

TWO DAYS

by Marie Anne Cope

Winner – 16+

‘Goodbye, my love, my dear Katharine. One day, I will see you again. Until that day, I will carry your love and this image of you in my heart. It will sustain me in the hard days ahead, I know it will. I have to believe it will. I have to.’

Katharine raised her hand to stroke the two day old growth on her husband’s cheek. Two days was all they’d been allowed. Two days to consummate their love. Two days to build a lifetime of memories. Two days to sustain them through the days, weeks, months, years or even an eternity apart.

She traced his strong jawline and hooked her index finger under his chin, tilting his face upwards, forcing him to look at her with those liquid brown eyes she’d fallen in love with.

She scoured his face, devouring every inch of him. Her finger traced the hook shaped scar under his left eye; a memento from a teenage duel, although it had actually been more of a scuffle. She smiled to herself as she was pulled back to that field, over a decade ago; such a long time ago now.

‘This is a matter of ownership, Kathy,’ Jared said, brandishing his home made sword in the general direction of his opponent.

‘But, Jar, this is silly. It doesn’t matter,’ she said, positioning herself between Jared and his much larger adversary, an adversary who had somehow managed to come into

the possession of a rather lethal looking bayonet, the potential damage from which was more than a little alarming to Katharine.

‘C’mon then, Kent, let’s settle this,’ his opponent said.

‘Please step out of the way, Kathy. I don’t want you to get hurt.’ Knowing her protests would be futile, Katharine dutifully gave in.

The future soldier and his foe faced each other, counted to ten had then advanced; Jared with his wooden sword and William with his bayonet.

That neither had ever fought before soon became obvious and Katharine, terrified that they might seriously injure each other, did the only thing she knew how to do.

‘What, in God’s holy name is going on here?’ John Rigby said as he stomped into the clearing, his daughter, Katharine, running to keep up. She stopped abruptly at the sight before her. Jared had William by the throat, his wooden sword pressed under the other boy’s chin, blood running down his own cheek from a gash under his left eye.

‘William tried to steal a chicken, Sir,’ Jared said, pushing his shoulders back and puffing his chest out as best he could, given his position. ‘I stopped him.’

‘William was not stealing anything, now let him go,’ John said, glaring at Jared.

‘But..,’

‘No buts, release him. Do not make me tell you again, boy.’

Jared let go and William nodded his head at John. ‘Thank you, Sir,’ he said.

‘Now, go take that chicken to your Mama, like you were supposed to and no more fighting.’

‘Yes, Sir, thank you, Sir,’ William said and nodded once again. He grabbed the peacefully grazing chicken and, carrying his bayonet in his other hand, disappeared into the woods.

‘You, get yourself home. Now!’ John said to a scarlet faced Jared.

Katharine smiled and looked back at that same scar now, all these years later. She wanted to absorb every line, every mark and every feature. The full sensuous lips that had sent her pulse racing over these last two days, the dark almost ebony hair that fell over his forehead and curled at his collar in a tousled way, the weathered skin, hued brown by the years working outdoors in the fields, his father having refused to own slaves. In their county, Elijah Kent had stood alone on this point and it had been no secret that he’d struggled financially because of his stance.

If only they’d had more time, she thought. If only the war hadn’t forced them apart, forced them into livings neither of them wanted. She dropped her hand and leaned her head against his chest. If they’d had a little more time they could have sat for a photograph and then she wouldn’t have to try and remember. She would have something real; something to hold; something to look at. She would be able to pick it up and see him, clear as he was today, instead of the faint fuzzy image her mind would no doubt retain.

It worried her, the thought of not being able to remember him, of not being able to recall his face in the detail she was now trying to commit to memory. Yet, why should it? She could, after all, remember the first day they’d met, as if it had been yesterday.

Jared pulled her to him and she inhaled the damp mustiness of his uniform; not the clean soapy smell she was used to. This wasn’t the memory she wanted to retain. Katharine closed her eyes and buried her face against his chest, unable to feel the contours of his toned torso through the thickness of his horsehair coat. He held her tightly, as though his life depended on it and maybe it did. She had to believe the feel of

her, the smell of her, the taste of her, and the image of her would sustain him, just as this moment would have to sustain her.

She heard the stomp of hooves and the impatient snort of horses, not twenty feet away.

'I have to go, my love.'

Katharine nodded and bit down on her lip to try to stop the tears from falling, but it didn't work.

Jared tilted her chin up and brushed his thumb across her cheek, wiping away a stray tear. He brought his lips down to meet hers and she felt her heart would break as he kissed her; the memories of two days of kisses re-awakening the longing deep down inside her.

A sudden cough from behind Jared broke her reverie and she opened her eyes to look up at him.

'I'm sorry, Sir, but we need to leave,' the owner of the cough said. Jared nodded, his gaze never leaving hers.

'I love you, my dear sweet Katharine. I will come back to you. I promise.'

Tears flooded her eyes and she pressed her lips together, unable to speak. She watched, a sob finally escaping her throat, as he turned away from her and finally joined his men.

Katharine felt soft gentle hands on her shoulders. She closed her eyes and turned into the embrace, finally giving in to the emotions overtaking her.

'Now, now, dearie. There are plenty more where he came from. We can't have you getting like this every time now, can we?'

No-one here would ever know what they were to each other because no-one would ever understand; not in these times. Everyone knew what the war had done to her. Everyone knew what she'd lost, or they thought they did. They knew her house had been taken by Union soldiers; they knew that she'd been raped by every single one of those soldiers, over and over, week after week, until they'd got fed up of her and had thrown her out.

Penniless and homeless, Katharine had been taken in by a local trader who'd found her collapsed in a ditch. He had tasked his wife with nursing her back to health. They'd been so kind to her and had promised to provide a roof over her head and food in her stomach, as long as she earned her keep. Katharine, so grateful for their kindness, had accepted without a second thought.

Jared didn't know, nor could he ever know. Good, sweet, kind Jared. He'd believed what she'd told him. He'd always believed what she'd told him. He could never know the real impact of what this war had done to her; the truth would kill him.

Katharine let herself be propelled back towards her shelter, pulling the shawl tightly around her naked shoulders. Why, she had no idea. She would have to relinquish it soon enough. Still, for a moment, she could pretend to be who she wanted to be – the desolate wife, devastated at sending her husband back to this God awful war – rather than who she was forced to be – a whore.

'I did warn you, dearie. You can't allow yourself to care. Now, get a smile on that pretty face and get back in there and earn your keep!'

She took a deep breath, raised her chin high, and hardened her heart as she threw off the shawl and strutted into the saloon.

'Hello boys,' she said, hands planted firmly on her shapely scantily clad hips, exposing herself for all to see. 'Who's next?'