oh my! What a story! *Shadows in the Mind’s Eye* is a stunner of a debut novel. Sam and Annie’s love is beautifully rendered, Sam’s combat fatigue (what we now call PTSD) is compassionately portrayed, and Janyre Tromp’s writing effortlessly captures the Southern voice. And the last half of the book is one dangerous, breathtaking twist after another, as Sam’s worst nightmares come to pass. A compelling look at a town struggling to find its soul and a wounded couple struggling to reclaim their love. Not to be missed.”

—Sarah Sundin, ECPA best-selling and award-winning author of *Until Leaves Fall in Paris* and *When Twilight Breaks*

“An achingly poignant tale of rediscovering love and trust between wounded hearts. Love, forgiveness, and danger weave together in Tromp’s emotional tale where the greatest of battles are fought in the mind. Beautiful in description with complex characters, readers will not forget this emotional journey.”

—J’nell Ciesielski, best-selling author of *The Socialite*

“Stunning and compelling, Janyre Tromp’s *Shadows in the Mind’s Eye* kept me turning pages, with a cast of true-to-life characters, pitch-perfect narrative, and a plot that will keep the reader wondering what is true (and what is imagined). Intense and full of heart, Tromp delivers a fresh voice in the world of fiction.”

—Susie Finkbeiner, author of *The Nature of Small Birds* and the Pearl Spence series

“With twists and turns as unexpected as an Arkansas thunderstorm, Tromp brilliantly explores the things war can change and the important things it can’t.”

—Lynne Gentry, *USA Today* best-selling author of *Lethal Outbreak*

“A hair-raising, mind-bending psychological thriller, *Shadows in the Mind’s Eye* by Janyre Tromp deftly explores a marriage torn asunder by war. Is a marriage worth fighting for when you cannot see the people your husband is fighting, or when you even become the one he is fighting? Tromp’s nuanced empathy elevates this story to another level and blurs the line between villain and hero, causing readers to ponder the lengths they would go to to protect themselves, even against ones they love.”

—Jolina Petersheim, best-selling author of *How the Light Gets In*

“*Shadows in the Mind’s Eye* is an intense, beautifully written novel about secrets and sacrifice. A story about poignant trauma and truth potent enough to heal a broken family. A fabulous debut!”

—Melanie Dobson, award-winning author of *The Winter Rose* and *Catching the Wind*

“With pitch-perfect dialect, lyrical prose, and homespun wisdom, Tromp delivers a slow boiling mystery that dares to ask the deepest questions about faith, love, suffering, evil, and hope.”

—Elizabeth Musser, award-winning author of *The Promised Land*

“Tromp’s debut novel is the perfect blend of historical fiction and psychological thriller. *Shadows in the Mind’s Eye* hooked me early on and kept me enthralled until the very end. The story is complex and offers readers a glimpse into the toll that trauma can take on a marriage. A story of war, of heartache, of love and healing, this novel will appeal to a broad swath of readers. Tromp is a new author to watch!”

—Kelli Stuart, award-winning author of *The Fabulous Freaks of Monsieur Beaumont* and the upcoming release, *The Master Craftsman*

SHADOWS

in the

MIND'S

EYE

a novel

JANYRE TROMP



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Shadows in the Mind's Eye: A Novel

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*“For Satan himself is transformed
into an angel of light.”*

—The apostle Paul
in his second letter to the Corinthians

CHAPTER
One

— S A M —

Darkness had long ago swallowed the Greyhound bus moving down the road so slow that it might as well have been going backward. It took every ounce of my control not to elbow the driver out of the way and stomp on the gas pedal. After all, the war was over, and every man here was ready to get home to his kinfolk. I wasn't no exception.

I scrunched my eyes shut and choked back another cough, the burn crawling down my throat and making me gag. Tugging my wool peacoat tighter over my shoulders, I hoped the major next to me hadn't noticed my flushed cheeks when we boarded. Last thing I needed was some officer ordering me off the bus and into an infirmary.

"You all right, soldier?"

I bristled, habit forcing my body ramrod straight. "Sailor."

"What?"

"I was a coxswain for a Higgins boat."

He stared at me like I was spouting Greek.

"A pilot for amphibious beach landings?"

When he still didn't show sign of understanding, I shifted the blanket so's my navy uniform showed. "I'm a sailor," I said, adding "sir" at the last second. No sense getting court-martialed for disrespecting an officer, even if he was army.

"Right." The man shifted. "No offense intended, but you don't look so good . . . sailor."

"I'm just fine, sir."

