

This session: focuses on Ashley Cole and Grace Dawson from "The Darkest Blue," Book 2 in the Shades of Blue series by Hildie McQueen

Staging: Ellis, Montana, a small town about 22 miles north-east of Alder Gulch (setting of "The Darkest Blue"), early December, 1866, between the end of "The Darkest Blue" and the epilogue.

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I took the last shot glass out of the water basin behind the bar and dried it, glancing out the frosted front window as I finished the last bit of work that would ready my saloon for another night of gaming, drinking, and pleasures of the flesh. A pristine white layer of snow blanketed the earth, its purity disturbed only on the walkways by booted feet and on the roadbed, where the passage of wagons had left an array of ugly ruts and hoof-churned mud.

Across the street, a bundled woman hobbled into the bone orchard and sat next to a headstone glistening with hoarfrost. Poor Mrs. Piney; she was the only one who ever went there. A mother and daughter hustled into the next door mercantile. A cowboy held the door open for them, tipping his hat.

A man mounted on a beautiful grey horse appeared down the road, ambling in from the west. He sat the saddle with the careless ease of a horseman to a manner born, his hips rolling easily to match the gait of the animal beneath him. I set the clean shot glass among its brothers, and started to turn away...then noticed the rider pull rein in front of my saloon. The "closed" sign was hanging in the front window, as it should. *Thank goodness.* Last night had been exceptionally busy, what with a horde of cattlemen heading through Ellis. I was dragged out and hankering for a nap before I had to start it all over again this evening.

Outside, the man threw a booted leg over the rump of his horse and slid to the ground in a fluid motion, then looped his reins over the hitching post. A second later, the door to my saloon opened and he entered, pushing through the secondary set of swinging doors. Hinges squeaked and the saloon doors *flap-flapped* together twice, then went silent. The stranger paused on the threshold, creating his own brand of silence—the dangerous, nape-prickling sort—and my heart tripped over the next two beats. *Jesus on the cross.* A gunslinger or an outlaw. And here I was without my man. Harland wasn't much smarter than the wood he hauled for me, but was big enough to clean the plow of most blackguards who had a mind for kicking up a row in my place.

This newcomer looked to be just such a sort, his jaw chiseled from a block of stone and darkened with a disreputable-looking stubble of beard. His midnight blue eyes, from where they peered out from beneath the low brim of his black Stetson, owned plenty of steel. He sent his gaze around the room, noting Old Tumbleweed slouched in the corner, full as a tick with whisky. His head was drooped forward, a steady trickle of drool forging a path down his huge bush of a beard—hence, his moniker. Then the newcomer’s eyes landed on me.

My heart beat out another staccato rhythm as he started toward the bar, his spurs clinking ominously across the wood floor. It was the only noise in the breath-holding silence. I shifted my gaze to the leather gun belt slanted at his lean hips. Holstered there was a .44-caliber muzzle-loaded cap and ball Army Model Colt.

Yes, I knew weaponry. In the more desperate days of my life, I’d been an Army camp follower, plying my wares in a manner best left forgotten, save for that those experiences had taught me a great deal about life and the world. With my ample bosom and fiery red hair, I’d been a favorite among the soldiers, thereby earning myself income enough to scrimp and save the extra to buy this here saloon. Retired now, I managed other women who were down on their luck, offering them a proper place to live, clean clothes, and good food. I sicked Harland after any man who dared to lay an unfriendly hand on them.

Stopping right in front of me, the intruder took off his gloves and set them down, then propped an elbow on the bar. He hooked a booted heel on the rail with another soft chink of his spurs.

I managed to pull up a smile. “Welcome, sir,” I said politely. “I open at sundown. If you could come back then, I’d appreciate it.”

He didn’t answer. Didn’t move. Just stared at me from the shadowed depths of his hat.

I picked up a damp cloth and wiped the bar, even though it was already spotlessly clean. I supposed he’d tell me what he wanted when he was good and ready. He didn’t. A full two minutes went by with me unnecessarily cleaning. I finally broke, sweeping a bottle of whiskey out from behind the bar and plunking it down in front of him. “You come to bend your elbow?” I asked. “I can spare one snort before I open.”

He glanced disinterestedly at the bottle.

