

SIDE BY SIDE

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A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK

1

I'm a fool for busting Clyde out of McClelland County jail.

My fingers rest on the typewriter keys. It's my own fault "Bonnie and Clyde" only exist in my head. That's the way it's been for nearly two years, ever since Clyde got caught again.

I breathe in, a cigarette clenched between my teeth, and the tip glows red. The smoke swirls 'round my mouth, escaping between my lips. I can right my wrong. We can be us again, if I can convince the governor of an early parole.

I snuff out my cigarette, glance 'cross the Barrows' living room at Clyde's daddy with a newspaper, and get down to business. I jab my fingers into the typewriter keys.

Dear Governor Sterling:

Letters ago, I searched for that colon. It took practice to remember to also hold down the shift key, or else a semicolon would blot onto the paper and I'd have to start again. Now both my pinkies know where to go. I press the carriage-return lever. The paper turns up and the typewriter screeches as it shifts to start a new line.

With my back ramrod straight, I begin.

I am writing on behalf of Clyde Champion Barrow, prisoner number 63527, to ask that his seven, two-year sentences be served concurrently, concluding at two years—

Ding!

I press the carriage-return lever. The paper feeds up. The typewriter screeches.

—as opposed to the mandated fourteen years.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I sniffle. The winter air feels too cold, even indoors, even with the fire crackling beside me. Mr. Barrow sets his newspaper aside to stoke it, a distant look masking his features.

On his behalf, I have secured a paying position.

I don't even feel a lick of shame over that fib. If ya want a parole, a job is a necessity—and a challenge to find nowadays.

More words fill the page.

Profoundly remorseful.

Even if that's not particularly true. I'd say Clyde's more profoundly resourceful, 'specially with his quick hands—on cars, on safes, and on me.

Clyde's daddy ain't more than a few feet away, yet I can't help trailing a finger up my thigh, pretending it's Clyde's touch. Eyes closed, through my dress, I cross the seam of my chemise, imagining Clyde working his palm beneath. He'd smirk. That boy is always quick to smirk. My lips quiver, fighting to keep my face from showing the fantasy running through my head.

I open my eyes, and the reality of where I am—and who I'm without—crashes into me. With renewed focus, I keep typing, line after line, trying to persuade the governor to let Clyde come home to me. Then I can start living again. Then Clyde can, after all he's been through.

V—

I hold down the key, biting my lip, composing myself. I let up, and continue.

Viciously brutalized.

Buck, being Clyde's older brother, struggled to relay that to me. His teeth grit and his breath held as he explained how guards are swift to beat Clyde. I cringed, imagining the guard patrolling on horseback around the grounds, smacking the butt of his rifle into Clyde's back. A demand to work harder, faster. Clyde referred to life at the prison farm as slave labor.

"Stay in Dallas, darling," he wrote to me, the letter typed. "I can't have you seeing me like this."

This.

What in God's name does it mean? I've seen Clyde purple and blue, the aftermath of him stepping in when my deadbeat husband came back for me. What makes these bruises different?

I shake the thought from my head and focus on my letter.

I implore you to see Clyde as worthy of reconsideration, compassion, and clemency.

In closing, I add:

Respectfully,

Cumie Barrow

Clyde won't let me sign my name, not wanting those guards who read our letters to utter it. His letters to me are addressed to Darling. Mine to him are signed Honey. Pardon letters are from his ma. She's able to read and write just fine, but with both Clyde and Buck locked away, the poor woman's heart is too heavy to find the right words.

The typewriter whines as I rip the paper free.

In her kitchen, I find Mrs. Barrow elbow-deep in a bird. After a quick wipe on her apron, she scribbles her signature with a pen. Clyde's mama gives me the letter and a hug, her thick arms pulling me to her. "Thank you, sweet Bonnie."

Then it's off to the post office.

I ain't more than two steps out of the Barrows' apartment, tacked on to the back of their service shop, when I'm face to chest with my much leggier best friend.

"What're you doing here?" Blanche asks.

By the looks of her, she's seconds from plopping down her bag, changing from her beauty shop uniform, and crashing into her borrowed bed at her in-laws. Her daddy only lives a few miles away, but Blanche would rather be with Buck's, being she hasn't seen her own daddy in months on account of the new lady in his life. And her mama, she's long gone. Over-a-decade gone.

