

Timberdark Extract

By Darren Charlton

“I need you to trust us when I tell you that there’s a place not far from here where you’ll be safe and where no one will look upon you with fear. We’ve got two horses and a spare tent for our travels but we have to act fast.”

The girl glanced at her pistol and said nothing. Peter held out his hand.

“Please,” he said. “I’m Peter and this is my boyfriend, Cooper.”

“You always do the talkin’ and him the moody stuff?”

“Not always,” said Cooper, butting in before Peter could answer. “I asked him out first. Sluiced out a bunch of guts from inside my canoe and put on a clean pair of undershorts and everythin’.”

Peter smiled. “Well, they were kind of clean. But yes, he did, too.”

“Told him I loved him first, too.”

“Yeah. Well, I’m working on being better at that.”

The girl narrowed her eyes and seemed to come to a decision about them. “Don’t think I’m joining you. Cos I ain’t. I’ve got some daddy issues to work through on the other side of that there ridge. But let’s get this show on the road.”

Peter didn’t much like the idea of leaving her behind. The fifteen or so notches scored into the side of Snowball’s saddle were evidence enough of just how successful their mission to offer sanctuary to as many Returnees in the region had been. But Cooper gave a reluctant nod and besides, the girl was clearly more than capable of taking care of herself.

Peter nodded and something heavy landed on the cabin roof. Footsteps scrambled and a clump of snow dropped down the chimney, smothering what was left of the dying embers.

“The chimney!” said the girl. “There’s no time to light the fire if they plan on getting in that way.”

Cooper shut the front door and Peter scanned the ceiling. But it went quiet. He could practically hear whoever was up there thinking what their next move should be. Then someone knocked on the door.

“Sweetheart?” came a woman’s voice outside. “It’s just me. Pat. I was out tracking deer this way and wondered if you might have time for a brew.”

Peter held his hand up to make sure the girl kept quiet and the knock sounded again. Someone crossed the roof in a single stride and dropped past the window. Cooper edged

further back inside the cabin, aiming the rifle towards the door. But somebody else popped a shot before he even had a chance to.

Peter ducked. A bullet whipped through the cabin breaking the window. But it didn't come from outside. The glass shattered out into the woods and Peter looked up.

"My name's Betty Bridges," said the girl blowing smoke from the barrel. "And is this all you boys got?"

Peter hoisted the wooden box with a plunger he had strapped across his shoulders off his back and placed it on to the floor. He stepped over the wire he'd trailed through the woods and got down on to his hands and knees. Cooper rammed a chair beneath the door handle to secure it and dropped to the floor next to them.

"I'm sorry if I honk, miss," he said looking out from behind the strands of his matted hair. "My boy and I have been out on the road some three weeks now."

Peter smiled to himself. He was never going to tire of hearing himself described as Cooper's boy. Never. Betty scrambled on to the floor next to them. Peter waited until all three of them were in position lying face down on the floor, then reached up for the plunger. He briefly glanced sideways. Cooper's dark eyes held his gaze. They said I love you, just as they'd done that morning beneath the warmth of the fire out on the plains. They'd been good together out here. Better than good. They'd been a team. Peter said it back without the need for words and, with a shove, pushed the plunger down.

"I guess this is where we say goodbye," said Betty. "But what in God's name is this place you boys talk of?"

The woods boomed.

The cabin shook.

Peter looked up, spitting snow and shards of sharp pine needles from his lips, and, smiling, said, "Wranglestone!"