



Dear Reader,

This fifth adventure of Eddie LaCrosse was certainly a lot of fun to write, and I hope that comes through in the reading. You get to see a little of Eddie as a young mercenary again, something I haven't done since *The Sword-Edged Blonde*. And his girlfriend Liz comes back as a main character, which she hasn't been since *Burn Me Deadly*. There's also a lot of influences from a well-known writer from a little town on the Avon River.

I hope you enjoy this sneak peek. Please feel free to share it with your friends! If you have any questions or comments, stop by my website and drop me a line. I love hearing from readers!

Cheers!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex Bledsoe". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Alex Bledsoe

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PART ONE: ISIDORE

CHAPTER ONE

The battles had been hard, the gold had been scarce, and the company--other mercenaries like me, most of them older, all of them unsophisticated as bricks--had gotten on my nerves. So I deserted. Or, as we called it in the trade, "chose to pursue other opportunities." That was the whole point of hiring out your sword arm instead of actually joining an army, wasn't it?

I was a young man that summer: long-haired, beardless, and still hiding behind a mercenary's blade from the truth about myself and my past. There wasn't a tavern wench I hadn't known, a farm girl I hadn't tried to know, or a noble lady I hadn't considered getting to know. I drank often, ate whatever came my way and took what I needed when no one was looking. I was Eddie LaCrosse, no longer Edward, the heir to the LaCrosse barony in Arentia, and I went where the wars were. Unless, of course, the war turned out to be boring.

And that's how I ended up in an Alturan forest just below the mountain foothills, minding my own business and pissing on a tree, when a man entered the clearing screaming and running for his life. A moment later he exited, pursued by a bear.

I fastened my pants and took off after him on foot, knowing my horse was useless in the undergrowth. Over the past sixteen years, I've often wondered why I did that. I was all business in those days, and business meant gold. I wanted to sign up with the Alturan army, then about to go to war with its neighbor Mahnoma and its paranoid king, Gerald. But instead of sticking to my plan, I ran to help a stranger without even a second thought. I suppose I believed there might be a reward for rescuing him. Yeah, that must've been it.

The man's screams and the bear's roars made them easy to find, but by the time I reached the top of a ridge and looked down into the little gully, it was too late: the bear had him. He lay beneath the beast, curled into a ball face down on the ground, screaming as the great claws sliced into his unprotected back. The animal bellowed and snapped, trying to get a clean bite on the man's head.

No thought went into my next decision, either. I drew my sword, held it like a dagger and jumped down onto the bear's back. I put all my weight and momentum behind the weapon, which struck the animal's shoulder blade, slid off the bone and buried itself to the hilt in the furry body.

The bear was a monster, easily 600 pounds and, when it reared up in response to my stab, twice as tall as me. It smelled of musk, mud, and bear shit, and its hair was slick and oily. I clamped my heels against its sides and clung onto the sword hilt with all the strength my terror suddenly gave me. The great claws swiped the air overhead, splattering me with blood and bits of the man's flesh.

"Run!" I yelled to the man on the ground, but he remained curled up, protecting his belly at the expense of his flayed-open back.

The bear stumbled backwards, still upright, and slammed me into the nearest tree. Six hundred pounds in motion can do some serious slamming, and my lungs emptied under the pressure. Little flashes sparkled at the edge of my

vision. My legs slipped free and flailed in the air. I knew if I lost my grip on my sword I was done for, so I held on despite everything, twisting the hilt and wrenching the blade as much as possible in search of some vital organ.

“Run, will you?” I yelled again.

Finally I hit something essential, because with a combination roar and wheeze the bear fell forward and hit the ground. The impact tossed me over its shoulders into the leaves beside its victim. I lay there and waited for my lungs to refill. The bear did not move, which was good, because I was out of juice.

At last I could breathe, and got to my knees. “Dude, you need to--”

The man I’d failed to save was still alive, his eyes wide and staring, but the bubble of blood between his lips told me he wasn’t good for long. I said, “Don’t move. You’re really hurt.”

He rolled himself over onto his ragged back. I winced at how much of his insides fell out through wide gaps as he did so. I wasn’t squeamish--I’d gutted my share of people--but there was something grotesque about it, and it made my stomach knot.

Faster than I would’ve thought possible in his condition, he grabbed my tunic and slapped the edge of a dagger against my neck. “Take...her....” he said.

