

**A BEGGAR'S RIDE:
TALES FROM WITHIN THE HERD**

A Thesis

by

KATIE LAURIE JENSEN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2010

Major Subject: English

A Beggar's Ride:

Tales From Within the Herd

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ABSTRACT

A Beggar's Ride:

Tales From Within the Herd. (December 2010)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Charles B. Taylor

This story suite is a work of autobiographical fiction, a coming of age tale which uses a young girl's relationship to horses—along with various people and places connected to the horse world—as its narrative theme. The collection is comprised of twelve chapters, including an Introduction and Prologue and much later, an Interlude and Conclusion. While the first person narrative voice is maintained through most of the chapters herein, the Interlude uses second-person perspective. Additionally, *NOW DEPARTING* is written in the present narrative tense. Poems are interspersed throughout the work, between chapters, as transitional bridges for the reader.

DEDICATION

To my family, then my friends, then my committee, and finally, to horses

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I became aware of my own connection with horses when my Sunday school teacher read to our class about Genesis and the Creation, telling us Who made what, and when. I found myself wondering what I might have been asked to do, to move, to create. In learning about those six days, I wasn't sure if anyone helped God besides maybe Jesus. But I could almost picture it: every kind of animal erupting from the deepest dust of the emerging earth, called forth just as Lazarus would be. Imagining such a scene, I knew what animal I would have called, in whose tongue I feel anciently fluent. My chosen chant would be a whispering whistle, a singular strain that could pierce through layers of sandy loam to summon a herd of horses, spilling out of the ground to fill the earth, the first great migration.

There may be more interesting animals than horses: splendid specimens of what time and nature can do, how survival shapes a species down to its newest member as it enters the world, splitting through its shell or breaking the water bag, then landing on terra firma, blinking and blissfully unaware of the struggle endured for its arrival. But for me, no creature is more sacred or spiritual than a horse, its eyes dark and knowing as it first watches the world, ears pricked at the possibility of everything.

Maybe there's a rational answer for my fascination, the reason why horses have looked to human beings for so long. To find it, you have to go back to that first day the

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plan was laid out, the galloping legs set into motion. What if the God of the Old Testament had not only said the words to make creation happen, but gave us—the old souls amongst us—the direction to do create? What if we had somehow partnered with Mother Earth and Father Time to deliver every form of life?

Such a stewardship would indeed bind us to this world, soul and spirit, with a responsibility we could never relinquish. Further, it would explain the directions God gave Adam and Eve in the garden, to “replenish the earth, and subdue it” (Genesis 1:28). It must not have been enough for them to dominate the land and its inherent life; God counseled his children to work with it symbiotically, that both the Earth and her inhabitants might be edified.

In nature, perhaps the most supremely evident, mutually beneficial connection exists between horses and Man. Throughout our shared history, we’ve discovered new territory by crossing continents together, warring and winning new lands. We’ve depended on each other for strength and speed, security and shelter. For empires and individuals, from the “sky dogs” first caught and christened by Native Americans to the Barbs and Arabians prized by Muslim and European conquistadores, horses have made human history.

My story reflects this greater truth. On the edge of every memory worth mentioning, a horse stands quietly in my consciousness. Each time I turn to narrate a defining moment, a singular event that has shaped my self, a horse reappears, shifting its shape, filling space that was missing, completing the picture and defining my experience. Though this horse image changes in size and shade with the many mounts

I've had—the sweat, mud and blood endured together—a horse is my remembrance.

Initially, the chair of my thesis committee was receptive to my idea of writing a horse-themed memoir. Only the title worried him.

“Just be sure you don't have the word ‘horse’ in it,” he told me.

“Why not?” I wondered.

“We don't want the thesis office to think you're writing a children's book.”

I could understand what he meant. Most of the horse-themed books I'd read throughout childhood and adolescence were pony club stories: accounts of middle-class white girls who happened to be at horse camp for the summer when conflict arose, conflicts which generally had to do with the other campers rather than their horses. In these books, horses are merely scenery, not a thematic vehicle. Still, they retain a few redeeming qualities, and as Alice Walker reminds us (quoting *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*): “Horses make a landscape look more beautiful.”

But the “children's book” comment was ironic. In a way, my love for horses not only sprang from interacting with the animals themselves; it also grew with my love for literature, beginning, of course, with books like Marguerite Henry's *Misty of Chincoteague* (both the book and series), then her historical fiction stories such as *King of the Wind* and *Born to Trot*. I loved the way Henry opened windows to the horse's long, shared history with men and women. But more than that, I found comfort—identity even—in the knowledge that others loved and respected horses just as I did.

Some people always have. Certainly, Native Americans recognized early the mystical power carried in the blood, bones and swiftness of the horse. This refrain

echoes through many fictional representations, characters such as Young Elk in Mari Sandoz's *The Horsecatcher*. Sandoz's novel is set in the 1830s among bands of Cheyenne and other plains people, a time when horsecatchers were their own brand of medicine men—brave as any traditional warriors—and mustangs were hunted for wealth and status. An experienced horsecatcher could capture a whole herd, Sandoz illustrates; once tamed, horses with rare coat colors were often used for ceremonial purposes—also recounted in the Horse Dance chapter in *Black Elk Speaks* (Neihardt & Black Elk).

Then come stories from the other side of the historical coin, that is, tales of the American cowboy and the Old West. Having gone the rounds with Louis L'Amour and even Larry McMurtry—whose epic *Lonesome Dove*, John Spong of *Texas Monthly* recently called “our *Gone With the Wind*...the book that forever changed the image of Texas”—I loved the lay of the western genre landscape. As for cowboys specific to my home state of Texas, there is Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*. Unfortunately for me, genre westerns deal with boys becoming men or men proving themselves; the country they reside in is hell on horses and women. A reader of these novels who didn't know American history better might think that every woman in 19th century western America died after giving birth to, unsurprisingly, a strapping baby boy. For a more modern coming-of-age novel with feminine themes to use as a model for my own story, I had to look elsewhere.

The search for an appropriate literary template had already led me through bizarre territory. First, I had encountered Jeanne Betancourt's *Pony Pals* books, with thirty-seven chronicles and counting (there's even a *Pony Pals Cookbook*—an unsettling

thought). And I couldn't ignore Walter Farley's famed *The Black Stallion*—the original text and subsequent series, with nineteen books in all. In these novels, Farley recounts the life of a young male protagonist (the intrepid Alec Ramsay). In doing so, Farley breaks free of the pony club stereotype, that is, a starry-eyed adolescent female, usually no more than twelve or thirteen, who may or may not learn something through her association with horses; after that, readers assume, the girl eventually outgrows them. Still, in *The Black Stallion and the Girl*, Farley introduces his readers to Pam Athena, lover of all things equine. She and a now-grown Alec (Farley's continual protagonist) enjoy a fictional fling until Farley kills her off in his last novel, *The Black Stallion Legend*. In this book, Alec is so distraught over the loss of Pam that he rides into the desert and, oddly enough, pulls off an anti-cowboy move and saves a tribe of Native Americans. So the Black—along with Farley's royalties—lives on even though women, by the looks of it, might not have what it takes to endure such an unforgiving, man's world.

But in reality, I knew better. I had heard other stories, stories of my mother's grandparents, ranch owners and pioneers in their own right. Stories of my father's people, early Mormons who crossed the ocean, then the plains—driven by horsepower—looking for a haven, finding themselves in the process. Their journeys all began with a dream, a wish. And just like the old adage said: if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.

I began to think of myself as that rider, the girl in their early dreams. In truth, I am the resultant product of actual pioneers' journeys, a woman born to a legacy of better

ground in broader country. I couldn't simply remember the horses I'd ridden and worked with while forgetting the generations of people who were also shaped by them, sharing their history. The real story of horses, I realized, is found in the stories of horse people.

The challenge, then, was not finding tales, but in telling them. Having already written a childhood memoir, I knew that I had worthwhile material. Flannery O'Connor once said that anyone who survived childhood had enough material to write. But for my thesis, I needed a different form. Since my history would include real people—mostly horse people like me, some loosely associated with these—their names, at least, would have to be altered. Then there was the problem of family; in remembering my history as the sixth of seven children, I knew that the sheer size of my family would be enough to daunt the unsuspecting reader. At times, keeping our names straight—Heidi, Kelly, Mindy, Adam, Ben, Kate and Brigham—was difficult even for our dear parents. And I'm often reminded by them how subjective my perception of past events can be. Combined with my imagination, the possible interpretations of personal and family history are endless. Thus, I've decided to only mention the relatives directly involved rather than paint an accurate portrayal of complete family life.

This kind of memoir, I soon discovered, was a popular artistic form for horsemen and horsewomen writers. Thomas McGuane navigated it with *Some Horses*, praising the cutting horse's "phenomenal alertness to space, shape, smell and light [which] amount to a kind of capacity, if you are unwilling to call it intelligence, beyond the human" (9). On the other hand, Teresa Jordan's *Riding the White Horse Home* and Sandra Day

O'Connor's *Lazy B* are also western-themed memoirs, but these stories are less about horses than about ranch-living relations. Perhaps the overall prize for giving equal weight to both horses and humans goes to author Mark Spragg for his memoir of collected stories, *Where Rivers Change Direction*. Still, a number of Spragg's stories in this collection don't mention horseflesh, an inconvenient truth for a writer like me, looking for a space for herself and her horses.

But in finding a form to call home, I was determined not to stray too far from the herd. Rather, I appreciated Rick Bass's sentiments in his essay collection, *Brown Dog of the Yaak*, which discusses not only his work as a writer and activist, but also as a bird hunter, partnered with his German shorthaired pointer, Colter. Bass writes: "If you're going to write about stone, over the long run it's probably best if you handle a lot of stone. There can be a power (and from that, a magic) generated by your passage back and forth, from subject to shadow-of-subject" (13). I'm relying on my own knowledge of horses—the mud, blood and sweat acquired throughout my personal history with them—to guide me through this somewhat experimental form and process.

A Beggar's Ride: Tales From Within the Herd is a work of autobiographical fiction. It is a horse memoir with human themes—those of a young woman, coming of age—and written as a story suite and comprised of nine chapters, an interlude and a few poems to ease the reader's transition as the story unfolds, usually chronologically. While the chapters are written in first-person narrative, the interlude—*Hell on Horses and Women*—uses second-person perspective. Like the horses in this narrative, the poems are often unpredictable and sometimes unruly. They are their own animals.

CHAPTER II

PROLOGUE (1983)

Before horses, there was the minibike. Ryan Bartholomew—a friend of my sister, Mindy—had outgrown it. It wouldn't start on the first kick, he said, but once you got it going, the ride was worth the work. He delivered it on a Sunday, I remember; we came home from church to find it leaning against the back steps, its dented gas tank a glistening, candy-apple red in the summer heat. We knew that riding on Sunday was out of the question to our devout Mormon parents—in their minds, it was way too much fun and therefore, breaking the Sabbath—so we waited agitatedly for the next morning. As the most adventurous sibling claiming motorbike experience (his expertise learned in the mysterious way that boys seem to inherit such knowledge), Adam rode first. Riding double with my sister, I waited awhile for my turn; I waited even longer for her to kick start it to life.

With a sputter and a spin, we took off through the back pasture, flying over the ruts in the road, having a heyday as we tooted the horn and sent cattle stampeding in every direction. It was great fun until we came over a particularly high bump and the engine stalled.

“What do we do now?” I asked Mindy after watching her investigate the bike, then try and start it several times. I was sure she knew no more about it than I did, but she was older.

“Not sure—I think the engine might be flooded.” She kicked and kicked for another ten minutes, hoping the engine would come to life. It was a long walk home

from the back pasture. The minibike refused to emit anything beyond a hopeless sputter. The cattle were long gone, headed into the shadows of the live oaks near the fence line. But the horses—a few cutters our grandfather raised for working with cattle—were curious, taking a few steps towards us, sniffing the air, their ears pricked in interest.

“Should we pray?” We prayed over anything we needed help with at home: schoolwork, illnesses, relationships, sick pets, Dad’s job, church callings, for gratitude, for health, for safety. This mechanical failure didn’t seem like too much for the Lord.

“I guess we can try.” We stood together in the weedy road, our heads bowed and arms folded like we’d been taught, eyes shut tight. “Dear Heavenly Father,” Mindy began in the language we reserved for prayer, “if it be Thy will, wilt Thou please let this minibike start so that we can get home before dark? In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.”

“Amen.” I waited what seemed an appropriate amount of time for God to fix whatever was wrong with our minibike—not very long. “You want to kick it again?”

“I guess so. Here goes.” She kicked again, twice more, three times, and the bike roared to life.

“Get on!” She yelled back to me. I scrambled aboard behind her. Giggling at our success, we readied ourselves for another surge of adrenalin and windburn, watching the horses scatter. Kicking and bucking, snaking their heads at the bike’s foreign noise, they trotted towards the safety of the trees. Then, just as Mindy shifted into first and let the clutch out, her hand slipped and the bike keeled over once again. Together, we were crestfallen.

“You wanna pray again?” I asked her as she swung a leg over the bike to stand

beside it, then began to walk. I tried to keep up with her long legs trailing through the tall grass.

“Nah.” Mindy sighed with a handle bar in either hand, a sage in her skinny jeans. “We prayed for the bike to start; it did. I wouldn’t want to ask for too much. Besides,” she reasoned, “maybe this is His way of keeping us safe or having us get more exercise. Get on—I’ll push you home.”

CHAPTER III

KING (1986)

Though I loved all of the animals on my grandparent's ranch—the bird dogs, Spot and Lou, as well as Blackie, the always-pregnant barn cat and a multitude of mottled cows, then their calves with sandpaper tongues rasping against my hands as they vainly tried to coax milk from my small fingers—King the bay was something special. I'd watch him for hours as he grazed amongst the cattle in the front pasture: his coat blood red, his main and tail black and windblown, unkempt, as mysterious as the depth of his eyes.

Even the old bull with the hash marks in his hide knew better than to mess with King. The old horse had entangled himself in barbed wire over the years and had lived through it all to acquire a multitude of these education marks and small scars left after the vet's patient stitching. They added to his status; while the Drawhorns didn't always possess the wherewithal to invest in vet bills, King was a horse who knew his business and therefore, was always the exception.

He lived amongst the cattle but never belonged with them; I never believed my grandmother's notion that King thought he was a cow, even though he followed the feed truck along with the great mooing mass. You could see him cutting them as he had once done when Grandpa worked him, mirroring every move, nipping and tearing at them to keep them from the hay until he'd picked his spot and begun to eat his share.

Occasionally I succeeded in persuading my older sister, Mindy—a breathtaking blonde, even in her youthful gangliness—to take me out riding with her. She rode once

a week despite the fact that she was severely allergic to horses. She would dope up on Sudafed before she went out, but she always came home looking like she had been the loser in a catfight with a swarm of bees—red and itchy all over, eyes swollen shut. I admired her perseverance and years later, I would hear a phrase that described her perfectly, one that she would have laughed at: Mindy was never afraid to “cowgirl up.”

We took an old halter, a lead rope and some grain pellets and hunted for King in the big pasture. As Grandpa’s health had gradually degraded, King spent more and more time in with the cows; he came running along with the rest of the herd when Grandma blew the old cow horn, the feed call, giving her the notion that King thought of himself as a cow. Mindy and I defied the idea, though we had to agree with her on one point—King was ornery just like our old Brahma bull. We could spend days riding him and he would still be full of “piss and vinegar,” southern slang for bursts of spunk and attitude. Even still, King was majesty itself to me; I often sat out on the long old porch or stood at the edge of the fence line just looking, watching him graze with the cows for hours on end.

Mindy loved him too, and it was from her that I learned the art of patience in dealing with horses. We spent hours in the pasture calling King, shaking the feed bucket, whistling and waiting. Snuffling, his ears pricked, he would get close enough to smell the feed, slowly lowering his head into the bucket, munching as we first touched his neck, then haltered him, talking to him all the while. Once the oats ran out, we’d lead him to the low slung tack shed—inside the old milking pen we called the lot—to saddle him.

I'd curry the mud and grass from his hair and coat as Mindy lugged Grandpa's ancient ranch saddle towards us—all forty-plus pounds of it—folding the right fender and stirrup over the saddle's seat before she hefted it onto King's round back, grunting from the effort. She cinched and cinched and cinched the latigo tightly around him, snubbing up our insurance against a bloated belly and a sliding saddle. The bridle came last, its bit unyielding to King's resistance as Mindy slid her fingers into the side of his mouth to touch his tongue, forcing him to open his jaw, allowing the bit to slide into its seat just behind his incisors. Now caught beyond escaping, King licked and chewed at the cold metal as Mindy patted his neck, reassuring him that our intentions were friendly.

We rode double through the front pasture to the stock pond, checking out the snapping turtles and after one season of floods, a stray alligator, marooned in our artificial lagoon after the water receded. Sometimes we simply crossed the yard to Grandpa's room to the window nearest his hospital bed, letting him holler to us about the saddle rigging or how the current weather patterns would change our riding conditions, his speech slurred from a series of strokes. On other days, there were neighbors to visit down both ends of the gravel road—some horse people or at least farmers, others not.

As we met others on Ford Avenue, it wasn't hard to tell where passersby were from: country people always slowed around us, courteous and careful not to crowd us or stir us a storm of dust as they passed. City people usually rushed past us, honking as they went. Our greatest fear was meeting a garbage truck or the Schwan Foods van or, worse still, an eighteen wheeler as it flew around the blind bend in the road, sending us

into the ditch. Levelheaded King was usually bombproof, but a truck of that size can scare any horse, not to mention its riders. After all, I didn't even have access to the stirrups or saddle horn if he spooked since I rode behind my sister, a situation which left me clinging to the saddle strings behind the seat for security. But I didn't worry too often. King took care of us.

Meanwhile, the came when Grandpa's heart nearly gave out, his lungs growing so congested that we knew he would never ride again. In a hospital bed in Houston, he granted Mindy's lifelong wish and gifted King to her, but the golden dream was not to last. The cost of vaccinations, feed and vet bills were too much for her as a jobless, high school kid in a small farm town and soon, King had to go.

Always stoic, Mindy didn't cry, resigning herself to reality. "I guess he'd be better off pushing cows around for a living anyway. Let's find a young cowboy to put some good miles on him," she told our father.

I wasn't so easily led. I cried for a week, then—after having been threatened by my father with a belt-spanking if I didn't straighten up—I suffered in silence, refusing to eat. Watching me mourn over King's impending loss, my mother wondered aloud, "What is it about little girls and horses, and little boys and dinosaurs?"

I couldn't tell her. She had never felt it as Mindy and I had.

In the week before King went to the sale barn, we two girls made his life as enjoyable as we knew how. We moved him from the big pasture to the milking lot, fattened him with carrots and sugar cubes, rode him every day, rubbed him down and talked and hummed to him in a calm, even voice. We lulled him to sleep and later,

dreamt of him as he had been years before—with turns on a dime and sliding stops, nose almost in the dirt: a working cow horse full of energy and talent. Time had made him older and slower, but his love for work remained, the last to leave the ranch.

The day before King was to be sold, I ventured out towards the lot with my grandmother. She told me she had to dig for some garden tool in the tack shed. She'd be busy awhile, so I went along. Grandma opened the gate and we went inside, but when she opened the tack shed door and began to rummage through it, I stayed behind with the old horse.

He was lying not far from me, his legs tucked under him, sunning himself on the grass. He looked at me—so intelligent and mysterious—and all of the sudden, I knew why I had come this last day. I wanted time on my own with him.

All at once, I found myself afraid to breathe, worried he'd spook and kick me though he'd never attempted it. Then I remembered our long hours together; I began talking to him in that certain soothing voice, telling him how beautiful he was, how good a boy. I crept towards him slowly, never looking down or breaking his sleepy gaze. It took me forever to reach him, but finally I closed the gap and slowly raised my hand to his neck. He didn't budge; he just sat there looking at me, then lazily closed his eyes as I stroked his neck, mane, up to his jaw line and behind his ears, back down again to his neck. An eternity later, I swung my leg over his back and eased myself down onto it, whispering to him, then laying my cheek on his the dusty softness of his neck.

He never stirred, only sighed as I closed my eyes in communion, inhaling his hide and miles we'd shared in the sun. So we sat, the old King and I, with life's old

secrets passing between us.

I've often wondered what sort of picture we must have made for my grandmother as she emerged from the dankness of the shed: a five-year-old, pigtailed child on the back of a rangy old cow horse, contentedly enjoying each other's company. If she thought anything was amiss, she never mentioned it.

"You saying good-bye?" she asked.

I nodded, easing my right leg back over, hopped down and stroked King's neck one last time.

"Well, we can go if you're ready." She held out her hand to me, beckoning me back into the waiting world. We walked up the road to the old house, my small, soft hand curled her knotted, ancient one. I turned back once to look at King—still laying in his sunny spot—and never saw him again.

There were others, of course: horses with strong pedigrees and eye appeal. Their types and traits vary as widely as their coat colors: spotted saddle horses and quiet Quarters, bays and grays, roans and duns, stallions, geldings, mares and more foals than I can recall. Through their persistent presence and even their absence, they have moved me and made me, shaping the story of my life. But with horses it is the same as falling in love—the ones that follow are never quite the first.

That image of my young self, barely awake to the world and bonding with it, still defines me. It was to be a legacy, comprised not only of horses, but of the people connected with their presence: my grandparents, Mindy, cowboys seasoned and still green, bosses, novice and noted riders, the legacy of the land.

CHAPTER IV

ZEKE'S CARBON COPY (1990)

As I crept past the ledge of my bedroom window, I was careful to avoid the searing noon heat of the shingles on the southern end of the roof. There had once been a screened porch that enveloped the upper floor of this old ranch house, but my great-grandmother—whom everyone referred to as “Madame Queen”—had ordered the entire third floor of the house cut off, the porch removed from the second story, telling her daughter, my grandmother: “Esther Rae, that is too much house for you to take care of.” So the matriarch had left me with no porch, no screen and no railing for my lookout spot, just a platform large enough to keep me from rolling into the hydrangeas below, risking death at the age of nine.

Still, I couldn't help but love the view. Thanks to my southern-facing window and my binoculars, I could watch the thinning cattle herd as they migrated across the ranch's nearly two hundred acres, through the back pasture, brimming with mixed coastal grasses and around the pond to the old barns under the live oaks where aging implements—the decaying debris of Grandpa's five decades as a farmer—sat, rusting in all weathers. There, the bovine population, staring soullessly, didn't mind standing in stale hay to escape the resounding rain and seasonal floods, sleet storms and hurricane winds.

But they weren't of interest to me; I was born to horses. My family ties to this land proved it: Papa and Nonie (my great-grandparents) had bought the acreage to fatten their stock; the ranch house—built in 1896 and abandoned shortly thereafter—was

merely an accessory. When my grandparents decided to set down roots in Dayton in 1943, the property, newly renovated, was gifted to them as a belated wedding present. Industrious as honey bees, Grandpa and Grandma Drawhorn had raised hay, rice, soybeans, cattle, cutting horses and four daughters here. My mother was one of them.

Now Grandpa was gone. So were the cutters, those classic Quarter horses with their big hips, their muscular chests bulging over their squatty legs, perfect for turning quickly on cows, cutting through the dirt as they slid into stops. The scene in the pasture marked an equine evolution on the ranch from the bulldog-stanced Quarters to sleek, leggy Tennessee Walkers, a plantation-born breed made for smooth rides and rich company.

Near the conclusion of each soggy spring, our ranch hand, Zeke—who now leased the cattle and the land from my widowed grandmother—turned his black stallion, nicknamed Carbon Copy after a famous progenitor, out for a few months with his band of broodmares, all papered and purebred. About a year later, the spring foals would arrive. Always, they were dark; Zeke bred Copy almost exclusively to black mares as a way to keep the foals' heritage rich with the breed's signature color.

“Don't fall in love with them,” my father would say, catching my longing looks toward the equine gold mine out back. “Those horses are for bluebloods.”

“They sure are a nice ride,” I said, denying him victory.

“Maybe so, but so is a motorcycle, and you don't have to feed it.”

I was sure he would never understand. He had never been a horseman, never would be. He loved motorcycles and airplanes and speed, not the God-given grace of

aesthetics and natural things the way I did.

On the other hand was Zeke. His real name was Melvin Giles—no one called him that. He was easy to talk to and always had time for me, to ride or to listen. He was that way with everyone he knew: after my grandfather was bedridden, for instance, Zeke drove his Ford up to the house on Sunday afternoons to fetch Grandpa from his hospital bed and tuck him into the truck, then drive him out to survey the cows. Zeke just seemed to know what other people needed; what's more, he cared enough to see that they received it.

Through my binoculars, it was always easy to spot Zeke's stallion, Copy, in the pasture: his crested neck, accentuated by a mane that grew to his knees and an even longer tail, standing a hand taller than any of the horses in his harem, his coat coal-black even in summer when the sun's steady bleaching turned many so-called black horses a disappointing brown. He had two other markings, a white star between his eyes and a single coronet band, a ring of white around a front ankle bone. Watching Copy, I knew I had glimpsed perfection as her gave that black Arabian stallion from Walter Farley books and movies a run for his money.

And Copy was gentle, quiet—rare qualities among stallions. I knew of few farms that would even house their own stallion, opting instead to board their mares with selected breeders when the time came, in the days before artificial breeding caught on. But Copy was a perfect gentleman in his relations with people and most other horses; Zeke never had to worry about pasturing him with mares and foals. He could feed Copy by hand and let his grandkids do the same. Early on, I asked about his training methods.

“Zeke, how come Copy will bow down to let you on?” Zeke was already in his sixties when I knew him as a child in the 1980s. He’d stop by the place before he made his usual rounds in the pasture; often, he rode Copy to both keep the stud in shape and check on the cows. If he dismounted, then mounted up again, he’d simply touch Copy’s withers just above the point of his shoulder and the horse would extend his near leg, sloping towards the grass and cutting the distance from the ground to Zeke’s stirrup by a foot or more. As the shortest kid in my kindergarten class, I envied his ability.

“Shoot, Kate, that ain’t nothing,” he’d say. “I just told him I’d whack him if he didn’t do it.” We laughed, knowing that while Zeke would use his spurs now and then, he would never touch this horse in anger.