All I wanted was to get home and wrap my arms around Charlotte Anne and my sweet baby girl, then sleep for the next week with

nobody pokin', proddin', or askin' me how I felt. The Lord as my witness, I swore I'd never leave our orchard and Hot Springs again.

"There's a hospital in Malvern. Maybe you oughta—"

"I reckon I'll take that under advisement, sir." Although I'd tried to make my voice respectful, it came out with a shade more lip than I, or my Ma for that matter, would've liked.

"Don't want you bringing home cholera or anything." He chuckled, then rubbed a hand over his mouth as if he realized how ridiculous he'd sounded and wanted to stuff the words back in.

We'd all been quarantined on the way home long enough that I was sure my backside had grown moss. The U.S. military had seen fit to be sure the only thing I brought home was a mild case of malaria and a smidgen of lead hidden in my shoulder . . . although they didn't know about the Japanese saber buried under the ratty underwear in my pack. That was my souvenir—a reminder of what happens to somebody who shoots a man in the back.

"Thank you kindly, sir. I'm just anxious to get home to my little girl."

The man smiled, and I relaxed.

"I got me a son." He pulled out a stack of photographs—a sturdy toddler, a wife, an older gentleman with grease smudged on his cheek—and I *mm-hmmed* in all the right places, least as much as was fittin' for a perfect stranger. It was almost like I'd returned to the person I was before going to war three years back. I traced the image of the little boy with my finger, registering that the major hadn't likely met his son yet, just like I hadn't met my little Rosemary.

Lights flashed off in the distance, igniting my memory, and the boy's picture slipped from my fingers and fluttered to the floor. My breath came in snatches, my mind desperately telling my heart to slow, that there wasn't nothing dangerous here.

"Just lightning." The major was studying me. "Makes me a mite nervous too."

I clenched my fingers around the dress gloves in my lap. Even

with the thunder, a body would think the hum of tires on the road and no threat of Japanese Zeroes strafing us would help me settle, maybe even fall asleep in two hops of a grasshopper. But I was pretty sure I'd left behind whatever hop I used to have on some island in the Pacific—squashed by the military regimen and then ground down by the Japanese for good measure.

The major leaned over and retrieved his photo. I noticed his perfectly manicured hand as he brushed off a bit of dust before slipping his boy's smiling face into a pocket of his immaculate uniform, no frayed edges in sight. Wasn't no way this man had been anywhere near the front. I rolled my head from shoulder to shoulder. Some folks have all the luck.

I could near feel Ma reach out and swat my head for such disrespect.
Samuel Robert Mattas, I taught you better than this.

Sorry, Ma. Maybe you could intervene with the Almighty upstairs and—

“So where you headed?” The major watched me like a body might watch a dog foaming and growling. More than a little annoyance skimmed over a healthy dose of fear. Lord Almighty, I'd turned into a mangy cur.

“I know you mean well, sir. But I'm trying to sleep. It's been a long time since . . .” Since what, I wasn't sure. Since I'd been safe enough to sleep without waking to panic coursing through me? Since I'd been home? Since I'd had a normal conversation with a stranger without near biting his head off?

At least he'd served. It was all those 4-Fers who got themselves out of the war, lyin' back and takin' it easy that deserved my wrath. Well, maybe not all of them. Certainly not Doc. He'd paid mighty with the polio. Wouldn't wish that on nobody, least of all my best friend.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and I closed my mind against the devil clawing at me. I was home, in Arkansas. My Annie and Rosie were waiting for me on the farm. Ma too. No landing run, no artillery, no Japs waiting to light up anything that moved in the waves.

Just a storm.

"I'm headed over to Crows." The man was still chattering while sweat tickled my spine. Somebody somewhere must've told him talking set a man at ease. Must never have met a mountain man.

Just a storm.

I held my breath, the growls creeping closer, seeking a target . . . the world pulsing, vibrating with the sound . . . the smell of fire crawling across the Arkansas plains . . . the green of the seat in front of me surging like the algae-crusting lakes we'd drunk from in the Pacific . . . the sickness roiling in my belly . . .

"My folks live up there." The major's voice echoed from deep under the water. "Pop says he held a job for me in the factory over in Little Rock. Don't know if I'll be able to take being on the floor, but . . ."

Up front someone flicked on a light, and a face jumped up to my window—hooded eyes, searching, hunting. I lurched to my feet, cracking my head against the ceiling of the bus as I tried to push the major to safety. He latched onto my arm, dragging me under, and I yanked away, panting. Didn't he know we needed to run?