I looked down at the bundle now resting on his chest: the bundle that he’d given his liver and big loops of his intestines to protect. A bundle that was moving.

A tiny pink fist emerged.

A baby.

From inside the bundle came an annoyed, wailing cry.

The man’s eyes met mine as he finished. “...somewhere safe!”

I knew I should at least pick up the child from his bloody chest, but I hesitated. Man-killing bears were one thing, but a baby was something far outside my experience. I had no brothers or sisters, and my friends back in Arentia were all about my own age. If they had infant siblings, we never had to deal with them. “Uhm, look, pal--” I started.

“Take her,” he said, half-spoken and half-gurgled. He dropped the knife and tried to hand her to me, but he lacked the strength.

“Let’s just get you patched up, okay?” I said quickly, knowing it was futile.

He shook his head. Now he was bleeding from his nostrils. Overhead, an opportunistic crow announced the man’s imminent death to its murder-mates. “Please, save her, she’s--” He sucked in a deep breath and his whole body went rigid from the waves of pain hitting all at once.

There was no escaping it, so I took the bundle with all the grace of a man fondling his worst enemy’s testicles. I pulled back one corner of the blood-spattered blanket, revealing tiny pink feet. Then I reversed the bundle, opened that end and saw the baby’s small, rubbery features.

The man slapped another bundle into my hand. This one was smaller, with the distinctive metallic sound of coins. Then he gestured me close.

“Her name...is Isidore. Please save her.”

“I will,” I said; what else could I say?

“Take this,” he said, and fumbled in the bloody folds of his clothes. “It proves...who she....”

He produced a small glass ball that glowed icy blue from inside. I’d never seen anything like it or, at that point in my life, anything I would accept as real, genuine magic. Because I was so startled, I didn’t reach for it, and then the man’s whole body spasmed with pain. The ball fell from his hand to the forest floor, where it burst like a soap bubble and turned into a fine, grayish powder that disappeared into the ground.

“Fuck!” the man hissed between his teeth, blood spraying forth.

“Don’t worry,” I said quickly. “Your daughter will be safe.”

“Not my...not mine...she belongs to....” Then he died.

I sat there beside him for a long time holding the tiny girl, who seemed quite content for the moment. She had wispy blond hair, big blue eyes and fat cheeks. When I tickled her under her chin she laughed, but I knew she’d need something to eat soon, and I was no wet nurse. How had her guardian managed? I checked and found a small ale-skin bag on his belt, and when I sniffed it had the distinctive odor of milk.

I hated to leave him to the mercy of the forest scavengers, but I was sure he’d understand. The living took prec-

edence over the dead, and the flies were already thick in the air. “There’s a good girl, Isidore. Let’s go get my horse, and then find you a home.”

She cooed. And damn it, I fell in love a little.

She suckled eagerly at the ale-skin, which had a makeshift nipple affixed to the cap. Her little hands pushed on the sides, which told me she was used to being fed this way. There wasn’t much left, though, and I didn’t know how long I had before it went sour. I climbed onto my horse--not easy to do holding a baby--and headed for the road I’d crossed earlier. A road, after all, must lead to a town, and there I could dispose of my unwanted bundle of joy, even if I just left her on the doorstep of a moon priestess chapter house.

Her little face scrunched up in annoyance at the uneven ride, and my horse tossed his head angrily when I kept him from going very fast. “So, Isidore,” I said to her as we moved along, “I take it you’re from this area. What does a young lady do for fun around here?”

She looked at me seriously and farted.

I laughed. “Sometimes I do that, too, just to see what will happen.”

She giggled and kicked her feet as if she understood.

The road was narrow, with barely room for a wagon to pass without scraping the tree trunks on either side. It told me there wasn’t much regular traffic, probably only one-way travelers going and coming based on the farming cycles.

Finally we emerged into the clear area of the mountain foothills, and the road began a meandering climb. Here we were out in the open, and the fighter in me cringed at the vulnerability. Ahead I saw a small village nestled between two hills, and on the slopes shepherds drove herds toward the town. Like most people who spent time around horses, I had an instinctive aversion to mutton on the hoof. But, since I had an absolute hatred for horses, I actually ended up not minding the sheep. So to speak.

“You belong to any of these people?” I asked Isidore. She refused to reply, being far more interested in chewing one blood-free corner of her blanket.