Copy was a particular source of pride for Zeke. Never a steady man, Zeke’d been in and out of a dozen professions before my grandpa had first hired him in his fifties, coming from somewhere in Louisiana with a wife, Buddie Jo, and three kids in his old Ford, pulling a flatbed trailer jerry rigged to hold a horse—a squatty chestnut nestled in the midst of three walls of square hay bales. I never knew why he’d left his own people and home state—any number of vices and gambles could have driven him to leave town. But I knew enough of Buddie Jo to understand that she had—and would have—chosen to stay with Zeke though she was often the only member of the marriage with the dependable income and dental insurance. Shortly after moving to Dayton, Buddie found work for the school district administration office; she would stay there for nearly thirty years as Zeke bounced between business opportunities.

Of course, Buddie Jo was there when Zeke decided to breed Tennessee Walkers

on their own little farm; she must have known that there was no real money to be had in horses in a small town like ours, so far off the map. But like many natural drifters, Zeke had rodeoed long enough to break a few bones, then discover his love for and skill with horses. Leaping into an investment in Zeke's skills a few years after they'd settled in Dayton, Buddie Jo climbed into the truck next to him one weekend—leaving the kids with church friends—and turned the older Ford towards Tennessee, now pulling a secondhand horse trailer.

“It was towards the end of the annual breed sale,” Zeke recounted again while we leaned against the ancient wooden fence, looking at Copy amongst his mares, switching their tails at the swarming grass bugs in the heat. “He was just a yearling then—all head and legs, no filling yet, but I could tell he'd be something—I'd seen pictures of his daddy. Copy was the spit of him.”

“And then?” Knowing how it went, I loved the next part.

“Well, that auctioneer or ringmaster or whatever—the old boy running the sale—he had the tag over ten thousand dollars when he told the handler to pull the horse up. Everybody in the audience is looking, wondering why he stopped the sale. Turns out the horse is lame.”

“How lame?” I asked, my boots kicking at the fence boards, my denim butt hanging over the top rail.

“Too lame for that kind of price. The man in the middle, he asks the owner sitting across the way if he wants to ‘No Sale’ him. Owner waves him off, says he'll take what he can get for the horse.”

Zeke crossed his arms and tilted his head, remembering. “Now I’d been looking Copy over for a few days, watching as they worked him out, cooled him down. They’d kept his toes a bit long—Walking Horse people like the look of high heels—and all that exercise had sore up a tendon. At least, that’s what I’d guessed.”

“But you weren’t sure?”

He grunted, looking me in the eye as he began to laugh. “Must’ve been sure of something. I bought him for \$500, trimmed his toes, then eased him into some light groundwork,” he shrugged. “Tendonitis cleared itself in a month. Never came back after that.”

I shook my head and whistled in admiration. “I’d say you made a deal.”

“I almost didn’t. We’d just come to look around. Buddie Jo’d worn me about bringing along a trailer in the first place. She knew we couldn’t afford nothing to put in it being’s we’d just barely bid on the farm.” He kicked at the same rock in the dirt, stubbing his muddied boots on it over and over, a penance for what came next. “See, I knew she’d been setting aside money for furniture since we come with nothing. Not much, just a little bit here and there. I didn’t even know if I could cover the horse, let alone if she’d let me. But she did, and we all slept on our floor mattresses for another year.” Squinting, he eyed his pride and joy, the herd of hopes grazing just in front of us, his one triumph. “Copy is Buddie’s horse.”

Unlike his black stallion, Zeke wasn’t much to look at. Years later I thought of him when I read that passage in Isaiah where the prophet speaks of the Lord as “having no beauty that we should desire him.” But here in Dayton, what separated Zeke from the

usual Stetson-topped, long-sleeved, pearl buttoned crowd at McGinty's Drug was his ready handshake and smile, his easy way with people. But Zeke was also a man acquainted with sorrows and grief; being both a farmer and a cockeyed optimist made him a gambler twice over, usually unlucky. Besides Copy, the only other sure bet he'd made had been marrying Buddie Jo. Even after most women would have cut him loose to drift on his own, she held fast to him, riding out her risky chances just as he had in buying the horse of his dreams.

And it wasn't just with each other—Zeke and Buddie Jo never considered other people lost causes. Later, they would be on good terms with each of their children's exes when they came to town, loaning them money, tools, horses—much of it was never returned; one horse, I learned later, was sold out from under them by a daughter's former husband. But still, they were kind, generous with their time and means, such as they were.

To me, he was golden. After my grandfather died, Zeke tried to fill the hole left by the man who'd been the soul of the family ranch. He'd take me riding now and then, and once I had my own saddle—a castoff gifted to me by a family friend who was selling out of the horse business—we went riding several times a week. I was a light enough rider to work with the younger horses he took on, easing them into their saddle breaking; he also preferred that I work with the horses that belonged to his female customers since horses often prefer one gender over another. Besides, I was free, lived just across the pasture from him and as a kid, I had nothing better to do. Horse crazed, I would have ridden anything; rides with Zeke put me near enough to him to be under his

tutelage, to observe his ways of working with horses and later, people.

Somehow, I knew that I was one of his projects, too.

I didn't mind. When I was eleven, I baked him a cake for his birthday, put a card—one I hoped he'd know was sincere—with it, tied it up in a bundle and attempted to pass it to him as he rode past our place on a spooky, head shy Peruvian Paso stallion.

“This is for you,” I told him as the stud danced under him, nervous at the crinkling of the plastic bag. “Happy Birthday.”

I saw him again a few days later when he came riding Copy, leading a fat strawberry roan meant for me. It wasn't until we were headed home that he brought the earlier incident up.

“Kate, I sure wanted to thank you for that cake you gave me. That old horse I's riding skipped around when I got to the gate, made me drop the cake. It got scrambled up some, but it still tasted good,” he assured me quickly.

“I'm glad you liked it. Sorry it got ruint,” I said, using my final word as he did.

“Not'tall. And about the card, I wanted to tell you that I'd be honored to stand in for your grandpa, only I want you to remember the man he was—an original, savvy? There cain't ever be any real substitute for a man like Laurie Drawhorn. Not ever.” He looked me squarely, the weight of his words hitting me between the eyes.

“I know it.”

“Alrighty then.” He hitched up his belt. “As for grandpa-ing, I'll do my best. Anything particular you want me to know?”

I shrugged. “I reckon you already do.”

He laughed at that, throwing back his head. “Well then. I reckon we’ll keep on going—we best get you saddled up. This little mare, she dudn’t like to wait on nobody.”

It was always that way between us. Around horses, we could say anything we wanted, voice any thought we were thinking. I soon discovered that Zeke was what my dad called a “tree stump philosopher,” unafraid to answer any question I asked him about the ways of the world I struggled to comprehend, his drawl weaving its way into my remembrance. He’d push his hat back from his forehead, listening and nodding slowly as he watched the road in front of us, squinting at nothing. When I’d finished, he’d nod a final time, then begin his response with a pensive, “Well...I’ll tell you...,” framing his response in terms of the horses we worked with—their moods and habits—and how we dealt with them, then relating animal behavior to the humans I knew, following it up with his maxim about animals who roamed in herds: “Just remember, people are no differnt.”

In this way, Zeke encouraged me in my work with horses while building my belief in myself. In attempting to answer my litany of questions about life, he simply expounded on what we already knew: the fundamental secrets of equine behavior. Horses, I learned, can often read much of a rider’s degree of comfort or confidence simply by gauging the person’s balance, the degree of tension transmitted to the horse through the rider’s hands and legs or even the person’s voice. But Zeke had also taught me how to read a horse: its stance, the carriage of its head, the way that its ears twitched—even when it appeared the horse wasn’t looking—following my movements, my touch, listening to my voice as I laid the groundwork for a successful ride. He called

it “measuring the horse’s mood.”

“Measuring his mood is just like taking his temperature,” Zeke explained as we gaited along, our horses falling in to a smooth foxtrot—faster than the average riding horse’s jouncing jog and a whole world smoother. “It won’t tell you everything you need to know about him, but it might keep you safe while you work with him, long enough to figure the rest out.”

The comment came in handy while I was riding Sarge, a headstrong Overo pinto with a colorless, glass-looking eye. The horse was new to Zeke and afflicted with the most common ailment in pleasure horses—stubbornness brought on by an apparent lack of exercise—so Zeke wasn’t taking any chances with him; he was towing me along behind his own horse via lead rope.

“I know you could handle him,” Zeke reassured me, boosting my bravado. “It’s the horse I don’t trust. He’s lazy as the day is long and shiftless, the kind of horse that’ll knock your leg into a gatepost just cause he isn’t paying attention.” He gestured with the lead rope. “This’ll help me keep an eye on him.”

He was right about the horse’s temperament, but after the first mile or two, Sarge went from rangy to resigned once he figured out that he was toting along a rider who knew what she was doing. When we stopped to water our horses at a neighbor’s pond, a cottonmouth skidded off the bank in front of us, then splashed into the water and snaked its way across the surface. Startled, Sarge jerked back on the lead rope so hard that it slipped through Pete’s fingers, burning his hand as he gripped it, nearly unseating him.

“Whoa, son,” I said, easily, tugging sharply on a single rein to distract the horse.

I grabbed the end of lead rope hanging just under Sarge's halter, connected by a metal bull snap, then coiled the slack and held the rope in one hand, the reins in the other as I walked Sarge to where Zeke sat on a dancing Copy, cradling his blistered hand and trying hard not to curse. "D'He get you?"

"Not too bad." Zeke spat into his hand, rubbing the spit into the angry welt on his palm. "Thank the Good Lord I'm a working man—that durn rope hit a callus." He watched me as I tried to give him back the rope. "D'you fetch that still in the saddle?" he asked, not taking it.

"Yeah, I just turned his head a bit and grabbed it. I was lucky he wudn't standing on it—why?" I was still holding the coiled rope out to him.

He shook his head, chuckling, then dismounted and came to where my horse stood. Taking the length of rope from me, he looped it around Sarge's neck, tying the excess off just in front of the horse's chest so that it reminded me of a hangman's noose once he'd finished. "That there's a cavalry knot," Zeke said, pointing to it. "I reckon if you can figure out what to do when a horse spooks, you can ride him without being ponied." That day, I went from being a dude to a trainer.

It went on that way for a couple of years. On Saturday mornings and some weekday afternoons, Zeke would take the Old Spanish Trail that passed through our place, turning off on the lane beside the ranch house before he tied Copy and any other horse to the ancient hitching post just outside our yard. Sometimes he'd call before he came over, often he'd simply show up on our front porch, always asking the same question: "Kate, you up for a ride?"

These invitations and the blessings they brought—that increased familiarity with horses, their varying traits and temperaments—comforted and calmed me as I found my way through the usual awkwardness of adolescence. I soon discovered that measuring moods was not only effective as I moved from one working with one mount to another, but also as I tried to successfully steer my way through social endeavors, especially when it came to adults. My father, for instance, was always tense after his daily commute, but now, if I paid attention to his tone of voice and body language, I could predict when the time was right to ask him for something I wanted and therefore, accomplish my mission of the moment. My parents thought I had become more caring and sensitive; in truth, I'd only wanted to avoid being injured.

Either way, it worked with both the horses and the men I knew.

I often wonder what else I might have learned from Zeke if my family hadn't sold the ranch and pulled up stakes, then moved across the country just as I entered high school. Before I left, Zeke and I had one last ride together. I wasn't yet fourteen, but we'd been working together for almost three years. He knew me better than I knew myself.

"I know it'll be hard for you," he confided after we'd turned our horses loose for the day. "Your parent's aren't horse people, and up there they'll be townspeople."

"They got stables in Orso," I said, repeating what my father had said as I watched our mounts kick up their heels in the pasture, now sold.

"Not in your own backyard, they don't," he reminded me, squinting from the glare. "Anyway, it costs money to board a horse, even if you do your own feeding."

“Maybe I could get a job.”

“When you’re older, sure,” he admitted. “A job and a car so you won’t have to have nobody else drive you around.”

“Two years,” I shook my head, facing the facts. “What am I supposed to do until then?”

“Well, I’ll tell you,” he began, thumbing the brim of his hat so that it stood straight up, open to possibilities. “Don’t sell your saddle. Store it wherever you have to—out of the weather, the snow and whatnot—but don’t sell it. And when they ask you what you’re planning on doing with it, just look ’em dead in the eye and say, ‘I’m saving it until I get me a horse to put under it.’”

I laughed at the logic of it. “Sound’s like a plan.”

“Good.” He smiled, satisfied, and lowered his voice. “You do that, Kate, and don’t forget me.”

I wouldn’t forget him in the years I spent living outside Texas, five before I returned to see another crop of Copy’s spring foals. Another ten had come and gone when we got the call from a dear neighbor that Zeke had been thrown off a horse into a trailer head first and wasn’t expected to survive. He did, but the injuries left him dazed, frazzled and unsure of himself; Buddie Jo caught him slinging chicken feed to Copy one day, feed with supplements in it that could have killed his favorite horse. She decided to ship the old stallion to her son’s place in Montana, then began selling the rest of their herd.

Losing his horses was the last straw for Zeke, and something inside him

descended into darkness. Soon, Zeke lost the ability to drive, to reason, to remember. His neurologist was convinced that the head injuries had somehow triggered the onset of Alzheimer's disease and dementia, triggering violent mood swings and emotional outbursts from a man whom people had loved for his good humor, his even temper. Buddie Jo took an early retirement in order to be with him fulltime as he followed her through the rooms of the farmhouse like a new puppy, afraid of losing his way in an alien world.

These facts I'd collected through the years away from home, stowing them in my subconscious as I made the decision to return for a visit, to see how or if I could help Buddie Jo and the man that had meant the world to me. I caught up with them in the foyer of our old church in Liberty one steaming East Texas Sunday in June 2002.

"Hello, Buddie," I said, hugging her, eyeing Zeke at her elbow. "You're looking well."

"And so are you. How's your mother?" In catching up with Buddie, I looked at Zeke, marking how his expression had changed from that of good-hearted rambling man to an innocent clinging to security, hesitant but willing. Buddie Jo was his only lifeline.

I finally turned to him, plunging in. "How are you, Zeke?"

He half-smiled, nodding, then turned to Buddie Jo for context. "This is Kate," she said softly. "She was our neighbor," she concluded, assured him as she apologized to me. "It's his Alzheimer's—he doesn't remember."

"That's all right," I said, talking through the lump in my throat as I extended my hand to him. He squinted at it a moment, then shyly smiling, he took my hand and

shook it.

“I’m pleased to know you.”

Melvin Giles

M.G. isn't perfect, my father said.

But I was a believer

Even while

He owed us thousands,

And he'd stepped out on his wife,

And she was the one with the steady job,

But he couldn't shake booze.

On our last day together,

M.G. told me not to forget him.

How could I?

Salted and peppered by six decades, he understood

Horses, cattle, land, history, people (except himself),

Life as he had worn and lived it—

In pearl button shirts and straw hats.

A sunspotted sage, smiling in every season,

That old man shared all that he knew with me:

Handling of horses,

Measuring moods and men,

Giving godliness—

A charity of trust and second chances—

Offerings to prodigals.

The goodness in him, I remember

Now that he's forgotten.

CHAPTER V

FRECKLES AND GRIEF (1993)

Denial

“Well, Kate, how d’you like him?” Zeke grinned down at me on the fidgety little spotted horse from his saddle, knowing the answer. He was riding Bogey, a Missouri Foxtrotter with a toe pick problem: Bogey tripped over nothing at all.

“I like him. He’s got more spunk than Pal, that’s for sure,” I said, thinking about my old pony, now gifted to my cousins and living on three hundred acres near Beaumont, growing fat and sassy. I’d been riding horses in training with Zeke for a few years, feeling my way along as a rider, easing into training with each separate head case Zeke took on—at least, the ones he let me handle. Some I rode with Zeke leading me along so that the horse wouldn’t break lose into traffic or the pastured herd we rode through, like the one I was riding now.

“Some of that is nervous energy you can ride out of him—the rest of it’s just *him*.” Zeke shifted in his saddle as his Bogey struggled to keep pace with the quickstepping running walk set by my much shorter horse as he strained at the lead rope that held him back. A spotted saddle horse, Zeke had called him, a newer breed which combined horses of color—mostly Tobiano and Overo pintos—with gaited horses: Tennessee Walkers, Missouri Foxtrotters and a few Rocky Mountain horses. Basically, the registry was a catch all for any horse with color that also happened to be gaited—that is, possessing at least one variation on a smooth, running step.

But this horse’s coat color was completely hodge podge and looked like it had

been put together by a committee, thin and rangy even in the autumn chill. “What’s his name, anyway?” I asked, straightening my scarf and squaring my black buckaroo hat with my free hand.

“Freckles,” Zeke said. “Find a horse with color and mottled skin like that, nine times out of ten, his name’ll either be something like Freckles or Oatmeal—hey, hey,” he chided Bogey, tugging at the reins to keep the horse’s head up as he tripped once again.

“At least the name fits,” I said, thinking about how the spots didn’t. Instead of a consistent base color like most Pinto or Appaloosa horses—black on white, for example—Freckles was, at best, a shade of red roan. Secondly, his spots were all different sizes, some smaller like that of an Appaloosa’s rump blanket, others large and patchy like a Pinto; in addition, he had two white socks on the front and full white stockings on the back. On top of that, the skin surrounding the fleshy parts of his body—eyes, nose, underbelly, tail end—were speckled pink, white and black, his mane and tail thin. This horse was far uglier than cute.

“Just remember,” Zeke said, reading my thoughts. “You can’t ride color. Or height. Anyway, he’s a good little horse; I had you in mind when I picked him up, seeing as you’re minus a mount.”

“Preciate it.”

While Zeke was the sharpest horse trader in the county, I also knew he was honest about the horses he bought and sold: he guaranteed them sound at the time of sale, and he also promised to tune them up—or ride any remaining bugs or bad habits

out of them—within the first thirty days. With that in mind and the fact that we were near neighbors, old friends and members of the same congregation, I asked the golden question. “What’ll you take for him?”

Zeke thumbed the brim of his hat back from his forehead. “Well...I’ll tell you,” he began, “I reckon I could let that little horse of yours go for \$800; it’s what I paid for him—I’d like to get my money out of him, at least.”

“I don’t blame you.” The horse had slowed some, not quite ambling along, his gait still smooth as glass as he kept popping his head, fighting me for more rein. “He likes to be out in front, doesn’t he?”

“Sure,” Zeke said laughing, “he’s got that little man syndrome—he’s at the bottom of the pecking order with most other horses because of his size, but if he can out gait the rest of them, he still feels like the leader of the pack. He’ll go all day, too,” he assured me. “These smaller crosses are funny that way: not much size, but they make up for it in endurance.”

“He’s gonna need it, keeping up with that pair of legs you’re riding,” I smiled, settling in to the feel of the horse, his quirky step, the toss of his head.

“He ain’t exactly falling behind now. Easy, son.” Zeke said to Bogey as the horse stepped around an ice-encrusted mud puddle, then went back to business. “Think your dad’ll go for it?” Zeke asked.

“I don’t know—it dudn’t make much sense for me to keep patching my old tack if he won’t buy me another horse.” I’d sent the saddle to Bingham Feed and Seed the summer before to have it cleaned and oiled; the old leather was so cracked and creaking

that I wasn't sure how much longer it would hold up, anyway. "Dad told me the other day, 'I bought you your first horse. Are you expecting me to continue to finance your habit?'"

Raising his eyebrows, Zeke chuckled. "I could hear him saying that. Still, we didn't do so bad last time—you had Pal for how long?"

"Five years, give or take." Back when I was seven, Zeke had received the green light from my father and began hunting for my first pony. He had been at the sale barn on a Halloween night when a palomino pony, ridden by three kids in costume, caught his eye. He brought him home and surprised me with him.

"What'd we buy him for, a hunnerd dollars?"

"One-fifteen," I reminded him.

"Well, I'd say you got a lot out of a hunnerd and fifteen dollars over five years."

He wasn't kidding. In addition to being ridden almost daily by myself, Pal—the squat little Halloween present—had been a frequent attraction at birthday parties and church picnics; usually, he'd behaved himself. I thought of him fondly enough to hope that he'd enjoy having plenty of acreage to graze and cows to chase on the Franklin family hay farm even though he'd tossed me off more than any other horse I'd ridden, the old bugger.

With Pal gone, my attention turned to my horse problem and the request for a new mount: a request, I was sure, that would be denied. "Everything boils down to money with my dad," I said finally. "He probably won't let me buy another horse until I can afford to either buy it or feed it on my own dime." True though it was, the prospect

seemed dim for a twelve-year-old with no immediate hope of employment, and my babysitting income wasn't regular enough to support any sort of equine subsistence.

“Well, we both know your dad's got a lot on his mind right now with your sister and being bishop and all.” Zeke brightened, ready to change the subject. “I'll tell you what though: you keep riding with me, maybe somebody'll want to hire you for your training services one of these days.”

“Think so?”

“Why not? I started out riding colts when I's about your age,” he said, shrugging. “Once you learn how to ground work 'em in a round pen, sack 'em out, then harness 'em up and teach 'em to whoa real good, add your weight a little at a time, nothing to it. Thirty days later, you got yourself a riding horse.”

I thought about that a moment. I didn't have a round pen to work in or even an arena, but I rode well enough that I might be able to make a go of it if my folks would be willing to board horses at Grandpa's old cow barn. “You don't think folks would mind I'm so young?” I wondered.

Zeke confided his most-prized business secret. “Listen, Kate, if you're good enough at this business, folks don't mind nothing. There are a lot of fellers half my age, younger even, doing what I'm doing and probly charging less, but folks still come to old Zeke cause I guarantee my work. Course, it might be awhile before your folks go along with the idea; there is some risk involved.”

“Yep,” I sighed, knowing that since my parents weren't horse people, they didn't appreciate the challenge inherent in working with them but thought instead of liability.

And since Christopher Reeve had taken his fall, my mother had been excessively worried about my forays into the horse world. Lately, she'd been chewing on the idea of making me wear a helmet when I rode, a possibility I loathed—this was Stetson country, after all.

“Anyway, I wouldn't give up just yet—you never know what your dad might say; measure his mood, then ask him. Whoa,” he said as we came around the bend of Ford Avenue, off the gravel of the town and into the soft sand of the county. As we pulled our horses up short, Zeke reached down and unsnapped the lead rope from Freckles's halter. “All right, son,” he said to my horse, “let's see how you travel on your own.” He gathered his own reins again and looked at me. “Ready?”

I smiled, kissing at the horse and gently squeezing my calves. “Git up.”

Anger

Later, as Zeke turned towards home leading the little horse—his motley back steaming from my saddle and its blankets, even in the October cold—I thought about how I might go about approaching my father. Eight hundred dollars for any sound gaited horse was a deal, I knew, but my dad wouldn't see the bargain, only the price tag. Dad's salary as a roughneck on an Exxon platform out in the Gulf left a few loose ends in our family's finances. Plus, I already had older sisters in college and a brother who needed help financing his own church mission to Ecuador, so I knew a new horse was at the bottom of our family's list of immediate concerns. Stowing away my saddle and accessories in the tack room, I turned the sweat-sodden blankets inside out and prayed that they'd dry before I needed them again, then vowed to ask my father about the little

horse before the day's end.

There was always a woodsy smell to my grandmother's old kitchen, like someone had set a stove out under the trees somewhere instead of enclosing it. I loved entering on cold days like this one, wiping my boots before removing them and stepping past the screened and wooden doors towards the old propane heater, letting the warmth hit me like a blast from a semi on the highway.

"How'd it go?" My mother said, noticing my smile and apple cheeks, ripe with the early evening frost. The fire in the propane heater reflected off the worn wooden cabinets, making the room glow. Mom sat across the ancient table from a man I didn't recognize in a green sweater that might have been cashmere and polished brown loafers, too posh for the ranch and the weather.

"Good. He's got a nice little horse there." I hung up my coat and hat near the heater, wiping at the horsehair on my moth-eaten woolies in vain.

"Kate, this is Marcus Beatty. He used to live down the street from us." There were still Beattys down Ford Avenue, Mormons like us since their grandmother had introduced ours to the Church. With our faith and large families in common, everybody in town thought that we were related; our families couldn't have been more different. Still, none of the other Beattys dressed like this guy.

"How are you?" I asked, shaking his hand.

"Fine thanks—just enjoying your mom's fresh apple butter. You were riding with Zeke just now?"

"Yessir."

“Brave girl in this weather.” He smiled at my mother, his teeth brilliant, his hair perfect.

I thought about that. “Not really. The horse keeps you warm enough.”

Mom laughed, knowing better. “Kate would ride in Antarctica if there were horses and trails through it.”

I shook off the compliment with a smile at my feet. “Is Mindy awake?”

“She should be. Mark just popped in and out—she knew him when she was little.”

“I’m gonna stop in. ’Scuse me,” I nodded at our guest.

“Sure,” he said. I crossed the kitchen, my boots thumping on the hardwood as I passed into the hallway towards the bathroom. I stopped to scrub my face and hands, soaping up to the elbows and letting the serpent of brown water slink its way to the basin. Then I went after my nails with Grandma’s unforgiving wire-bristled brush.

I was right to be vigilant with the dirt and possible germs. Mindy’s white count was so dangerously low that she’d been wearing a surgical mask for the past few weeks even at home. Unable to venture out now that it was flu season, our friends often stopped by to say hello at the door or wave through the window, some of them donning masks as she did so they could sit near her and chat, such as they might.

Mindy had begun to slur her words during the previous May. By July, she couldn’t speak at all. It was the latest injustice dealt to her since she had been diagnosed with brain cancer a year before; it meant that the tumor—which originated in her left cerebral hemisphere, paralyzing her right arm and leg—had crossed over and begun to

invade the right side of her brain. The doctors at MD Anderson had done everything they were able to do, and after rounds of chemotherapy, radiation and surgery, she'd been sent home to die that summer.

She was twenty-two.

My mother still waited for Mindy to be cured by a miracle, but I knew what was coming every time I looked through the French door between our rooms and spied the short mass of dark curls, propped up to survey the sea of linen over her hospital bed. That had been the greatest shock of all: her trademark golden locks were shorn away before her treatment, and in their place had grown this soft, wavy stubble, alien in color.