Perplexed, I looked him up and down. The man seemed tense as all get-out. Maybe...? I braced my hands on the bar and squeezed my upper arms together, pushing my full breasts further up into the low cut of my neckline. "You hungerin' for some friendship, fella?"

His gaze flickered down momentarily, showing less interest in my bosom than he had with the bottle. Well, that was mighty disconcerting.

I exhaled loudly. "Look, mister, I'm gonna have to ask you to state your business, then be on your way. I don't want any fuss, and you look like the type who could give me a passel of it."

Finally a reaction besides that unnerving indifference. His mouth twitched up at one corner. "I'm just waiting for someone."

He turned his head to look at the door, and my gaze slipped to the place where his rugged jaw met his corded neck, chestnut brown hair curling down from underneath his hat. He was handsome, I realized, tall and well-formed, cutting a fine swell in his clothes. His broad shoulders stretched the fabric of his long coat, and the wedge of flesh visible where he'd left unbuttoned the collar of his navy shirt was tanned and muscular. I studied the masculine hand laid on the bar: broad of palm with strong fingers. Those were working man's hands. A cowboy or a cattle rancher, then, rather than the reprobate I'd originally assumed?

Another man shouldered his way past the swinging doors of my saloon, tall and blue-eyed, as well, but older than my unwelcome visitor. He removed his hat and slapped it against his thigh, heading over to the stranger. "Ashley," he said, giving the man a whack on the shoulder.

Ashley straightened. "Hey, Pa, what's this about?" He glanced around the interior. "What did you want to meet out here for?"

"Truth is, I brought Grace with me," Pa answered. "She just popped into the mercantile for a moment, but will be—"

"Grace?" Ashley interrupted, his brows lowering.

"Yes." Pa set his hat carefully on the bar. "I don't make a habit of sticking my nose in business where it doesn't belong, you know that, but you're my son, and it's my job to look out for you. So..." He trailed off, and his cheeks colored a bit.

The slant of Ashley's brows deepened.

Pa cleared his throat. "I want you and Grace to talk with someone a bit."

Ashley's eyes narrowed. "Talk? About what?"

Pa eyed the whiskey bottle, as if contemplating his own snort before forging into this conversation. "You're about to become a married man, son. Before heading down that path, I think it best if you cleared some debris from your life." Pa's eyes darkened, staining closer to his son's midnight. "The harrowing events from your time in the Cavalry dogged you for three years, Ash, all the while you blaming yourself for Private Smith's death. A man doesn't get past something like that from one day to the next. I know Grace wants—"

"I'm fine," Ashley cut in sharply. "I'm not having nightmares anymore, and if I did, I'd talk to Grace about it. Or you and Ma."

"Yes, well..." Pa shoved a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his brow. "That's another thing. I know you and Ma have a special connection, but ... sometimes a thing like that can actually get in the way of a man and his wife, if he's not mindful."

"That," Ashley responded in succinct syllables, "is probably the most absurd thing you've ever uttered."

"Maybe." Pa sighed. "Probably. But it wouldn't hurt you to get some general clarity in your life all the same. Trust me, son, you're going to need all the help you can get before entering into a marriage. Females are a strange breed. Beggin' your pardon, miss," he tossed at me.

As if conjured by talk of females, a woman entered the saloon, a small loaf of bread clutched in her hands. She stood just inside the swinging doors looking uncomfortable, and rightly so. She wasn't any class of woman who belonged in a saloon, save for the part that she was beautiful, and all of my girls were. She was dressed genteel-like in a blue gingham frock, white gloves, a fur-lined cloak, and a frilled bonnet framed her heart-shaped face. Her appearance was a picture of arresting contrasts, her fair flesh creating a striking palette for black hair that trailed down her back in a single long braid, and dark, exotic eyes.

Pa leaned toward his son, his voice lowering. "You may be able to say no to me, Ashley, but Grace has agreed to this. I'd like to see you try and deny her."

Ashley cursed under his breath.

"No one has to know about this," Pa continued. "It's why I found a stranger"—he gestured at me—"in another town for—"

"What? *Her*?" Ashley whipped his head around and now he *did* stare at my breasts, as if the pair made the idea of talking to me about his impending nuptials all the worse.

A muscle jumped in Ashley's jaw. "She's a...a..."