I heard music as I got closer to the village. Multiple pipers trilled in a cacophony of tunes, and Isidore began to cry at the noise. I awkwardly put her on my shoulder, stuck my reins in my teeth and patted her on the back the way I’d seen nurses do when I was a child in Arentia. A moment too late I also remembered what I’d often seen as the result, as she threw up milk down my back.

I sighed. “You’re not the first girl to puke on me, Isidore. But let’s not make it a habit, okay?” I wiped her chin with my sleeve.

A circular stone wall surrounded the town. Eight feet high, it was a remnant from the days when the village needed protection from rampaging hoards very much like the one I’d just deserted. I say “remnant,” because in places it had crumbled with age and never been repaired, meaning that large-scale violence was no longer an immediate danger. The wall sported four gates, one at each cardinal point, that could be closed, I assumed, but looked like they never were: the wood was old, rotted and overgrown with the same vines that laced the stonework.

The town announced its name on a faded sign by the southern gate: Mummerset. The second “m” was arrowed in from above after the “u.” If this was the central town for a bunch of shepherds, I knew it would consist of mostly the various services needed by the mutton industry. People wouldn’t live here, they’d have small farms out in the hills. I’d find a farrier, maybe a couple of weavers, a trading post for sundries, and most importantly of all, a tavern. If I was lucky, there’d also be a moon priestess chapter house, where those mysterious women who’ve taken a vow to answer need would take Isidore off my hands.

When I passed through the gate, I saw a considerable crowd ahead of me, jammed into the town’s central courtyard.

Of course, I thought. It was close to the spring equinox, and therefore time for their festival. This was a standard celebration to mark the return of warm weather, the birth of babies, both human and animal, conceived during the long winter months, and to encourage the fertility of the land over the coming growing season with pageants, games, sacrifices and other activities.

I smiled. “Other activities” to encourage fertility could mean a lot of fun for someone like me. If I could ditch

my current miniscule girlfriend, of course.

I stopped at the first hitching post I found, outside a small building that displayed elaborate wool tapestries. Dismounting while holding a baby was more difficult than I expected, and I nearly dropped her. She began to cry, and an old lady in the shop shook her head at my ineptitude.

“She’s not mine,” I said defensively.

“That’s what men always say,” she snapped.

Isidore was still fussing as I walked toward the town center. The crowd had gathered for a mass shearing competition, and the snip of cutters as they removed the wool was loud enough to compete with the pipers.

One man threw up his arms and shouted, “Sheared!” A cheer erupted. He was shirtless, soaked with sweat, and white bits of wool stuck to his torso so that he looked like some sort of were-sheep. The denuded animal before him was pulled aside, and another fully-wooled one took its place. He bent to his task.

I stayed at the back of crowd, bouncing Isidore on my shoulder and taking in the scene. In addition to the musicians and competitors, there were many young ladies dressed in loose clothes, with ribbons in their hair and bells on their wrists and ankles. Some were also a little tipsy from whatever home brew they drank here. Now that was more like it, I thought, as one saw me, smiled, and winked. Things were looking up.

Then Isidore cut loose with some truly epic cries. “Green isn’t your color, short stuff,” I said to her. I found a leaning spot out of the sun, took out the milk and tried to feed her, but she wouldn’t take it. I jostled her, none too gently, but that didn’t help, either. I began to get annoyed.

Then a girl with bright red lips and blue smears over her eyelids stopped and said, a bit woozily, “You need to change her.”

She was lovely, in a farm-stock sort of way, and one of her shoulder straps would not stay in place. “Into what?” I said.

She giggled. “Her diaper, silly. Don’t you smell that?”

“I don’t smell anything but sheep.”

“Well, if you undo that blanket, I’ll be you find she’s left you a gift.”

I felt the same instinctive revulsion all men feel at the thought of handling dirty nappies. “Really?”

“Really. Don’t you know how to change a diaper?”

“She’s not actually mine.”

“Oh, silly man, just accept it. A child is a miracle.”

Before I could ask for actual help, she swirled off in a cloud of drunken lace and jingles. I looked down at Isidore, still crying, her face scrunched up like an angry red monkey. “All right, goddammit,” I sighed. “Just give me time to find some help, will you?”

No one at the festival seemed the least bit interested in a strange blood-spattered man toting a fussy baby, a sight which I’m sure would’ve raised at least a few eyebrows any other day. I wandered through the crowd and tried to ignore the many young women while I sought an older one who might have some practical advice about my dilemma.