I hold up the letter.

She nods, understanding. The way from here to the post office practically has a *Bonnie* path worn into it.

Blanche offers, "My dogs are tired as sin, but I'll keep ya company if ya want."

A little white something pops from the bag hung over her shoulder.

A little white head, to be more exact. "I'm more interested in that dog," I say. "Where'd she come from?"

"He," Blanche corrects. "I checked. And I named him Snow Ball."

"Ah, 'cause he's all white." For once, Blanche has a perfectly reasonable rationale for one of her decisions.

She scrunches her brows. "No, 'cause this here dog is the start of something good. And more good will stick to him, accumulating more and more. I can feel it. I found him on my way home. No tag or anything, so he's mine."

"And Buck's mama, she going to be all right with you keeping him?"

Blanche shrugs, a typical Blanche response. "Cumie can have some of Snow Ball's good, too." She nods to my letter. "Maybe he'll help get Clyde home."

'Cross the street, Old Jed whistles from his stoop, saving me from pointing out how that doesn't make a lick of sense. Both laces of Old Jed's ratty boots are undone. Really, it looks like Old Jed himself has come undone. But he's still a permanent fixture in West Dallas. Always there, always hooting at the gals that scoot by.

I shake my head, taking one more peek at Old Jed as we head down the cracked sidewalk toward Elm Street. "Somehow, I bet ya that man outlives us all."

Blanche loops her arm through mine. "As long as he's got enough teeth for whistlin', that's fine by me."

We both laugh, but quickly cough away our giggles as we pass a man curled up against a building. A *Hoover blanket* covers his midsection, leaving feet, arms, and a head exposed. I squirm out of my jacket and lay it over the newspaper that's doing little to serve as an actual blanket.

Blanche clucks. "Bonn, that heart of yours is going to land you on the streets, too."

I raise a brow in Snow Ball's direction, then shrug. Maybe both our hearts are too big, but fortunately, working at the diner's been kind to me after the stock market crumbled and the bank stole all I entrusted to them. Since, I've been squirreling away tips when I can and I've got some clams in my pocket. Not a lot, but enough.

Too many others aren't as lucky. President Hoover may claim the economy is fundamentally sound, and this depression is merely a passing incident in our national life, but I'm calling his bluff.

There. And there. Blanche and I pass one building after another that's boarded up.

A pang of sadness hits me as we approach what used to be Victor's, the soda shop Blanche and I used to frequent after school let out. I swallow, afraid to look 'cross the street from Victor's to Doc's. I'll look at the three-story building, though. I always do, as if pressing on a bruise to make sure it still hurts.

It throbs; setting my eyes on the physician's office, knowing that Dr. Peterson still practices inside those walls, but beneath the office is nothin' but empty bathtubs and a dusty bar. Blanche and I used to secretly spend our nights there, serving bootlegs. I stood on the stage, feeling the heat of eyes and lights on me. In those moments, I allowed myself to think I could be somebody. That a *somebody* would see me up there and put me on a real stage on Broadway. Or maybe in a film, instead of my always watching from the crowd. I'd be somebody who was more than poor, somebody who would've made my daddy proud, if he were alive to see it.

But no, our country went to hell, Doc's and Victor's crashing along with the banks. Everyone's dreams are stuck in the mud, not just mine. Once in a blue moon, a gal gets discovered at a diner, but none of the fellas I show my pearly whites to have fancied making me a star. I reckon I should simply be happy to have a regular shift to work. Many can't say the same thing. Took Blanche a while to find new work, grudgingly charming her way into the Cinderella Beauty Shoppe.

So yes, I'm calling your bluff, Mr. President.

Blanche's gaze is higher up, on a third-story window where she once lived.

I ask her, "Miss it, don't ya?"

"I miss him more."

Buck.

The wind carries the faint sound of a bell and a *ping* of a coin into a kettle, and blows Blanche's short hair 'cross her face. She tucks a strand behind her ear. Her wedding band, still shiny and new, catches the sunlight.

Blanche is someone who'll always surprise me. Selfish yet caring. Impulsive yet levelheaded. She once threw caution to the wind, the one who dragged me into Doc's in the first place. "But the wind'll change directions on ya, Bonn," she told me a few days ago. "It can all come back and hit ya square in the face."