I waited, very aware of the flamboyant shade of my red dress and the yards of gaudy lace bordering every hem as I wondered what colorful euphemism Ashley would devise to describe a woman of my profession.

"A saloon mistress," Ashley concluded.

*Relatively tame.* I supposed I had to give him some credit for that.

The door burst open and Eldon and Little Gun stampeded inside, tramping snow across the wood floor.

"Ma!" Eldon, the elder boy, at six years, shouted. "Li'l Gun and I made a snowman big as ourselves. Come see!"

I hurried around the bar. "What did I tell you boys about barging in the front door," I scolded. Coming up to the two, I rewrapped Little Gun's scarf around his neck. His skin, usually a pretty chocolate color, just like his brother, Eldon's, was turning red from exposure. "A saloon is no place for young'uns." I leaned down and kissed each one on the red nose. "I'll be out directly to see your snowman. Meantime, you go over to Bonnie's Boardinghouse and get something hot down you."

"Okay!" The boys scampered out.

I passed a quick glance over Ashley and Grace, both of their expressions open with surprise, although Ashley's was more subtle, then returned to my place behind the bar.

Pa picked up his hat, saying to his son, "Miss Malloy might be a lot of other things, but she's also a mother and a woman with a reputation for giving good counsel." Pa looked at me as he went on, "Grace over there can be a little slow to warm to strangers, and Ashley, well... you've already seen how he can be." Pa offered me an encouraging smile. "Have patience with them

and soldier on." He jammed his hat on his head and strode out, leaving the rest of us in an awkward silence.

Experienced now with how long Ashley could let a quiet spell extend, I didn't wait it out this time. I grabbed a shot glass and set it on the bar. "I'm guessin' you're gonna need some of this for what lies ahead." His impending marriage or this talk his father had pushed on him, I didn't specify. Figured it could be either. I uncorked the whiskey bottle and splashed the amber liquor into the glass. *On second thought...* I grabbed another shot and filled it. I was probably going to need some liquid courage for this, as well.

Grace stepped forward. "I'll have one, too."

Leaning both elbows on the bar, Ashley pushed his face into his hands.

I looked at Grace.

She held my gaze with an unflinching stare, a firm set to what I now saw was a stubborn little chin.

A bold one, this miss. Yet I'd wager a heap of money that strong spirits had never passed her pretty lips.

"Come this way." I rolled my shoulder at them, indicating they should follow me. "You can set your bread there on the bar," I added as I grabbed the whiskey bottle and headed into the back rooms that served as living space for me, Eldon, and Little Gun.

Ashley glanced around as he entered, another bout of surprise chasing across his expression. He'd probably expected a lurid boudoir, rather than a homey living room. I gestured toward the three chairs positioned around the black potbellied stove.

Grace removed her bonnet as she sat.

Ashley acted the proper gentleman and threw another log on before settling in, while I gathered three glasses at the small sideboard and filled them all.

"Here." I held one out to Grace. "It's sherry from my personal stock. Think you'll prefer this ." I smiled. "It's fine as cream gravy."

She accepted it, returning my smile with a small one of her own.

I handed Ashley a whisky, then sat in the vacant chair with my own shot glass. "So what did you all want to discuss?" I asked straightaway. Pa had cautioned me to patience, but allowing this Ashley fellow to hunker into one of his silences would get us all nowhere slow. And I had a snowman to get to admiring.

Ashley held his shot glass on his knee. "President Johnson has botched the country since Lincoln's assassination, wouldn't you agree?"

I fought back an amused grin, instead tilting my head in a manifestation of curiosity. "Do you mean his plan of Restoration or—?"

"No, thank you." Grace took a dainty sip of her sherry. "That's not what we're here to talk about."

Ashley paused, his lips pressing together as he ran his gaze over me, not in a sexual way, but rather in open speculation about just what sort of creature I was.

One that had a brain in her head, clearly.

I turned to Grace, watching her calmly sip her sherry. Her posture was erect without being overly stiff. *She* was the curiosity, this woman, clearly a proper lady, but with a streak of lightning in her unusual for a female of her standing. It set me to wondering how she felt, strong as she was, about her intended having such a *special connection* with his mother. "How do you and Ashley's ma get on?" I asked.