"There's somebody out there." I pulled on his elbow, desperately searching for an escape route through the sea of seats.

What were they thinking letting a bus full of unarmed men meander down a highway with the headlights un-blacked? It was suicide to sit in a target all lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Ain't no one out there." The major held his hands out in front of him like he was surrendering to me, pleading like I was about to shoot him dead.

I glanced behind me to prove him wrong and saw my reflection ghosted on the glass. Ears sticking out of dark, messy curls. Eye sockets bruised by exhaustion. More lines than a twenty-seven-year-old man should've earned. Other than the whirl of its tires on the road, the bus was silent, and everybody watched me. When the whispers started, I leaned over the major and said sorry before yanking the cord to alert the driver someone needed to get off the bus. I grabbed my blanket

along with my peacoat, cap, and gloves before stumbling down the aisle, staggering between the seats.

Wasn't no way I would let them all stare at me the rest of the way to the Hot Springs transportation depot. Maybe a hike would bring me to my senses. A body could hope.

I forced the bus's door open nearly before we stopped, and waited, bouncing on the balls of my feet while the driver opened the storage locker and wrestled my pack to the side of the road.

"You sure you want out here, son? Ain't nothin' here but trees and coyotes."

I nodded at the old man scratching the bare scalp under his driver's cap.

"I know the folks who live on the other side of that hill."

I tried to sound convincing despite the blank void stretching in every direction. Electricity may have been strung up in Little Rock, but FDR's New Deal hadn't lit up half of Arkansas yet.

The driver sniffed at me, seeming to smell the lie, before shrugging and pulling himself back onto the bus.

"I been in worse than this," I called. But seeing as the door was already closed, I don't know who I was trying to convince.

The bus eased away, picking up speed until its red taillights disappeared around a bend.

Behind me an owl hooted, and I squinted into the distance.

Now I'd gone and done it. I had no idea where I was. Somewhere past Malvern, I supposed. Only chirping insects and the curling of ominous clouds eating away at the stars greeted me.

I shivered at the creeping cold of night and pulled a scrap of oiled blanket over my head and coat. The month of May on the Arkansas plain used to feel mighty warm compared to the frosty air of my mountain home. One more thing the Pacific had changed in me.

"Best get movin'."

One thing the last three years had taught me was how to move quick and keep going—no matter what.

Wish I could've blamed someone else for the chilled wet seeping through me, but the fault landed square on my shoulders. The good Lord knew I didn't always think things through. I had a history of it . . . especially when it came to Charlotte Anne, my Annie. Even back the first time we met, I must've been crazy on account of what I did. Ma near lost her mind when I came struggling through the door of our farmhouse kitchen with a half-froze girl in my arms that Saturday afternoon. With Doc home sick again, I'd been on my own as I dragged her out from under the ice on the pond halfway down our mountain. And I did what I always did when I didn't know what to do. I went and found Ma.

"The Judge's princess, no less." Despite her sputtering, Ma had hustled Charlotte Anne into my sister Mary's flannel nightgown and robe faster than two shakes of a rabbit's tail, me still standing in the kitchen dripping wet while they went over to the living side of the house, my own sopping jacket and boots on the floor next to Charlotte Anne's. My brother and sister watched the whole thing with wide eyes. When Ma brought Charlotte Anne back, she told her to sit herself down while she got her some soup. Then she seemed to notice the rest of us gaping in the door. "Peter, your pa's out huntin'. You take the horse and run down to the Judge's place and let the help know Charlotte Anne come up to play with Mary so's they can tell the missus where she is. Tell them I'll have her home by dinner. But don't you let on that Sam brought her. You hear?"

That's when I knew I was in trouble. Ma had never countenanced even the whitest of lies. But she knew there wasn't nobody—let alone a riffraff farmer boy—supposed to get close to Charlotte Anne less the Judge decreed it. Course, the Judge never once sat behind a courtroom desk in a black robe decreein' nothin'. The reason folks called Roswell Layfette "the Judge" was on account of the fact that he was judge, jury, and executioner for none other than the Right Honorable

Mayor McLaughlin and his gangster buddy from Manhattan, Owney “The Killer” Madden.

The Judge would make Ma’s paddle look like a party game if’n he found out what I done. Wouldn’t matter that I hadn’t asked Charlotte Anne to follow me onto the ice. I’d get blamed for putting her in danger all the same. I was four years older than her nine and knew better. Somehow I’d surely bewitched her with my dark, devil looks. It wouldn’t matter what the reality was. The Judge would find a reason to make me regret near killing myself to save his daughter.