That's why she sent her husband off to jail. "Buck," she told him, "you got to go."

While she once saw his arrests as scandalous and delicious, she now sees the police's eyes on him as restrictive. Mostly for herself.

"Do your time," she told him. "Get rid of those warrants out on you. Then no one will be after us no more."

Two years ago, I should've let Clyde do his time after the law came for him.

But no, I couldn't stomach him being away for five years, so I taped a gun to my upper thigh and smuggled it into the prison's visitors' room. Clyde's expression was priceless. *Astonished* would be a word for it. He chuckled, dimples showing. "My God, Bonnie, what am I going to do with you?"

I wanted to beam at impressing my man, but I shrugged, and mostly feigned bravado at what I'd done. "Someone once told me that big things await us. But not in here."

Goodness me, he did it. He escaped. We were going to run away together, hide out on a plot of farmland. He knows a bit 'bout tending one since he came from one. But Clyde, fresh out of jail, said it was too dangerous for me to go with him right away. He'd come back for me. The law stomped on that promise when they caught him two weeks later. Then there he was, facing fourteen years instead of five. Clyde would've been nearly halfway done if it weren't for me.

I squeeze Blanche's hand, as much for her as for myself. She jars out of her own memory and drops her gaze from the window of her onetime home.

"I hope you're right about Buck finishing his time," I say, "and having that fresh start."

She says, "When is Blanche ever wrong?" I open my mouth. She adds, "Don't answer that." Snow Ball barks sharply. "Would you look at that; Snow Ball agrees."

Really, I hope the same will apply to Clyde, and no one will be after him once he gets out. Then there won't be a need to hide out on a big stretch of land. We'll start anew in Dallas. But fourteen years . . . That's a lot different than Buck's year and a half. I'll be thirty-five. I ain't going to think where I'll be or even who I could be with—'cause this here letter will work. I hug the envelope against my chest.

Clyde and I will have our chance at being free. Even if Clyde doesn't believe it himself. "I'd leave all the stealing behind for ya, Bonnie," he told me once. "But ain't much I can do 'bout the name Clyde Barrow. You know I'm more likely to find a door in my face than a handshake."

Maybe that's how it's gone in the past, but—for our future—I want to believe Blanche—and her dog. I kiss Snow Ball's furry head, and then set my sights on the post office down the block. Outside, a man from the Salvation Army collects money. I finger a coin in my pocket. I'll drop it in, for good luck.

This will be the letter to get Clyde pardoned. This letter will breathe life into the word *free*. He'll come home to me. My life will no longer be stagnant. I'll be moving forward, with Clyde.

2

The morning's been slow at Marco's, with few patrons and even fewer tips. I shouldn't complain; there have been tips. But now the diner's lunch hour has come and gone, taking its chatter and commotion with it. I make my rounds, checking on the dawdlers, my heels tapping against the tiled floor. One woman asks for buttermilk pie. Then, coffee in hand, I refill and refill.

Ain't life grand.

Blanche thunders in at half past one. She often comes in on her days off and the sight of her makes my day a touch grander. I'm behind the counter. She slaps a palm down, bent over at the waist, with Snow Ball tucked under her other arm. Blanche ain't out of breath, but I reckon she rushed here to beat the cold and is now letting her dramatic side show.

I restrain from rolling my eyes. "Blanche?"

Head down, she holds up a gloved finger.

I tap my foot.

"Stitch. In my side. Better now." Blanche lifts her head. Her nose and cheeks are rosy. "Clyde."

It's only one word. Yet that one word is all it takes to send my heart beating like hummingbird wings. Problem is, I don't know if I'm 'bout to soar or fall to the ground. So much can happen in prison.

All I say is, "Tell me."

"He's gettin' out."

My Lord, my knees buckle, from a wave of relief.

Blanche fishes out an envelope from her coat. "Got it here in black and white. Cumie asked me to take it to you. Wants you to be the one to greet Clyde at the bus after all you've done."

It's the fastest a letter has ever exchanged hands. Excitement has my eyes jumping from spot to spot, unable to put more than a few words together at a time. But I see what I need to see.