“Hey, Minz,” I said, pulling up a chair at her bedside. She'd been staring at the TV when I came in, then turned her ocean eyes on me. “Whatcha watching?”

She nodded at the television, mounted on the wall near a window. It didn't take me long to recognize Little Joe and Hoss Cartwright on the screen. “*Bonanza* again, huh?”

She nodded, then pointed to the nightstand. The guessing game had begun.

“Want your water bottle?”

She shook her head.

“Chapstick?” Her lips had dried out from lack of use.

Another head shake followed, with a more urgent wave of the hand.

“Notebook?”

Bingo—a smile.

I handed her the notebook and pen. “Guess you could have written down those

things, anyway.”

With it on her lap, she looked puzzled. Lost—I’d seen that look more and more lately.

“*Bonanza*, remember?”

“Ahh,” she managed. It was about the only thing she could say anymore.

Steadying the notebook on her thigh with her useless arm, she began to write in that flouncy, left-handed, Louis XIV courtier script of hers. The girl might have lost all her hair, but she still had style.

It was more than I could say for her room at present. She shared the sickroom suite—really a mother-in-law apartment—with Grandma, our mom’s mother, who cooked her own meals on a hot plate near the sink in the corner. The counters were covered with pill bottles, a blender and a case of vanilla Ensure—Mindy had recently been equipped with a stomach tube. With the well wishes lining the walls and the stuffed animals sent from the florist, the room would have looked and smelled a bit like an old folk’s home if it hadn’t been for the huge bay windows on three of the four walls; it was utilitarian, but at least it was well lit.

Finished, she nudged the book towards me, and I read the two words that had been the cause of all the fuss.

“‘Michael Landon’?”

At that, she sighed dreamily, letting her eyes roll back a little as she batted her lashes at the mention of his name, then smiled.

“Oh I know,” I confided seriously. “I’ve often wondered if it was wrong to be in

love with Pa Ingalls on *Little House* after wanting to be Laura.”

Hooting at that, she laughed and slapped her knee with her good hand.

“He was okay in *Bonanza*, too—all brave, young and handsome, and a lefty like you. Too bad Adam Cartwright left—he had that black Irish thing going.”

Frantically, she grabbed for the notebook again, desperate to trap a new thought before it escaped her. I stood, craning to see the words she wrote: “Like his singing.”

“I’d forgotten Adam sang. It only added to his aura.”

She nodded, scribbling again on a new line. “New little horse?” She’d been watching

“Yep. Zeke says he picked him up with me in mind. D’you see him through your window?”

A nod. More scribbling. “Ask Dad yet?”

I rolled my eyes, sighing. “What d’you think?” I tried to turn back to Little Joe’s wooing of some girl who’d sure as shooting end up buried and blessed on set by the end of the episode (the Cartwrights’ love interests never lasted long), but Mindy’s unrelenting stare wouldn’t let me.

“What?” I demanded.

She shrugged, but kept staring.

“You know how he is.” I folded my arms and shoved my sock feet under the edge of her quilt, a hand-made patchwork consisting of squares made in the old tradition still kept by the women of our faith. At many of their women’s meetings, this sisterhood—women over eighteen, the members of the Relief Society—would set up a

quilt on stands at the back of the room before the meeting began; as the meeting went on, different women would venture to the back of the room, usually to tie the quilt—that is, stitching the top and bottom together, turning it as they went. But Mindy’s quilt was special: instead of simply tying a quilt for her, the women of our ward had each made her own square; then, they’d stitched the work together, reminding Mindy and anyone who saw the quilt of our connection to each other, especially as sisters, daughters of God.

“If I say anything to him about the horse, he’s gonna think I’m talking it up to him,” I said, returning to the trouble with Dad. “He doesn’t care that I’ve outgrown pal—Dad’s no horseman. All he cares about anything is what it’s gonna cost him. He never talks about anything else.”

Then came another scribble. “Never know,” she wrote, and then, “Dad loves you.”

“He says so. But I hate that everything has to be his way. It’s not even worth bringing it up unless I want to bow down to him.”

She rolled her eyes. “Too dramatic. Good man.”

I softened, “I know—he’s in there somewhere. I just don’t know how to ask him.”

She thought for a moment, then wrote her advice. “Straight out.”

Bargaining

This insight was the last bit of wisdom Mindy offered. She’d pegged Dad to a T; he was definitely a shoot-from-the-hip kind of guy, a trait he’d helped refine in the rest

of us. I took it that day, and I told our father about the horse, not how Zeke had been looking for a mount for me, but instead that Freckles was a steal at \$800. We'd be buying him at cost; I figured a bargain hunter like Dad couldn't pass that up.

I was wrong.

"Eight hundred dollars? Do you have eight hundred dollars?" The ice of his blue eyes drilled through me.

"No sir."

"You got a job?"

"No sir." I knew that now wasn't the time to mention the business proposition I'd discussed with Zeke.

"No, you don't. And you got no way to get one and no way to feed or maintain this horse even if you had a way to buy it. And if Zeke's gonna fill your head with ideas of how your folks can buy you whatever you want, then maybe you just oughta stop riding with him."

Obviously, I'd misread his mood; my blood chilled at the thought of having to give up riding with Zeke. I knew I couldn't make Dad understand, so I backed down instead of pursuing the argument.

"Sorry—I won't ask again."

And I didn't. Zeke still had me ride the horse as the fall frosts came, stepping through its hoary ice as he and I and sometimes his clients rode trails through the backwoods, the hollers, steeps and prairie of the coastal plain. He'd been right about the Freckles's energy level—he was always spunky, especially on these cold mornings when

our horses had to work extra hard to warm themselves against the chill. Gradually, he was settling down, growing as comfortable with me as I had with him. He still tried to break free of the pack we rode with, even if it meant only passing Zeke's horse du jour.

Around about this time, I met one of Zeke's clients, a single lady from Houston named Karen. She was without family and other hobbies, so even though it was over an hour's drive from her home to Zeke's place, she came to Dayton every weekend.

Sometimes, we rode together.

"How are you liking Mr. President?" I asked once, nodding at her gaited Pinto, another Spotted Saddle Horse and much more handsome than Freckles. "He seems to be giving you less grief these days."

"Oh," she said, laying a hand across her heart. "Zeke is a miracle worker. Prez's so much more sure of himself, he's not popping his head, he's not spooking at every shadow on the road..."

I smiled, knowing what a basket case the horse had been before the thirty day run with Zeke. "You sound pretty pleased."

"I am! You have no idea."

"Oh, I do—I rode him the day after you dropped him off."

She regarded me, arching an eyebrow. "You rode him?"

"Yes ma'am. Zeke ponied me around the first couple of miles, but after that, he started to mind his manner. He's not a bad horse, just young's all."

"I'm glad to hear it...even if it *is* from someone who could be my own daughter."

I was afraid I'd gone too far, made her feel inadequate as if Mr. President was too much horse for her. "Oh, it's nothing—I've just been using a few of Zeke's tricks on him."

I shouldn't have worried.

Karen only laughed. "You just be sure to tell me what they are," she said, and winked.

We passed by the window of the sickroom as we came through the lane and out toward the back pasture. I halted a moment and waved, thinking that Mindy might be able to see us if she were indeed awake. A slow raise of the hand from the far side of the white room confirmed it to me.

"Friend of yours?" Karen asked.

I nodded. "My sister. She's the only person I know that's more horse crazy than I am. She's always been allergic, though. It complicates things."

"Is that why she didn't come with us today?"

"No ma'am. She's bedridden."

She gasped. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

I shrugged, smiling. "It's not your fault—I don't mind talking about it. She's got a brain tumor, and it's left part of her body paralyzed, so she can't exactly sit a horse anymore. She's only gotten to ride once since she's been sick—we had a church picnic down at the Beatty's this past June, and she took a turn on that little mare of theirs."

Karen squinted, trying to remember the horses we'd passed down the road. "That little sorrel one? Dolly?"

“That’s the one. She’s always been ornery as a mule with me. Really stubborn—tried to bite my boot anytime I asked her to get going. But that day, she rode like a dream.” I couldn’t help but smile at my favorite moment of that day: sitting under the carport at the Beatty’s place, resting a moment after a game of tetherball with my younger brother, sipping an Orange Crush. Down the lane came Mindy on Dolly, somehow hanging on to the saddle horn, her useless arm bashing against her thigh as Dad jogged in front of the red mare, trotting her along. Several times, he’d looked back to make sure she was still there.

“Well,” Karen said as the summer’s image shimmered and vanished in my vision, “I hope she gets to ride again someday.”

Politely, I smiled at the thought, knowing it would never happen.

After my talk with Karen, I had begun to wish that all of the problems in my life were as easy to handle as Mr. President’s idiosyncrasies had been. With him, I’d had to fight a bit to get him to come around, but he was making progress, and Karen could see it, although it wasn’t as dramatic yet as it would be after more long rides and sweaty saddle blankets. I’d seen for myself that change was work.

There were other things, greater priorities in my life that I desperately wanted to change but had no idea how to solve: my family’s lack of money, my sister’s lack of time, and, although I didn’t want to admit it, the gap between myself and my father. I suppose that’s why I fell in love with training horses: at their roots, the catalysts for equine behavior were usually simple. A horse might toss his head, for instance, because the bit in his mouth isn’t sitting correctly or perhaps is too severe in its design; he might

even need his teeth floated (trimmed) or if there's a wolf tooth present, removed. But even if you have to hunt for it, there's always a reason why.

But within my family, there were no such luxuries. There was no direct cause behind my sister's cancer. There was no particular reason why I couldn't talk to my father beyond keeping the peace with pleasantries. Nothing I did seemed to change these two greatest sources of unhappiness. So it went throughout the fall. Soon the sweet gum maples and live oaks were as naked as my hope for the two things I wanted most: Mindy's health, and much farther down on the list but still important to me, a horse of my own.

By Thanksgiving, Mindy was fading fast, shifting through stages of consciousness, her breathing now a death rattle. Her congestion grew so severe that Hospice sent over a suction machine since she couldn't effectively clear her own throat. It was, I suspect, the last option available to us short of putting her on a respirator or ventilator, a measure she'd been opposed to all along.

December 12th was a Saturday. I was supposed to have gone to my friend Ginger's twelfth birthday party, but I'd caught the flu the Thursday before and was still fighting a fever that morning. Dad, a gun enthusiast since he saw his first western, had ventured into Houston to attend a gun show with a friend from church, my little brother tagging along. At home, only the women remained: Mom, Grandma, Mindy and me.

I sat in my bed, dozing and reading, listening to life as it lingered out of the new room, trying to imagine what my sister was clinging to. She'd gone through all the rites required by our faith for secure passage into the next world. Over the past year, she'd

been to the temple, made covenants to consecrate her life and living to God, talked to the bishop—who also happened to be our dad, leader of the local congregation—about whatever few loose ends she still wanted to tie up, any last minute burdens to toss out. All she had left was to wait, to *endure to the end*, as we say. And by December, she was easing out of endurance.

To this day, I can't understand how anyone who would approve a stomach tube for a patient would still expect that patient to swallow her medication. For Mindy, it was a death sentence. Hearing her choke that Saturday morning, I leaped out of bed and into the sunlit sickroom.

Even now, with my vision whitewashed by the passage of time, nothing can smooth the indelible image of my sister's last moments. My grandmother had been administering pills to her when one had caught in Mindy's throat, causing her body to convulse reflexively, each jerking motion more violent than the one before. After nursing two other invalids—our great-grandmother and our grandfather—Grandma was focusing on the task at hand, trying to suction out Mindy's throat with the machine that Hospice had sent us. But the machine wasn't working.

Mindy was dying.

I ran through the house to find my mom sweeping the driveway and called to her. As Mom ran to help, I spotted Zeke and Karen, nearing our house on horseback.

“Zeke!” I screamed between sobs. “Mindy's choking!” Moving faster than I'd ever seen him do, Zeke flew off his horse like a calf roper, threw his reins to Karen and ran inside, leaving her to wait in the lane outside the fence.

I followed him, watching him throw his hat into the kitchen corner's rocking chair as he made his way to the sick room, thinking what a true gentleman he was to remember to remove his hat in such a crisis. With all his tinkering experience on the farm and in his history of odd jobs, Zeke went to work where he figured he'd be most useful, falling to his knees in front of the suction machine, desperately fiddling with knobs and hoses and freeing Mom to assist Grandma.

Not knowing what to do, I followed my instincts and ran back into the hallway near the kitchen, then dialed 9-1-1. It had recently been installed in our area, but the operator sounded like a veteran. She asked the usual questions: nature of emergency, victim's age, current situation. Distracted by my adrenalin and the sound of my heart beating in my ears, I still sensed her tone change when I mentioned that Mindy was a cancer patient.

Haltingly, the next question came. "Is there an ADult with you, hon?" she wanted to know, her East Texas accent reaching through my hysteria to catch me by the elbow, willing me to slow down and think.

"Yeah! My mom's here." I wondered why it mattered.

"Does she know that you called us?" the dispatcher asked patiently.

"No—she's in trying to help my sister!"

The instructions came, slowly and deliberately. "Go and get me an ADult, hon. I need to speak with an ADult."

Exasperated, I ran back to Mindy's room yelling for my mother. "Mom! Nine-one-one's on the line! They said they have to talk to you!"

“WHAT!” Mom turned on me, almost spitting with rage. “Go hang up the phone! Mindy signed a DNR—you shouldn’t have called them!”

Suddenly, I remembered the red folder my mother had put before my sister early last summer, just after Mindy’s speech started to slur, her memory to fade. Mom had fumbled in explaining it to Mindy, who sat looking puzzled, hurt over having to discuss her own death: a DNR is like a living will, a legal order for medical authorities not to resuscitate an individual. Signing it classifies an individual as *no code*, or in other words, prevents medical personnel from working to save a person’s life.

I knew we were beaten as I returned to the phone, repeating what I’d been told through my desperate tears. “Sorry...my mom says that my sister signed a DNR—I guess I shouldn’t have called you guys.”

“That’s all right, hon,” the woman answered, more patient with me than my mother had been. She must have this before, I thought. Thanking her anyway, I hung up before the line went dead, feeling I had killed my sister.

Dragging my feet, I sought out the sickroom and found Zeke standing near the head of Mindy’s bed, not too near, his eyes brimming. Grandma had gone around to the side near the window to stand beside my mother, who leaned over Mindy’s body, running her hand through the short, dark curls, pressing her cheek to Mindy’s forehead as she sobbed her name over and over, not looking for a miracle now, but calling after her lost child. My sister’s body—seizing with a whiplash effect from her slow suffocation when I’d last entered the room—was mercifully still at last. Mom’s cries gave way to soft whispers as a palpable quiet settled over us, then in us.

Peace filled the room. I wanted none of it.

I followed my feet through the house, past the useless telephone in the hallway and through the kitchen, then down the steps of the porch and into the yard. Barefoot, the gravel bit between my toes as I approached Karen and the two waiting horses.

“She’s gone.” It was simply said. Karen reached out to me, crushing me to her as she cried, two strangers intertwined in an instant.

“I know you’ll miss her, Kate,” she told me as I numbed to the shock of it. “It happens to all of us.”

I fought the urge to push her away, to shove her to the ground, leap on her horse and ride until everyone who knew me had forgotten me, until I could no longer remember my own name or why I was running. I’d find a fresh horse somewhere, get a job, make a new start out West, the way they did in the old days. There was nothing here to hold me anymore, and between prairie grasses and mountainous deserts and endless oceans, I’d find somewhere to belong, a purpose in pursuit of some nameless, greater goal.

For all that, my feet stung with the reality of my lack of preparation, my inadequacy of the moment here in the driveway, before I’d even begun. Wiser now, I made my decision as I left Karen with the horses and passed back through the gate, listening to the stillness of the afternoon. Sooner or later, I would be needed.

Depression

I saw my sister—what was left of her—once more before the funeral. Her body had been stripped of her death clothes, then washed and made decent by an old towel

draped across her bare torso. Zeke's wife, Buddie Jo, had come to help, painting Mindy's finger- and toenails one final time (as she had through Mindy's long illness), then rocking me as I sat and watched Mom and Grandma redress Mindy in her favorite pajamas. Mindy'd ordered them out of her Victoria's Secret catalogue, and like her, they were modest: long-sleeved with a soft floral print and satin trim. She'd said they made her feel like she was on vacation at Club Med, lounging in the pool—a stretch for someone lying in bed for days on end. Thus, we sent her off in style, in clothes that would be cut off her body before it was embalmed, the last of her dignity taken with them.

She was free now.

I wished it was me. The weeks following her death were a blur, a nagging fog that failed to clear. Voices filled the house as neighbors, friends and family came and went at all hours. Our front parlor was brimming with visitors, our freezer with their offerings. I smiled at a few of them, thanked them for coming, slept through the holidays and missed the transition into the new year like a train connection, sitting alone in the empty space as the world and its seasons marched past the sickroom window in a parade of possibilities, none of them my own.

The charming chill of fall had long faded, the sodden stench of winter having taken its place. I went rounds with the flu, pneumonia and mononucleosis relapses before a particular physician diagnosed a chronic illness as my underlying condition, a chink in the armor of my immune system that left me fighting coughs and catarrh as my lungs ached, wheezing under the strain of winter. The thought of choking in my sleep

left me an insomniac; I read books to fill the spaces between dusk and dawn. Since I'd missed too much of seventh grade with sickness and subsequent doctor's visits, I was placed on homebound status for the remainder of the year, adding to my restlessness and reclusion. I studied alone at home, tutored weekly by a woman sent out by the school district whose education was no better than mine and who read far less than I did. But bless her heart, she came, and she tried. Few of my friends made such an effort.

My only rays of respite shone on warm days. Then my mother would consent to allowing me outside to ride with Zeke after being assured that my fragile lungs were encased in several woolen layers. On such days, Zeke never failed to show up on our porch, often trailing the little spotted horse—still unsold—beside him, a souvenir from simpler times.

So it went until Valentine's Day. My mom, devout a believer in wholesome celebrations, gave us little presents for every single holiday long after the time we expected candy hearts or Easter baskets filled with chocolate and that fake grass. She'd get creative about it, buying us new music albums or movie tickets, even specialty foods she usually only bought at Christmas time: bean dip, Cheese Whiz, sugary cereals. My younger brother, Brigham, was already digging into his when I came to the breakfast table; next to my plate, there was nothing. It remained that way even after I handed her the Valentine's Day card I'd made on our computer, addressed to her and Dad.

"Thanks, hon," she said, hugging me. "Dad's gonna let you in on your gift when he gets home tonight."

That was stunning—Dad hadn't been shopping since he married my mother

except for the occasional midnight run to the Stop-N-Go for Sprite when one of us had the flu. He had none of the patience the task demanded: having to hunt for miscellaneous items, waiting in line, cashiers who couldn't make change. Anyway, Mom liked the logistics of planning and purchasing, especially for items not mandated by her grocery list. "*Dad* bought my present?"

"Not exactly—that's all I'll say, so don't ask me anymore," she ordered, sealing the vault but almost bursting with the secret.

Stuck, I pondered her revelation throughout the day as I worked on my algebra homework and did my chores around the house, hiding from the grey weather outside. Why does love's annual monument always fall on the day with the crappiest forecast? Maybe it's because that's when we need love the most, or at least, to be reminded of it.

So it was for me that year. Dad got home at the usual time, ate his dinner and because he had no church duties for the evening, stayed seated at the kitchen table and settled comfortably into the *Houston Chronicle*. I'd stayed behind to clear and wash the dishes, working alongside Mom as usual. She was running the water as I approached her, trying to be inconspicuous.

"Is he gonna give me my present now?" I asked, lowering my voice.

"What?" she asked, turning her good ear towards me. She'd lost more of her hearing after each child's birth, and I was standing on her more-deaf side. Normally, I didn't mind repeating myself, but her tone had ruined my attempt to remain clandestine; Dad's head went up.

"What's going on over there?" he snooped.

I turned back to Mom and mouthed the words: “Dad...my present?”

“Oh.” She hollered over her shoulder and the rushing faucet. “Kate wants her Valentine’s Day present, Daddy, if you’ve got a minute.”

“Yeah—I guess I do,” he said, closing the first section of the paper. Unlike my friend’s fathers, he never read the Sports section. “Sit down.”

I sensed a trap. He never asked us to sit down unless the situation was serious, unless we were in some kind of trouble he’d just found out about or we were about to be. “Okay,” I said, voicing each syllables slowly as I eased a chair up to the table near him.

“So, you like that spotted horse of Zeke’s?” he began.

“Yeah.” Wondering where that had come from, where this conversation was going, I glanced back at my mother, still up to her arms in Palmolive suds where I knew she was straining to hear.

“What?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Yessir. I like him.”

“As much as you did in October?”

I nodded. “Better. I’ve gotten a better feel for him,” I tried to explain.

“Well,” he leaned back in his chair, something he always scolded us for doing, and continued, “it looks as if you can have him.”

Another look at Mom, who’d turned from the sink and was smiling at us.

“Really? When?”

“When you hold up your end which I’m gonna tell you about right now. If you agree to it, Zeke can bring the horse over here this weekend and put him in the lot.”

“What do I have to do?” I asked, trying not to play into his hand too much.

“First of all, you need to write a thank-you note to your benefactor for buying you the horse.”

“You guys didn’t do it?”

“Shoot no. Zeke didn’t either—he wanted too, he told me last fall, but he couldn’t afford it.”

I didn’t question that truth, but I was still confused. “Do I know this person?”

Dad nodded. “You know them. But the identity of the person remains anonymous as a condition of the gift of the horse.” He sat back, folding his arms behind his head as he considered me, his head tilting. “Seems you’ve done all right for yourself. Made an impression, anyway.”

“I’d say,” Mom said, wiping her hands on her apron and pulling up a chair of her own.

“And that’s all I have to do—send this person a thank-you note?”

“No—I said that was the first thing. Second, more important, you need to read *The Book of Mormon*.”

Left behind by the lack of segue between the two previous topics, I squinted at him. “What? I mean, what for?”

“Because Kate, a gift this big, you need to earn,” my mother explained, revealing her part in the plan. “And you’re reading so much now that we want to make sure you’re focused on the right things. First things first.”

“Fair enough,” I granted with a shrug.

Dad grunted. “It’s a sight more than that. We’ll expect you to pitch in for grain when you get a little income. You’re still soaping your tack, aren’t you?”

“Yeah—I need some more saddle soap, though.”

“Buy that first. You keep that stuff well oiled, it ought to last you awhile.” He turned to my mother, who nodded—pleased—and thumbed through the *Chronicle* until he found his funnies.

I nodded, then shook my head, disbelieving. “Oh. May I be excused?”

Dad waved his hand. Meeting adjourned.

Acceptance

While I never thought that Freckles was much to look at, I loved him anyway because he was mine. Skittish at first, he grew quiet under the calm of my touch and the smooth sound of my voice. He came when I called to him, whistling. I’d watch him kick up his heels and fart at the end of a long ride, laughing at him as he shook the sweat from his hide and rolled in the dirt to drive the flies away, the kinks out of his back. I hoped he was happy.

We stood regarding each other one evening in early spring. The humidity had begun to lift as the shadows set in and I leaned over the edge of the gate, listening to the rhythmic chewing as my horse cleaned out his manger, the grain dribbling brown at the edge of his mottled lips.

“He settling in?” My father asked, sauntering towards us from his machine shop, across from the barn.

“Oh yeah. He’s calmed down a bunch.”

“Slimming down, I see, though he’s still eating like himself.”

“Yeah—Zeke put him out to pasture those last few weeks he had him. All that rye grass fattened him up,” I shrugged. “By summer, he should slick up real nice.”

Dad shook his head. “That won’t make him pretty.”

I laughed, shaking it off. “Well, you can’t ride color. Anyway, I don’t care—he’s a good little horse.” I nodded towards the shop where he’d been tinkering with his latest acquisition, a used motorcycle. “How’s that new street bike coming?”

“Pretty good.” He leaned over the top rail and spat, wiping the grime from his mouth with a greasy wrist. “I’m cleaning the carburetor’s all—waiting on another part. Once I get it put back together, it should run all right. I hope.”

“Least you know what you’re doing.”

He raised his eyebrows. “That’s no lie—we’ve been real fortunate not having to pay a mechanic to fuss over all the motors on this place. Can’t say that for vets,” he teased, half serious.

“Maybe not, but I’d take a hay burner over a noisy, stinking machine any day.”

Dad shrugged. “I know you would—to each his own I guess. With me, it’s always been motorcycles, speed in general. Got my first one when I was fifteen; my folks didn’t know I’d been riding my friends’ since I was twelve. They were pretty surprised when we went to buy it and I rode it down the street, took it through all its gears,” he laughed, looking wistful. “An old Indian 215. Cost me \$200.”

“Less than my first horse.”

“Yeah, but it was still a lot back then. A boy my age expected to work about 200

hours to come up with that kind of money.” He smiled, remembering. “I’d head off to the mountains or to the open fields out by San Francisco bay. Kinda saved me, I guess. Before that, I was feeling stifled, craving adventure. My buddy Gary and I even planned to ditch school, travel up to Idaho and live off the land. We had money and supplies saved up. His dad worked for the railroad, so Gary could get passes for both of us.”

Though I’d heard snippets of my father’s less-than-angelic past, this devil-may-care scheme was news to me. “Really?”

“Sure.”

“What stopped you?”

He squinted at my horse, still chomping in front of us, then turned wise eyes on me. “The Lord.”

Knowing his temperament and the fact that he’d been born in covenant—Dad’s parent’s were LDS—his confession nearly made me laugh. “You got religion, huh?”

Slowly, he nodded. “Good thing too. The Lord softened my heart—I still wanted my life to be filled with adventure, but I knew I had to do it in a way that wouldn’t hurt other people—both my folks would have been crushed if I’d left.”

I considered that, knowing that about his parents’ loveless marriage, three decades long. Dad was the oldest son: his mother’s crutch, his father’s whipping boy.

“I knew I’d need a good education to get to where I wanted to go,” he continued. “When I was finally honest with myself, I recognized that I needed more time. With myself and with the Lord. It’s like Paul says about his having fought the fight and kept the faith. When you quit fighting, you’re not keeping the faith.”