I hightailed it ’cross the breezeway to the bedroom us kids slept in, then put on my only other shirt and pants. When I hurried back to the kitchen and started loading Charlotte Anne’s dress into the washbasin, I guess I was hoping to wash away the guilt of what I’d risked. Or maybe I was just trying to make up for my complete stupidity.

Ma near dropped the soup pot. “Thank you kindly for your help, Sam, but I think you need some warming up too. Go sit, now.”

At the time I thought Ma was shocked I was willing to help. But now I know she didn’t trust me to wash Charlotte Anne’s dress. She was already covering for me bringing the girl home like she was a lost puppy. Wasn’t no good way to explain how a frilly dress got mangled by a boy.

Don’t rightly think Annie had any idea how near death she’d come. Especially since that little girl, always lookin’ sour in church, was happy as a mouse with a bite of cheese in Ma’s kitchen. She was “cute as a button,” Ma said. And what with her blond hair drying in ringlets, even a boy my age could agree with that. Seemed like she belonged in the fairy tales I read to my sister and brother—a beautiful princess brought back to life by her rescuing prince.

Despite the fact Ma had called me a dimwitted fool for hauling her up the mountain, she told me later she was glad I’d brought Annie to our house. The girls were inseparable after that. “They’re good for each other,” Ma had said.

I don’t know why Mrs. Lafayette kept letting Annie come to our

place, especially when Annie had sneaked off to the pond that day to skate. She weren't one to countenance a dirty farm. Maybe it was Ma's friendliness with her and Mary's painfully polite nature. But I think Mrs. Lafayette knew what was going to happen even then.

Under the late afternoon sun, the forest near glowed in golden light. After walking most of the night and all day, I trudged up the dirt road, past the pond, energy flowing through me even as the elevation stole my breath. Annie would laugh for certain at me huffing and puffing my way up our road. It was steeper than I remembered and more treacherous on account of the fact that the logs in the corduroy roads covering all the deep gullies and ruts were rotting through. It was in desperate need of fixin'. And if the path to the homestead was in such a state, I was afraid to see the condition of the farmhouse.

When I stepped onto the last of the corduroy roads before the farm, a log crumbled under my feet. I tipped, spinning my arms frantic to catch my balance, my pack slipping off before I tumbled pell-mell on the half-rotted logs behind me, staring at the sky. My shoulder ached under the bandages as I pushed myself up and brushed the debris from my palms. So much for being presentable. I might as well have rolled with pigs. At least my peacoat protected most of my uniform. I could shuck it and not look too much like a vagrant.

I sidestepped the broken log and turned onto the little pocked lane to our house.

Up yonder a spot of sky opened up beyond the forest—the farm clearing. If I'd had more left in me, I would've run. But my feet wouldn't cooperate, and my body held me at a steady, military march. I rounded the last corner, and our peach trees spread out before me, rising from the dip in the land pointing toward the mountains on the other side. Up on our hill, the sorting shed stood like a lone sentry, looming over the farm below. The sun slipped behind a cloud and doused the light over the orchard, the tortured limbs of the peach trees

reaching for the sky. Weeds had straggled up between the trunks—a sign that Annie was having trouble keeping up. But the shed appeared in good order and rows of beets were laid out neat and proper, the greens slightly purple and strong. Both were signs that my girls and Ma at least had something to eat.

As I wandered through the rows of trees with tiny peaches clinging to the branches, I found myself praying and hoping. Everything I'd read said that folks on the home front were doing fine, but part of me wondered if that was as much a lie as the magazines saying us soldiers were right as rain in April—a fairy tale sold to everyone on account of that's what they wanted to hear. But stories always seem to stop at the happy moment; they never tell the rest of the story.

I touched the row of medals on my chest, tempted to pull them off and leave them in the mud along with the memories. But the magazines also said our wives would want to see them. I wasn't sure of that, but one of the ladies at the last base confirmed it and told me the best gift I could give my Annie was to talk to her. 'Bout what, I wasn't sure.

I trudged up the hillside squinting at the house we'd worked so hard to resurrect from years of relentless mountain weather. The roof bowed in like an old swayback horse too tired to hold up much of anything anymore. Signs of poor mending jobs were everywhere. Mismatched wood tiles sat patched over the roof, and more than a few warped boards speckled the porch that stretched the length of the dogtrot house connecting the living side, the kitchen, and the covered breezeway in between. Good night, what a mess I'd left for Annie.