Clyde Barrow.

Conditional pardon.

To be released February 2, 1932.

"That's—"

"Today," Blanche finishes. "Letter's dated a few days ago, but Cumie only just got it. I raced it here, 'cause I'm a good friend like that."

I squeal, loud enough for the woman taking too long with her pie to look down her long nose at me. Not like I care.

She says, “I’ll even take the couch tonight so you two can have my room. That’s how good of a friend I am.” Blanche shakes her head. “It’s been a while for you two. My goodness, it’ll be nearly as long for Buck and me by the time he’s paroled. What’ve I done?”

I roll my eyes. This ain’t ’bout her and Buck. It’s ’bout me and Clyde. “He’s getting out,” I repeat, and then a second time at barely more than a whisper. Clock says it’s nearly two. I scan the letter, but, “What time?”

Blanche shrugs. “Buck said it took him five hours last trip.”

“Five hours. So if Clyde got the nine o’clock bus”—I yank at the bow at the back of my apron—“he’ll be here any minute now.”

I grab my hat and coat from beneath the counter. Marco isn’t anywhere in sight, and I’m not going to take the time to find my boss. Pie Woman startles as I race toward the door.

“You’ve got Snow Ball to thank, ya know,” Blanche calls at my back. “The good’s going to keep rolling and growing bigger and bigger. You watch.”

I won’t say it aloud, but *God bless you, Snow Ball*. My new life with Clyde starts today. I only pray he doesn’t get off—or has gotten off that bus already—with no one to throw their arms ’round him. I run ’cross town, rubbing a hole into the heels of my stockings, and my skin.

The bus station has others waiting, a sign the nine o’clock bus hasn’t arrived. I lick my lips, breathing the cold air in and out through my nose, trying to collect myself. I hope Clyde didn’t leave Huntsville earlier. Surely he’d have surprised me at the diner, though. Blanche found me at Marco’s easy enough.

I turn up my collar against the wind, and clench my hands together, anticipating our reunion. Only me, Clyde . . . and the army of homeless fellas ’cross the street. To pass the time, I watch ’em. Their cardboard and scrap-wood shelters are a sight to cause sore eyes, haphazardly filling what was once a park. Now it’s a community of displaced souls, unable to make ends meet.

Hoovervilles, that’s what I’ve heard these areas called. And that armadillo roasting on a spit, I believe that’s known as a Hoover hog.

President Hoover ain’t a popular man.

But that man won’t get a second more of my thoughts. A bus is approaching down the street, kicking up dust. I smooth my hands over my new secondhand coat, then down my long dress. My hat gets a quick adjustment, too, before I wring my hands together. And wait. I wait to see the man I haven’t set eyes on in almost two years. I haven’t heard his voice. I only know Clyde in the stiff letters of a typewriter and through Buck’s deeper tone.

Clyde will be different. I know it. I just need to look deeply into his hazel eyes to know if everything will be okay. If we’ll be okay.

The five-hour ride from the town of Huntsville shows differently on everyone who exits the bus. A man stretches. Another has ruffled clothing. A woman exhales, a red-faced child in her arms. I chuckle as one fella stomps his boot at the top of the bus’s stairs, shaking life back into his numb foot.

Reunions happen at the mouth of the steps. I wait impatiently for my own, praying for my own. A man exits, then it's like the bus is out of more. I stare at the opening, my spirits darkening as the seconds go by, before surveying the small group that's formed.

Then another fella appears at the top of the bus's stairs, slicked-back hair, a face that appears to be freshly shaven, a full bottom lip I'm aching to kiss.

Clyde.

My smile and my fluttering heart compete to be the first to respond to the sight of him after so long.

I rush closer, saying *excuse me* as I angle my body left and right.

Clyde chucks a bag and a long stick down the bus's steps, and I don't realize 'til I'm standing over them that the second is a crutch. He shuffles forward then hops down the three stairs. Each thud he makes against the steps pounds in my head.

All his weight is on his right foot, his left foot hovering above the dirt. The laces of his boot are undone, the shoe's tongue hanging to one side. I'm a statue, my mind rattling with too many fears of why Clyde Barrow stands before me—lame—to think of what to do next.

"Bonnie," Clyde breathes.