The out-of-nowhere question startled Grace, but she answered without hesitation. "Why, just fine. She's a good woman, very devoted to her husband and boys." A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "If I were to give her one shortcoming, it might be that she spoils Ashley overly much."

"Your pa spoils you," Ashley countered, "and you don't seem any worse for wear."

"That's true." Grace chuckled. "And, honestly, it's difficult to fault Ashley's ma for her ways. She's just protecting him, and, after all, I feel the same, not wanting folks to glare at Ashley or talk bad about him."

That statement put a frown on my face. I could see folks perhaps looking askance at this man's intense demeanor, but couldn't figure a reason anyone would feel the compunction to glare. "Why would a person do that?"

Grace set her sherry aside, her chest moving on a large breath. "Ashley was accused of murdering a fellow Cavalryman. He *didn't*, of course, but, unfortunately, his good name was besmirched before he was able to set the matter to rights."

"I'm sorry to hear that." I looked at Ashley. "Was that the Private Smith fellow your pa mentioned?"

Ashley stiffened. "It's over now," he said, his tone curt and as subject-ending as his closed expression.

"Very well." If the man said so, I was inclined to take his word on it. *I'm not having nightmares anymore...* So, if not that, then what? Something had itched at Pa enough to make him bring his son in to talk to a woman of the world. Had we genuinely gathered here to review connubial matters before these two jumped over the broom? Hard to imagine that a man who was close to his ma needed such a course.

I turned my attention to Grace. Maybe there was something of note to be found here. "So tell me about you and your pa?"

"Oh." She brightened. "We're very close, although I would advise you not to take that 'spoiled' comment too deeply to heart. My pa just indulges me a bit because he wants to make certain I never doubt his love. I'm not of his blood, you see."

I lifted a brow. "No?"

Grace shook her head. "My pa found me near a wagon train that'd been attacked by Indians." She nodded toward Ashley. "Secretly, I've always assumed his ma favored him for the same reason, Ashley not being of her blood, either."

Now I arched both brows. "Not another wagon train?"

Grace's eyes leapt with amusement. "No." Then she sobered. "His original ma just up and left when he was a baby."

Ashley had found a sudden fascination with his boots.

I sat up straighter. "That's quite a commonality between you two, both of you bein' adopted." That was actually...an incredible commonality.

"I never really thought about it before." Grace's mouth turned down in consideration. "Is that something of concern?"

"I prefer to say there might be *challenges* for you two. It's not unusual for a person who's been abandoned by a parent to be slow to trust again. Both of you were left out in a field, so to speak, and are now comin' into a relationship where trust is essential for—"

"I wasn't abandoned." A crease pulled at the middle of Grace's brows. "My parents were slain."

I quieted my voice. "It's still a loss, Grace, one that I'd wager you feel, somewhere in you, however slight, no matter how dotin' your pa is." I glanced down at an unfastened button on one of my cuffs, and drew a breath. I knew why Ashley's pa had chosen me now. "Maybe this story will help you see. A pretty squaw used to work here at my saloon some years back. She was popular, the men bein' taken by her foreignness. They kept her powerful busy, which made it an especial challenge to avoid certain...outcomes." I turned my whisky glass slowly in my hand. "Six years back she gave birth to Eldon, then two years later, Little Gun, whose entry into this world took her life." I tossed back my whiskey without a flinch or a flush.

Ashley narrowed his eyes on me.

"They're half-breeds, though, belongin' neither here nor there. So no one would assume responsibility for them." I set aside my glass, feeling a smile of remembrance touch my lips. "I adopted them."

Grace was focused intently on me; Ashley now on his whiskey glass.

"I offer those boys all the love in my heart, of which there's plenty to give, I promise, same as your folks give to you two. But their ma's death has left a mark on those two, regardless. I see it sometimes in the way they deal with me, throwin' fits when I go off to the mercantile, fearin' that I won't come back. In your own marriage, because of your past, you might sometimes find yourselves—"

Ashley blasted a disgusted breath from his nostrils. "If you're suggesting that I'd throw a fit if Grace goes out to shop, then you'd be sorely mistaken."

"But she's right, Ashley," Grace protested. "I always have been slow to trust folks." She swallowed. "I don't want any hidden...reticence on my part to get it the way of our happiness."

