



Dear Reader,

Thanks for checking out a bit of *The Hum and the Shiver*, a fantasy set in the modern world - but it's not "urban." Its protagonist is a hell-raising farm girl, it's set among the mountains of East Tennessee, and it involves the magic found in songs and stories both passed down and newly created. I call it "gravel-road fantasy."

It's about an isolated group of people known as the Tufa, who look a little different and keep mostly to themselves in the hills and valleys of Cloud County. When one of them leaves to join the army, she's injured in Iraq and has to recover both physically and emotionally back among the very people she'd fled. How she does it, and what it means to both her and the Tufa, is the basis of the story.

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!

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CHAPTER ONE

A screech owl stood on the porch rail, its tiny talons scratching against the wood. The dawn light made the tufts of its wind-ruffled feathers look jagged and bloody. The bird had a voice far out of proportion to its size, and was intimately acquainted with the night winds that guided the Tufa destiny. It was also, when seen during the day, an omen of death.

So when Chloe Hyatt, a pureblood Tufa, saw it through the little window over the kitchen sink, she froze.

Water from the faucet ran heedlessly down the drain. She began to hum a secret tune for both calm and protection. The day's events were going to be difficult enough without adding this to it.

The owl's head turned almost 180 degrees to stare at her. The movement was so sudden she jumped. For a moment the bird held her gaze, then it flew off into the trees.

She followed its flight and caught the haint's outline as it faded into the dawn. As it had done for the last week, the apparition remained silent and watchful all night. When it first appeared, they'd all approached it, but it ignored entreaties from Chloe; her husband, Deacon; and their younger son, Aiden. Kell, her older son, would have sensed it and come home from Knoxville had it been meant for him. That left only one Hyatt ordained to receive its message: her wayward middle child and only daughter.

But though the haint wanted someone else, Chloe knew the owl was intended just for her. It wasn't the first death omen the night winds had recently blown her way.

The sun crested the side of the mountain, turning the ominous red dawn to gold. Midges and pollen hung sparkling in the air. Everything brought by the night wind vanished.

Deacon came up behind her and kissed her on the shoulder. He smelled of aftershave and that generic dandruff shampoo he liked. "Morning," he said quietly, not wanting to wake Aiden. The boy had been so excited about his big sister's impending return that he hadn't fallen asleep until midnight, after both Chloe and Deacon sang him their usually foolproof lullabies. Even Tufa children, it seemed, could hear the hum but resist the shiver.

"You haven't made the coffee," Deacon observed.

"Sorry," Chloe murmured. She put the carafe under the faucet.

Deacon peered out the window. "Was the haint still out there this morning?"

Chloe nodded as she filled the coffeemaker. She did not mention the death owl. Deacon had been upset enough by the unseasonable blooms on her acacias.

"You'd think it'd know she ain't here yet," Deacon continued.

Chloe dried her hands, hoping Deacon didn't notice the trembling. "Just 'cause they're from the other side don't mean they're any smarter than they were before. When it was alive, it might've been one of those people who were always early for things."

He nodded. "True enough. You sure it ain't for you or me? Maybe we should call in Bliss, see if she can talk to

it.”

“It won’t speak to her, you know that. Aiden can’t see it, and Kell would’ve been home from college by now if it was for him, sensitive as he is. That only leaves one of us.”

Deacon nodded. He spoke the name with all the weight it carried: the name of his middle child, the one who caused him more sleepless nights and grief than the other two put together. It was a name the whole world now knew, the name of his only daughter.

“Bronwyn.”

The Black Hawk military helicopter blew wispy fog from the treetops as it circled over Needsville, Tennessee. The rotors’ throb bounced off the Smoky Mountains, echoing as if a herd of gigantic, apocalyptic horsemen were charging over Redford’s Ridge.

The pilot dropped as low as he dared, twenty feet above the power lines, as he approached the town. He recalled his father’s description of a similar approach to an Asian village, only instead of power lines it had been palm trees, and the villagers had pointed guns and artillery instead of fingers and American flags.