Then I'm in his arms. Clyde wobbles, steadying himself against the bus. At first, his arms are stiff. He softens. Our eyes meet, and it aches how badly I want him to crash his lips to mine. Clyde's too slow, and I cup the back of his neck, pulling him to me. Our kiss is clumsy, as if we're trying to remember how the other's lips move. I help him remember, taking the lead. Then Clyde deepens the kiss. Boy, does he kiss me, like he's got something to prove.

I stay in his embrace, my forehead tucked beneath his chin, and we both breathe in, like we're trying to recapture each other's scent. I don't recognize Clyde's.

He pulls back, raising his hands. Clyde hesitates before framing my face. His own features, 'specially his jawline, are tense. Then there it is: I recognize the intensity of his eyes. My heart expands and my breath catches, a wonderful tightness seizing my chest.

A line of poetry flitters into my head, as it so often does when Clyde sets his gaze on me.

Love comes in at the eye.

Thank you, William Butler Yeats. I know with certainty that Clyde's love for me knows no ends. But I also can't miss the darkness lurking behind those eyes. I should ask Clyde why part of his body weight rests on me, but I ain't eager to learn the answer to how the guards hurt him this time. The bus's engine fires to life. I lean toward Clyde's good ear, the one the malaria he got as a boy didn't steal the life from, and a lie tumbles out above the engine's rumble: "I've good news."

Clyde's head cocks. "I could use a heaping of that."

I push on, desperate for our reunion to be a happy one. But even more, I'm desperate for Clyde not to break the terms of his parole and be sent back to a place that's made him unable to walk on his own. "I've gone and found you a job."

Clyde's voice comes out unhurried, unsure, as he says, "Did ya now?"

No, but I nod eagerly. The bus pulls away. Clyde bends to pick up his crutch. I ignore the sight of it. “I was leaving the theater the other day and the owner—Mr. Johnson, his name is—joked he should put me on his payroll, since I’m there so much.” This much is true. With each step, my shoes rub my heel raw a bit more. Clyde moves beside me, all his weight to one side. “But Mr. Johnson really does need an usher. His last one—this big, burly fella—just landed himself in the big house. So this morning,” I say, transitioning from fact to fiction, “I marched over to the theater and demanded for you to get the job.”

“Did ya now?”

“I did. And when Mr. Johnson said no, I threatened to take my patronage elsewhere. I told him Clyde Champion Barrow could keep things in line better than most. No one would dare slip past you with a five-finger discount.”

Clyde’s on the verge of a smirk, but it’s not quite there. I lean in to kiss him, but ain’t it strange, he turns away. “Truly, Bonnie, I’m flattered you think I could do the work of a big, burly fella. But—”

“Just say thank you”—I force a smile—“and show up tomorrow for the matinees. *Shanghai Express* opened today and the line stretched ’round the block to see Marlene Dietrich. Tomorrow is sure to be just as busy. You’ll show ’em how burly you are, honey.”

He stares at the cracked sidewalk. For a few unbearable seconds, it’s just the thunk of his crutch followed by the quick movement of his good side to catch up with his bad. Finally, with those eyes of his still trained down, he says, “Thank you. I’ll do good by you, Bonnie.”

Excitement over Clyde’s return fills me again, and this time my smile is genuine. Now, I got to exit stage left to get Clyde that job. I ramble some more, telling Clyde to go on home to see his family, then I say, “I’ll come by tonight.”

I expect a kiss good-bye, but Clyde’s head must be elsewhere, and I have no problem taking matters into my own hands.

I’m halfway to the theater, my blisters screaming at me, when I remember I ran out of the diner with hours to go. I curse at my foolishness; another gal would gladly snatch up my future shifts. By the time I reach Marco’s, I got my excuse on the tip of my tongue.

“Feminine problems,” I tell my boss, and promptly hold my breath.

He mumbles something incoherent before, “Don’t do it again.”

“I won’t, sir,” but it’s as if Marco is reading my mind, as all I want to do is get to the theater. I busy my hands with pouring coffee and I busy my mind with how Clyde’s hands are going to relearn my every curve tonight.

When it’s finally quitting time and I escape outside, the crisp air is a rush to my senses. I hightail it down the street, and in between breaths, I practice my conversation with Mr. Johnson.