“Guess not.” I thought about my sister, the way she passed away more every day through our last year together, her legacy of longsuffering. But there had also been joy, and finally, peace—enough to hold onto.

He hugged me to his side for an instant, his one affectionate gesture. “Keep that in mind while you’re doing your reading. Let’s head home.”

The Sickroom

The whitest and lightest

room in the house

had its own outer door.

Behind us: the Old Spanish Trail,

Ford Avenue in front,

the lane just past the fencerow,

But the road I remember

lies in the room

with views spanning forever.

CHAPTER VI

HORSELESS CARRIAGE (1995)

“Name?”

“Katie Baker.”

“Grade?”

“Freshman, I reckon. I’ve been doing some homeschooling for the past year or so.”

At that, the registrar looked at me over her bifocals. “Where is it you’re from?”

“Texas. Near Houston.” I looked down again at my boots, realizing that I hadn’t seen another pair—nor a tooled belt, nor a cowboy hat—since I’d moved to urban Utah.

“Have you gotten used to our weather yet?” She tried to hide her amusement.

“No ma’am—not hardly.” It was January, and thanks to an after-Christmas blizzard, every surface under the winter sun was encased in ice, from the door handles on my mother’s new Jeep to the school’s numerous parking lots and walkways. There were twenty-two hundred students enrolled in Orso High School, nearly half the population of our town back home—most of them had seen me slip and fall at least once on the ice outside this morning. Not one of them had offered to help—some boys behind me had laughed. A few cliques turned to stare at my boots as I tried not to notice, and I hadn’t even made it to class yet.

“Well, here’s your schedule,” the woman said, handing it over. I tried not to notice her beehive hairdo, thinking that maybe she’d been here as long as the school itself. This was the Beehive State, after all.

“Thank you,” I said, taking the card from her.

“Don’t thank me too much—these are your core classes; they’re required of all freshmen.”

I looked at the card she’d handed me again. “Hang on—you require two social studies and two science classes from every freshman?”

She sighed, clarifying, “Only those coming to us in second semester with no official transcripts for fall classes.”

“Soooo,” I tried to process the bad news, “I’m going to have to make up last semester even though I was homeschooled?”

“You weren’t officially enrolled anywhere,” she repeated. “We’ve no way of knowing what your academic capabilities are.”

“Ma’am,” I tried to stay calm and sound polite, “I can keep up with any kids my age. Isn’t there a test I could take or something—”

She’d begun to shake her head, her eyes closed. “But at least you can wait until summer school to take your additional English and math courses.”

“Do I get any electives?”

“You have PE.”

I tried not to gag as I gathered my books. “Right. Well, thank you anyhow.”

“You bet,” she said, taking the glasses from her beehive again as she turned towards her computer. “Oh, freshman hall is the last one on the left. Mr. Bailey’s room is up the stairs.”

Stairs, I thought. My poor, puny lungs were already burning from the long walk

in the frosted air.

“Just be yourself,” Mom had told me as she dropped me off that morning in the parking lot of the Seminary Building, a Utah novelty. Since so many kids here were Mormon that the state actually allowed a release time period for students to attend religious classes just off campus—in this case, across the parking lot from the school. Knowing this, Mom’s advice seemed even more confusing: all my life, the fact that I was LDS made me stand out at school but here in Orso, it made me the same as ninety-five percent of the student body. For me, it was natural to keep the two halves of my life separated into secular and spiritual.

But who was I now? Which me was I supposed to be?

My parents had no helpful advice to offer. Right now, I was a fourteen-year-old high school freshman girl and cross country transplant, privately fighting a chronic illness made worse by a Utah winter and depression brought on by homesickness. Added to the fact that I had sold my horse and couldn’t ride anymore—the thing I loved most—my assorted issues only compounded my identity crisis. Before this, I’d at least been able to talk to one of the women in my closely-knit world for direction: my sister, my grandmother, my mother. But in the past year, I’d lost my sister to cancer, my grandmother to a retirement home and my mother to the distractions involved in relocating our family.

At home, I was alone, surrounded by people who, whether they’d admit it or not, felt as displaced as I did. In our little house in west Orso—a quarter of the size of our old ranch house with no open land and on the opposite side of town from where the

popular kids lived—no one had found his feet yet except my father, who loathed the inability to adapt. The move had intensified his survivalist tendencies; he was tired of rough necking and wanted the chance to try something new, so he had hired on with a risk management firm in Salt Lake City, buying a horse and starting work before the rest of us had even arrived in Orso.

“Isn’t this the perfect size for us?” he’d said as we’d hauled in the first of the boxes out of the U-Haul. Several of the men helping us from the local LDS ward—one of hundreds in the area, I was shocked to discover—had already slipped through the snow-slushy mud while lifting and moving our heavy furniture and major appliances.

“Oh, I just love it, Daddy,” Mom agreed, pecking the old man on the cheek as she went to organize the kitchen.

I dreaded what was coming as he turned next to me. I wasn’t cut out to be a yes-man.

“How do you like it, Kate?”

I looked at the squat little brownstone duplex. For now, I had space in the basement to myself—dimly lit, but there was a TV, bathroom and a bedroom of my own. That could change, I knew; Dad was thinking about renting out the basement as a separate apartment, a move that would cut into our shrunken square footage by another half. But it wasn’t a hole in the wall like some of the places I’d seen in our new neighborhood, so I tried to be kind. “It’s nice.”

“Nice,” he repeated, displeased. “Come talk to me for a second,” he said, laying a hand at the back of my turtleneck and walking me over to a bare corner of the yard

where he wouldn't make a scene. "Mama and I worked hard to find this place. You should be glad you have a roof over head—shoot, it's paid for!"

They hadn't had to worry about that much. Our family had owned the ranch outright; when Dad and Mom sold it, most of the proceeds went into buying this place.

"I said it was nice, Dad." I had been taught to be honest, but even I knew that honesty wasn't always a welcome guest.

He could tell I was fudging and didn't like the way I'd repeated myself. "You'd better shape up," he said, pointing a squat finger at me. "That attitude of yours isn't gonna win you any friends."

I nodded—the response he expected—staring past him into the wool collar of his vintage flight jacket, unaware of how prophetic he could be.

Orso High, I soon discovered, was about like any other average American high school. There were kids from the rich and poor sides of town, a few places in the middle. The students were mostly white, with a good number of Latinos and Asians thrown in. Also, since Orso was a college town, many of my classmates were the children of professors, a first for me. My mother had never finished college—meeting and marrying Dad in her freshman year, then staying home to raise her kids—and back home in Dayton, her academic situation—as a woman with some collegiate experience and a house full of books—was better than average. Here, there were jocks, of course, musicians, artists, geeks of varying degrees, a few stoners and a goth or two. The crazy thing about it was that every kid I encountered could be classified into more than one social group; there were plenty of athletes who were also musicians and competitive

academically. And there were kids who spoke a second language fluently after having lived in foreign countries; they'd returned to Orso to graduate. To me, everyone worth knowing seemed mentally ambidextrous, ridiculously talented and already booked when it came to friends.

Then there was me: a country girl far from the farm, socially awkward and now, under constant threat of arrest by the fashion police. I didn't care enough about being popular to let clothes or money get to me too much, but I desperately wanted a chance to be on equal footing with my classmates. Unfortunately, most of the other freshmen had been together since elementary, and while I could keep up with them in analyzing *Lord of the Flies* or applying Pythagorean theorem, I was totally unprepared for the social tumult surrounding so many teenagers.

For the first few weeks of school, my classmates sniggered every time I asked or answered a question. At first, I thought it was my accent, but I knew better—Dad grew up in California, so he was always sensitive about his kids sounding too like hicks from the sticks of East Texas. On the other hand, my teachers back home had always expected “Yes ma'am” and “No sir” as a matter of course; if a student didn't follow any comments up with such polite social tags, that individual would be considered cheeky or rude, a kid who hadn't been taught manners. Even my parents often used such language in conversation with people who were elderly or perhaps held some sort of authority that warranted respect.

But in Orso, the opposite was true. Other freshmen laughed because they seemed to think I sounded country or worse, that I was smarting off to the teacher. I could tell

that the teachers weren't used to my manners, either. Trouble was, I knew that if I dropped it altogether, my parents would still be expecting it at home; they set quite a store by politeness. In the end, I decided to try a fifty-fifty split: to forget about my speech at school and remember my manners at home.

There were smaller battles, daily ones I lost to my ignorance of social nuances. One came at a school dance following a basketball game a few months after I had moved in. I met some friends I had made in PE—girls who, like me, were misfits at social grouping. When it was my turn to pay the dance's admission fee, the kid making change looked at my jacket and wouldn't let me in. "Sorry—we're only supposed to let in OHS students."

"I am an OHS student," I tried to tell him. "I'm a freshman."

"Where's your student ID?"

I'd left my wallet in Mom's car and had just enough money to cover the entry fee, with Dad's obligatory quarter leftover in case of an emergency: "Never leave home without enough change to call us," he'd say. But this didn't qualify as an emergency, and anyway, my folks didn't own a cell phone. "I don't have my ID with me, but I am a student here," I confirmed.

"Then where'd you get that jacket?" he demanded, pointing at my coat. It was the same coat I wore to school and just about everywhere else, the only coat in our closet that came close to fitting me and was also warm enough in this weather: my brother's old purple leather letterman jacket from Dayton High School, to which I'd tried to artfully add a few of my own patches and pinned-on choir medals. Up until that

moment, I'd never considered the obvious problem inherent in wearing another school's colors.

Luckily, one of my new friends stepped in—a feisty five-footer named Aspen. “She’s telling the truth; she’s a new student, that’s all.”

The ticket kid wasn’t convinced. “Let’s hear your teacher’s names.” It took another five minutes for me to convince him that I really did belong at Orso High. It took another three years before I began to believe it.

Looking back, I realize that the elements weren’t conspiring against me as I worked through this awkwardness of adolescence. Knowing that I couldn’t change much about my situation killed me again and again as my father and mother quoted Viktor Frankl’s adage from *Man’s Search for Meaning*: that the only thing over which you have absolute control is your attitude. Everyone kept assuring me that I could decide for myself to be happy; my parents, friends and neighbors—basically anyone who could see how miserable I was—told me that I must create, or at least find happiness in my own life by looking for sunshine, then magnifying it, a tall order in the midst of grey winter skies and stormy health.

With the warmth of late spring came a surprising break in the gloom as I rode my bike down into industrial Orso one day, headed towards a feed and tack store we’d driven by a few days before. I hadn’t seen a horse in months since there were no stables anywhere near my neighborhood, and I wouldn’t be able to drive to one for another year, anyway. Besides that, I couldn’t see paying for riding lessons when I already knew enough about horsemanship to work as a trainer. But currently, there was no hope of me

getting any training time in since I knew no one in the Orso horse business and still had nothing but a bike to get around on. I was good and stuck for the time being. As the awareness of my predicament set in, I'd set out for the feed store that Saturday morning, if only to sniff the saddles and remember old times.

With my luck, I should have known better: two blocks away from the tack shop, I rolled my bike through a load of spilled screws, my brakes screeching as I slid over the asphalt on my side, skinning my hands. Surprised that I was still in one piece, I rose limply, like a ragdoll, cursing my luck and the gash where my Schwinn's derailleur had given my leg a bloody hicky. There was no hope of patching the tire, I soon discovered—a 2" screw had welded the tread, Tuffy liner and inner tube to my rim. I'd have to replace the whole rear wheel. I had no money even for a new tube.

I kicked the bike with my good leg and wondered when my luck would change.

"Need any help?" The offer had come from a curly-headed man in a polar fleece vest and jeans, standing just across the street from where I'd landed. His arms were loaded with boxes as he emerged from a brick warehouse.

"Well, sir," I said, shaking the gravel from my jeans and trying to remember my street smarts while my head spun; I knew no one for miles. "I reckon I'll manage." But I knew I was out of options since my leg hurt too much to walk home. "Do you maybe have a phone I could borrow?"

"Sure." He looked over his load, jerking his head towards the door he'd just come through. "That's the office there—can you make it?"

"I think so." Wincing from the pressure on my scraped palms and bruised hip, I

steered my battered bike towards the open door. “Preciate it,” I said, limping past him as he loaded the boxes into the back of a small pickup truck.

“No problem,” he said, shutting the tailgate. “Phone’s on the desk.”

“Thanks.” I pulled my bum leg over the threshold and blinked until I could see through the cavernous dark of the warehouse. I stared into the aging office—several desks deep, all piled with paper and boxes—thinking that it looked like one of those crime scenes where would-be burglars who had come here hoping to find a priceless secret had ransacked the place, leaving the wiring bare out of spite. On top of that, it smelled like burnt sugar. There was a radio playing an alternative rock song from somewhere beyond the sagging stairs in the corner.

“D’you find it?” He yelled a minute later.

“Uh—I wasn’t sure which desk you meant,” I said, not wanting to call attention to the mess.

He didn’t seem to notice. “Let’s see. Oh—I guess I left it over here.” He pulled the phone off of a chair behind the first desk and listened for a dial tone. “Wanted to be able to find it again. Just dial nine first.”

Luckily, Mom was home, but when she asked me where I was, I realized I had no idea. “Um—what’s your address?” I asked the friendly stranger.

“Corner of second east and sixth south,” he told me, looking up from a pile of pink invoices. “Tell her Sparks Candy Company—there’s a sign on the building.”

The street numbering system—every block a hundred—still threw me, but I told Mom the directions, assuring her I was fine once again as hung up the phone, turning on

my toe.

“You can sit while you wait,” he offered. “Just set that stuff in the chair somewhere.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather not bleed on your furniture. You mind if I wash my hands?” I held up my gritty palms.

“Whoa—no kidding, huh? Bathroom’s through that door there.”

I thanked him and began to wade through the hip-deep pile towards the door he’d pointed out, then left it open as I stood picking debris from my palms and letting it run into the sink, the soap stinging the raw sinew.

The man sat at his desk, sifting through leaves of triplicate order forms. “You mind if I use this First-Aid Kit in here?” I called to him, eyeing the box with the red cross; it looked like it’d been around since the Great War.

“Sure—d’you find one?” He sounded impressed more than surprised, then went back to sifting.

“Yes sir.” I rifled through the little generic packages until I found the right-sized bandages and antibiotic cream.

He glanced up at me again as I sat heavily in the chair, eyeing my torn jeans. “That cut on your leg might need some stitches,” he offered, his ear to the phone.

“Oh—it’s smooth and shallow. I’ve had worse cuts than this—I’m not too worried.”

“More bike wrecks?” He smiled.

I shook my head. “Horses.”

“Really.” He didn’t sound interested, but there was nothing else to do, so I spoke again.

“I grew up on a ranch,” I said, noticing the pictures at the side of his desk. In one, he was posing with a small blonde woman. On their laps sat two children, a girl and a younger boy. The other frames held stark black and white faces, careworn and unsmiling. “It ain’t ‘if’ you’ll get hurt, it’s ‘when.’”

“You’re not from here.” It wasn’t a question.

“Texas.”

“I wondered—we don’t get many girls your age passing through this part of town. It’s mostly just day laborers and contractors,” he explained. “A lot of the construction companies in town use this area for housing supplies and that. It’s not as busy as it used to be.”

“I was headed to the feed store when I fell.”

“What for?”

“Nothing. Look around,” I tried to laugh, embarrassed by my homesickness.

“They got a lot of saddles and stuff.”

He smiled. “You made quite a switch coming here. To the city, I mean.”

I nodded. “Wudn’t my decision. It’s nice enough, I guess,” I said, not wanting to sound rude. “You lived here long?”

“All my life—went to Orso High, then the University.”

“You LDS?”

He nodded. “You?”

“Yep.” Another Mormon encounter—we’re everywhere.

“I figured you were, moving to Utah from Texas, but these days you never know—I’m not waiting on them anymore,” he said, hanging up the phone with a bang.

“Your mom’s on her way, I guess?”

“Yes sir.”

He stood up, whacking at his pockets until he heard his keys jingle, then nodded to himself. “Well, I hate to run, but I’ve got some deliveries to make. It was nice meeting you...?”

“Katie.”

“I’m John—John Sparks.”

“I’d shake your hand...”

“No worries,” he said, seeing my hasty bandage.

“Thanks again,” I said, thinking that maybe people here were friendlier than they seemed. “Good luck with your deliveries.” I hobbled out of the office and back into the street.

“You must be lucky. See, I wasn’t supposed to be here today, but my folks are out of town. They own the place, and we’ve been short handed since one of our shop girls quit. My niece, actually,” he explained, rolling his eyes as he followed me outside. “She broke up with her boyfriend and left me in the lurch.”

“Family business?” I wondered.

“Five generations worth. The original Sparks crossed the ocean and the plains carrying his candy molds. He built this building—what’s left of it,” John said, eyeing

the roof as he bolted the door. “The whole thing needs to be renovated.”

“I’ll bet,” I said, thinking about what my mother might say if she ever saw the inside of that office. Renovations? This place needed gasoline and a match.

“Anyway, we’re always short on help—you don’t need a job, do you?” he suddenly asked.

Surprised at his offer, my heart skipped a beat as I thought of having something worth doing after school everyday. “What do you need someone for?” I didn’t know anything about candy; we’d never been allowed to eat much of it.

“You’d just be packaging, mostly. We do quality assurance checks on the candy after we make it, then sort it, weigh it or count it and box it up. Most of our jobs are custom orders, though, and we’re way behind. Christmas is our busiest season, but with summer coming, the amusement parks start ordering batches from us by the dozen. You got a résumé?” he asked, throwing me off again.

“Uh, I could make one.” I still wasn’t sure about the details, but a job was a job, and he hadn’t asked how old I was, so I didn’t have to lie about being only fifteen.

“Mostly, I’d like to have references—you know, just to make sure you’ll show up and not steal anything. You can put your bishop’s number on there.”

I chuckled at the Mormon measure of his humor. “Fair enough. Some of the others might be out-of-state, though,” I said, seeing Mom’s Jeep pull around the corner.

“I don’t mind that—you being raised on a ranch says something about your work ethic, I guess. That your mom?” He waved her over to a parking spot near the building.

“Yes sir.”

“Just call me John.” He said it more firmly now, then jogged towards his pickup. “If you’re still standing, you can start Monday afternoon.”

Mom was just as excited for me as I’d been in relaying the news of my job offer to her; she even forgot about the fact that I’d torn my best pair of jeans. We discussed my newfound possibilities as we drove home.

“And he doesn’t care that you’re not sixteen yet?”

“He didn’t ask, so I didn’t say anything,” I confided. “Anyway, there must be different rules since it’s a family business—he said his niece just quit on him,” I said, wondering if she’d been of working age or not.

“Well, if you work hard enough, he might not worry about it,” she decided. “At least you can ride your bike once you get the tire fixed. It’s not too far, and I don’t mind driving you now and then when the weather’s bad.”

I was sure that she’d be happy about it. With my father, it was another story.

“A what?” he asked, staring at me over his *Deseret News*. I’d waited until after dinner to spring it on him.

“A job. Working down at the candy factory.” I stretched out my sore leg and hip under the table, flexing my foot and settling in deeper into my seat, ready to go the rounds with him on tiptoe if I had to.

“What will the hours be?”

“He didn’t really say, just that I could start Monday if I wanted to. And if I brought him a resume, with references. He said I might put the Bishop’s name down.”

“That’s smart,” Dad relented, still calculating the risk involved. “He the only one

working there?”

“Today he was—he said his folks were out-of-town, and his niece just quit.”

There went the eyebrows I hated. “He say why?”

“She broke up with her boyfriend,” I shrugged.

He lifted his glass until an ice cube fell into his mouth, then began chomping it.

“Dudn’t mean she can’t work,” he grunted.

“That what I was thinking,” I said, eyeing the common ground between us.

He saw it, then bridged it. “You tell him you know how to work?” he wondered.

I shrugged. “Didn’t have to once he found out that I’s raised on a ranch.”

“Guess that’s what he’s looking for then,” he said, standing as he put down his glance with a final thump. He turned towards Mom. “What do you think, Mama?”

“Well,” she said from where she’d been standing at the sink, struggling to hear with her good ear. “I’d say knowing how to work beats being silly about boys.”

I knew I had him then. She and I both did.

“Well, I don’t care,” he said, shrugging his approval as he hitched his belt. “We can fix that tire tonight—I’ll spot you the cost of a new rim until your first paycheck. But don’t ride through that spill of screws again; this time, we’ll line that tread with thicker Tuffies.”

CHAPTER VII

WORKIN' HARD AT HARDLY WORKIN' (1996)

After school each day for a year and a half, I stepped into the warehouse office of Sparks Candies, hacking my way through the paperwork and ancient underbrush of filing implements, wishing I had a machete handy to make the job easier. Reaching the open breaker box under the stairs on the landing, I hung up my coat, donned my hairnet and penciled in my arrival time before attempting the cavernous stairwell. Dimly lit and steep as any northern slope, the narrow stairs spat me out into the mechanical bone yard on the second floor, strewn with ancient confectioner's tools: sorting trays, copper cauldrons, scales, marble cooling slabs, molds for sugary clear toys—which might be sold as stocking stuffers or the prize of Easter baskets. I could tell I was nearing my desk when the debris turned more organic: stacks of cardboard boxes sporting the company's logo.

There on the uppermost room of the decaying factory, I'd reach my chairless table and clear away the unrelenting film of sugary dust from the worn steel, reminding myself that I only had three more hours and several hundred jumbo pops to go before I could tackle Geometry at home.

But where was it all going? For more than a year, I hadn't known. Sure, I wanted a horse, and having sold Freckles back in Texas, I had savings enough to buy one. Even still, I knew that my expenses wouldn't stop there: there'd be feed, hay, vet bills and farrier fees since most of the horses here were shod to protect their feet from Rocky Mountain soil. Add to the predictable fees the inevitable ones: the nearest stable

was a hilly ten miles away, and while I didn't mind biking that far in the summer time, it seemed a tiresome distance on a daily basis and completely out of the question once the snow began to fall. Plus, I had no way to trailer a horse out of town to do any real riding. So even though I was now gainfully employed, I was still stuck.

What I needed before I found a horse, I decided, was a reliable way to get around Orso—and hopefully out of it—even in winter's slush. Buying a car posed its own set of problems. The foremost was maintenance: my folks would never pay for insurance or gas, which meant that while I might have enough to buy a used car of my own, I would end up working just to keep my car running, a prospect I didn't find promising. What I was looking for, I realized, was freedom, and owing anybody anything would only leave me bound.

Circumstances changed during the fall of my junior year when I was finally allowed to partake of Orso High's endless list of elective classes. I chose two that semester that I'd always been interested in: Vet Tech, an obvious choice for a displaced farm girl, and Art. I loved the supplies more than I liked the subject itself—all those perfect sets of paint and pastels and Faber pencils made to match every color of the sunset. Although it soon became evident that I wasn't much of an artist, class was made more interesting after I discovered that my teacher, Carolyn McNally, was a kindred spirit.

She wasn't flashy like some of the art teachers I knew—Dayton High had one that dressed up like Freda Kahlo one year, unibrow and all. But Mrs. McNally had been *everywhere*, and the walls of her classroom were filled with pictures of famous

destinations that she'd taken herself, then enlarged. The Parthenon, the Coliseum, several pyramids and Turkish bazaars came to life with the help of her keen eye and supershot professional camera, an aptly-named Canon with a lens longer than my arm.

"Is there anywhere you haven't been?" I asked her one day, staying late to wash out paintbrushes.

"Of course! I'd like to make my way through Africa sometime. It's a bit tricky traveling there with high school students, though."

"Students?"

"Every summer I take a trip through a student-based tour company—Intrepid Tours. If I get enough students to sign up, they write off my ticket."

I was intrigued. "So, how do you pick who goes?"

She shrugged. "Any student who can pay their own way can go—as long as I can trust them."

"Where are you going this summer?"

"England, France and Spain."

England, France and Spain. Like bibbity-boppity-boo or abracadabra, they were magic words that burned in my imagination, visions that danced and shimmered as I counted batch after endless batch of lemon meringue then peanut then watermelon suckers over the monotonous noise of the factory's sucker machine and through the changing chill of seasons, checking every blessed one for a misshapen head or broken stick before I plopped them in bags—forty at a time—and shoved them into boxes piled high on the Sparks Candies shelves where they waited until John got around to

delivering them. It was December now, and the sucker machine was running at all hours to keep up with the orders, along with the chocolate machine and the seasonal hand-dipping staff downstairs. *England, France and Spain*: those three words, those three countries were all I had to guard against isolation and depression, against boredom and the blandness of overtime in Orso.

I'd always been fascinated by England, with all its history and horse culture—knights were the predecessors of cowboys, of course, keepers of the chivalric code. And I'd taken French through the summer and now the fall, so visiting France was the real test: a chance to try out what I'd learned in language class. I didn't know much about Spain except that there were castles there, and it was where Crusaders first brought their Spanish barb horses—the ones you see in tapestries with the powerful arched necks and short backs—against the Arabians, small, fleet-footed horses bred in the desert.

Mystical Spain was gravy; I drooled over it, daydreaming.

A noise from the room beyond me interrupted my fantasy, spooking me into burning my finger as I went to seal another bag of suckers.

"Frick," I muttered, sliding the plastic glove off my hand and away from the melting material. I sucked on my finger to put the fire out, then went to investigate. At the end of the room in the roaring, bellows-fed fireplace, a large cauldron hung from a spit arm, its contents bubbling to a sugary boil, waiting to be spun into taffy, then fed into the jumbo pop machine by John or his nephew Tony, each wearing leather gloves to guard against scalding. With one eye on the cauldron, John sat in his apron and today's flannel shirt, surrounded by a dozen fifty-pound bags of Imperial sugar, cracking open

metal molds and trimming the clear toys from them. I welcomed the warmth of the fire and rubbed my arms against the cold as I smiled at him—I wasn't allowed to wear my winter coat upstairs. Regulations.

“Need any help?” I said.

Grinning, he looked weary. “Better not. You've seen your desk, I guess?”

“Uh-huh.” There were trays upon trays of suckers waiting for me, gifts from the sugar fairy and the all-night sucker machine. “Looks like the old boy's been going whole hog for awhile. When'd you fix it?”

Through his hazy fatigue, John had missed my metaphor. “Huh?”