“Your folks are sure glad to see you,” he yelled over his shoulder to the young woman in the passenger seat behind him. She did not respond.

Needsville’s main street — its only street — swarmed with people watching the helicopter as it passed overhead. But Bronwyn Hyatt, a private in the United States Army for at least the next thirty days, knew that the pilot’s observation was wrong; these weren’t “her” people packing the street below. Hell, the entire population of Needsville couldn’t block its own traffic. Most of the crowd consisted of reporters and well-wishing strangers drawn to the circus her return home had become; the vehicles she saw were TV news vans and shiny SUVs, not the rusted-out pickups and old sedans of the natives. As she scanned the crowd, she saw very few heads with the same distinctive straight, jet-black Tufa hair that she wore neatly pulled back and tucked under her uniform’s cap.

Her official minder, public relations liaison Major Dan Maitland, peered out the other window. “Jumping Jesus on a pogo stick, look at all that,” he said. “Where the hell are they all going to stay? Didn’t you say there’s only one hotel in town?”

Bronwyn shifted her weight slightly to take the pressure off her leg. The metal rings and struts of the monstrous Ilizarov apparatus wrapped around her thigh and calf, sending bone-holding screws and pins through her pasty, tortured skin. She would’ve been more comfortable on a stretcher, but she’d been on her back quite enough these last nine weeks. And not, she reflected wryly, in the way her Needsville reputation always implied.

Maitland leaned close and shouted above the engine, “Can you see okay?”

Bronwyn shrugged. The engine’s vibrations jingled the new medals on her chest. “Seen it all before,” she said. “Yeah, but from the air?”

Again she shrugged. Tufa flight was something she could never explain to someone like him.

Maitland patted her on the shoulder. He was a career officer, frighteningly good at his job, and exuded false sincerity with such skill that dozens of flash-in-the-pan media figures still counted him as a friend when he likely couldn’t remember their names. Luckily Bronwyn had seen right through him at their first meeting and maintained a cool cordiality that ultimately perplexed him. He seemed unable to imagine anyone, male or female, immune to his charm. Watching him hide this confusion was one of the few things that still brought Bronwyn any pleasure.

Maitland said something to the pilot, and the helicopter passed back over the town, banking sharply so Bronwyn could be seen at the window. The harness that held her in the seat dug into her shoulder. When she placed her left palm against the glass to maintain her balance, she saw many of the hands below wave in response. The sun glinted off a thousand camera lenses. None of this was a surprise, but it disheartened her just the same. A hero’s homecoming, and she couldn’t even remember what she’d done to earn it. Or even if she’d done anything at all.

As the helicopter rose to continue on to the small county airport, she caught a glimpse of an old man seated in a rocking chair outside the post office. Rockhouse Hicks did not deign even to acknowledge the circus around him, or her passage overhead. It wasn’t in his nature to admit, even for a moment, that someone else might be more significant than himself. That made her smile; some things in Needsville truly never changed.

But the smile faded almost at once. That was both Needsville’s charm and its curse. Nothing of significance ever

did change, or ever would. She herself was living proof of that. And she was too numb to feel either anger or sorrow at the realization, just the weight of its reality.

“We’ll be landing in five minutes,” the pilot told Bronwyn. “I just got the message that the motorcade’s already there waiting for you.”

Craig Chess watched the helicopter circle overhead as he lifted the box of plastic disposable silverware. He stood on the porch of the Catamount Corner, Needsville’s only motel, and the cacophony in the street made him wince at its shrill, unnatural loudness. Needsville was a quiet town, both by disposition and logistics: Three hundred taciturn, mysterious people spread out over an entire valley simply didn’t make much noise.

Now, thousands of people from all over the country brought the entire hamlet to a dead stop. And all, he reflected ironically, for the return of one local girl who, he’d been told, couldn’t wait to leave.

“Makin’ it okay, there, Reverend?” Marshall Goins asked from the storeroom.

