

# The Cellmate

by  
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The rays of the sun glistened through the mist as it rose between the mountains, covering the landscape with a wet cloak. Squinting his eyes against the shimmering light, Andy Sturgil stood in awe of the morning's beauty. The dew made everything on the ground sparkle, and reaffirmed his belief that this was truly God's country. You could keep Chicago, New York; all of those big cities. Whitesburg would do just fine.

Whitesburg Kentucky was not a bustling metropolis in 1925, but to the people, like Andy, who lived in the region, it was the center of trade, law and information. The mountain people made infrequent trips down the slopes and out of the hollows to supplement their meager lives with the essentials; coffee, sugar, flour, and sweet wheat middling. Wheat middling was the chosen grain for feeding milk cows. Middling without salt was the main ingredient for White Lightning. If a man could make good liquor, and Andy did, he would also make an excellent profit. One jug of the precious brew had sold for forty dollars at the end of the war. A man just might get fifty these days.

On this particular Indian summer day, Andy journeyed toward the town and made a mental note of what he would trade for. He was in need of an ample supply of sugar and sweet wheat middling. The still was ready for use after the new copper tubing was put on, and he was eager to churn out the best supply of White Lightning in years. Andy knew that he had to find a new location for his still because Sheriff Turner was on a rampage. The law had already destroyed four of his neighbors' secret enterprises, and Andy knew that he had to be shrewd in choosing his new spot. He had finally decided on settling the still on a dry ridge, away from any of the mountain streams, and pipe the water to where it was needed. This would take more time, but the sheriff and his men knew to look for stills along the waterways. With the arrival of winter, the snow and ice would help to cover the pipeline.

A few meager jars of last year's supply were nestled in a knapsack slung across his shoulders. Old Man Tribbit had told Andy to bring him a few jars before winter set in. He would pay the going price. It would help in fighting the sickness that always came in the cold weather months.

Even Doc Handy was known to prescribe toddies made with Andy's brew for the croup. So great was his reputation that Sheriff Turner made it his primary goal to lock the brewer king up every chance that he could.

Andy's thoughts touched on Turner as he made his way down the serpentine path. The bottom of his trousers swayed heavily with his strides as they collected the dew from the dense grass and brush. Andy knew that the region's stills were a source of irritation for the sheriff. In Turner's eye, the mountain people had been living by their own code for too long. As the appointed law officer in the region, he was determined to make them respect his authority.

However, in recent weeks the war that was being waged on moonshiners, had taken a backseat to a special case, which had monopolized the bulk of Sheriff Turner's time. Lloyd Frazier had been found guilty of murdering a woman. Most people knew the kind of person Lloyd had been, quiet and kind of shy. Nobody really understood how he had been capable of such a crime. They did, however, know that Lloyd's mother had been jealous of the victim; they had been seeing the same man.

Annie Frazier had given Lloyd a saddle horse in return for the promise of getting rid of her rival.

It had been difficult to find an executioner to carry out the sentence. Men had resigned rather than be responsible for taking the life of the young man.

News of a hanging had spread quickly throughout the region. Whitesburg had never had a public execution and the subject was on everyone's lips. Andy was vaguely aware of the facts. He knew little of the family, although he had known Annie. They had attended the same small one-room schoolhouse as children. He had glimpsed the boy now and then through the years in town with Annie's father. The old man had loved the boy as his own, and unlike the rest of the family, overlooked Lloyd's illegitimacy. He had also fostered the boy's love of horses, and had promised to get Lloyd the finest mount possible. The promise had turned into a dream following the old man's death. Dejected, the boy looked to his mother for any kind of affection as he continued to withdraw from the rest of the world.

Andy's mind closed on the subject as he approached Old Man Tribbit's door. He had been looking forward to some hot coffee and happy conversation when he arrived, but the sight of the old man's face let him know that this would not happen.

Tribbit had known the boy since childhood and knew of his devotion to his mother. He was also aware of his love of horses.

As the old man led Andy inside he asked, "Well, did you know that young Lloyd dies tomorrow?"

With a shake of his head, the old man continued, "He always did do what that no-account bitch of a woman wanted. She knew how to get to him too. She knew he wanted that chestnut mare something fierce. Lied to him, she did. Told him that the woman had threatened her. Said how afraid she was. Lord knows that boy wouldn't have hurt anyone on his own."