“Clyde’s a hard worker.” I pass Doc’s, not looking at it. “Wonderful attention to detail.” Up ahead, a crowd at the Palace Theater is already lined up outside to see Marlene Dietrich on the silver screen. That’ll work in my favor, as Mr. Johnson may be eager to make me smile and get me on my way. “Committed to his work.”

I find Mr. Johnson inside, rushing here then there, that way then this way. Frankly, it’s baffling his midsection resembles a spare tire with all the running he does. I tap him on the shoulder, his round face lighting up as it does when he sees me.

Chin raised, I spout off my idea and Clyde's better qualities.

Mr. Johnson says he won't hire him, not a fella like Clyde, known for robbing all over Dallas. "I ain't keen on swapping one convict for another, Bonnie," he says, not making me smile one bit. In fact, it boils my blood.

Clyde tried before at an honest life, going so far as to ink USN on his upper arm before trying to enlist in the United States Navy. 'Cept, it didn't go as planned, not with him having malaria as a boy. The navy didn't want a lad who had trouble hearing out of one ear.

I ain't going to accept Mr. Johnson being someone else who doesn't want Clyde. My chin goes up more to deliver my rebuttal.

"I ain't keen on finding a new theater to go to. I rather like it here."

Despite the depression, Mr. Johnson ain't hurting for patrons. I'm a dime a dozen, but there's something to say 'bout loyalty in these times, and he exhales, louder than his already abnormally loud breathing. Mr. Johnson fetches me the previous burly man's uniform. "Bonnie, don't make me regret this."

"Won't be nothin' to regret," I say. "Clyde did his time. He's straight now."

Later, I tell the same thing to my ma as she purses her lips at me. She sighs and stitches into the sleeve of the uniform's red jacket. Clyde'll need it shorter. I could sew it myself, but the new cuffs on his matching pants will take me long enough and Ma's spent decades working as a seamstress. She'll have the jacket fitting Clyde in no time, which will get me over to the Barrows' in half the time. My foot's already tapping with the need to see him.

What I don't need is my ma mumbling under her breath 'bout Clyde getting out sooner than she thought he would. Or should. Then, loud and clear, she says, "Your brother made manager at the cement plant."

We make eye contact. The single lamp in our living room casts shadows 'cross her face. Ma pokes her needle through the fabric. I nod and glance at the clock. It's getting late. "That's wonderful for Buster. Daddy would be proud."

My ma pokes again. "Did Billie tell ya she's going to be a nurse? Of course, she still has a year of senior high to go, but she's got her heart set on it."

"I'm glad they're both building futures for themselves." I say it 'cause I am, but also 'cause I know what my ma's getting after with her not-so-subtle updates. I focus on Clyde's pants, restraining from pointing out how I dropped out of school after Ma got sick to work extra hours, all to keep a roof over my little sister's head. It's not as if I wanted to say good-bye to one of my dreams, of standing in front of my own classroom, all those eyes on me.

She says, "Ever think 'bout going back for your degree?"

"Some," I say, but it's been hard to pull myself from the "life's on hold" feeling that swept over me when Clyde was sent away. But now he's back, with a second chance at an honest life. No reason for me not to get another shot, too.

Ma rips the thread with her teeth. "Ya know," she says, and I brace myself for whatever she's throwing at me next, "I heard over the party line that Roy's back in prison."

"Sounds 'bout right," I deadpan. "What'd my charming husband do this time?"

“Roughed up a fella. Mrs. Malone told Mrs. Davis that Roy was three sheets to the wind at the time.”

I’d be redundant to say *sounds ’bout right* again, so I settle for a slow headshake.

“Sometimes ya think ya know a boy . . .” Ma shakes her own head.

I smile tautly, not giving in to her taunts. *Sorry, Ma, but my heart’s set on Clyde, and there’s a future waiting for us.* Clyde believes it so much that a few years ago he wrote it into a song. I complete the stitches of Clyde’s pants, our chorus filling my mind’s ear. Bonnie and Clyde—sung one after the other. Four quick beats, followed by three slower ones—*Meant to be*—I pause, then think—*a-live*—I dip my chin once, twice, before the two final notes of our melody—*and free*.