Craig shifted the weight of the box in his hands. “Sorry, got distracted by all the commotion.”

“Yeah, it’s a sight, ain’t it? I always figured Bronwyn Hyatt would cause a major ruckus one day, but I never thought it’d make the national news.”

“It’s international,” Craig corrected. “I saw a German TV crew setting up.”

Marshall emerged from the storeroom with another box. The label said Napkins, 3,000 count. “Do you really need that many napkins?” Craig asked.

“Yankees are sloppy. Better to have too many than not enough.” He also paused to look over the crowd. “You ever figure a town this little could hold this many people?”

“Never,” Craig said. “Did you?”

Marshall shrugged. “Good for business, if nothing else. I’m selling parking places in the side yard, and we’re booked to the gills. Hell, we even have some folks paying to camp out in the lobby.” He paused. “I mean, ‘heck.’ Sorry, Reverend.”

“I use the word myself sometimes,” Craig said. “Does the fire code allow you to put people in the lobby, though?”

Marshall chuckled. “Not much worry about codes and such here in Needsville, Reverend.”

Craig was eleven months shy of thirty, and had received his appointment as minister for the nearby Triple Springs Methodist Church just after graduating from Lambuth College in Jackson. He’d never met Bronwyn Hyatt, but had heard so many stories about her since he arrived six weeks earlier that he felt as if he knew her. “Ten feet tall and bulletproof,” as the Travis Tritt song said, only she apparently never needed alcohol to feel that way. A full Tufa at a time when most families had diluted their heritage through intermarriage, she was as well known for her exploits as for her famously profane language. Needsville’s extended Tufa “community”--essentially everyone--had more than its share of iconoclasts, but Bronwyn, though she was only twenty years old, was extreme even for them. He wondered how her horrific wartime experiences, now chronicled all over the world, had changed her. He hoped not much, because he secretly hated to think he’d never get to meet the girl once known as the “Bronwynator.”

Marshall brought him back to the moment when he said, “I think these two boxes’ll do us, Reverend. Just put yours inside the dining room entrance, and Peggy can sort ‘em out. Thanks for the hand.”

“Glad to help out, Marshall. You and Peggy have made me feel awfully welcome.”

The older man went inside the motel, and Craig was about to follow when something caught his eye: a man with the distinctive black Tufa hair struggling to get his camera in position for a shot. That struck Craig as odd, and it took a moment to realize why: none of the other Tufa were taking pictures.

Craig watched more closely. The man also wore a lanyard with an ID tag that said Press. He managed to get his camera up above the heads of the crowd just in time for the helicopter’s final pass. When he pulled it down and scanned back through the pictures, though, he frowned and muttered to himself.

Craig decided that, although this man had the general look of a Tufa, it must be a coincidence. His conduct was so different from the quiet, suspicious natives that he had to be simply a Yankee reporter who happened to have dark

hair. After all, there wasn't a single newspaper in all of Cloud County, so no real Tufa journalist would have anywhere to work.

Craig went inside, threaded through the out-of-towners texting, talking on cell phones, and begging for accommodations, and deposited the last box by the dining room entrance. Normally the Catamount Corner used cloth napkins that matched the tablecloths in the dining room, but that wasn't practical, or appropriate, for this crowd. They treated the town like it existed solely for their benefit, and deserved no more than they got.

As he turned, he was knocked into the wall by a man with slick hair and a pin-striped suit talking into his Bluetooth as he muscled his suitcase across the lobby. "Come on, baby, you know I didn't mean it. Just score me some, and I'll pay you back when I get back to town. I'll even take you out to dinner somewhere nice, what do you say?"

Craig sighed and pushed himself upright. God loves everyone, he reminded himself, even Yankee jackasses. He worked his way to the door and out into the street, hoping he still had time to get close enough to witness the main event.

Three burly MPs helped Bronwyn out of the helicopter and into her wheelchair. One of them accidentally brushed the curve of her breast with his hand and flushed bright red, although he said nothing: apologizing, after all, was for fags. She held on to her cap and the hem of her skirt, both of which threatened to fly askew under the idling rotors. She carefully arranged her injured leg on the upright footplate, the metal rings gleaming in the sun.