The yard was empty. No Rosie playing or running to greet me. I forced away the memories of abandoned huts in bombed-out villages. Repeated the refrain I'd repeated then—whatever had happened there could not happen here. Would not happen here. My girls were safe, snuggled in the mountains and watched over by family.

“Annie?”

I wandered through the equally empty kitchen, my footsteps pounding in the silence like distant mortar shells. The pantry door

was open, and I poked my head in, despairing at the near-bare shelves. The fire was out in the stove, and dirty dishes soaked in stone-cold water. There was a time when Charlotte Anne would have never left dishes out like this. There wasn't no dust on the countertop, though. That meant they'd been here recently.

"Annie?" I called again, this time through the breezeway. The creak of the porch swing was the only response.

I pushed through the door to the living side of the house. Mending overflowed from a basket next to the rocker, where my hand floated over the headrest. I knew my Annie had sat here night after night with Rosie, and a familiar aching to hold them both spread through me again.

In our bedroom, dust particles floated through the slanted beam of sunlight laid across our mussed bed. I smoothed the quilt before wandering through the curtain to the other bedroom. A tiny dress hung from a peg on the wall, and a slate and books sat stacked on the table. I picked up the cornhusk doll left on the bed and hugged her to my chest.

Then I trudged down the porch steps and across the yard to the small granny cabin that my papaw built for his folks when he married and that Ma now makes her home. The door creaked as I opened it, but Ma's sitting room was hunkered down all quiet—like it was locked in a time vault exactly as I'd left it, right down to the crocheted doilies on the worn chair and davenport. Silence dragged me to the bedroom in the back, where the curtains drifted and curled in the light. The neatness should have been comfort, but it rankled.

Where were my girls and Ma?

I loped to the barn hoping to find some clue, ignoring the pigs in their pen. When I pulled open the heavy barn doors, the cow jerked her head up, still chewing her cud. The horse and wagon were gone. My heart picked up pace as my imagination galloped down a path.

Charlotte Anne was a mighty beautiful woman, and even her daddy couldn't protect her up here in the mountains. Any sort of man might come and do as he pleased, especially given how the Hot Springs law

turned a blind eye to pursuits most of the country would call illegal. Alongside the gambling came the mobsters, money laundering, drugs, women . . . I pounded a fist on the wooden post, demanding that my mind slow down and work proper. The Judge wouldn't be round to help—Annie would never let him—but Doc would. Ma would. There surely would've been signs of trouble if'n someone had tried to take advantage of my Annie.

More'n likely they were in town. I stood sagging in the horse's stall, the tired going all the way into my bones. I'd imagined my girls leaping into my arms the minute I got back, everybody laughing—and then maybe eating some fried chicken before snuggling with Annie. After that, as irrational as the dream was, I'd sleep and sleep, just like I'd been hoping to. Nothing had prepared me for an empty home and me near panicking over my family being in town.

"Well," I said to the cow, turning a useless circle. "No reason to keep standing here." But where to go? My own bed sounded like a bit of heaven. But I didn't want Annie stumbling onto a filthy, near stranger asleep there. It'd give her a fright for sure.

"Guess I'll bunk with you, Elsie." I shut myself in against the chill, then shucked off my muddy peacoat and shoved it and my pack into a corner. When I clambered up to the loft, I nestled into the hay under a horse blanket and lay listening to the wind whistle through the crack in the enormous, barn doors. Elsie shuffled in her stalls beneath my perch. If I closed my eyes, I might almost make believe I was back when we were first married and fixing up the house—Annie curled into me. It had been years since my arms had been full. I pulled a bundle of hay into my chest.

We'd be normal soon. Rosie would run out from the breezeway to greet me after chores, little blond curls bouncing with each step. I'd swing her into the air and not let her go for as long as she'd let me. And Charlotte Anne. My Annie. Beautiful as ever, coming out to the porch so's not to miss it, hair highlighted golden against the afternoon sun. There wasn't anything to stop it from happening now.

My eyes drifted closed and then snapped open. Fell shut . . .

CHAPTER
Two

— ANNIE —

The buckboard bench creaked underneath me—a strident voice scraping and dissonant against the soft jingle of Buttercup’s harness and the low rumble of Doc’s Buick in front of me. A lavender blanket of dusk hung over the road winding into the mountains.

My little Rosemary was snuggled in the wagon bed beside her uncle Peter. Both were sound asleep with warm bricks at their toes and a layer of wool blankets over their bodies. Even in May, the nighttime temperatures in Arkansas’s Ouachita Mountains are cold enough to nip your fingers, especially up in the gorge. I buttoned up my knit sweater. It was a bit big on me, but it was warm. And I’d let down my hair from its usual bun, shielding my neck from the chill.