“The machine,” I thumbed in its direction. “It was busted when I left last night.” Today, I'd hoped to be helping with clear toys or even the dippers downstairs, watching their expert fingers work under a chocolate puddle as they whacked the excess chocolate from a candy center, then set the hand-dipped chocolate on a cooling rack to drip dry, swirling a tight design over the top of each one to indicate the kind of center inside. I could have watched dippers all day.

At last, John blinked, catching on about the sucker machine. “Yeah—it goes out every year during the rush,” he admitted. “Just out of spite, I guess. Dad and I finally got it going around two last night...or,” he looked at his watch, “this morning.” He rubbed his eyes, still holding on to his pocketknife as he stifled a yawn.

“Your wife must miss you,” I said, with no hope of reprieve from the jumbo pops as I walked back to my overflowing desk and my melted gloves.

He chuckled, the truth of it ironic. “Yeah, she stops by every now and then, just

to remember what I look like.” He yawned again, then blinked and went back to trimming.

I smiled, hoping he’d be careful of his fingers and his knife; he was too sleepy to be working safely. I didn’t know if John had had any say as to his career choice, whether he’d just pursued the family business out of duty or noblesse oblige since he was Ma and Pa Spark’s only son. He had two older sisters—one of them was even named Candy—but neither one seemed particularly interested in the old factory beyond the fact that it offered their kids part-time jobs when and if they wanted them. In John’s case, however, his sugary fate seemed sealed from the time that his ancestor emigrated from England with his confectionary tools in tow.

Dutifully, John had taken up the family cross and studied business at the University, then spent the rest of his life putting up with the rest of the Sparks and the run-down factory. He never said a word against his people or profession, but it was easy to see that while he was kind and generous to his employees, he was unhappy with his state, tied to the outdated methods and endless demands of a job that (his folks thought) he was born to do. Mom said it best after talking with him one day while waiting for me to finish my shift: “I wonder what John would’ve done if he’d had a brother?”

While John might have secretly hated the cards he’d drawn in life, at least he’d been lucky in love. He’d met Marie in college, and I could tell she was crazy about him by the way that she dragged her heavily-pregnant self and two golden kids up to visit John while he hurriedly ate the lunch she’d packed for him. Normally, she’d have been down in the basement helping with the Christmas rush—which began in October—but

John was making sure that this year, she took the holiday season more easily.

Just for kicks, I thought about their possibilities outside of Orso and the family business. I could picture them running a ranch, their determination and months of overtime paying off in ways that were appreciable to others, ways to be admired. With his quiet manner and easy temperament, I knew that John would've made a good horseman. He reminded me of Zeke, but with more shyness, less decisive, lacking none of the grit. He was younger, too—I wondered what it would be like to play with his sandy curls, then had to laugh at how hard up I was for somebody to flirt with.

I counted boxes and filled a few orders that afternoon, dreaming of my trip and the possibilities of meeting a nice boy in Europe, if there was such a thing; Dad seemed to think there wasn't. But Mom had gone with me to the orientation meeting on the summer trip back in October. Since then, we'd perused the brochures sent by the tour company, pouring over the agenda and optional excursions together. She'd never traveled but always wanted to and loved the logistical part of planning it all. In moments like these, I discovered that I'd inherited her dreaming and my father's drive.

"You're so lucky, Kate," she'd told me one evening as we sat in the freshly scrubbed kitchen with the dishes drying on the drain board.

"I've always wanted to go. In school, I had a pen pal in Rome and wanted to meet her. 'Course, meeting Rossano Brazzi wouldn't have hurt me any, either."

I knew who he was thanks to Mom's official Rogers and Hammerstein collection. He'd played Emil de Becque in *South Pacific*, crooning over Mitzi Gainer as a lonely bachelor, wanting to hold on to her and the love they'd found. I didn't know

anyone as glamorous or as beautifully-voiced as Mom's favorite movie star, but sometimes while watching my parents or couples like John and Marie, I could tell that love—the longsuffering, unconditional kind—was worth holding out for and hanging onto. Good men looked hard to find, not to keep.

“What do we need?” John asked as he put his knife away and dropped the clear toy into the pocket of his apron. Then, he checked the temperature on the cauldron before he turned to the steel table in front of the fire. His posture reminded me of a general, standing in a War Room.

Scrabbling out of my fantasy, I reached for my “Backordered” list hanging on the wall near the shelves. “One chocolate cherry, one cookies-and-cream, two chocolate mint and one peanut. Oh, and Janine called yesterday from Pebbles in My Pocket,” I remembered suddenly, noting it on my list. “They're out of peppermint and orange dreamsicle.”

“I better do those first,” he said, pulling a hairnet from his back pocket. “She and Marie went to high school together. If Janine has to wait, I'll hear about it when I get home.”

“Sometime after Christmas?”

“Right.” John took down the heavy work gloves from their hook near the fireplace, then set to work on the boiled sugar, pouring it onto the table and separating the bubbling mass into two large globs, popping any bubbles he found with his spatula so they wouldn't shatter in someone's mouth later—that was the difference between candy making firms like ours and the big time competitors, John had told me: the care

and handling involved. He added a dash of flavoring to both of sugary blobs, then squirt red food coloring to the smaller one; the other one, I knew, would whiten as it cooled, giving the pops that striped peppermint look.

Across the room from each other, we worked silently while Alanis Morissette belted out another man-hating tune on the ancient, sugar-encrusted radio. I stamped my frozen toes against the cold leather of my boots, still counting and bagging suckers while John kneaded the hot sugar into long cylindrical strips of taffy, braiding them together until the product resembled a giant peppermint stick. Soon, he was feeding the mass into the sucker machine, carefully observing the apparatus for any glitches or hiccups while it cut, molded, stamped and inserted wooden sticks into the flavored lollipop heads, then chucked them down a chute that resembled a long hamster wheel made of wire mesh. The wide wheel spun on, cooling the jumbo pops until they slid down the full fifteen feet of it and dropped into the tray where I stood, waiting to sort them and wondering what British candy tasted like.

“How far behind is he?” The promise of Europe was so intense and the sound of the sucker machine so loud that I didn’t notice Ma Sparks until she barked at me, ruining another daydream.

“Pardon?” I asked, losing count.

“In batches.” She jerked her head in John’s direction. “How many batches behind?”

“Oh.” I checked my sheet again to be sure. “About six or so. The machine broke down again last night.”

“I was here,” she cut me off. “You staying late?”

“For another hour.” She huffed at that, but I had a math exam later in the week and needed an A far more than the Sparks’ paltry overtime since I was shooting for an academic scholarship to take me out of Orso and back to Texas. And I could stand Ma Sparks huffing and puffing; what I hated was her hovering over my desk, plotting yet another way to impose her will upon the underlings, i.e., everyone else in the factory.

Deliverance came as John’s wife and kids—all in hairnets—burst onto the scene.

“Hi, Big Katie,” Brandon yelled as he ran past me to tackle his dad. Instantly, John shut off the sucker machine and stepped away from it, giving himself more room to hug his son, still in his heavy coat.

John’s daughter, the other Katie, stuck closer to her mother, as usual, giving me a shy wave.

“Hey there,” I smiled at my adopted namesake.

“It’s still working, I see.” Marie pointed at the sucker machine as she waddled towards my desk, sighing.

“That’s the story—we just finished another batch.” I felt sorry that I didn’t have a chair to offer her.

“Now, he’s only a half-dozen behind.” Ma Sparks meant to sound glib, but Marie and I knew better. We ignored her.

“How’d the trip to the doctor go this week?” I asked.

She sighed. “Good—twelve weeks left. I hope I can drag myself through them.”

“At least you’re getting plenty of time with your feet up.” I almost burst out

laughing at her irony. There we stood, watching the two kids cling excitedly to John, whom they hadn't spent much time with since Halloween. The Christmas rush meant that Marie been an almost single mother for the past few months, not to mention dead on her feet with her third baby coming.

"I wouldn't say that," Marie said. Steady as a saint, she artfully steered the conversation away from Ma Sparks's simmering bile. "We're sure missing Daddy." She regarded John as he held his son on his hip, with his massive hand softly touching his daughter's hair as he explained to them what had happened to the machine. The technicalities were lost on Brandon as he wiggled to the floor, then turned to place both chubby hands on John's cheeks when his father tried to scoop the boy up again.

"Do you have something for me, Dad?" He was so excited, I thought he might pee his pants.

"Hmm." John's eyes shifted to Katie. "You wanted magnolias, right?" She beamed at him, shrugging, her smile revealing several lost teeth. Those vintage candies, pastel-colored and perfumed, were her favorite. "I saved a box for you with plenty of pinks—it's down in the office."

Silently, I prayed that John could find the box where he'd left it.

"And me, Dad? Remember me?" Brandon asked, trying hard not to interrupt as he tugged on John's shirt.

"I don't know..." John said, looking pensive. "You'd better check my pocket." Elated, Brandon shot a lightning-quick mitt into John's apron pocket, pulling out the small, blue sugar airplane that John had been trimming from its mold when I'd come in.

“Wow! This is mine,” Brandon said, staking his claim.

John was delighted. “You bet.”

Ma Sparks closed in. “You finished all those clear toys?” she asked John, squinting as she tried to pin him under her formidable stare.

But he was watching his son. “I finished this one.”

“It’s an airplane, Grandma!” Brandon held it out a little for her to inspect, then landed it on his father’s shoulder.

“Is that for your stocking?” she wanted to know, a chill in her tone. I recognized it as the latent, what’s-it-gonna-cost-me tone, Ma Sparks’s signature charm.

So did John. “It’s one of the smaller models, Mom,” he sighed, rolling his eyes slightly at her before he regarded the boy. “Anyway, Brandon wants to be a pilot,” he said, tickling Brandon until he erupted into a fit of giggles, then relenting. “Come on, Katie,” John said with a smile as he balanced his son with one hand, holding his other out to his daughter. “Let’s go find those magnolias.”

As they walked away, Ma Sparks got in a last shot. “Just don’t forget to brush your teeth!” she screeched after them, tisking as she left us, still on the prowl.

“Merry Christmas to *you* too,” I muttered.

Marie stifled a hooting laugh with a coughing fit. “Well,” she said, clearing her throat another time, “we’ve gotta get going. Try not to freeze up here.”

“Will do.” I nodded to her, reaching for the new tray of still-warm peppermint jumbo pops before I remembered to ask. “Hey, d’you find out what it is?” I called after her on the stairwell.

“What?” she asked, distracted by the voices of her family coming from the office below.

Shyly, I gestured at her stomach.

“Oh,” she smiled, running a light hand over her swelling belly. “It’s a boy.”

CHAPTER VIII

BULLS WILL BE BULLS (1997)

“Olé.”

The onlookers in the Plaza del Toro were only murmuring now, sending up a chorus of Amens coming at the end of a long sermon. In the arena below us, a handful of mostly-drunken fools were taking their chances against a few young bulls. The brashest among them, a bedraggled tourist trailing an Australian flag fashioned into a cape, had dodged the young bull’s charge once again. He looked like a shipwrecked Rastafarian; like him, a lot of the vacationing Aussies were surfers and, as far as I could tell, liked their liquor. All the people in Pamplona did—maybe that’s how the first one got up the guts to run with bulls. It was that redneck joke we Texans often told with a Spanish twist: What are the last four words you ever hear in Pamplona? Hey y’all, watch this!

And here we were, watching, even though to me, the bulls seemed ridiculous. “I don’t know about you, Frank,” I told the dark-haired boy sitting next to me, “but where I come from, we’d almost call that a market steer—that bull can’t weigh more than my first saddle horse. And the Spaniards keep saying that these bulls aren’t even dangerous until they get separated from the others. But in Texas,” I shot a look at Bella, sitting on Frank’s opposite side. “Bulls are always dangerous.”

“What was that one bull—Bodacious, right?” Frank smiled at me, nudging my arm and remembering as we watched the contestant below who was reeling more quickly now, probably from a night of partying and this morning’s rush of adrenalin.

Frank shook his head, leaning in towards me. “He wouldn’t stand a chance against a bull like that. Drunk or sober.”

“Who’s Bodacious?” Bella asked, not wanting to cut in, but curious. All grace, Bella had been “brought up right,” as my mom once put it. Normally, I didn’t stand a chance against her where boys were concerned though she wasn’t usually interested in them. Frank had gotten to know Bella first before we’d hung around London together and gotten cuddly; the transfer of his affection hadn’t seemed to bother Bella. I loved her for it.

“Bodacious was a PBR bull a few years ago,” I told her, hearing the crowd’s half-hearted roar again. “You know—Professional Bull Riding? He weighed more than a ton and was all muscle. And mean—he had this trick when they pulled the gate: he’d buck and drop down on his forelegs—like to knock the cowboy forward?” Bella nodded, so I kept going. “Then he’d jerk back on his hind legs, and the force of it would slam the cowboy’s face into the back of the bull’s head.”

“Ugh,” Bella said, hiding her eyes. Frank shook his head, but he was still smiling. Guys love gore.

“More than one guy got knocked out that way—Tuff Hedeman even had to have plastic surgery on his face afterwards. I heard he had a metal plate put in where his cheekbone used to be.”

The crowd gasped, so we stood to get a better view of the Australian struggling to his feet. A near miss.

“Didn’t he gore some guy to death?” Frank wanted to know as we sat down

again. He inched towards me, touching my knee.

“I don’t think so, but he did have horns. Kind of unusual for how Charolais he looked; they’re polled, after all—that’s a breed without horns,” I explained. Frank nodded, squinting. He was from Laredo. I’d never cared for city boys, but he seemed to like the fact that I was a country gal, smiling at me for a long moment.

“Anyway,” I said, feeling silly for the dead space that had passed between us, “he was a cross. You know, a hybrid? That must have been where the horns came from.”

“Or maybe the devil—that’s what a real Texan would say,” Frank laughed as he winked at me, teasing the Texan out. I didn’t mind.

I’d only had one officially-acknowledged boyfriend: a short and stout eighth grader named Don who asked me to “go with him”—where, he never said—then was too scared to hold my hand at the movie since my parents were only four rows behind us. Still, I’d never thought that I missed much as far as puppy love went. Until I met Frank.

His real name was Francisco Santos, sort of a backwards tribute to St. Francis. He was good looking—with an easy smile and dimples—but most of all, I fell for his manners. Unlike the other high school kids we’d met up with on the London leg of our European tour that summer, I hadn’t heard Frank curse or offer a derogatory comment about anyone; he was polite to his teachers, kind to the boys and girls in our group. Plus, he spooned his soup toward the back of the bowl when he ate.

Frank was true gentleman.

My other girl friends—Bella and Kennedy—hadn’t been as lucky in love though Kennedy had openly swooned at the idea of finding a fella on tour. Bella liked Frank,

but she didn't seem too sorry that he'd looked my way; she got on well with everyone anyway. Kennedy, the drama queen in our bunch, worried that the three of us—Bella, Frank and I—didn't include her in our conversations. Actually, she was a little out of her depth when it came to topics that interested us since she'd lived in Orso all her life and never watched the news.

“It's like the two of you and Frank. I just feel totally ignored,” she'd whined to Bella and me one night as we got ready for bed in our closet-sized hostel room.

“Well, if you want to join the conversation or activity then jump in,” I said, echoing my mother's oft-spoken advice as I washed my face. I thought then that she might be jealous over the fact that out of the four of us, Frank had chosen me to pursue. But no one had been more shocked about it than I had. “You don't have to wait for an invitation.”

“Yeah, but I feel like a fifth wheel,” Kennedy said, flipping her head over to brush her glossy blonde locks.

Bella looked pained. She was more sensitive than I was closer to Kennedy, but I wasn't going to let her cave in. “Look—you just said that you feel ignored, and then you said that you don't wanna jump in. That's not our fault; the choice to be involved or not is totally up to you.” My mother's advice seemed to work, and for the remainder of the trip, Kennedy drifted between hanging around with us and getting to know some of the kids from Seattle. At least she seemed content—she didn't complain again.

Then there was Trish. I'd known her longer than anyone else in our foursome—this group of Mormon girls that had paid their dues to accompany our art teacher,

Carolyn McNally, to western Europe. Trish was a loner at school, smart, taller than most of the boys we knew. Like me, she was one of a million other nondescript high school girls that passed people in the hallway, students and teachers, without leaving much of an impression. I liked her because we had a lot in common: eclectic taste, outspoken decisiveness, a sense of humor if not of fashion. And neither of us was boy crazy.

So much to everyone's surprise, Trish had found love on the second day of our trip. Her new boyfriend, Ryan, was from Seattle. I could tell he was a fast mover with none of Frank's virtues or charm, and while watching him, I thought how my father would be proud of the fact that I disliked and distrusted this boy who seemed so willing to prove himself a man with any assenting girl. In front of our teachers, he was arrogant, but polite. Away from them, he seemed used to aggressive: an alpha with an entourage of buddies and giddy girls who thought he was "hot." I would never have pegged Trish as the swooning type, but by day three, she was making out with him in the back of our tour bus, unabashed and unashamed.

"What should we do? Should we do anything?" Bella wondered. As far as we knew, Trish had never had a boyfriend. Without either one of us voicing our worst fears, we both worried about Trish getting in deeper with him than she'd intended.

"I don't think she knows how deep she's in it," I said, watching the two of them make out over Bella's shoulder. "Carolyn must not have said anything to her yet—we would've heard something, surely." It was his boorish bravado, his seamless power over her that turned my stomach. Around Ryan, Trish's demeanor changed from confident

and decisive to needy and demur. His hooks were in deep, we knew—how we'd get Trish home without Ryan leaving a lasting impression, I couldn't say.

Maybe it was none of my business. Maybe I was wrong in judging him so harshly. Maybe measuring people's moods wasn't as simple as in working with horses, but I had a nagging feeling that Ryan was shifty, subtle even. If he had been a horse, I wouldn't have taken my eyes off of him.

"Well, it's her life," Kennedy shrugged from across the bus aisle, shaking her head and half-smiling, flipping through her copy of *Teen People*. I knew she was right, but as members of the same faith, our unspoken rule was solidarity: when another girl was in trouble, you stood up for her. The fact that we wouldn't smoke or drink was a given, but the subject of guys hadn't even entered the conversation: it seemed such a non-issue until now. Young as we were, we had all had known before we boarded the plane that nothing meaningful could come out of a month-long summer tour amidst a bunch of high school students. Still, we were a long way from Orso.

I was lucky with Frank—he didn't try to rush things or stake a claim, just enjoyed simple familiarities as they unfolded for us: holding hands on the bus, walking together. At one point, Carolyn peeked back at us and snapped a photo of the two of us leaning on each other as we slept, neck pillows and all. "I couldn't help it—you look so cute together," she beamed. I was pretty sure that she didn't approve of Trish's making out, but what could anybody do about it out here?

We'd worried about her easy way with him as the long drives through the Spanish countryside, the way she now sat on his lap through cities and towns, bus stops

and train changes. Then, the evening before our flight home, we discovered her missing, along with her purse and passport.

Throughout the tour, we had so much fun that we had forgotten to care about Trish and Ryan. We looked at London—a three-day blink—then had taken the Chunnel over to Paris where I got my head stuck in the chicken wire surrounding the lookout point on the top of the Eiffel Tower, earning a proud scar. Then came the Louvre and the *Mona Lisa* where I dropped my camera, and L’Opera—now a dance theater—where I’d spotted Barishnikov crossing the street with a bodyguard and yanked on Bella’s sweater to get her attention, then realized it was someone else’s sweater I was yanking on. Next was Versailles with its opulent galleries, its hall of mirrors and cobblestone streets, and later, Biarritz, that former royal hideaway in the Basque country, lined with pebbled beaches where pilgrims once came to take the waters. Now, travelers came to play roulette and sample the ice cream as they stared at the ocean. There, we listened to the band echo through the casino as a woman sang “Smooth Operator” unseen, her sultry voice shimmering in the summer heat.

There were things I missed during the moments when I remembered I was seventeen and far from everything familiar: my mother, not out of homesickness but for all the things that I knew she’d love to see—as I was—and probably never would. My own bed. Cow’s milk at breakfast. Electrical outlets with good old American voltage. Definitely not my job at Sparks Candies but my life, setting my own schedule. While lounging on the bus was an option, lingering was discouraged by our tour guide; we had an agenda to follow. I longed to return to each city and town even before we left it

behind. I wanted to saunter, to soak my feet and to satiate my wanderlust one toe at a time.

Barefooting the beach at Biarritz, dodging stone bruises and the pebbles there, laughing with Bella and Frank while gasping at the bay's chill, I knew it would be over too soon. After Spain, I'd be headed back to Orso with nothing to look forward to and only a handful of souvenirs—a batch of film rolls to remember the greatest month I'd ever spent. With each day that passed, the reality of our departure loomed so great that it became hard to enjoy through the present.

Then came Spain: ancient, mysterious, more diverse than modern England or even Paris, its history as eclectic—and cherished—as its architecture and language, just as unpredictable. Here, it seemed as if anything could happen: a refined bank president made a gentlemanly pass at Carolyn in San Sebastian when he discovered that she'd planned to walk back to our hotel with her students—she blushed, declining politely. Bella and Kennedy got flashed by a street performer dressed as a priest in Barcelona, discovering that the guy wore fishnet pantyhose and red pumps under his would-be clerical robes. Frank bought me jewelry—a simple silver chain and matching bracelet—after we'd strolled together through El Corte Ingles, one of the largest department stores in the world. It seemed fitting since we'd had our first outing together at Harrod's in London. And in the midst of our last days together, Trish nearly gave herself to a guy who thought of her no more than a notch in his belt.

The four of us were to fly on our own to New York from Barcelona in the morning, Carolyn opting to stay in Spain for another week. That night, I wanted to find

another Lladró to match the figurine I'd found with Fred earlier on La Rambla. It was a figure of a young girl in a nightdress, almost dancing—the pair had reminded me of Mindy and myself through her long illness, a hint of sadness in their delicate fingers and downcast eyes. I knew how much Mom would cherish them, so reluctantly, I left the porcelain girl's perfect match in the store window, telling myself that I'd come back later that evening with my mad money, the last fifty bucks I had to my name. Bella and Trish had agreed to go with me since Frank had said he needed to meet with his Laredo school group, but when the time came for Trish to meet us in our room on the fifth floor, she didn't show.

“I haven't seen her since before dinner,” Bella said, hopping up and down on her suitcase as she struggled with its zipper and all those sweatshirts she was hauling back saying, “Paris: J'adore.” Luckily for her butt, Bella hadn't bought as many pointed Eiffel Tower miniatures.

Just then Kennedy traipsed in. “You girls sure you won't come along?” she asked, wearing her modest-yet-chic little black dress, the only time she'd pulled it out on the trip. “I'll bet that neither of you have ever been to a real discotheque.”

I looked at Bella, who shrugged back at me. “That's a double ‘no.’”

“You should,” she grinned, sing-songing the news. “Frank's coming.”

“I know. He told me,” I sang back. Knowing that Bella and I'd wanted to get an early night before our morning flight, Frank had asked me earlier if I minded him escorting Kennedy to go dancing with some of the others in the group as she'd been begging him to go every night we'd been in Spain. I didn't mind since I wasn't much of

a dancer, and I thought it was sweet of him to take her. I was sure that Ryan probably wouldn't have unless it was to try and get her drunk or something. "Hey, Ken, have you seen Trish?"

Kennedy rolled her eyes. "Have you checked Ryan's room?"

"Should we?" Bella spoke up.

At that, Kennedy nearly tripped over her pumps, stifling a laugh before she caught herself. "Wait—like, seriously?" Her eyes widened. For the four of us, spending time alone with a guy in his room was absolutely off-limits. Even as teenagers, our faith-based wariness of such a situation it went all the way back to Sunday School and that account of Joseph in Egypt being hit on by Potiphar's wife, leaving so quickly that he left his coat behind: "He got him out." That was what we had been taught to do—run and not look back.

But after searching our floor, we hadn't found Trish in any of the usual places, and while I knew it wasn't my business, I was concerned for her. We all were. And it was getting late.

"Where else could we look for her?" I asked, tucking my money belt into place—a gift from my streetwise father—then pulling my shirt tail out to cover it.

"This hotel's too small for her to get lost in," Kennedy said. "Maybe she went out."

"Without us? On our last night here?" I wondered, incredulous.

"Maybe Carolyn knows," Bella suggested. "Should we ask her?"

"She left with that excursion group already; I saw her as I came down the hall."

At dinner, Carolyn had jokingly told us to behave ourselves—something she hadn't had to worry about much—and get to bed before midnight since our flight was leaving early the next morning. She'd wanted to catch a flamenco performance downtown somewhere. We were alone.

I couldn't shake the feeling that this was the chance Ryan had been waiting for all along—to get Trish away from the rest of us, to single her out from the herd, then take what he could get. Still, we'd be intruding, and if there really was nothing going on...

“Let's go look for her,” I said. “Bella, you coming?”

She left her packing and followed me into the hallway.

“You guys want some company?” Kennedy asked, grabbing her silver clutch purse.

“If you're up for it.” I said, eyeing her five-inch heels as I pushed the elevator's down button, praying she wouldn't sprain an ankle in our pursuit of Trish. “I just hope we find her soon—that Lladró store's gonna close in half an hour. When's your dancing lesson start?”

“Fred's not getting back until later—he said he and Gus had to take care of something,” she said, tugging at her waist and repositioning her pushup bra. “Actually, I was just trying the outfit again to see if it still fit—those San Sebastian pastries.” I knew how she felt. We'd ridden out a summer shower in a local bakery and an hour later, had each put away half a dozen lemon mousse cupcakes. “Remember how Trish kept picking off the kiwi and feeding it to Ryan?” she laughed, then stopped suddenly. The

ancient elevator groaned its way downward as we stood quietly, waiting and wondering.

“You don’t really think she’d—do you?” Kennedy asked our collective question.

We looked at each other. Bella seemed skeptical.

“I don’t think she’d start anything,” she offered. “But it is the last night they’ll see each other. If he wanted to—”

“Sure he does,” I muttered, trying not to sound too self-righteous but convinced that the boy was a total player; he would take as much as she’d give him, maybe even before she’d realized what she’d done. “He was sitting next to Trish at dinner when Carolyn told us she wouldn’t get back ’til late, remember?”