The one-hangar airport, with its lone runway and faded orange wind sock, served mainly crop dusters and charter sporting flights and was overwhelmed by the sudden military occupation. In addition to the huge Black Hawk delivering its human cargo, the local National Guard motor pool provided two staff cars and a jeep. Beyond them waited some sort of huge vehicle that did not, from the little bits Bronwyn could see around her escorts, appear to be military.

Maitland stepped behind her and took the chair's handles. "Are you comfortable?" Before she could answer, he continued, "We added a special seat to the motorcade to accommodate your leg."

"Don't forget the crutches," Bronwyn said. "I'm not making a speech sitting down." It was her only real demand, but she intended to stick to it. The people of Needsville were not about to see her unable to stand and face them after everything that had happened.

"All arranged," Maitland replied. And then Bronwyn saw the vehicle intended for her return home.

She grabbed the rubber wheel runner and brought the chair to a sudden halt. Maitland's stomach bumped into the back of her head. She stared for a long moment, then slowly turned as much as her injuries allowed. "Major Maitland, I know you outrank me, and I apologize in advance for my language, but there is no . . . fucking . . . way I am getting into, or onto, that."

Maitland crouched beside the chair as if he'd expected this response all along. In his Teflon voice, he said, "I understand, Bronwyn, really. I thought it was tacky, too. But it was donated by the Ford dealership in Johnson City, and it might sow ill will in the community if we don't graciously accept it."

"I don't care if it sows black-eyed peas," she snapped. "I'll do this show, but not if I have to ride in that."

Maitland's voice grew softer, and he leaned so close, she could smell his aftershave. "Private Hyatt, this is not a 'show.' It's a hero's welcome. Perhaps you should be a bit more . . . gracious?"

Bronwyn turned her dark eyes on him. "Major, I'm as gracious as a possum at the Brickyard, but there's no way I'm going to ride through my hometown like some sort of trailer park beauty queen."

"I agree," Maitland said. "The thing is, it would make it much easier for all those people to see you. So it's really not for you, it's for them."

There was no arguing with that. Left to her own preferences, Bronwyn would've returned home in the middle of the night wearing sunglasses and a blond wig. This carnival was for everyone but her.

The platform for her return consisted of an enormous Ford pickup truck jacked up on gigantic tires, towing a small yacht. The masts had been removed, and a sort of throne had been mounted high on the foredeck. The bow sported the now-ubiquitous high school moniker known far and wide since her rescue: The Bronwynator.

When she saw the name, she muttered, “Oh, God,” and shook her head. “Do I get to keep it when we’re done?” she asked sarcastically.

“Ah . . . no, I’m afraid not.”

Bronwyn managed a knowing smile. “You’re very good at your job, sir.”

“I’m just grease for the gears of necessity,” he said with absolutely no irony.

Craig threaded through the crowd lining the street until he reached the incongruously new post office building. Rockhouse Hicks sat in a rocking chair on the porch. Something about the old man stopped strangers from approaching him, and even other locals gave him plenty of space, inside an invisible circle that kept everyone else away. The effect was almost tribal, as if Hicks were a chief or medicine man. Craig’s research on the Tufa, though, insisted they were all fervent individualists with no hierarchy, so he couldn’t be any sort of leader. Unless Hicks’s peculiar birth defect — six working fingers on each hand — fulfilled some unknown community superstition, Craig could only work with the idea that people avoided the old man because, simply, he was a shit-head.

But with the Tufa, you could never be sure. Dark haired and dark skinned, yet not white, black or Native American (although often content to be mistaken for any of the above if it meant they’d be left alone), the Tufa kept their secrets so close that, to Craig’s knowledge, no one even knew how they’d turned up deep in Appalachia. Yet when the first official Europeans had reached this valley three centuries earlier, the Tufa were already here, living quietly in the hills and minding their own business.