After settling business, Andy said good-bye to the old man, and as he closed the door behind him, he thought of Annie Frazier. She had never been a virtuous woman. It was no surprise to anyone when she turned up pregnant with Lloyd at sixteen. Still, she had been responsible for the boy and cared for him. Annie had never married, and was still a fine looking woman at the age of thirty-six. Andy knew that she had been seeing a railroad man, but didn't think much of it. Annie always had a man.

Andy's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a sharp sounding voice. "Stop right where you are Andy." He turned to see the sheriff and two of his deputies standing close behind him.

"I'm taking you in for questioning. We've uncovered a stash of bootleg liquor and I think you know something about it."

Andy grinned at the men, knowing that Turner had no such evidence, but decided that it was best to cooperate in order to cover his tracks.

"Whatever you say John."

As Andy was escorted into the jail, another deputy motioned for Turner, and the two whispered softly, looking once in his direction.

"Andy," Turner said, "We only have one more cot left and the cell is occupied by the Frazier boy. You don't have to stay there, I mean, we could make other arrangements."

The thought of spending the night handcuffed to Turner's desk didn't appeal to him. John Turner had an irritating habit of rolling a toothpick back and forth in his mouth, and the vision of being forced to witness the smacking sounds in between lectures on law enforcement hastened his answer.

"I don't mind bunking with Frazier."

As the key turned the lock, a slight movement caught Andy's attention and he found himself staring into a pair of dark eyes. Surprisingly, nothing was said and Andy nodded his head as he sat on the cot. The boy looked at him for a moment and then turned away. Feeling uneasy, Andy lowered himself down on the cot and attempted to find sleep.

The sound of a horse whinnying broke the silence of the cell. Lloyd rose from the cot and moved to the window, staring at the sight below. His chestnut mare was enclosed in a small area behind the town's blacksmith barn. Beyond, were the gallows, but Lloyd's eyes were fixed on the mare.

"She needs to be brushed and one shoe is loose."

Andy opened his eyes at the soft whisper. "I'm sure they'll take care of her."

Lloyd continued as if he had not heard the remark. "She also likes a little taste of sugar now and then."

The boy continued to stand by the window, and Andy finally drifted off to sleep.

The night grew chilly and the single blanket on the cots did a poor job in keeping out the cold. After a while, a slight stirring from the other side of the cell awakened Andy. As he felt Lloyd's presence hovering over him, fear crept into his brain and he found that he could not move. Lloyd placed his own blanket over Andy and carefully spread it evenly over his shivering body. Ashamed and embarrassed by his fears, Andy pretended to be asleep while his cellmate stood by the window and watched below.

Lloyd was removed from the cell early in the morning. Andy had awakened to find that he was alone, and went to the window. The crowd seemed to fill the entire town and the sound of hymns rose into the air. He saw the boy climb the steps but could not bring himself to watch the execution. Down below, the mare paced the small enclosure and snorted nervously.

At midday, Andy was set free. He knew he would be. Sheriff Turner warned Andy to watch his back because he would always be there. As he approached the door he turned and asked, "What about the mare?"

"What about her?" Turner was busy shuffling papers and didn't bother to look up.

"I mean, who'll take care of her now? You think Annie will...."

"Look, I don't have time to worry about a damn horse - least of all that horse. Tanner will probably sell her for as much as he can get to make up for her room and board, even if it means the glue factory. Nobody in Frazier's family came to claim his body, let alone his property. It's up to the blacksmith."

At the end of the day, the sun slanted at the edge of the sky, casting shadows of everything it touched. On the road, which led out of town and forked into the numerous hollows and farms, Andy Sturgil made his way back to his home. He had purchased supplies; coffee, flour, sugar, and a few sacks of sweet wheat middling, without salt. He dug into the side pocket of his coat and filled his palm with sugar. There would not be enough for a huge supply of moonshine that winter. He stopped and held his open hand beneath the mare's lips.

Yes, she was a beautiful horse. He would fix the loose shoe, brush her, and give her a taste of sugar now and then.

As the two figures made their way down the road, the sun set slowly behind the mountains. The night air grew chilly, but Andy wasn't cold.

"I'll take care of her, Boy," he whispered softly.