Ashley looked toward the ceiling. "You and I are fine, Grace. Don't let this woman plant worries in your head."

"You remind me a bit of Eldon," I told Ashley, "such a barrellful of intensity and frustrations. With Eldon, this comes from him carryin' doubts within himself. I see the question hoverin' in his mind, 'maybe my ma left me because I wasn't good enough.' I know that doesn't make complete sense, because his ma died, but the worry is still with him."

The skin across Ashley's cheekbones tightened. Clearly, he wasn't enamored with the topic matter.

"Your Pa said that you blame yourself for Private Smith's death." I tilted my head to one side. "Is that because you didn't feel quite good enough to save him?"

Ashley's chin jerked back.

"And the fact that your ma and Grace are overprotective of you...is there a nigglin' part of your mind that wonders if they do that because they think you *need* it?" I was pushing him. But a wound left to fester would never heal. It needed to be lanced.

"Ashley doesn't need protecting," Grace jumped to his defense. "His ma and I are just fussing over him. And as for Private Smith, Ashley himself was injured at the time of that tragedy."

I nodded. "Of course, he doesn't need protectin'—look at him—and I'm sure he would've been plenty capable of helpin' the Private in less taxin' circumstances. I'm not sayin' that he should feel that way, just that it wouldn't surprise me if, on occasion, he did, considerin' what I've seen in my own adopted boys. I'm not tryin' to fill your head with worries, either," I added. "I'm just recommendin' a mindfulness of the past in case it might influence you. And a course of action to take if it does."

"A course of action?" Grace repeated.

I smiled. "That can be as easy as just makin' sure you talk it out if you start to feel an unusual nervousness about something or an irrationality of any

sort. Seems simple, but you'd be amazed at how many husbands and wives never talk."

Some of the tension eased from Grace's shoulders. "Well, talking forthrightly is one thing that has never been an issue for me." She looked at her fiancé. "What do you think, Ashley? If you start feeling—"

"I think," Ashley interrupted in a taut tone, "that this conversation is about as savory as road apples and just as useful." He leveled a look at me. "Men don't take a course of action that includes talking, Miss Malloy. It just isn't done." He turned to address Grace. "I have no trepidation whatsoever about entering a marriage with you, Grace. No *doubts*. I'll shout that into my father's face, into Miss Malloy's, and from the rooftop of every barn in the county, if need be. My *plan* is not to create a problem where none lies. I think that should suit us just fine."

The door to my sitting room burst open, and Pa hurried inside. "Sorry to intrude, folks, but I just got word that Nora has gone into labor. We need to head back to Alder Gulch."

Ashley slugged back his whiskey and came to his feet. "We're done here, at any rate." He held out a hand to Grace.

Pa ducked out, and I rose, too.

Grace slipped her hand into Ashley's, her eyes on me as she let him help her out of her chair. "Well, I, for one, will enter our marriage with a keener awareness of myself and my husband-to-be." Grace tied her bonnet back on her head, glancing at her fiancé. "I gain comfort from that, Ashley, even if you're too stubborn to recognize the importance of what Miss Malloy said and let it settle some of your own demons."

Grace exited.

Ashley followed, but as he came to the doorway, he paused in the jamb. A long moment stretched, then he looked at me.

I caught my breath. Lord, and I thought he'd been handsome before. There was a depth of emotion in his eyes now that took him out of the territory of sinister outlaw and transformed him directly into the cowboy next door who every girl had secretly loved.

"Ma'am." Ashley touched two fingers to the brim of his Stetson, then left.

I paused for a moment, my belly turning over. He'd just shown me a sign of respect. Exhaling slowly, I collected the whisky glasses and brought them back over to the sideboard. I set them down, my fingertips lingering on the lip of one of the glasses. From a man like that, I couldn't ask for any other expression to let me know that I'd moved him. A smile worked at my mouth.

"Grace," I murmured. "You're one lucky lady."

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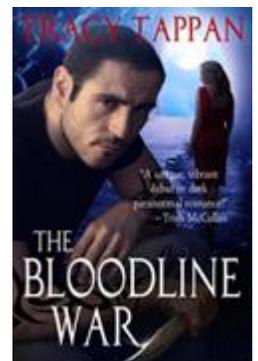
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