Craig, however, was determined to reach out to everyone, even (or especially) the ones no one else would accept. One of the first things he learned was that no one in Cloud County really liked Rockhouse, and he sympathized with the mean old man’s isolation. So he leaned against the wall beside him and asked, “Ever seen a helicopter over Needsville before, Mr. Hicks?”

Hicks slowly turned. He had sun-narrowed eyes that made his expression impossible to read, but the hint of malevolence shone through. Craig imagined that as a younger man, Hicks had been serious trouble.

“Reverend Checkers,” he said.

“Chess,” Craig corrected with a smile.

Hicks continued to glare at him. Then just as slowly, he returned his gaze to whatever he’d been contemplating before.

Craig knew this counted as a dismissal, but he wasn’t giving up that easily. “She’s getting quite a welcome. Can you see okay from here? I bet they’d let you sit up on the podium if you asked.”

“Seen that girl since she was knee-high to a wet fart. Don’t reckon she looks that different now.”

“Now she’s a hero, though.”

Hicks said nothing, but spit out onto the tiny lawn at the base of the post office flagpole.

“You don’t think so?” Craig persisted. “She killed ten enemy soldiers single-handed.”

“They say.”

“You don’t believe it?”

Hicks spit again and shrugged. “Wasn’t there. Don’t trust stories about killings unless I see the corpse myself. Been burned that way.”

The hint of mystery piqued Craig’s interest, and the annoyance in Hicks’s voice felt like as big a triumph as a whole congregation answering the call to salvation at the end of a service. Any reaction Craig got from the old man was a step forward, a break in the isolation. “Well, I’m going to see if I can find a better spot to watch from. Y’all have a good day, Mr. Hicks.”

As he worked his way back along the road, he bumped into the man he’d seen earlier, the Tufa reporter. He said, “Excuse me,” and tried to catch a glimpse of the name on the press pass. It read SWAYBACK.

The yellow ribbons tied to trees, fence posts, and telephone poles, clichéd as they were, made Bronwyn feel surprisingly warm inside. She recalled tearing ribbons from some of the same trees when she was a kid, convinced they were too hokey to have any meaning. But now that they were displayed for her, she understood them in a new light, even if she still thought they were inane.

Like Cleopatra on her barge, she was towed slowly down into the valley toward Needsville. She sat in the ludicrous chair and gritted her teeth against the vibrations going through her shattered leg bones. Somehow they'd mounted a leather recliner to the foredeck, with a modified footrest to support her injured leg. It seemed solid enough, but did nothing to make her feel less ridiculous. She thought about waving with the back of her hand turned out, like Queen Elizabeth, or mouthing "This is so lame," as Nancy Kerrigan had at Disneyland. But at least for a little while longer, she was still a soldier; she'd do neither.

She wanted to stare straight ahead, at the fresh lines painted on the highway after the state repaved it earlier in the spring, but there was no resisting the pull of the mountains. At first she looked only with her eyes, cutting them enough to see the lush trees and rolling slopes visible past the MPs standing at the deck rails beside her. But like that first taste of liquor to an abstaining drunk, it only made it worse. The leaves sang to her, tunes blew through the breeze, and for a moment something that had been silent and still since she'd left this place vibrated deep in her chest. But it was only a moment; like everything else, it faded to numbness and left her aware of its presence but unable to actually feel it.

Except somehow, she sensed danger. Not the immediate kind as she'd known in Iraq, but real nonetheless. It was like a shadowy animal glimpsed over the tall grass that ducked out of sight the instant before she turned to look directly at it.

It took twenty minutes to drive the half-mile from the city limits to the bandstand and podium set up outside City Hall. The crowd's response was every bit as loud as the helicopter's engine. Bronwyn saw few heads of straight black hair or dark sullen eyes among the throng; and, as she expected, Rockhouse Hicks had not moved from the post office porch. It was okay, though; she'd have plenty of time to see the locals. These strangers weren't here to see her, anyway; they wanted the Bronwynator.