“When’d we finish dinner?” Kennedy turned to look at her watch; she’d left it in the room she and Trish shared.

Bella checked the time. “Over an hour ago.”

The elevator bell dinged twice as the door opened on the second floor. The Seattle floor. We stepped into the middle of the long hallway and stared at the numbered rooms. “You guys know which one is his?”

“No clue.” Kennedy said. “Should we just start knocking?”

“How do you say, ‘Sorry, wrong room’ in Spanish?” I wanted to be sure--I knew it in French, but that wouldn’t help me much.

Bella squinted, trying to remember. “I think it’s ‘sala incorrecto’... or something. Anyway, ‘sorry’ is ‘lo siento.’”

“Here we go.”

After apologizing to three rooms full of Spaniards and getting no answer from

the fourth, we struck gold as Aaron, also from the Seattle group, came whistling down the hall in his flaming pink swimsuit.

“Hey ladies,” he said, delighted to see us. “What brings you down here?”

“We’re just looking for Trish,” Kennedy answered. “Have you seen her?”

“No—I just came from the pool. A bunch of us are there hanging out, but they weren’t there.” There was no need to tell us who “they” were. “Did you stop by Ryan’s room?”

“We weren’t sure which one he was in—and we’re in a hurry,” Bella hinted, smiling politely.

“Oh—he’s in the one next to mine. This way.” Aaron led us past the elevators, down the opposite end of the hallway from where we’d started our search. We followed him, relieved for his help.

This time, Aaron knocked for us.

“Who is it?” Ryan’s voice came, annoyed.

“It’s Aaron. And the Utah girls.” Aaron called back, smiling and winking at us. From inside the room came a muttered curse, a harried shuffling. “Maybe I should have said ‘One Jewish boy and four Mormon girls’?” He turned back to the door. “They’re looking for Trish.”

Then the door opened on Ryan’s composed, almost angelic face. “What’s up?”

I began to push past him. “Is Trish here? We were supposed to meet with her.”

“Yeah,” he said, surprised. He opened the door a little wider. Across the room, Trish sat on the bed, her ankles crossed, her hands tucked under her thighs, her hair

slightly disheveled. Her eyes flitted from Ryan to us, there and back again. She was scared.

“We were going to head back to La Rambla—did you still want to come with us?”

She eyed Ryan once and stood up quickly. “Yeah.” At that, Ryan rolled his eyes and sighed slightly—I wasn’t sure that anyone other than Aaron and I had noticed. Bella and Ken were still standing in the doorway.

Aaron smiled at us again as we left the room, waiting a moment before he piped up to Ryan. “Hey man, you wanna come for a swim?”

“Maybe later,” Ryan mumbled, shutting the door in Aaron’s face.

“I think he needs some alone time,” he laughed at Ryan’s brush off. He and I walked back down the hallway as Bella and Kennedy stood on either side of Trish, chatting easily, leading her towards the elevator.

“I think *she* needs some girl time,” I said, watching her.

“You think she’s all right?” Aaron asked.

“I don’t think he did anything to her,” I answered.

Aaron shook his head. “No—Ryan’s cool. Too cool for his own good maybe—he’s convinced himself that he’s slick. But you Mormon girls are too smart for these Gentiles, right?”

I laughed, waving as I left him to follow my friends. “We’re not the only ones—thanks for the help.”

“Anytime. See you at breakfast.” He headed back towards the open doors at the

back of the hall into the warm August wind and the sounds of summer coming from the patio.

It was half-past eight by the time we took the elevator back to our rooms. I looked at my watch, softly shaking my head to Bella, my chance to buy the figurine gone. Trish's face was a mask of shock as she began to cry silently. I was glad that we'd gone looking for her when we had—her recovery would take awhile.

Once we opened the door, Trish fell into Bella's made bed, hiding her shame as she rolled onto her stomach and sobbed. It wasn't like her at all—she was never theatrical; that was Kennedy's cup of tea.

"You okay?" Bella asked, knowing that Trish wasn't. We sat on the bed next to her, making attempts at comfort.

Trish wouldn't answer.

"What happened?" I finally asked, trying to help her get the details out. She wasn't going anywhere without telling us, anyway—we wouldn't let have her.

"I don't know!" she cried, hurt. "We were just talking—well, then making out downstairs after dinner, and he said he had to go back to his room for something. We were holding hands as he led me down the hall," she shrugged. "I knew that some of the others were going swimming, so I thought maybe he wanted to grab his suit or something. And then we were in his room...and the door was locked—"

"Do we need to beat him up?" I asked. "I could ask Frank."

That broke the ice. Trish couldn't help laughing along with us through her red-eyed sobs. "No—nothing happened. I mean, it might have if you guys hadn't shown

up.”

“That’s why we’re here.” Kennedy fiddled inside her purse for a moment, found a Kleenex and reached out to Trish.

Bella sidled closer, wise in her approach. “We knew you liked him. It’s just that he seemed to kind of...want more, you know?” She looked to Ken and me for help.

“Like he was more...experienced,” Ken suggested. For once, I appreciated her perspective.

“Yeah.” Trish had stopped crying and heaved a heavy sigh. “And I’ve never had a boyfriend before...”

“I hadn’t either until Frank—well, not in high school, anyway,” I admitted. “Not anyone who liked me like *that*. But it’s not like I’ll see him every day, is it? I mean, it’s easy to get swept up in everything here—it’s so temporary.”

“So don’t feel bad, Trish,” Bella said. “You didn’t do anything—”

“—And you left before *he* could do anything,” I pointed out. “You’re okay.”

“We’re here for you,” Kennedy repeated.

Trish reached for all of us at once. “Thanks you guys.” Startled, she came to her senses. “What are we going to say to Carolyn?”

We looked at each other: three scrubby American students as worn as our travel clothes, with Kennedy dressed to the nines. “Nothing,” I said. “We just stick together from now on—two by two, like the missionaries do.”

Breakfast was interesting. Aaron was up early, cracking jokes in his brightest colors as he passed through the buffet, waking the rest of us up by degrees.

“I didn’t know guys wore capris,” I said to Kennedy.

She looked at Aaron’s bright orange pants. “They don’t.”

“Oh. Right.”

Ryan hadn’t shown up to breakfast at all—he was sleeping in, apparently after burning the midnight oil a little too brightly.

“He was on the other side of the club from me and Frank,” Kennedy told me over *pandulce*—sweetbread—and juice, her hair in a sloppy bun, smudges of mascara still under her eyes. “But he was grinding with some girl I hadn’t seen before and standing with her at the bar the rest of the time.”

I tried not to choke on my OJ as I considered the irony of the image. “And after all that work he did to corner Trish too. Well,” I coughed, “he was just barking up the wrong tree, I guess.”

Looking past me towards the open door, Ken lowered her voice. “Here they come.” Then Bella and Trish—clear-eyed, looking happy to be headed home—sat down beside us.

“Leave any milk for us?” Bella demanded, pulling out a chair. Trish sat beside her.

“Take all you want,” Kennedy said, handing it over. “It came from a goat.”

“Bleh.” It was a collective reaction. Someone tapped me on the other shoulder.

“Hey, stranger.” Frank lowered his voice, speaking into my ear and pecking my cheek. “Can I steal you away for a minute?”

“Sure,” I smiled, my cheek brushing the light stubble on his chin, remembering

the feel of his skin on mine as we'd fallen asleep together on the bus, leaning on one another. He must have shaved this morning—he always did—but already, he had a five o'clock shadow.

“Howdy, dance partner,” Ken said, playing cute.

“Excuse us for a moment, ladies. We need to settle something.” Frank sounded serious.

“We do?” The girls smiled back at us, their eyebrows rising. I took his arm as he led me back into the hotel, away from the café.

“We never got to say goodnight,” he told me in the hall, winking.

We linked arms, striding together. “Well, Trish was still in a state after her mess with Ryan. Bella and I told her we'd stay with her.” I'd barely been conscious of Frank's voice as he walked Kennedy to our door; she hadn't wanted to stay alone in the room she normally shared with Trish—mostly out of her fear of sleeping in and not having time to pack anything. After breakfast, she'd still have to shower and organize her slough of souvenirs.

“I told you not to wait up for me,” Frank teased.

“Don't worry—I didn't.”

He laughed at my honesty. “I never have to wonder what you're thinking.”

“It saves time—where are we going?”

“My room.”

I stopped short. “You want to tell me why?”

“It's a surprise.” Through his smile, he looked confused.

“I hate to tell you, Bud, but we’ve had enough attempted bushwhackings on this trip.”

He squinted, then shook his head. “Not my style—anyway, Gus is still in there sleeping. You trust me right?”

I had to admit that I did. “Good; I was an altar boy.” He took my hand again. “Come on—I’ve got something for you.”

We followed the snoring to his door, the last one in the hallway. Carefully, Frank listened as he unlocked it, then timed his entry to Gus’s noisy exhalations. Once inside, he leaned and reached around the door, balanced whatever he held in one hand while he relocked the door from the inside, then stepped back into the hall.

“You’re pretty good at that,” I noted.

“My parents are both light sleepers,” he said. “They chew my butt if I come in late.”

“Sounds painful. What have you got there?” Besides promising to write, I hadn’t gotten him a goodbye gift.

He held the shoebox-sized carton he’d retrieved out to me. “Happy Late Birthday and Early Christmas.”

I looked up at him. “What is this?”

“It’s a going away present—well, more of a ‘Next-time-we-see-each-other-you-can-make-it-up-to-me gift.’”

“But I didn’t get you anything—I mean, I didn’t really have time—”

He waved me off. “Just open it. Please.”

I shook my head, embarrassed at his kindness as I tore the corner of the paper. Under the utilitarian brown paper was the edge of a box, light blue with a darker blue edging, a maker's mark in the center: Lladró. He'd knocked the words out of me.

"Gus and I headed down just after dinner to buy it. I knew how much you wanted it, so I had to beat you back to the store to get it. We barely made it."

I'd told him about Mindy, of course. Not nearly everything, but he'd understood and known enough to read the rest as he watched me through the long days, the long drives together. That kind of intelligence was rare, I knew—rarer still when coupled with his impulsive kindness, his innate desire to be of service, to do the right thing.

I'd seen it so many times. I'd fallen hard for it and was so stunned, I couldn't even unwrap the box.

Frank was still watching me, uneasy at my silence. "You still want it, right?"

Standing on tiptoe, I closed my moist eyes and kissed him.

Pieces of Her

Mom kept my sister's silken-gold hair
in a gallon Ziplock, hoping that someone
would weave it into a wig
For charity. Maybe.

Sis cut it
the day before her first round of chemo,
then passed for that '80s actress, Mary Stuart What's-Her-Name,
the one with the sassy bob.

Mom took a picture of Sis with her new 'do:
Standing in the living room,
Reflecting in the mirror on the mantle
Wearing her lightest summer dress,
Smiling like Princess Di and smirking at the Royals.

The dress I wore through high school,
then college
to places she never went,
with guys she never knew
to church on Sundays and graduation
with my hair spilling down my back and shoulders,
glinting in the setting sun.

CHAPTER IX

HELL ON HORSES AND WOMEN: AN INTERLUDE

Despite what those romantic novel covers have led you to believe about the West, mornings in the mountains can be as grey and ugly as any city sidewalk. When you rise at 6am to meet another sodden Wyoming dawn, you wonder if the sun's planning on making an appearance at all. There you are, stuck in the fog between heaven and earth, alone in the chill, your feet already wet inside your boots.

The horses stand with their heads hanging, their backs soaked and steaming from last night's rain and this morning's sweat as you work amongst them in the corral, trying to dodge their kicking legs and churning feet as the ground beneath you morphs into a cesspit of mud and manure. Far-flung, it sticks to every corner of your clothes, and oilskin isn't easy to clean. From the tangle of halters attached to lead ropes on your arm, you produce a set and corner the nearest nag by walking towards the point of his shoulder. Your step holds him steady.

"Whoa, Son," you say, as if you were some distant relation. He backs his ears and turns his butt to you, his back hoof poised on its toe for an impending kick. You step to the side, kissing at him. He follows the sound and faces you, with one ear listening to his buddies behind him and the other pricked in your direction. Having won, you smile as you renew the old approach towards his shoulder, laying a hand on his withers, then his mane as he licks and chews, bowing his head for the halter. "Good boy." You toss the lead rope around his neck—insurance in case he bolts—adjusting the halter around his nose before you buckle it, then lead him to the picket line and tie him there with a

horseman's knot.

Once this week's remuda is caught, Chet—the boss's son—gives the feed call. "Aaaaaaaaaaay-oh!" he yells from the back of the stock truck. Hearing it, every head tied to the picket line comes up. "Damn, I love that," he says, almost smiling under his thick mustache, three year's worth of peach fuzz come to fruition. Down the line, a few hands empty the bags of pellets under each horse's nose—a third of a Folger's Coffee can to a horse—making sure each horse can reach the feed while standing tied. In the silent spaces between the chewing, a sound like steps on gravel, the rest of the crew contemplates their hangovers, hats hiding their eyes.

Suddenly, Chet kicks the bucket of curry combs towards the steps leading out from the back of the stock truck, and you grab one, along with a hoof pick. "Make 'em look like they're going to the fair." Chet's eyes meet yours. "And you can pretend they're going to Sunday School," he says, laughing.

You don't mind—compared with a few of the other jokes these cowboys have told on behalf of your faith, this one is harmless. You go down the line with your comb and pick, pulling out burs and bits of sage, working quickly but thoroughly, knowing this might be the only day this week when each horse will receive a decent currying unless he's caked from head to toe in mud one morning. There are simply too many to tend, they say, not bothering to check a horse's feet even after a day on trails through the backcountry and down the old logging roads. But lameness is still a death sentence.

Daily saddling is done more carefully since any guest could hold the outfit liable for slippage resulting in injury. There's a riding waiver, of course, but you know it's no

more than a security blanket the owners curl up with, you think as you work over the familiar tack: bridle, saddle pad, saddle, front and back cinches, with a breastcollar to match. This last piece is the most important out here, giving the horse something to pull against while he's climbing. Without it, the saddles would slide too far back on the horse, loosening the cinch, spooking the horse and nullifying the waiver.

Saddling moves along at a steady pace—trouble is, nobody's bothered to check the width of the bars on each saddle and whether or not it fits the horse it's assigned to. You've wondered if you should point this out to Chet or maybe the boss when they complain about how Charlie—that easy-keeping sorrel with the blaze and stockings, your favorite though he's too tall for you—winds up wither sore every summer and has to be pulled off the dude string. But you know that it wouldn't matter anyway; it'd just be another alienating moment between you and the locals, so you try to pad up every horse at the shoulder, making sure he's snug before you move on.

The waiting begins as the saddling ends, so you take a minute to grab your gear from under your bunk and throw it in the stock truck before the guests arrive and the wagon train rolls out. Back in the cook shack, the old gray mare—it's what the boys call her, including her husband—hollers at the fishing guides about commissary courtesy one more time.

“You all are only supposed to pack what's on the list,” she says, thumping a spatula full of Dutch oven potatoes on to your plate, following it up with a few greasy sausages and scrambled eggs of a strange color. “I don't want to walk in there and find that the cooler's been wiped out so's I have to make another trip to Jackson to pick up

extra toilet paper and Cool Whip and I-don't-know-what-all." Her frizzled grey hair frames her face like an Egyptian helmet, reminding you at once of a Cocker Spaniel and your third grade gym teacher, both similarly (dis)tempered.

The food is unappetizing, but the smell is unbearable once Kelly and his boys sit down to eat next to you on the picnic benches. They've been shoeing the last of the remuda and haven't bothered to visit the scrub sink outside. Always together, they radiate the sickening smell of burnt skin, that distinct odor made when horses' hooves are filed, or in this case, ground to an even edge before the shoeing begins.

Shoeing can be a simple job, you know, but it's never an easy one. Your first morning with the outfit you saw the impossibility of shoeing six hundred horses made easier by a device that was arguably illegal, unquestionably inhumane. The image burns in your mind as you pick at your food: a horse's legs strapped to a table, then the whole animal flipped horizontally so that Kelly and both apprentices could each go after a hoof at once. One wrong move could get any one of them killed: the farriers under flying feet, the horse under the pressure of his collective guts pushing against his lungs, slowly suffocating. You know it's the reason why the oldest of cowboys force a sick horse to stand up or put him in traction so that he's hanging a few inches off the floor, feet dangling beneath him.

"Does it hurt them?" you asked that first day.

The sound of the grinders suddenly stopped. Covered in a fine white dust, the remnants of hoof material that stuck to the sweat of his thick arms, Kelly looked like he'd been attacked by a snow globe. Finding you contemptible, he rolled his eyes in your

direction, then hollered, “Next,” letting fly a brown stream from the ball of Red Man bulging in his cheek. His two mustachioed hands stood the platform upright again—the horse still strapped to it—and unbuckled the straps that held the horse down, with the animal desperately trying to win back its footing and dignity.

The taller of the two helpers untied the horse’s lead rope and handed it to you. “Welcome to Wyoming,” he winked. He looks at you now, winking again over his serving of heart attack. You smile politely, finishing quickly as the first van full of dudes drives into base camp. Stopping to scrape your plate, you see the string of horses waiting at the picket line, the massive Percherons—once the horses of knights in full battle armor—being hitched to the wagons, the chains on their doubletree jingling as Vance and Crazy Willie straighten the harness lines.

The sight of them together reminds you of the first time you saw the herd, before the shoeing table and the burning smell. They’d been all majesty then as Buck—it was his real name—and some of the other boys had worked to round them up, then push them through the network of corrals and chutes before they waited for the farriers. Every coat color imaginable came thundering across the sixty-acre pasture towards you and suddenly, you’d remembered the lullaby: browns and bays, dapples and grays. Pintos, with splashes of every color and white, even some that were tri-colored—what the old cowboys called calicos—came along with buckskins and duns, a few rare grullas. Milling around like siblings cramped in the back of a station wagon during a long car trip, they kicked and bit, shied and shifted, restless as they sensed the cowboys watching them, sizing them up for the coming summer season.

“There’s my horse,” one buckaroo said to another as they sat near the gate after having penned the horses, their mounts lathered at the bit and back cinch.

“Your horse, hell. Landon’s got dibs on that on that’un already. He takes him up to that camp on the Yellowstone every year.” The rider took a can of Copenhagen out of his shirt pocket, thumping it methodically to knock the snuff into a corner before he opened it and pinched off a fat bit, then expertly fingered it into the groove between his lip and gums.

“He don’t own him,” the first one answered, leaning over his horse’s shoulder to spit.

“None of us do,” the second rider said, offering the can of Cope, consolation for this, the chief injustice in the life of the working cowboy, the other being the schedule: long hours of backbreaking work punctuated by the bosses’ sudden changes of mind as the more outspoken—generally male—members of the ruling family debated which pressing issue to tackle first. For grunts like you, it is a world of hurry up and wait.

CHAPTER X

BURNING INSTEAD OF BEAUTY (2000)

“You Mormon?” Lance, the wagon master, had asked when he’d interviewed me. We’d met in a truck stop as he passed through Utah on his way to somewhere with a load of something. It had been Mom’s idea, when I’d mentioned my desire to do something outdoors for the summer; she suggested I reconnect with some old friends of theirs—outfitters in Star Valley, Wyoming—and ask if they needed help. Trouble was, the old friends had sold the whole outfit to another ranching family. And while the new owners had processed my application, whatever ties my folks may have had with the original owners didn’t translate into our working relationship. I would be a grunt—worse, a grunt from out-of-state—and I was coming alone.

“I am,” I confirmed to the Marlboro Man, trying not to stare so obviously at the blue of his eyes. Many women had, I’d bet.

“So am I. You active?” he wanted to know.

“Yessir.”

“Well, I am and I’m not—Mormon, but not active. Ain’t easy to be up there,” he jerked his head toward the mountains as his eyes pinned me to the far wall like a germ under a microscope while the scrutinizing continued. “Fact is, most of the crew’s Mormon—at least they were raised to be—but you’d never know it. Cook’s the only one I know of goes to church. That ain’t every Sunday, either.”

Smiling, I shrugged, hoping I sounded confident. “I’ll do what I can.”

“You sure?” he demanded, adding, “I don’t want to recommend you and then

have you quit. Or worse.”

Cautioned, I was curious about what he meant, appreciating this stranger’s warning about holding fast to my faith. I sat a little taller. “Thank you, but I’m sure.” Wild horses drug me into it.

In May, our conversation still hadn’t gotten very far. “You don’t say much, do you?” Lance said, pushing the packet of potato wedges that we were supposed to be sharing across the bench seat towards me. His ice blue eyes crinkled as he said it, surveying the two-lane stretch ahead of us from Afton to Jackson. I settled in for the long trip to base camp.

His stubby, calloused fingers sorted through the heap of carbs, found the greasiest one. He folded it into the diminutive cup filled with ranch dressing until his fingers were creamy white, then popped it into his mouth. Then he grabbed his Diet Dr. Pepper and held it out to me, an offering.

I smiled. “No thanks, I’m good.” I raised my Aqua Fina, sipped a bit, then held the sweating bottle to my cheek. It mingled with my own as the pickup truck ambled over the radiant blacktop then dropped towards the valley floor, a harsh strip cutting through the thick carpet of wildflowers, the vivid green rye grass. Behind Lance’s flatbed GMC was a fifth-wheeled trailer pulling an enormous water tank; the rhythmic rocking of the pickup mixed with the weight of the water to send us surfing down the highway.

He caught me eyeing the trailer through the rear window. “We have to haul in everything,” he said.

“Including your crew,” I observed.

“Some of them,” he nodded. “Most drive their own trucks up to base camp.” Of course they all drove trucks, I thought—up here, it was as if no other forms of transportation existed. “We take the tourists up in vans to where the wagons are circled.”

“Where’s that?”

“Mount Baldy, Leidy, wherever we’re allowed to go—we have to get permission from the forest service first. We use mostly the same roads each trip, then pitch camp in a few different spots up there. You’ll probably be bringing vans down and into Jackson on Saturdays so’s you can do the laundry.”

I hadn’t minded being assigned this task—mostly washing kitchen towels and sleeping bag liners—since it meant I’d have a way to get around and wash my own stuff every week at the local Laundromat. Since I was one of the first fulltime female crewmembers on site at base camp, Lance enjoyed showing me the ropes. Amidst the late spring preparation for the coming summer and aside from the dude string preparations, there were tents that needed mending and repacking, a potty wagon—basically a Port-a-John on wheels—to clean and stock, bedding to organize. As we carried out this last task, sitting on a camp mattress together in the afternoon sun while tying bedroll liners inside sleeping bags, some of the crew rode by.

“Whatcha doin’ there, Lance?” Buck called out, grinning at us.

“Nothing much,” he yelled back as he tied up a bedroll, then winked at me. “Just playin’ in bed.” With twenty years between us—and the fact that he had daughters my

age—I hoped he was kidding.

The pace took some getting used to since at the Sparks factory, I'd worked according to the clock, tackling the same task day after day. The only changes came when John made a decision about some small detail which he'd put off for the necessary waiting period: long enough, that is, for his mother to steam and his dad to remind him, then ask again nicely. That hothouse of family drama looked like a Sunday afternoon on *The Waltons* compared to screwing up out here, where a false step could lead to getting kicked in the face by a newly-shod horse. Or falling victim to the natives' sardonic humor.

Throughout that month, I made plenty of rookie mistakes, like buying a hat the wrong color: in Texas and throughout most of the South, cowboys wear light straw hats, usually white in the summertime, but in Wyoming, everything is black—it adds to the Marlboro Man mystique and can disguise trauma to the head. Or when catching a horse, remembering to use the lead rope and drop it around the horse's neck before you attempt to pull the halter over his nose. Vance kindly reminded me of this last rule since he knew my horsemanship skills—what we call ground manners—were a little rusty; he also encouraged me not to get killed making a stupid mistake in the middle of the herd.

I'd never ridden bulls before, but the chaotic scattering that occurs when a bull throws a cowboy and starts looking for some poor soul to gore was the same scene I imagined now as I worked the huge herd. Its epic proportions—the fifty-or-so horses spinning tightly together—posed the greatest threat to my safety; up to this point, I'd worked many horses but only one or two of them at a time, more if I tagged along on

one of Zeke's trail rides. But here in mountains with a herd this size, the dynamics were radically different. Instead of pairs of horses and riders pushing down a trail in a more or less orderly fashion, my crew was faced each morning with controlling the entropy of a single, freewheeling mass made of kicking heels and hooves, of heads snaking out to bite from any direction, of half-ton bodies that swarmed and shifted several ways at once.

Daily, we hauled a tangle of halters and lead ropes out of the stock truck to catch the first mounts as Vance gave us a heads up: "Chances are, you might not ever know which horse killed you, but always keep your eyes open. You blink, you're dead."

He wasn't kidding. The current that spurred the herd often began as a single flutter, a butterfly effect: Horse A twitches at flies with tail and accidentally swats Horse B in the nose. Horse B then throws her head, lashes out to bite Horse A but instead, takes a chunk out of Horse C's hip. Furious, Horse C wheels around to kick at Horse B while every horse around her shies away for a few steps to escape the impending carnage. Unless (s)he possesses a sixth sense and quick feet, Wrangler A gets crushed under the hooves of spooked horses since the action that began with Horse A happened behind him or her, with a few other horses milling around in between Wrangler A and Horse C. Anything could happen to anyone, rookie wrangler or seasoned cowboy, who wandered into the midst of that herd and was silly or determined enough to try and sort out an individual from the chaotic mass.

Life with humans, it turned out, wasn't any different. I told myself that the tough parts of the job—aching, sweaty hours I'd spend every day and crewmembers I couldn't

relate to—were worth the effort as long as I got to spend the time learning the ways of horses, in the herd and on the trail. Everything else, from unsurpassed vistas I'd encounter to connections I might make over the summer, would all be gravy.

But with the gravy, I had to learn to take my lumps—usually, it meant swallowing my pride and eating whatever slight the cowboys wanted to dish out. Their favorite pastime, the teasing was often good natured despite its dry harshness. Sometimes it bit bone deep.