Peter’s one good arm draped over my little girl, protecting her from any real or imagined attack just like he had the entire time he’d been back from the war. Next to them Dovie May slumped against the side of the wagon, snoring slightly, a bit of straw sticking out of her neatly coifed silver hair.

I was mighty glad Sam’s ma had consented to going to town with us. Not only had she been a huge help in picking out supplies for Sam’s return, but the fresh air had pinked her cheeks and she’d entertained Rosie with her laughter. It was almost like the old Dovie May was there—strong and healthy.

A mist from the earlier storm hung in the air and made me wish I was burrowed under a blanket too. I should’ve asked Doc to handle the wagon up the switchbacks to the farm so I didn’t have to. But as usual, I was more worried about not fueling the gossips than what was best. Folks were gonna talk, and it weren’t worth a hill of beans to try and stop them.

Mama would come right out of her grave and smack me upside the head for disrespecting the neighbors if she could. But she couldn't, and Sam was the one who'd asked Doc to check in on me in the first place. Wasn't nobody could argue with that . . . even Daddy. It made sense, after all. Doc and my Sam had been two peas in a pod ever since they were knee-high. Two boys traipsing all over town and the springs. Hardly anything came between those two. Only the polio that got to Doc . . . and me. Oh, they'd never had a row over my attentions or nothin'. Doc knew I loved Sam, and that was that. But then with Sam away, Doc got so's he'd . . .

The wagon bumped over the logs in a corduroy road, and I clung to the reins as the wheels slipped around finding slim purchase. I concentrated on Buttercup's palomino rump, trusting her to follow the Buick and not to veer off the narrow, winding road into the yawning mountain chasm. It'd be my luck to have Sam come home and find us dead on the bottom of the ravine.

My heart sped, and a smile swept through my whole body. Sam.

Doc had brought the telegram up a few days back. My Sam was coming home soon. Peter had been so excited his brother had made it across the ocean safely that he'd come out of his stoic self and done a jig with me.

Only reason I didn't camp out at the transportation depot was on account of Rosie . . . well, that and Daddy would have never stood for it. The Judge's daughter don't show weakness, even if she don't belong to him anymore.

By the time we reached the house, the sun had found its hiding place, and the moon hung curved in the sky, smiling down at everybody. A few stars poked through the gray clouds, and I wondered if the sun ever got lonely up there all by himself. The moon had the stars, and the stars had each other, but who'd the sun have? Nobody liked doing everything by themselves. But, I supposed, the sun was stronger for having to light the whole sky by his lonesome.

Wish it worked that way for people. Before Peter came home, I'd done near everything by myself for three years and didn't feel

any stronger for it. I glanced back and frowned at the boxes wedged in between everybody. I'd finally accepted help from Daddy to fill the empty pantry, but I wasn't sure I wanted to know what it would cost me.

While Doc parked his auto on the far side of the corral, I slithered out of the wagon seat the best I could without waking the three in the back. I wanted to get Rosie snuggled in bed before Doc found reason to be in the empty house with me alone. Not that anything would happen, mind. It was just awkward, me having a family and him almost a brother and yet not quite.

I slid my girl out from under Peter's arm and scooted to the back of the wagon. Doc appeared lugging a flashlight and near scared me silly enough to drop Rosie. But his arm snapped out and steadied me against his chest, his blue-sky eyes catching mine before softening. His breath warmed my cheek as he shifted, his expression asking if he could help. I leaned away, one hand on the floor of the wagon, the other under Rosie as I shook my head, stretching a fake, sunshiny-bright smile across my lips. I could do this. Had to do this.

Hefting my daughter, I carried her to her bedroom, then snuggled her into her straw tick and tucked a coarse blanket under her chin. My girl's head of frizz made me sigh, and I touched a stray blond curl that had escaped her braids.

When was the last time I did Rosie's hair up nice? Mama'd never let me go anywhere without taking care with my stubborn blond curls and dressing me up right proud. Was I doing right by my girl, not taking more of Daddy's help? Or was it bad enough that I'd let Doc talk me into accepting those boxes? Of course, without them, our cupboards would be empty. Wouldn't do to let Rosie starve when help was available, especially when it meant Dovie May and Peter could keep the meager stores Doc gave us.

A rasping crept into Rosie's breathing, snatching my thoughts back. She was struggling a touch for air, and fear climbed up my throat. What if one of these times Doc's medicine didn't help? What if I had to stand by and watch as she gasped for breath and died?

