

Hearts Bleed Longest

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by Doris Hume

THE STORY: Brock Kittridge, has been the center of the town for 10 days on his last leave and then married, nervously awaiting his return.

"When I marry," Thayer had said once to Amy, "I'm going to be sure—and it's going to be for keeps."

But now there was Brock. "You're what I want, Thayer. Ten days, 10 years—what's the difference? When you know, you know; nothing changes that." Not laughing now; deeply in earnest.

"The difference is, Brock, do we know?" Everything within her pulling her toward him, even while the deep steadiness that was part of her counseled caution.

"You love me, don't you, Thayer?"

"I love you, Brock." Never more than now with his eyes serious and grave upon her. "It isn't that."

"Then what is it? I don't get it, Thayer. Things can't be half—not with us. You're my girl—it's as simple as that."

Hard to meet his eyes and go on saying the reasonable thing. "Brock, you want me now . . ."

"You bet I want you." Standing there not touching her, yet by refraining holding her to him with something stronger than physical contact, a new maturity in his forbearance that moved her as nothing else could have, sent her heart into a side-slip.

They had driven out to Drumhead Hill, a rounded wooded knoll on the outskirts. They had got out of the car, above them the clear blue April sky. A man and a girl, the weight of their future pressing in upon them.

"Brock . . ."

"Thayer, I want to marry you; now—today. I want to think of you with my name, I want to know that you belong to me. I know there's the chance of my not coming back, but never the chance of my coming back with any different feeling for you." His eyes were searching hers; his hands came out in an odd little defenseless gesture. "Darling—it's for always, can't you see?"

She went into his arms then. He did not kiss her at first, he did not speak. He stood there holding her, his cheek pressed against her own as if nothing mattered but her nearness. Then slowly he moved his cheek until her mouth lay beneath his own. It was a long kiss and it held a tenderness that made tears burn behind her lids. Then, suddenly, her arms went about his neck, her palms were against the back of his head, pressing him closer. He kissed her again; she heard him whisper her name in a sort of exultation.

He was for carrying her off, then and there. She shook her head. "We must let your mother know, Brock. I wouldn't feel right if we didn't."

"Darling, mothers always oppose sudden change just as a matter of principle." Then, caught by her gaze, he said a little huskily, "Oh, I know you're right, Thayer." He drew her closer. "Always be right—for me." He kissed her. "My girl, my own girl—how'd I ever do it?"

April, 1942. Gas unrationed, and within two hours the road to Las Vegas unrolling swiftly beneath their impatient wheels.

THE little bedroom clock said 2:30. Her living with Brock's mother was his idea. They returned from their short honeymoon to lunch



"Well," Aunt Hildreth had said, "so you're Thayer. . . . You're very poor at description, Corinne." She added to her sister-in-law. They don't like each other, Thayer thought, watching them.

with Mrs. Kittridge, Judson Kittridge—Brock's uncle, and his wife Hildreth. Thayer had not met Hildreth before. The very antithesis of Brock's mother, she was tall and thin, possessed of penetrating hazel eyes in a strongly featured plain face.

"Well," she had said, "so you're Thayer." Her handclasp was firm, her gaze dazzling. "And you're very poor at description, Corinne," she added, to her sister-in-law.

"Why," fluttered Mrs. Kittridge charmingly. "I told you, Hildreth, that Thayer was pretty, that she had brown eyes . . ."

"You told me none of the things I'm finding out for myself," retorted Hildreth crisply. "What do I care for prettiness and brown eyes?" A quick warm smile illumined her face and she took Thayer's arm. "My dear, we've no intention of dissecting you. When I'm pleased I forget my manners."

It was an odd meal. Fascinated, Thayer watched the play between Aunt Hildreth and Mrs. Kittridge. They don't like each other, she thought, and then involuntarily, I like Aunt Hildreth. She watched the sharp clever face, so in contrast to Mrs. Kittridge's gentle beauty, and then she was aware of something: Mrs. Kittridge's smile kindled to warmth only when it dwelt upon her son; her eyes caught no spark from him when they rested on anyone else. Only the tension of the moment enabled Thayer to have this discernment.

Afterward Brock and Thayer had driven out to Drumhead Hill, for tomorrow Brock would be leaving. Thayer had presented her views. "The war isn't going to last forever, Brock, and I'd rather be—on my own until you come back. I've told Miss Mary to hold my room."

"Hey," Brock said, pulling her over close to him. "I'm giving the orders. We Kittridges boss our women—all except Aunt Hildreth." He laughed, then sobered.

"Why, Thayer, Mom's expecting you to stay. Didn't you see all the new chintz and stuff in the bedroom? She really went to town on it."

"Is it your room done over, Brock?"

"No, mine's next to Mom's; it could hardly hold me for all the junk I had in it."

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