A free man is what Clyde is now, even if earlier it seemed like chains were still wearing him down. It’ll take time, I’m sure. But tonight, it’ll be the two of us: Bonnie and Clyde. Boy, am I ready to feel alive.

3

Ma sewed at snail’s pace, delaying my reunion with Clyde as long as she could. But here I am, the moon high in the sky, twisting the knob of the Barrows’ apartment door. Each time I come here, I’m impressed with Clyde and his family. They didn’t end up in Dallas ’til after the Great War, when life fell apart for farmers. Cities promised more. Still, Clyde’s family lived under their wagon, then a tent, ’til they opened this here Star Service Station.

It’s almost as if our relationship started under a tent, too. But now we’ve got a chance for more.

The door’s unlocked, Clyde no doubt expecting me. I smirk at Blanche asleep on the couch, like she said she’d be, and tiptoe toward the second of the two bedrooms with his uniform slung over my shoulder.

The door’s ajar, the room dark on the other side. On a twin-sized bed, Clyde lies on his side, his back to the door. I lay down his uniform and shed my coat. With each step toward him, my anticipation grows. My foot connects with something hard and I nearly stumble. The noise startles Clyde, and he rolls over. What I kicked gives me a start. His crutch. I step over it, not sure I’m ready to know what caused his broken bones. All I know, they’ll heal, given enough time.

“Sorry for waking you,” I say. I’m not. This is Clyde’s first night home and what I have planned doesn’t allow for much sleeping.

Clyde rubs his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Late,” I say. “Sorry I couldn’t get here sooner. I’ve got your uniform for tomorrow.”

I kick off my shoes. Clyde’s now slouched in bed, darkness hiding his features. He pats the space beside him, and it’s all the invitation I need. There ain’t much room, but I have what I need to lie facing him. Something—a hesitation I feel—stops me from draping my arm ’cross his body. Maybe it’s ’cause we haven’t been intimate in years. Or maybe it’s from how I had to kiss him first back at the bus station.

“Bonnie,” he says, and I’m glad he spoke next, as I’m at a loss for words, besides asking for another kiss. “I’m mighty thankful for you.”

“Oh yeah?” I stretch out my arm now. His stomach is hard beneath my touch.

He nods. "Aye."

I'm encouraged and rock into him. "How thankful? Want to show me?"

Clyde clears his throat. The roughness of it vibrates through my arm. He scratches his neck. He sniffs. The boy does everything besides move to touch me.

"Some other time."

Some other time? I prop myself up. My heart thumps in my ears, no longer from anticipation but from the fact this is going all wrong. "Not now? It's your first night home."

He nods. "That's right. First of many nights, Bonnie. Reckon we'd be better off when my parents aren't on the other side of the wall. Go on and lay your head down. Let's get some sleep."

I glance at the shared wall, then back at Clyde. His rejection has me stuck between thoughts. "You want me to stay?"

Clyde mimics my position and runs the back of his fingers 'cross my cheek. "More than anything, darling." He settles back down. "Tomorrow's a big day. I don't want to misstep."

"Okay."

I slowly shift to my back, as if I got to move at a snail's pace myself, uncertain of how to act. By now, I thought Clyde's hands and mouth would be running all over me. That's certainly not the case, and I can't help wondering if his parents were an excuse. Or if being home, and all I threw at him, is too much after what he faced in jail. I glance again at the crutch, and decide it ain't fair of me to be impatient. And Clyde's right, tomorrow's a big day. There will be another one after that. There will be plenty of time for us to discover each other once again.

The next afternoon at Marco's, I glance at the clock every two minutes. My shift fell later in the day, keeping me from overcompensating with one smile after another as Clyde worked the matinees. I can imagine his smirk in reaction to my grins. I can hear him say, *Bonnie, you can do better than undressing me with your eyes.*

'Cept, I haven't seen that smirk of his since he's been home, and last night makes me feel like those words aren't ones I would've heard.

It's nearly dark by the time I'm headed toward the Barrows'. Down the block, in front of a boardinghouse, Clyde sits on the stoop with a boy I've never seen before. The kid's looking at Clyde like whatever Clyde's saying is going to be on his next exam.