Doc said it wasn't likely. But still, it niggled . . . especially since I couldn't give her another treatment tonight. A mustard rub on her chest might help. She'd probably sleep better with it, but if I woke her now, I'd never get her back to sleep. I took a steadying breath. Doc knew what he was doing. He took care of my daughter almost like she was his own.

Rosie shifted, and her wheezing cleared. Blessed silence.

I braced myself against the wall as the fear drained from my body, leaving behind a desperate, dry exhaustion. My own bed was on the other side of the curtain separating my room from hers, and it called to me like a siren's song. But animals needed caring. Peter had done most of the morning chores before we left, and I couldn't ask him to do my work for me again tonight—especially since I still wasn't sure if he was back at the Mattas farm by choice or on account of what the war had stolen from him. I couldn't afford to let my neediness drive him away.

'Sides, it wasn't his responsibility. It was mine. And the Mattas farm wouldn't take care of itself. It didn't care none that I was a city girl born and raised—and mostly alone to boot. I was a grown woman doing what generations of women had done before in times of desperation. I was taking care of what needed taking care of, not depending on anybody who could leave when times got hard.

I heard rustling outside and hurried out to help.

A neat pile of boxes already sat in the breezeway outside the kitchen door, and I gave them wide berth like they were a pack of dogs that might be friendly but could also be hunting their next meal. Doc stood in the yard holding the reins of the horse, waiting on me.

Always there, waiting on me.

"Peter took Dovie May to the cabin," he said. "Told him I'd help you finish up here so's he could settle in his ma without worrying none."

My skin pricked, and I smoothed my dress sleeves.

"You cold?" Doc led the horse toward me, his arm outstretched

like we were at some ball and he was asking for a dance. Wasn't no party here.

"I'm fine." I turned, rubbing the cold stiffness out of my own arms, just like I'd done ever since Sam left.

A kitten streaked through the grass between me and the barn, circling me and mewing for scraps. Rosie's Bailey baby. I squatted and scratched his mostly white fur, sending him into contented purrs. As I fed him a tiny bit of fried chicken from my pocket, Doc sighed, then limped to the barn. The squeak and thump of his leg brace played a disjointed rhythm with Buttercup's harness until they stopped at the barn doors. No doubt waiting for me again.

Sometimes I wished he'd just keep moving.

Bailey's whiskers flared in delight as his pink tongue licked off every last bit of oil from his lips. I stood, shaking my head at his little face squinting up at me, hoping for more. He was fatter than any of the other barn cats for a reason.

"You tell the rest of them felines they can have scraps if they start being nice to my girl."

Bailey rubbed himself against my leg, weaving in and out of my steps, ears flicking left and right before trotting off to explore the grasses for who knows what.

Doc hefted the barn doors open. Not that I needed him to, but Sam had built them to resist storms and certainly didn't plan on me fighting them. Oh, I wasn't some fragile thing, mind. But I was downright grateful not to wrestle the things tonight, even though Doc seemed to struggle as much as I might.

Soon my Sam would be home, and I wouldn't have to choose between tussling with things and asking for a favor. He'd help with the farm and Rosie and his ma. He'd stay for good, and he'd do what Peter couldn't. I wouldn't have to wonder if I had the strength to do something.

Once inside the barn, I lit the lantern hanging on the wall just inside the door. Doc unhitched Buttercup from the wagon, and then I led her to her stall before slipping the bridle up over her ears and

easing the bit from her mouth. Free of the metal bar, she smacked her lips and snuffled my cheek, expecting *her* treat. Apparently, I gave out far too many goodies to the animals round here.

I rubbed her forelock, and she nudged my pocket with her velvet nose, soft as the velvet Christmas dresses Daddy used to buy me to wear—until he stopped.

Buttercup nibbled on the fabric of my dress searching for an invisible treat. She knew where I hid bits of apple and carrot . . . when I had enough to share.

“Hey now,” I said, laughing. “Ruining my dress ain’t the way to get me to give you something.” I pushed her away and then hoisted the collar from her neck.

Doc rubbed Buttercup’s neck with slow, strong strokes, and the horse near rolled up in ecstasy. But when he patted her for a final goodbye, the mare’s head snapped up, and she skittered sideways, ramming into me before bolting out the door.

“You sure got a way with mares.” I was joking, but Doc frowned at me like I’d meant it all kinds of ways other than what the words really meant.

He straightened his bowler and brushed Buttercup’s hair from his suit coat. “I’ll go find her.” He heaved the doors shut, closing me in with the warmth held by the barn.