Two MPs carefully carried her to the stage, where Maitland provided the promised crutches. Her injured arm could barely do its job, but it was a matter of pride that she stand before these people. She reached the podium and waited patiently while the applause continued and the cameras fired away.

As the cheering died down, Major Maitland eased up to the microphone. "Private Hyatt will make a statement, but as you can see, she's not up to any questions. We ask that you respect her courage, and her injuries."

Bronwyn unfolded the two pages of typing with the word APPROVED stamped in red near one corner. She blew into the microphone to check her distance from it. Then she cleared her throat and said, "Thank y'all for being here. It's great to be back in Needsville." She stopped for renewed applause. Her voice sounded thin and weak in the loudspeakers, certainly not strong enough to belong to a First Daughter of the Tufa.

"I'd like to thank everyone who hoped and prayed for my rescue and recovery," she continued. "For a long time, I had no idea anyone even knew or cared about what had happened to me. Now, believe me, I know that to be false. I feel blessed, honored, and grateful beyond words for the love my home community has given me so freely."

She felt herself turn red. Intellectually she understood, and even agreed with, the need for these words to be spoken aloud. But having to say them still incited those old rebellious feelings. They weren't as strong as they'd once been, though; it was like the shadow of something that used to be gigantic.

"I'd like to thank the staff of the VA hospital for the excellent care they gave me. I'm also grateful to several Iraqi medical personnel who helped save my life while I was in their care. And of course, to the brave Marines who rescued me.

"I'm proud to be a soldier in the United States Army. I'm relieved that some of the soldiers I served with made it home alive, and it hurts that some did not. I'll miss them. And now . . . I'm going home."

She quickly folded the speech, turned, and this time did not resist when the MPs moved in to aid her. As they carried her down the steps, she made eye contact with a woman in the crowd who had straight black hair and soft, tender eyes. The woman held out her right hand in a fist, wrapped her thumb over the back of her index finger and then

turned her wrist and spread all her fingers wide.

Bronwyn said nothing. It wasn't normal sign language, although it was a sign and she knew the language. But she couldn't find the strength to respond, and her hands were busy making sure she wasn't accidentally dropped onto the sidewalk. She was placed in the passenger seat of a shiny Town & County for her trip to her family's home, and as the door closed she looked for the woman in the crowd. But, not surprisingly, she'd vanished.

The sense of danger momentarily returned. Certainly it didn't come from the woman in the crowd, whom Bronwyn would trust with her life and song. But the woman knew about it, Bronwyn was certain. And it explained her serious, even grim expression when everyone around her was cheering.

By the time Bronwyn finished her speech, Craig had maneuvered close enough to get a good look at her face. He'd seen photographs, but he was surprised by how beautiful she was in real life. Mountain girls' faces tended to have hard edges, sharp planes, and leathery skin; Bronwyn had the high cheekbones and strong chin, but her complexion was smooth and unlined, and still had the softness of youth. Her dark eyes were large and hinted at self-aware intelligence.

Craig scolded himself. He tried to avoid thinking about people, especially women, that way. It was unprofessional for a minister, and unkind for a human being. What mattered was what was inside, not the surface they presented to the world.

Someone jostled him from behind, and when he turned, a camera's flash blinded him. "Whoa!" he cried, putting up his hand to shield his eyes.

"Sorry," the photographer said without looking up from his camera's screen.

As his eyes recovered, Craig realized the photographer was Swayback, the reporter who looked like a Tufa. "Hey, who do you work for?" Craig asked before he could stop himself.

Swayback looked up, alarmed. "Wait a minute, you're not gonna complain to my editor just because a flash went off in your face, are you? Good grief, there's a million photographers here, it could've happened to anybody. I said I was sorry."

"No, I just--"

"Tell you what: I work for the Daily Planet. My editor's Perry White. You tell him all about it." Then Swayback turned and disappeared into the crowd.

By the time Craig turned back toward the podium, Bronwyn Hyatt was gone and everyone began to disperse.

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