At last I spotted a tavern called the Head Boar. A middle-aged woman stood behind the bar wiping glasses, although there were no other patrons at the moment. I cleared my throat. “Excuse me.”

She winced at a particularly loud squeal from Isidore. “That baby ain’t happy.”

“That makes two of us,” I said.

“Where’s her mama?”

“I have no idea. She’s not mine.”

“Denial is a coward’s way out, son.”

“No, seriously. I found her in the woods. There was a man with her, but a bear killed him. He died protecting her. This is the closest town, so I figured she was from here.”

She looked me over. “Is that where the blood came from?”

“Yeah. I killed the bear.”

Her skepticism returned. She looked me up and down. Even back then, I wasn’t automatically intimidating.

“You killed the bear?”

“Yes.”

“Single handedly?”

“No, I used both hands.” Isidore shrieked again.

She thought it over. “Well, good on you, sir. Bears eat sheep, and sheep feed us, so we’re always glad for fewer bears. My name’s Audrey.”

“Eddie. Pleasure to meet you.”

She nodded at the baby. “Are you planning to just let her keep squalling?”

“A girl out there said she needs a diaper change.”

“And?”

I held Isidore out to the woman and said, only half-joking, “Help?”

She laughed. “Give her here, then. Six kids and ten grandkids out of me, I should know how to do this. Come here and I’ll show you.”

“No, I meant, you take her. Keep her yourself, or find her a home, I don’t care.”

“Oh, I’m too old to raise another baby,” she said as she gathered Isidore into her arms. And damned if I didn’t feel a jolt of mixed jealousy and possessiveness at the sight. She put the baby on the counter and began unwrapping the blanket.

“Where is everyone?” I asked, gesturing at the empty room.

“Outside, where the drinks are free. When the complimentary stuff runs out about nightfall, they’ll come wandering in here willing to put down gold for even the worst stuff I’ve got.” She held up her hand, which was now stained red from the bloody blanket. “Is this more bear blood?”

“That’s probably from the man who died.” I realized with a start that I hadn’t checked Isidore for injuries. “Is she all right?”

“She’s marinating in her own pee, but otherwise, yeah.” She stopped as she was about to throw the blanket aside. “This is silk. This is expensive. No one from here would have a blanket like this. It’s a bearing cloth for a squire’s child, at least. What was this man like that you say you found her with? Did he look rich?”

“Hard to tell by the time the bear got through with him.” I felt the weight of the gold bag on my belt, but didn’t mention it.

She put the blanket aside, then sharply sucked in her breath.

“What?” I said, concerned.

“Who would do this to a baby?” she said, appalled.

She held her so I could see. Across her tiny back, someone had tattooed--on a baby!--an elaborate circular design. I didn’t recognize it.

“Damn,” I said.

“It must’ve been done right after she was born.”

“That’s....”

“Awful’ is the word you’re looking for.”

I knew a lot of organizations and societies used tattoos to mark alliances, relationships, even social castes. All of them, though, waited until youngsters reached puberty, or at least were walking around on their own. I knew of no group that marked its members this way from birth.

“Well, at least she doesn’t seem to be suffering from it,” Audrey said, and began work on the more pressing problem of the baby’s wet bottom. “And she’s definitely not a local girl. If anyone tried this on their children around here, they’d end up on the business end of a burdizzo.”

“What’s a burdizzo?”

“Keeps the male sheep under control. Works just as well on male shepherds.”

“Ah. Well, she’s a local girl now. See ya.” I started for the door.

“You just wait right there, young man,” she snapped. She’d already wiped Isidore clean and was fastening what looked like a dishrag around her. “This child may not have sprung from your loins, but that doesn’t mean she’s not your responsibility.”

“Yes, it does,” I insisted.

“Look at her. You want her to go back to the people who used her like a sheet of vellum? Who the hell’s going to take care of her if you don’t?”

“You?”

“I’m too old, I told you.”

“Well...where’s the nearest moon priestess?”

“Two weeks to the south,” she said.

I raised my hands. “Look, this is not my problem. I’ve done my good deed, okay? Do whatever you want with her.”

And that might’ve been it. That should’ve been it, and it would’ve been, if four grim men on horseback hadn’t appeared outside the tavern and dismounted.

Experience told me they were trouble. Instinct told me they were trouble for me.