As my loneliness loomed larger through June and July, I told myself that I wasn't here in Wyoming to fool around or goof off. I had come for the horses, the hundreds of them that I might never encounter anywhere else, knowing that after this kind of experience, I could pick up any other horse guiding gig I wanted. But I'd also come to chase a dream, the same dream that wranglers scoffed at the tourists for having, that unabashed yearning for the undying west, the form of the frontier. The Marsdens—owners of the outfit—understood this desire and took every opportunity to capitalize on it—why else would a software engineer from Kansas City leave his job and comfortable three-bedroom to sleep in a cold tent at ten thousand feet and pack his own lunch every morning before putting in six hours on a horse he'd never ridden, in mountains he'd never seen? And more importantly, why would he bring his wife and three kids along?

The answer was always the same: adventure. Guests looking for the brand of frontier experience we offered came from a world away, and the majority of those had never ridden a horse—notwithstanding the ponies at Coney Island or some other such place; many of them opted to ride in wagons during their stay. But week after week, the

unattainable ideal was always the same: it loomed in the shape of the Grand Teton, its peaks made purple through the haze of the forest fires that summer, jagged points in the skyline that marked our days and nights.

I understood, shared their reasons for coming, for trekking across the country or the world to see something that remained unaltered in modern memory. Mine were the same since the mountains, the wildness of the sage-spotted land—unlike the size and scope of the wilderness—had shifted and settled, but never really changed. There were horses running in these hills when man first came to the mountains; the herds, though now branded, were still here. And getting to know a part of this ancient history—even for a few days—was the closest that most of us would ever come to making our own.

I didn't mind being a rookie in the outfit so much as being treated like I didn't have a clue about anything. Some of my ancestors had settled this part of Wyoming, after all, and I'd grown up on a ranch myself. True, I'd been removed from it for the past few years, but what I'd learned from Zeke—the feel for horses, he'd called it—was beginning to come back. I knew that once I was horseback, I could hold my own without any trouble, even in the mountains we'd be covering. I wasn't scared of the heat and since it was June, I didn't fear the cold. But the working conditions were far from anything I'd experienced in Texas or Utah, and as for the people I worked with, the gap was even wider.

To begin with, I soon realized that when it came to dating, these western cowboys' tactics weren't much different than their interactions with horses: approach a herd of women and see if any one filly catches your eye. If you think you can outlast,

outsmart or out wrangle her, then go ahead and try your luck, but watch out for who might be in the background. In these encounters as with the horses we worked, I admired these fellas' try—that gritty resolve that cowboys can hold to the point of foolhardiness. It ran from one cowboy to another, rebounding through the outfit from the oldest cowboy to the youngest and back again. Where the veteran cowboys had accomplished much, the younger ones were anxious to prove themselves, and with a challenge undertaken by a newly-hired buckaroo, the top hand also tested himself. The proving ground was as wide as the landscape and included cattle, horses and above all, women.

“Kate,” Buck said to me one evening after we'd come back to camp from our biweekly showering trip to the far-off KOA campground, “has anyone ever told you how majestic you look in the moonlight?” His buddies stood in the background, eyeing Buck's approach as they would have watched him corner a filly in the corral.

I tried hard not to laugh, not to say, *à la Anne of Avonlea*: “Actually, lots of people have.” After all, Frank had admired me aloud a few summers before as we'd toured Europe, walking and talking. And I felt bad for Buck; eligible boys outnumbered girls by at least three to one out here, and he was a good guy, a trusted hand and hard worker even if he wasn't my type (exhibit A: chewing tobacco lining lower gums). With my hair still wet from the biweekly shower and my makeup non-existent, I thanked him for the compliment, knowing how hard up he was for a crush this summer. “Thanks, Buck. That's sweet,” I said. He smiled a little more shyly at me in the following days although he had thrown his loop and missed.

My relationship with other crew members wasn't so amiable. I didn't smoke or chew tobacco, didn't drink beer or tell tales in the back of the stock truck with the rest of the wranglers, most of them younger than me. And I couldn't understand why the most popular weekend pastime was to blow your money on drinks until you passed out, threw up and couldn't remember anything that had happened the night before. Unlike my coworkers, my own weekends in Jackson took on a tame routine: I did laundry—my own and the camp's—ate sushi by myself or with a few guests we'd hosted the week before on the wagon train, went to church, caught up on sleep, read and walked around town to kill time. While most of our crew stayed together even during their off hours, I was content to be on my own.

Maybe that's why I felt more at home with the guests than the wranglers. While I followed the company's dress code and wore the mandatory boots, jeans and pearl-buttoned shirt on the job, I couldn't and wouldn't change who I was, who I would still be with the coming fall: an out-of-towner, a college student, a modern woman, a Mormon. And while my strong sense of self often alienated me from some groups within the human herd, it pulled me toward others.

One was Ray Holdaway, our Tuesday and Wednesday night entertainer. Ray was a singing cowboy from California who summered near Jackson and worked at the various dude ranches and tourists traps in the area, singing his way along. We met the first week of June, when the early tourists rolled in.

Lance introduced us at the chuck wagon. "Kate, this is Ray. He'll be up with us twice a week to entertain the guests."

“Howdy do, Kate,” Ray said, doffing his hat to me. I thought I’d melt into the blue of his eyes. Chivalry wasn’t dead after all.

Ray was younger than Lance, I guessed, but older than me, I knew. With his quick clean shirts, quick wit and gentle manners, he attracted the single women on the wagon train like bees to honey. Though I enjoyed his company, I wasn’t about to get caught in the swarm.

“How ’bout some old western music?” he’d ask the guests sitting expectantly around the campfire. Tuning his guitar as he strummed, he’d then burst into song unabashedly, beginning his set with *Streets of Laredo* or *Home on the Range*—something they might know, some common ground where each soul could find comfort in this, the alien wilderness. He stuck mostly to western music, the traditional ballads with horses and gunfights and old cowboys reminiscing about the one that got away. If his listeners started to fidget, Ray threw in a few Beatles songs or Simon and Garfunkel to win them back. Ray didn’t read music, but people.

Resting with my back to the fire, I sat listening abstractedly as I wrote a letter home.

“Whatcha writin’ there, Kate?” he asked suddenly.

The twenty or so guests turned my way, curious.

I tucked let letter back into my sketchbook; it doubled as a journal. “Oh, just answering a letter from a guy I know.”

“Tell him to stay away from other women,” Ray winked. His audience laughed.

“He’d better,” I said. “He’s a missionary.”

“Well, that takes care of that,” Ray laughed, then turned back to his guitar. “You know, there’s an old cowboy song about a girl named Katie.” With that, he strummed the first few chords of *Navajo Rug*. I’d never heard the song before, and that first listening, I didn’t know whether to be flattered or offended that he’d thought of this song in conjunction with my name. It told the story of a drifter who falls in love with the waitress (named Katie) in a truck stop. After closing time, she bars the door, takes a Navajo rug down from the wall, lays it on the floor and you can guess what happens next. Years later, the drifter meets the owner of the roadhouse (Old Jack) and asks about Katie. He hears that the store burned down and Katie left town. Then Jack says, “You should have seen her runnin’ through the smoke / Draggin’ that Navajo rug.”

Eventually, I developed a soft spot for Ray, his shining eyes and mellow voice, and the refrain of the old song that bore my name: “Ay, ay, ay, Katie / Shades of red and blue / Ay, ay, ay, Katie / Whatever became of the Navajo rug and you?”

There under the stars, I wondered about the woman, the rug and the man who now remembered them.

Openly, the Wyoming hands scoffed notions of western romance. It might have been their bread and butter, but not a single cowboy or cowgirl wanted to admit that they’d signed on for the same reasons the tourists had, that is, to see the rawness of a West that had already disappeared. The only difference between the two groups was their honesty: while tourists paid for the privilege of living as pioneers once had, the cowboys actually believed that they were still living it. The local hands saw riding, roping and ranch work not as a nearly-extinct lifestyle, but a sacred trust. They were

simply born to it. For them, there was no other way to live.

Ray was an exception. For starters, he was a Californian by birth, a hippie by experience and a western musician—a balladeer—by choice. His costume was just that: full-brimmed Bailey beaver hat with its loud band, bright pearl-buttoned shirt and matching scarf, hand-tooled boots and chaps, always a vest. He even wore cuffs—a wardrobe accessory so rare these days, I had to ask what they were.

“Back in the day, men’s shirts weren’t uniformly sized, so cowboys wore these to cover the gap when their sleeves were too short.” He explained this to me over plates of beef, beans and corn bread I’d helped prepare in the chuck wagon. He’d had to bring his own beer.

“Aren’t they kinda hot?” I was forever rolling up my mandatory long sleeves on the trail.

“Sure, but they’re more authentic, and they look tough,” he reasoned.

“Unlike the guitar.” I envied his musical prowess but found comfort in knowing that I was a better rider, at least—a fact he’d acknowledged more than once.

“Watch it,” he warned, defending his vocation. “I’ll tell Lance he needs to make you sing for your supper.”

He knew I could sing by then, that I’d been doing it all my life, first as a means of devotion and an expression of faith, then for competition in local and state events. By August, we’d spent every Tuesday and Wednesday night together around the campfire, warm through the mountain nights from recounting the old stories, the hymns of the country and its people, in the firelight. In singing those songs, I felt I’d come home.

“You should come with me next summer,” he suggested one Wednesday night. The last of the tourists had long headed for their bedrolls and spring bar tents, already frosted on the inside. Over the hills, frosted with purple sage under the August moon, the horses’ bells—those we buckled around their necks after every evening’s feeding in order to find them the next morning—clanged and clinked in a hundred directions, cutting through the night air, a rustic symphony.

I snuggled down deeper into my woolen sweater and down vest. “Where would we go?” I wondered, not sure if I’d spoken aloud.

He shrugged. “Anywhere. Arizona in the winter, then back here. Everywhere around Jackson besides the Bar J.” I knew that ranch was famous for its Saturday chuck wagon dinner and show, including singing wranglers. It was the one corner of the market Ray didn’t have cornered. He laid his guitar aside, clearing his throat when I didn’t answer. “It’s not much of a living, but I like it. I could use a partner with your range.”

“My range?” I wondered if he was kidding.

He wasn’t. “Sure.” He slid down from the log where he’d been sitting and landed in the grass next to me. The ground was cold, but hospitable to two rumps that had been in the saddle all day. “You’d get to travel around, meet people from everywhere, sing for an hour or two. The rest of the time would be yours. Ours.” He tucked one of my stray locks behind my ear.

I smiled. “I bet you say that to all the girls.” I hoped it wasn’t true.

Ray laughed to himself, then took off his black Bailey to run a hand through his

hair and shook his head. “Just the ones with Navajo rugs.” Leaning in, he kissed me. “Sleep on it,” he said, replacing his hat and collecting his guitar. He whistled as he found his way back to his truck and into town, the moon marking his silhouette in the darkness.

The next Tuesday, Ray wore the necklace. It seemed out of place with the rest of his clothes, I noticed; while distinctive—more Will Scarlet than Robin Hood, you might say—his costuming had never before included jewelry. And this pendant, with the turquoise arrowhead, looked authentically Native American. I knew there were a few rez nearby, but I hadn’t been on any of them as per my father’s expressed concerns with a single white girl being on Indian land alone yada yada. So I was interested.

“Nice necklace,” I offered, teasing him as we sat under the chuck wagon’s awning. Lunch was over, and I was camp jacking for the day, but the wood for the cook’s fire was chopped, so there was nothing to do until the dudes came back in, just before dinner. Ray had come up early, so we were taking a break together. “Is it Navajo?” I teased.

He slung back the remnants of his coffee, then set the mug down. “Nope.”

“Maybe they only make rugs,” I said, not knowing. “D’you steal it?”

“Nah,” he said, fiddling with it. “The wife gave it to me.”

While my blood chilled, I felt heat struck. “The wife?” He wore no ring. I knew he didn’t have kids—he’d told me.

“Yeah.” He said it so easily.

“You mean ‘ex-wife’?” I asked.

“Well, yes and no—technically, we’re separated. I can’t afford to get divorced.”

I wanted to ask if he could afford to have his face smashed in by an angry gal wielding a coffee mug. If he could still sing with a set of broken, no-longer-Chicklet-perfect teeth. If a quick jab to the Adam’s apple might make it harder for him to string women along or at least, to sing about it. Out of nowhere, I remembered that scene from *The Music Man* where the anvil salesman breaks the truth to Miss Marian (the Librarian) about her new boyfriend, Professor Harold Hill: he’s got a gal waiting in every county in Illinois, and that’s a hundred and two counties. But I could only look at him.

The fact that I was still speechless finally registered with Ray. “What’s the matter?”

I wanted to run, to make a timely escape before the first tears fell. I’d almost been caught. But to simply run away would still leave his loop around my neck, the slack tangling around my feet as I stumbled to safety.

But I wanted freedom, with no strings attached.

So I turned, walked back to where he sat, looked at him squarely and let fly my fist. My knuckles landed near the bridge of his nose, knocking him off of the picnic bench as the twinkle in his eyes was replaced by a shocked, almost terrified look.

“Where’d that come from?” he sputtered, scrambling backward as he loosened the bandana around his neck. Keeping one eye on me, he gingerly dabbed the bright cloth at his nose. It was bleeding freely now.

“I can’t say,” I answered honestly, shaking the dull ache from my hand. There on his knees, he almost looked pitiful. “You should have kept your eyes open.”

Some Horses (after Raymond Carver's "Car")

The horse bought at an auction with three kids riding it in Halloween costumes.

The horse that languidly leapt into my grandmother's garden.

The horse that took off with my father.

The horse with the roached mane.

The horse I was taught to fear but didn't.

The horse gifted to me by a childless woman.

The horse that farted when he kicked up his heels.

The horse that threw me onto concrete.

The horse with the Cadillac walk.

The black horse with regal bearing.

The horse that slid on the cement.

The horse with buckshot in his rump.

The horse that tripped over every rock on our gravel road.

The horses I watched with binoculars from my bedroom window.

The horse that stole my neighbor's French bread from her kitchen.

The horse my father ran alongside to teach me to ride.

The horse with the ever-pregnant belly.

The horse with the barbed wire scars.

The horse that took off with me.

The perfect horse that was too tall for me.

The horse with frostbitten ears.

The horse the old woman rode, unevenly balanced.

The horse I left tied to a highline then tried to ride away

The horse I tailed through scratching willows along the Snake River.

The horse that wandered away from the herd each morning in the mountains.

The horse I left in a meadow before I walked home, singing to scare away bears.

The horse that ripped the back pocket of my jeans for my grape Jolly Rancher.

The horse that threw the shoe the little boy heard.

The horse with leopard spots.

The one-eyed horse.

The horse with shaggy feet.

The horse with halter scars

The horse that reared with me, then hopped.

The horse that left the butt of my jeans caked with dirt and sweat.

The horse that saved my reputation and withstood the boy's massive weight.

The horse that followed me along the fence line but never left the corral.

The horse that knocked my tent down.

The horse with ruined lungs.

The horse with no tail.

The draft horse that stepped on my bare feet—an old grey Percheron.

The horse jumping through my dreams through my dreams

The horse that spooked at lines, painted on the pavement.

The horse I fell from with the Boy Scouts watching.

The horse with tender feet and corrective shoes.

The horse that peed as the train passed

The horse I jumped over picnic tables.

The horse with the J-Box Dot brand.

The horse with the bear paw spot.

The horse I let go.

My horse.

CHAPTER XI

NOW DEPARTING (2001)

Sunday Morning

All of the horses are up, some resting on tilted toes, eyes closed against the rising sun. A few watch us, their ears pricked towards my orange cat, Fox, and me as we step off the tiny porch and onto the trail. Fox hops on to the top rail of the corral fence, showing off his agility as he bounces over each buck's post end and traipses up to the tack shed, never even pretending to wobble. The horses follow us along, their voices low and rumbling in anticipation of the morning feed: a horse purr. Their paces quickens as they rush towards the bottleneck near the gate that leads to the top corral, jouncing and nipping at each other before I can open it. Cisca, our head mare, backs her ears and bares her teeth sharply at Molly, lowest in their pecking order, aiming for her withers.

I hate bullies.

“Hey, hey, hey!” I cuss Cisca, deepening my voice in rebuke. “Quit it.” My sharp tone surprises a few of the more timid horses, including Molly, causing them to spook away from the gate before they circle back, more hungry than curious. They stand there gawking like children, wondering if I'll feed them after all.

I open the bottom gate and look them over as they pass through it into the top corral. The brash and bold ones—Cisca, our only dun, and her bay half-sister, Bonnie, then Bravo, our pushy, proud cut gelding, and Sassy, the shaggy half-pony, followed by Casper, the almost-white Arab-Quarter, and Toby the paint calico—trot along, eager to

pick a top spot along the rail and eat first or thereabouts. The others lag behind, weary from the long summer of teens, tweens and trail rides—Pepper, the gentle, lazy giant, near Cub, fat and docile, then Molly and Peggy Sue, our nervous, head shy mares and finally Bud, swaybacked and brown, walking just ahead of Joe, the oldest and slowest but most trusted nag, arthritic and sagging.

I know how they feel.

Sunday Afternoon

With Fox for company, I've spent lunch and a few hours reading in the bunk house before Lou pulls into camp, home from church. We're so far up the canyon from Kamas—the nearest town on this side of the mountains—that I don't like to leave the horses and camp, so Lou and I trade off, taking turns between watching camp and running errands down in the valley, going to church and out to eat each weekend. Just in case, we have a satellite phone—cell phones are no good up here, and there are no landlines. The sat phone costs something like \$25 per minute, so it's only for emergencies, according to The Boss, a school psychologist who runs the place during the summers. Emergencies, she insists, must include bloodletting, dismemberment or both.

“How's church?” I ask Lou as she parks her Jeep and barely misses the cat, hunting gophers in the scrub brush.

“That one guy made a pass at me again.” Tall and willowy, beauty is Lou's primary curse, especially on Sundays when she cleans up and dresses in her best. I can't blame the thundering herd of guys who tail her for trying—she'd probably look great wearing a potato sack.

“A pass, huh?” I haven’t had one thrown my way in awhile.

“He asked me out for next weekend. I told him I had to work.”

I think for a minute, listening to Fox’s bell as he comes jingling up the trail, harassing gophers once again. “You still want to?”

She shrugs. “Not really. Tony said he’d take me up to Mirror Lake on Saturday if I wanted to go.” Tony is Lou’s boyfriend, a diesel mechanic who rides a crotch rocket. Since the camp road turns off from Mirror Lake Highway miles before the actual lake, neither of us has ever seen it. “I thought you were heading home?” Her voice is hopeful.

I don’t tell her that I can’t afford gas. “We’ve got that family reunion coming up here Friday evening. If you stay to do trail rides through Saturday lunch, then you can have the afternoon off.”

“Thanks, Bug,” she smiles with perfect teeth. None of our campers are supposed to know our real names. Most of them come from shady places, broken homes; some have issues so far gone that even anti-psychotic meds don’t seem to make a dent. Maintaining social and emotional distance keeps all of us safer, The Boss tells us every Monday morning before the new crop of campers pulls into the place. So we’ve gone from Kate and Melinda to Bug and Lou, call signs like the pilots have in *Top Gun*—too bad the guys we work with aren’t hot like Tom Cruise. This summer, I might have even settled for Goose or some lesser male.

Lou’s stomach growls, so she heads for the lodge. “I’m gonna go eat.” My cat follows her a few steps.

“Fox.” He stops and regards me, then deciding, moves my way once again.

Lou watches this, laughing aloud. “Your cat thinks he’s a dog.”

“Strange things happen at 7800 feet. Grab us a couple of Otter Pops, will you?”

I head for the bunkhouse, calling my cat.

I’ve taken this trail a thousand times this summer, walked the length of the camp past the creek, the turnoff to the road, the barn, the tack shed and down the long line of buck-and-rail fencing to where it dead ends at the bunkhouse steps. The Boss worried about us at first, about our being so far away from the other cabins and campers. But we have a two-way radio she knows about and a pellet gun she doesn’t (for shooting gophers), and we keep it locked when we’re out.

Besides, I want to keep an eye on the horses.

It’s an easy job, all in all, and the pay’s three times what the Girl Scout wranglers make back home. But I’m glad to be nearing the end of the summer.

Fox shoots ahead of me in pursuit of some rodent or another.

“Get ’im,” I say, watching his shoulders and hips pump up and down like the wheel on a steam engine, driving him forward. He reminds me of a cheetah with stripes instead of spots. I look up, letting my eyes linger on the herd before I reach the cabin.

They’re in a half-circle, I notice, surrounding a horse whose color I don’t recognize right away. Somewhere in the back of my brain, the animal behavior warning bell dings: all is not well. I retrace my steps along the trail and stop at the fence, then shimmy through it for a better look.

It’s Molly they’re guarding—odd considering that she’s low on the totem pole

here. As I invade their inner circle, the horses don't break ranks, but tighten around me restlessly as I run a hand over Molly. Her lungs are pumping hard as she stands, dripping sweat, her pulse racing, her eyes closed as if she just ran a marathon and is trying in vain to recover.

I run to the bottom gate and break our cardinal rule, screaming on my way to the tack shed. I need a halter and a lead rope.

"Lou!" I can't hear her, so I shout again. "Melinda!"

Scrambling inside, I can hear her tripping over her heels and binding skirt on the road. She falls, cursing to herself.

"What's wrong?" She yells outside the door.

"It's Molly!" I shout back. "She's sweating bullets and breathing like she's been running all day."

Lou tumbles in behind me, almost whispering our worst fear. "Colic?"

"Maybe—I don't know." I head off toward the bottom corral at a quick march, not so fast as to spook the horses, but I keep talking over my shoulder. "She's not trying to lie down yet, but she looks bad. We need a vet—go up to The Boss's cabin and call Carlene, will you? If she's not there, call her service. I'll keep walking her.

Lou keeps an extra pair of boots in the tack shed. Today I'm grateful for them as I hear her stomp into them, then jump off the front steps, racing towards the lodge and the satellite phone.

Molly looks worse now, her breathing heavier. She lets me halter her without any trouble, but won't move when I pull on the lead rope. As I twist her tail up over her

back to get her going—a last resort—she steps forward and staggers, nearly taking me with her. I know I've got to get her out of the corrals and into the shade, but every step is more difficult than the last. Her breath smothers her body; she gasps for air, craning her neck towards the water trough as we pass.

But it's too late to let her drink.

Colic. It's the most common gut ailment I know of, usually caused by the horse consuming too much dry feed without adequate water. I've tried to prevent it, putting out salt and mineral blocks for the horses to lick, making them thirsty enough to drink more in the mountain heat. And we cool our horses out gradually after rides to prevent any sort of heat exhaustion.

Still, I am unprepared.

Without intervention, I know the end usually comes when the colicky horse lies down, tries to roll, to work out the unseen kink in its gut as he or she screams in pain. Once a horse is down with colic, it rarely gets back up again.

Molly will not go down, I tell myself, pulling her into the trees. Not with me.

Sunday Night

The fight is over before it begins. With our usual vet gone, we've called this one over from Park City—more than an hour away—only moments after finding Molly. In vain desperation, I've racked my memory to remember every possible remedy to uncoil the gut that was slowly killing her, that might have been bothering her for a day or more until we noticed.

From the back of brain came an old Mormon pioneer story, the one our people

had remembered for more than a century, about the single mother crossing the plains. When one of the oxen in her yoke foundered, she put her hands on his head and prayed over him. But for this ox, she told the Lord, she had no other hope of making it over the plains and mountains beyond, no man to help her move her family west. But she had faith enough to believe that God could heal this sick ox, and sure enough, He did. The animal got up, made it to the Salt Lake Valley and died of old age.

It could work for us, I know, so I pray. Believing.

Molly dies anyway.

“It was colic.” Bloody to his elbows, the reserve vet, Dr. Morgan, reaches inside Molly’s steaming, drawn carcass and tugs at a few innards. Finding it, he pulls out a three-foot length of bowel, black with old blood and decaying grass, then looks at me. “Nothing you could have done—million-dollar horses go down every year, just like this.”

Through glistening eyes, I look at Lou, her mascara dripping in long lines down her cheek, her boots and skirt muddy and bloody to her knees.

“Don’t know if you’re aware, but she was pregnant,” he says later, washing his arms in the scrub sink near the lodge.

“How pregnant?” I wonder, my heart still unbelievably beating, enough to ache a little more.

“‘Bout three months, I’d say.” He cleans his tools carefully, rinsing and re-soaping each one before stowing it in its place.

Monday Noon

“Maybe it was a blessing.” Lou says suddenly at lunch.

Over the regular mealtime din, I wonder at her words.

“For her and her baby. You know what that Larry’s like—if I was a horse, I wouldn’t want him anywhere near my baby.” Larry is our outfitter, the guy who owns our dude string. Lou has a point, and looking at our herd proves it—each one of our horses has issues with care or handling or both. We’ve done what we can for them, but some of their problems run too deep. Joe, our geezer gelding, has had an abscess the size of a tennis ball on one cheek where his teeth have cut into his gums for years. We’ve had his molars floated and put him on a senior feed, but someone should have put him down years before. Yet here he is, still working.

“Maybe it’s a blessing.” I stare at my food, then push my tray away and rest my cheek against the cold steel table, soaking up relief from the noon heat. There’s been no Grand Entry this week, breaking the old pattern we’ve held to every Monday for the past three months. Some of the repeat campers notice, but I won’t ask the horses to walk around Molly’s carcass in order to parade up to the Lodge and back, just to showoff.

In the chaos of the lunchroom, The Boss finds us.

“You alright?” she wonders, trying not to seem like a grief counselor. She still does.

“We’ll live,” I say, from under my elbow. “When’s Cooney gonna get here?”

“He can’t get up this way until tomorrow night,” she says, sitting down heavily.

“He didn’t want to come at all—I had to convince him of the difficulty in keeping

seventy-eight curious kids from peeking under that blue tarp.” She motions to where Molly lies, slit from stem to stern near the tack shed under the only cover we could manage, with flies breeding in her rotting organs. It is the best we can do for her.

“What’ll we do ’til tomorrow?” Lou looks worried. We’ve already missed the first two rides for the week.

“None of those cabins has more than nine kids,” The Boss says, trying to reassure us. We’ve still got enough horses to cover the job, but there’s a question in her voice.