As his limping steps disappeared, I hefted the harness onto its hook, wishing it was a mite lower. At least Peter had mucked the stalls. I picked up the bridle and reached to hang it.

A scramble in the haymow sent bits of straw raining down on me. The movement was too large to be any of the barn cats, and my fingers tightened around the leather reins, my rapid heartbeat loud in the silence.

The sound of a footstep on the planks above shattered my frozen stance, and I spun and backed toward the doors, my mind bouncing between escaping or protecting my girl. My foot caught on a rough spot, and I stumbled, falling in a scrambling heap.

Everything was silent. Even Elsie stood still as death in her stall.

Shivers crept down my spine. The devil himself had come out of the mountain, casting a cloud over everything. Peter had warned me that he'd caught a few drifters up on the farm.

Elsie kicked against the wall, and a scream clogged in my throat as I stumbled into the nearby grain store, searching desperately for a weapon. The cow lowed at me, rolling her big brown eyes like she wondered who'd let the crazy woman into the barn. The metal grain scoop wasn't going to do much, but I held it in front of me nonetheless. Least it might protect me until I crossed the barn to get my shotgun out of the wagon.

"Who's up there?"

My voice was run over by fear. Wasn't sure even the cow could hear me. I'd read about blood-crazed men coming home from the war. We'd asked them to be killers over there, and some were having trouble giving it up. But as the calm, chirping cricket chorus started back up, the stories of those men not quite right and doing terrible, twisted things began to evaporate.

I'd near convinced myself I'd dreamed it all when a man-shaped figure peered over the ledge. I recovered my voice, the scream ripping through the air as I dropped the grain scoop, ran for the shotgun, and stood in the shadows between the intruder and my sleeping daughter.

"Best stay where you are. I got a gun." My shaking hands belied the confidence in my voice.

The man's answer was muffled by his stumbling descent. Though I followed his movements with the barrel of the gun, I wouldn't shoot him even if I'd thought to load the darn thing. Last thing I wanted was the law sniffing around the farm because I'd killed some drifter. Sure as the sun rises in the east they'd find something, and then Daddy would swoop in to smother me with his saving.

"We don't have much food to share." My voice sounded like an unsteady girl's, cracking in the middle, but the footsteps stopped. "We'll feed you, then you best be on your way."

I shifted my sweaty grip on the shotgun. I could do whatever was necessary. *Think of Rosie.*

“Come on out.” My command echoed into the rafters.

The man stepped forward, the meager light behind him casting strange shadows across his body. His tattered uniform hung on him, and a row of medals glinted from the chest that had no doubt once been broad and strong. The poor man.

The tip of the gun dipped.

I heard a match strike and fizz, watched it sacrifice its light to the lantern by Elsie’s stall. The chest of the man leapt into color, and he brushed at the splotches of mud across his navy trousers. A gold wedding band caught the light, and I was so mesmerized by the meaning that I nearly missed him speaking.

“Annie?” He stepped toward me, squinting into the flickering light. “Annie?”

That voice.

The shotgun clattered to the ground. I gasped for air, my fingers fluttering to my lips, praying I wasn’t dreaming. But then his arms were around me, his breath against my hair, my neck. Desperate. Lost. His body, skinnier than I ever thought possible, yet real, wrapped around mine. *Please, God. Real.*

His stubbly beard pricked my fingertips while his fingers explored my face, his calluses scratching my skin, anchoring me. He pressed my head into his chest, and his heart pounded against my hand, beating in rhythm with my own. The dovetail fit of our bodies—nearly forgotten, but precious and right.

My Sam was home.

I took a half-step back, brushing at my day-rumpled dress, wondering how he saw me, wishing I’d had time to change. Least I wasn’t in my blue jeans or overalls. I choked back a laugh, imagining him mistaking me for Rosie the Riveter. He wiped a tear from my cheek, and then he sketched the trail of the others down my neck, my skin burning under his touch.

“Are you real?” he whispered, echoing my own question. I’d thought for sure I’d be a widow at twenty-three. Took more than a telegram about a homecoming to make me believe, I guess.

Shadows in the Mind's Eye

My fingers ran up his arm, over his muscles and bone, the line of medals, exploring for the injury I knew was there somewhere. He winced as I reached his right shoulder.

“I’m supposed to be wearing a sling, but it gets in my way.” I heard the smirk in his voice. He never did let much slow him down. He lifted my hand to his lips, his breath warming my fingers before he kissed my palm. Life shifted back, and I took the first real breath I’d had in three long years.

Sam was home. And everything would be all right.