Clyde sees me, whistles. The boy mimics Clyde, earning the kid a hoot from Clyde. The whistle is odd enough, but coupled with Clyde's animation, it's like he's putting on a show. He edges himself off the steps.

"Quite the greeting," I call and point at the boardinghouse. "Ya getting us a room?"

"Nah." Clyde tucks the crutch under his arm. "Just here talking to an old friend."

That there strikes me funny, being the kid looks to be teen-aged. I wave to the young'un, resembling Clyde in his dark hair and narrow shoulders. Clyde totters toward me, I walk toward him. He says, "Reckoned you and I could find a spot of our own, though." He nods to his family's service station down the road, their apartment tacked on to the back. "That place is feeling a bit cozy."

I smile, which will be the complete opposite of my ma's reaction. In fact, it's a bit of a relief Clyde's thinking 'bout us getting a place that doesn't share a wall with his parents. "How'd your first day go at the Palace?"

Clyde says flatly, "Po-lice came by."

We stop, face-to-face; a streetlight flickers above us.

"What on earth for?"

"Johnson did me good and called the laws to let 'em know I was employed. They came down to see for themselves."

"Good," I say, still not sure why his voice has an edge.

He raises a brow. "Would be good if they didn't take me in."

"In where?"

"'Cross town to the station. Sat me down. Questioned me—"

"'Bout what?" I shake my head. "Clyde, tell me you didn't go and steal something within hours of getting out of prison."

Clyde turns away. "That's great, Bonnie. Thought you'd have more faith in me. In us."

I curse myself and grab his arm, keeping him from going any farther from me. He tenses. "I do," I say. "I'm sorry. It got me nervous, that's all, at hearing they took you downtown."

"Well, I didn't do nothin'. They only wanted to shake me up, let me know they have their eyes on me. I'll tell ya what, I didn't enjoy the twenty-block walk home."

I flicker my gaze to where the crutch meets his arm, imagining the skin rubbed raw, even beneath his coat, uniform jacket, and shirt.

"Bonnie," he says, "ya didn't tell Johnson I'm crippled."

I hadn't. Mr. Johnson needs an able body. But that's Clyde. "You ain't crippled."

He starts to limp toward home, as if proving his point, and I've no choice to finally acknowledge it. "I'm sure you don't need that ol' pole. Not for long, anyway." I raise the pitch of my voice at the end of the sentence, indicating a question. A large part of me hopes it goes unanswered. I'm terrified of the happenings of the prison farm.

Clyde stares straight ahead, but it looks like he rolls the words 'round his mouth until he says, "I cut off two of my toes."

"*You* cut . . . You did it to yourself?"

"I had no choice, if I wanted to survive. I ain't exactly a big, burly fella, Bonnie. It was hard out in them fields. But with two less toes, they assigned me to the kitchen."

Clyde's clever, horrifyingly clever. But the more I think 'bout it, Clyde's willingness to forever handicap himself is every bit horrifying. And also limiting, being Clyde will need work that doesn't require manual labor. I restrain from wringing my hands, not wanting Clyde to see my unease, and also my worry that ushering at the theater may qualify as a job unfit for him. I swallow, refocusing, 'cause one thing's for sure: "I'll take that limp if it meant saving your life."

"Me, too," he says. "I'll be damned if I didn't wish that pardon came a few toes earlier, though."

"Me, too," I mumble. Yet now he's out. We're living the straight and narrow. Clyde'll make ushering work and the law will grow bored with him.

"But Bonnie?"

I look over at Clyde, and, golly, I'm taken aback by how much I missed being next to him. I only wish pain wasn't etched 'cross his face.

"I need ya to know something," he says. "I ain't never going back."

"To the theater?" I lick my lips. "Clyde, you got to."

"No, Bonnie. I meant to prison."

I scrunch my brows and reassert the thought I just had. "The police are going to move on and find a new fella to harass."

He slowly shakes his head.

"Clyde," I say firmly. "They've no reason to take you back to prison."

"It'll break me."

He packs so much emotion and conviction into those words. I count my heartbeats, suspecting there's more to Clyde's survival at the prison farm than I've been told. I'm at twenty heartbeats before I muster the courage to say, "Whatever it takes, we'll keep you out."

Clyde turns to me. He kisses my forehead. "That, we will."

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