

## **63 YEARS AGO**

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The air is getting hotter. The air is a furnace. There's a rumbling in the sky over the mountains to the west.

A man comes in from the south. Walking over the cracked earth down the middle of the road through the center of town. He wears a black hat and his black boots are cracked leather; dust hangs on him. He carries a knapsack over his shoulder, through the straps of which hangs a black coat. It looks like one foot in front of the other is just about all he can manage.

—My grandma would say you look like you been walkin since the middle a last week.

He sees her sitting on the porch. Stops. Regards her. She notices the once-shiny black stripe running down the legs of each pantleg. Soldier.

—Your grandma'd be right.

He stops in front of her house. Sets his pack down. Pushes his black hat back. Puts one boot up on a wooden plank in the fence. He says to her:

—What's your name, child? And what is this place?

—I ain't no child. I'm Athena. And this here's Clarksdale you've arrived at. Who are you?

—They call me Joe.

—You say it like it's not your real name.

—Near enough.

—Well, it's not much of a name. Least in terms of length, I mean.

Joe shrugs. —It's what people seem to call me.

—Hmpf. What are you doin here?

—On my way to someplace else, darlin. Other side of those mountains.

She blushes at his "darling" and wipes the black bangs off her forehead but they flop back into her eyes. Looks at him sideways through them.

—That sounds more interestin than here.

The sky rumbles again but the clouds are too high and too far off over the mountains for it to make much difference here.

—Won't rain, she continues. —Never does down here.

Joe looks up. —Hotel down this way?

She nods. —Above the saloon.

—Thank you, Miss Athena. And thanks for the introduction to Clarksdale.

—You're welcome. Bye.

He hoists his knapsack and gives her a crooked smile and grazes the tip of his hat with his index finger toward her. —See you around.