Closing my eyes, I raise myself up and face the crowd of kids at the other end of the lodge, all seventy-eight of them. There are little ones as young as six, then boys taller than me sprouting premature mustaches and every age in between. All of them want to ride a real horse on a real trail, at least once.

“We can still make it,” I say to them.

The Boss isn’t convinced. “How?”

“We’ve still got all of Wednesday and Thursday, a few hours on Friday morning. We’ll run four rides on both full days, then finish up with the last cabin before the buses pull out.” Lou nods, considering.

The Boss whistles. “That’s a pretty long haul for you.”

I stand and stretch my neck, rolling my head from side to side before collecting my still-full tray. “You mean them,” I say, nodding towards the remnants of our herd as they stand looking through the rails of the bottom corral, staring hopefully. “They’re still watching the tarp.”

Tuesday Evening

“Taking his time, isn’t he?” Lou asks, handing me an Otter Pop—my favorite flavor: Alexander the Grape.

I take it from her. She sits next to me on the fattest fence rail near the top gate. We watch the road.

She looks at me, staring at the swatch of blue on the ground. “Nothing you could have done.”

“Nope.”

“Vet said so.”

“I know,” I say, tearing the seal on the popsicle with my teeth, spitting the tab into the grass and bending to pick it up again. “I just can’t help thinking that if I’d found her earlier...” I shrug.

Lou shakes her head. “No guarantees. You know what old cowboys say: ‘When it came to designing the horse, God asked for another chance.’”

The ironic truth of it makes me crack a quick smile—the yards of gut, of intestines running against gravity without even a cow’s rumen for help. It’s a wonder the species survives at all.

Lou smiles with me, then turns serious in confessing, “With the shape she was in, I’m surprised she was still up and breathing when the vet got here.”

I nod, slurping the last of the cool, sweet juice from the plastic tube. “I was praying she would be.”

“That right? Well...,” she says, rising to dust her jeans, “the next time you’re at

it, I could use a million bucks.” She takes the wrapper from me and heads to the tack shed, then stops. “I was too, you know.”

The rumble of tires on caliche and cattle guards gets our attention. An ancient, oversized farm truck rolls in, a young couple in the front seat. The sign on the driver’s side door reads, COONEY’S HIDE AND TALLOW. The man waves at us—I wonder if it’s the original Cooney or one of his infamous sons.

I point at the tarp.

He makes a slow turn, backing up to it. The truck’s been outfitted with some sort of hydraulic ramp like the ones you see for a wheelchair, only twice as wide and longer. The brake lights come on a few feet from Molly’s hoof, protruding from under the simple cover. Her leg was too stiff for us to move.

“How long’s it been dead?” The young guy wants to know. He’s sitting in his truck, door open, pulling on a pair of heavy work gloves. I don’t blame him.

“Since Sunday afternoon,” I say, wondering if I want to watch while we works.

“Vet cut her open?”

I nod.

He shakes his head, then stands near the tailgate. “We won’t get nothing out of her.”

The thought of Molly being processed—cleaned like a dead deer, her carcass dipped into some vat of something strong enough to eat the hair off her skin, then boiled down to the bones—makes my stomach heave.

But I know it’s this man’s livelihood. And not an easy one—as more and more

people move into the valley below us, they complain about the smell when the wind shifts and travels past his family business. But today, I'm glad it's there—animal rendering is like recycling, I remind myself. Besides, without a way to bury Molly, we would have had to burn her—definitely out of bounds on the edge of National Forest in dry, summer heat. Besides, there are the children.

“What'll you charge?” I ask him.

“Pickup and mileage, two hunnerd dollars.”

“You'll get something from her, then. Just be sure and bill us.”

He grunts, ripping the tarp off Molly. The flies buzz in angry protest, rising with the stench as her shroud is removed. Her eyes are still open.

Thankfully, the man knows his business. He wastes no time in maneuvering the drop-down ramp under the carcass, then pulling a shovel out of the back of the truck to tuck the guts closer to her body on the ramp. In one motion, he raises my horse up to the level of the truck bed, then dumped backwards into it with a singular, hollow thump. Dead weight.

He tidies up quickly, shoveling a few stray bits and pieces into the back, leaving most of the blood-soaked gravel behind.

I hold out my hand to him; he takes off his glove, and we shake hands. “Thanks for coming all this way. I don't know what we would have done.”

He nods, climbing back in behind the wheel. The woman in the cab smiles silently at him, edging closer to him on the bench seat. Cooney throws up his hands in surrender. “She took the call, made me come. All those kids.” He looks over towards

the campfire, listening to the singing. “I should have been a plumber.”

“Ditto.”

I can’t help thinking about what my mother always said whenever we kids wanted to add another pet to the mix: Animals always come to some sad end. Thank goodness for a college education—I’ll head back to school in the fall.

Cooney turns his truck around near the barn, heading back down the road with Molly’s remains, waving at The Boss as he goes. She meets us by the tack shed.

“Show’s over,” I say, leaning on the gate.

“Glad I missed it.” Her eyes start to water as she passes the stain in the dirt, and she tries not to breathe through her nose. “You sure about tomorrow?” she asks, nearly gasping.

“We’ll be fine. We’ll take the younger cabins first—that’ll leave the oldest boys for last. Those little ones have a harder time waiting.”

“Thanks. Both of you.”

We smile. “That’s why you pay us.”

“Yeah, but I wish it was more,” The Boss says, turning nostalgic. “I can’t forget you two hauling that girl in off the hike with heat stroke—back in June, was it?” That day, we’d gone straight up the mountain after just coming down. “Now this,” she nods at the truck, dipping into the waiting world below us. “I wish I could have you every year.”

“Preciate it,” I say, standing to face her. “But when this summer’s over, I’m out.”

“Go on,” Lou says, disbelieving.

“After this?” I’m as surprised at their reaction as they are to my ultimatum. “I don’t think I could stand it. I plan on doing more with my life—something different, at least.”

I can tell Lou’s still skeptical. She knows the love, the life of horses, the way it draws people like us forward onto new mounts and faraway places like this one. We both know that I’ll find myself with them again, sooner or later, like a habit I can’t kick, a craving that never dies.

Lou says no more.

“We’ll miss you,” The Boss slaps me on the shoulder after a long moment as she heads back towards the campfire, then turns to face me. “You know, Bug, out of all the things I’ve had to worry about this summer, horses haven’t been on the list. I thank you for that.”

Friday Morning

“That the last of them?” Lou asks me, watching a few lingering kids—happy and sore—head toward the lodge, wobbling from the ride and waving to their mounts; Lou waves back. Pre-dawn, accident-free trail rides like this last one are worth celebrating in this frenetic season with fence breaks, slipping saddles, careless drivers and one of our horses at the glue factory.

“We’ve still got one more group,” I say, sitting on the tack shed steps as I slurp down an Otter Pop.

“Whose?” She waves again at the kids and hands me a granola bar from her

back pocket. Our horses have breakfasted; we haven't.

“Peach's. He said he's got three boys this week.”

Wednesday's unannounced downpour has put us further behind schedule; we're usually finished with campers by Thursday night, but with Molly's death and the rain, our dance card is still full of kids who want the chance to ride. And since we've told The Boss we could do it, everyone is counting on us. The Boss has even promised us her tub privileges once we're through, with her private stash of bath salts—the ultimate reward.

We chew silently, squinting and blinking through the dust and already-shimmering heat at the string of horses in the corral. Our backs and shoulders ache from the long day before and the long day ahead. The horses sigh heavily under the weight of the sun, struggling through the thin mountain air to finish what we begin each morning. Now, some of them stand on three feet, their back legs cocked, their weight resting on tired toes, ears slung back like Eeyore's when he lost his tail.

Lou coughs, spitting out a raisin into the weeds. “Who d'you wanna pull out?”

“How old are Peach's boys?” I ask, trying to picture our guests. By this time, I can guesstimate sizes well enough to put the right horse with the right rider given some wiggle room for temperament and athletic ability.

“Thirteen, maybe fourteen. But Canada says that two of them are heavyweights.”

I survey our dude string, several of whom are feeble enough to follow Molly's trail; we'll have to choose our horses carefully for this last ride.

“Let’s get Pepper, Bonnie and Cisca. We can loosen the latigo on the rest of these guys.” Cramming the granola bar’s wrapper into my pocket and adjusting my doo rag, I tighten it, and trying to avoid scraping the deep sunburn on my forehead. “Who’re you taking?” I ask, as if we were all on our way to the prom. As if I don’t already know.

Lou grins at me. “Peggy Sue.”

“It’s your funeral. We still haven’t fixed that stupid fence from the last time.”

“I just won’t tie her up again,” Lou reasons. “She’s too edgy.”

“That old girl ain’t just edgy,” I say, digging my fingernails under Casper’s cinch to loosen it. He blows out, shifting his weight. “She’s a head case.” Every few days, something—or nothing—scares Peggy Sue badly enough that she tries to run off with whatever she’s been tied to. Last time, she’d spooked the other horses and split open her hock so badly that we’d had to call the vet. Again.

But there’s no denying that the little strawberry roan has a Cadillac walk and a puppy’s disposition; Lou loves her, warts and all. “You’d better bring up the rear,” I say.

“Right.” Lou finishes untacking Toby’s bridle and loosening his cinch, whacking him on the butt as she steps behind him. Languidly, he snorts.

We set to work, first stripping off the bridles from the seven remaining horses, pulling the headstall forward from behind each horse’s ears, letting the metal curb bits drop into our hands: hunks of metal, sticky with spit from the horses’ heavy salivating, tainted green from the overgrown tips of grass they’ve snatched along the trail.

Afterwards, they lower their heads, then sit dozing with eyes half-shut, sputtering loudly through their nostrils as Lou and I make our way down the line, humming to them, bringing deliverance as we paused beside each one long enough to let the slack out of the latigo, that long strip of leather that held the cinch and saddle on like a too-snug belt. When relieved, each horse lets out a lusty sigh.

Before long, we see the three latecomers sauntering towards us and the tack shed, caps on backward, oversized Nikes flapping, unlaced. I shake my head, still amazed that to date, no one has broken a toe or sprained an ankle. At least they aren't allowed to bring flip flops to camp. And these guys are even walking instead of running—someone has finally read our sign at the gate: NO RUNNING OR YELLING BEYOND THIS POINT.

“How y'all doing?” I venture.

“Fine,” the tall, curly red-headed one answers for them, baby-faced and freckled.

“Y'all are from Peach's cabin?”

“Yup,” says a large black boy.

Lou smiles at them. “Any of you ever ridden before?” She tries to sound sincere.

“Once, at a birthday party,” Curly says, smiling back at her—all the boys do.

“They just went around in a circle.” He motions with his finger.

“Someone else was doing the driving though, right?” I squint at him.

Curly nods. “They were hooked to a merry-go-round or something.”

“Uh-huh.” I look at the last one, a big boy, still silent. He stands two steps

behind the other two, gaping at Pepper. That isn't unusual. At seventeen hands high—five-feet-eight at the shoulder—Pepper is classically Percheron, a French breed once used to carry knights into battle, in full armor. He's stepped on my foot once before, shifting his massive weight onto it, barely noticing as I elbowed him in the ribs to get him to move. He's an intimidating sight.

But like Pepper, all of the Percherons I've worked with are huge lap dogs, babysitters, perfect for jobs like ours. With child obesity rates being what they are, we are lucky to have him; Pepper can carry anyone and never strays off the trail. It's like riding on autopilot.

Of course, this kid doesn't know that—he stars at dappled-grey mountain of horseflesh like he's seeing a cobra in a glass cage. Interested but petrified.

Ignoring the solemn boy for now, I lean against the buck and rail fence. “Okay, what are y'all's names?”

The black boy speaks. “I'm Fly.” He points to Curly. “He's Jose.” Then he nods at the quiet one. “That's *Nathan*.”

Nathan. He is maybe five-seven and weighs at least three-fifty. I take a deep breath and head toward Sassy, leading her out for my usual demo and thinking that I might have to change our game plan. The black kid—Fly or whatever-his-name-is—isn't thin either, but Nathan has at least sixty pounds on him, and Pepper hasn't come with a partner. We could use some Salt.

“Well, I'm Bug—this is Lou.” She waves. “I know Peach has gone over the rules for being around horses with you guys already, so we'll just review some basic

riding techniques now.” I run through the basic equipment list: bridle, saddle, horn, stirrup. Get on the same way you get off, just in reverse order. Then I list the Do’s, Don’ts and Bewares: avoid getting too close to the horse in front of yours. Spot rocks, holes and approaching cars on the trail, then alert your neighbor. Move through the gate one at a time. Wait for the last wrangler to pass before you continue. Our daily demo is like that movie they still show in driver’s ed—the one that keeps telling you to stay two seconds behind the car in front of you, check your blind spot, signal when you turn. And it produces the same results: glazed looks and nodding heads.

“Okay, any questions?”

The boys turn their glassy stares on each other, blinking, except for Nathan. His eyes are fastened on Pepper.

“Good. Lou, let’s find them some helmets and then mount ‘em up.” Fly and Jose aka Curly follow close behind her to the tack room. I have to smile at Lou’s faithful following, remembering the nursery rhyme about Bo Peep and her sheep. Every week, the older boys we host are bashful but determined to earn her attention. One kid has even come down to the tack shed every night during his free time to help muck out the corral. But word must have gotten around about Tony-the-diesel-mechanic since nobody’s actually tried to get fresh with Lou. Yet.

While the two other followed Lou like lemmings, the Nathan kid stays where is.

“Go on, Bud.”

“I can’t ride.” His voice, unlike his frame, is light and airy, almost soprano.

He reminds me of a giant choir boy; he isn’t the first scared kid I’ve dealt with. I

smile at him, trying to sound reassuring. “You came to the right place, son. That’s why they pay us the big bucks. Go on with Lou, now.”

“I can’t.”

I’m through pretending to be patient, but I try again, folding my arms and leaning towards him. “Can you tell me why you ‘can’t’?”

He shifts from one foot to the other, grinding his tennis shoe into the dirt.

“‘Cause I have cancer and a shunt, and if I fall off, I could have an aneurism and die. I can’t fall off.”

For the first time this summer, I hesitate, shocked breathless by his pitiful confession. Suddenly, I wonder if he’s serious, but something—in the excuse and in his face—tells me that this wasn’t the kind of lie a teenage kid would come up with, this disease, this difference between him and the other boys in his cabin.

Still, a nagging thought itches in the back of my brain: each camper who has come to us has ridden, most of them for the first time. Our approval rating is unprecedented: a documented 99% of campers surveyed have had a satisfactory experience with our horsemanship. Upon learning that, Lou and I toasted each other with Otter Pops from the camp kitchen. And with Molly’s death, it’s important to me to leave a legacy behind me this year, something other than a dead horse.

But this kid’s case is different. There’s his medical condition—if anything happens to him, Lou and I can both be held liable—not that we’ve got anything someone will want. But so can the camp, maybe the whole YMCA. Second, he’s huge, and even if we can get him in the saddle, his horse has to be able to make it over the root-and-

hole-filled forest trail without even a hiccup. The only way it can work is if we keep the ride simple and short, just like we would for the youngest campers. The problem lies in letting the other two boys think they're getting the usual treatment for a cabin full of boys their age, that they haven't been shortchanged.

I look to my horses for answers, then find one in Sassy. "You see that little horse I rode earlier?" I nod to Nathan.

"That one?" He points a chubby finger at her, scoffing. I'm not surprised—she is short but tough as nails, her coat a shaggy sorrel, even in this heat. It's an old joke between Lou and me—guess the pony's bloodline. We've gone through everything from Shetland to Clydesdale to English sheepdog, every combination imaginable. This little mare reminds me of my first horse since before I could ride on my own, my dad would sit behind me in the saddle as my squatty pony held us both. Our Sassy is even stouter than my pony was; she's perfect for this job.

But Nathan doesn't know that. "I'm too big for her."

I shake my head. "Dude, that horse could piggyback a Mack truck and not feel a thing." I soften my voice, but stay firm. "We have a rule here that every camper has to at least give our horses a try. Will you try, Nathan?"

Almost imperceptibly, I walk backwards towards Sassy, coaxing the boy along. "We'll get you on, then start out real slow here in the corral. I'll lead you around and when you're ready, you can drive. Okay?"

He stares at me, then at the tack shed where the other two boys are clowning around with Lou, trying on helmets. He considers Sassy for a long time, then takes a

deep breath.

“Okay. But just around this inside part, right?”

“Right.”

“And you’ll walk next to me the whole time?” His plea is desperate, his eyes scared, the eyes of a child half his age, a fraction of his size, almost begging me to hold his hand.

“I’ll be with you all the way. But I have a feeling that you won’t need me after awhile. Now go on with Lou and pick out a helmet.” He exits the corral in the same way he’s entered: through the gate, too large to scoot through the rails of the fence the way most boys do. I watch him climb the tack shed’s steps as the other two, holding their helmets, made way for him to pass between them. Jose speaks first.

“You riding, Nathan?”

“I’m gonna try Sassy,” he nods over at the two of us. I scratch Sassy under her chin.

Fly glances at Jose, then stares back at Nathan, his brows furrowed. “I thought you ‘couldn’t’?”

Nathan shrugs. “I’m gonna try.”

The boys look at each other, shrugging it off, then walk towards their own mounts: Pepper and Cisca. We get them up first—I want Jose and Fly out of the way and occupied before we try anything with Nathan. Soon, Lou has them walking around the corral, hollering corrections and encouragement as she comes down the fence line towards the three of us. For once, they pay her little attention.

“Need a hand?” She smiles at Nathan, then searches my face.

“One or two.” I heave at Sassy’s latigo again, removing any possibility of saddle slippage. “Fetch me that stool, will you Lou?”

It takes three tries from our plastic step stool and a whole lot of cheerleading to get Nathan onto Sassy’s back. With the last leap, he closes his eyes and gets a leg halfway over her shaggy red rump. Lou grabs at his knee and I shove his butt into the seat as the other boys continue their turns around the corral, oblivious to our endeavor.

“Well,” I say, panting, “You’re on.”

Sassy sighs, steady but unexcited at the prospect of moving forward. Shaking, Nathan sits rigidly for several minutes. “Whoa,” he finally manages to say.

I pat Sassy’s neck. “You mean ‘Get up,’ don’t you?”

“No—I’m just gonna sit for a minute.” He’s stunned at his own success.

I shrug. “We got all day, Nathan. Don’t we, Lou?”

Lou plays with Sassy’s mane. “Yep. But you know, she’s just like any other girl, Nathan. The best way to get to know her is to take her for a walk.” Lou winks at him.

Nathan nods, eyeing me nervously. “You coming?”

“I’ll chaperone.” Trying not to grin, Lou hands me Sassy’s lead rope. “Turn the key, Nathan.”

He sits a little taller. “Get up, girl.”

This life of horses is never easy, I think as I lead Nathan around the pen, then open the gate to lead the trail ride down the road. And the rewards—shining ones like

this—are too far between the price you pay in blood and sweat. But Nathan stays close to me on Cisca's flank, finally trusting Sassy enough to use the reins on his own. We climb the switchbacks of the old gravel logging road together—me and the three boys—with Lou riding drag at the back. Reaching the top, we rest our horses in a clearing and watch as the sun clears the tallest peaks in the timberline.

Summer's gone.

CHAPTER XII

EPILOGUE (2008)

I spotted Pal in a pasture off FM 1409 while leaving town after my grandmother's funeral. We were driving with the windows down, enjoying the honeysuckle-sweet air in spite of the heat. I wasn't sure if it was him at first—I asked my husband to pull over as I investigated the pony, squinting past the shimmering mirage rising off the East Texas blacktop. But instead of fading from existence, the illusion grew more vivid as I approached it, and just beyond the white fence in a sea of Bahia grass was the horse of my dreams, a gift from my father.

There had been other tokens of his affection: a pair of knit gloves from the five and dime. A wooden penguin figurine with fiery rhinestone eyes. Industrial-grade coveralls from his roughneck job, sized small. When Dad called you aside and said, "Hey, I got something for you today," he quickly followed it up with an honest, "It isn't much."

Erring on the side of practicality, my father's gifts to the seven of us kids weren't spectacular and often, garage sale finds. If Dad had a motto, it might be *Semper Thriftus*: always bargain. But there were times—splendid and shining jewels—when he hit a home run. A new go-cart for the older kids. A tree fort with a hammock, a rope ladder, a zip line. And for me, a pony of my own. With time and nostalgia this stubborn, shaggy lump of coal became a diamond in my memory, the greatest treasure of my childhood.

I'd been asking for a horse since I learned to speak, and thanks to my grandpa's

aging cutting horse and my older sister, Mindy, I loved catching, feeding, currying and riding horses. But by the time I was six in 1987, my arguments hadn't swayed my parents towards buying a horse. In desperation, I pulled out all the stops at Christmastime, writing a solitary item at the top of my wish list: "My own horse." That didn't work, either.

The holidays came and went uneventfully, then my June birthday and most of the fall. But sometime in Indian summer, I overheard Dad talking to Pete, my grandpa's farm hand, who had a sideline as a horse trader. Dad used the words "about a hundred dollars" and "something real gentle." I kept my aching fingers crossed.

Then in November, hope came as I left for school on a Friday morning: "Hey, I got something for you today." I spent all day stewing about Dad's words, wondering and wishing, bombing my spelling test. Later, as my siblings and I did our homework in the living room and awaited Dad's return, I dared to speculate openly.

"A horse?" said Ben, just older than me, scoffing. "Why would Dad get *you* a horse? I've wanted a mini-bike longer than you've been alive."

"You've got no place to put him," Adam, my oldest brother, pointed out.

I rallied again. "He could stay at Grandma and Grandpa's." Their ranch bordered our backyard.

"If it was anything big, Dad would've said so," Ben said. "He's probably forgotten all about it."

Always contemplative, Mindy finally spoke. "How'll you pay for feed?"

"I have my birthday money," I said. Even to me, it sounded lame.

Finally Dad stuck his head through the front door. “Katie, come on out here a minute,” he said, retreating to the porch. I followed, facing his blue gaze. “Listen, Pete found you a horse. He isn’t much, but you’ll have to take care of him and help pay for feed when you can. Pete’s gonna keep him over at his place until we have a place to put him.”

Gob smacked, I wanted to make sure that I’d heard him right. “I got a horse?”

So did Ben. “*She got a horse?*”

He was a Welsh pony, shorter than I’d imagined, squat and woolly in his winter coat. He perked up and whinnied when Dad, Mindy and I drove around the corner and saw him grazing in the middle of Pete’s lawn.

“There he is,” Dad announced.

“I like that horse,” Mindy declared.

Still shocked, I couldn’t stop smiling and nearly fell out of the van.

As Mindy and I looked him over, Dad knocked on Pete’s door, interrupting his dinner—he came outside dabbing at his face with a napkin. “Well, how do you like him, Kate?” Pete asked.

I bent down to pet the horse’s velvety cheek. “I like him.” Just then, my dream horse broke off grazing to nibble on my shirttail, leaving a trail of slimy grass stains behind.

Pete ran a hand over the pony’s roached mane, trimmed to the roots. “I was telling your dad this old boy’s about twelve years old. Good teeth. I saw him up at the auction Halloween night.” He laughed, turning to Dad. “Did I tell you that fella had

two kids riding him, one pulling his tail as they went round the sale barn, all in costumes? Not bad for a hundred and fifteen dollars.”

Pal—for “palomino,” Spanish for his golden-cream colored coat—was more lap dog than pony, but that was okay since I didn’t own a dog either. After convincing my Dad to stake Pal out for the night in our yard the way that Pete had done in his, Pal got loose and headed across the highway, stopping on the far side to munch on Mrs. Everett’s azalea bushes. It took Dad half the night to catch him.

That first escapade was an omen of greater capers. In the six years I had Pal, he escaped our farm more than a dozen times no matter how we tried to keep him contained. He learned all kinds of tricks: how to let himself out of his corral, how to climb our back steps or walk up my grandfather’s wheelchair ramp, then peek through the screen door. How to get into his feed bucket. How to eat watermelon rinds. How to find me when I whistled for him. Even how to tell time—if I hadn’t fed him by four o’clock, he’d remind everyone, nickering impatiently each time someone slammed the screen door.

But on at least one excursion, Pal went from trickster to burglar. Our neighbor Francine had just returned from Brookshire Brothers, and once home, set her burgeoning grocery bags on her counter. The phone rang, so Francine ran into her living room to answer it and left the back door open. Pal wandered right into the kitchen and headed straight for the bar. After nosing through Francine’s groceries, he found a loaf of French bread and tried to back through the door with it.

“Pal!” Francine yelled, walking in on him.

His head shot upwards in surprise as he looked around, knowing he was caught. To her credit, Francine tried to wrestle the bread away from him there in the kitchen. Eventually, she gave up and instead, opened the door a little wider to let him outside. Pal jumped the kitchen threshold unscathed, then trotted triumphantly away, the bread still dangling from his mouth.

Then there was the time that Dad brought Pal to school for show and tell (or, show and I-told-you-so). I'd had Pal for awhile, but a few kids in my class still didn't believe he existed. Finally, I explained my dilemma to Dad. "Well," he said, "we'll have to fix that." As my teacher let our class out for recess the next day, there was Dad with Pal, saddled up and grazing on the lawn of Stephen F. Austin Elementary in the shade of an oak tree, waiting to carry me home.

After that, Pal became famous, and for years, he and I managed the pony rides at most of my siblings' birthday parties and various church picnics. In public, his behavior was always impeccable but at home, I spent hours urging him from a jarring trot into a respectable lope. He generally bucked me off once he'd decided that I'd played Paul Revere long enough; often, he'd amble back towards the barn and wait patiently for me to open the gate. Thus, I learned how to take a fall without taking it too personally, and how to get up again.

Inevitably, I dreamed of flashier horses as Pete exercised his endless string of acquisitions down the length of our dirt road: Missouri Foxtrotters, Tennessee Walkers, Pasos. Saddle horses. A man could ride them all day and not regret it the next morning, Pete said. And when I was twelve, after wishing for one horse in particular, I inherited

him.

But two horses were too much for one girl, Dad said, even if she was as horse crazy as I was. Since I didn't have the heart to sell Pal, I decided to give him to my cousins, Janelle and Annette, just younger than me. That last day, I rode him and fed him, petted him and told him to behave at his new home. As my uncle and cousins pulled away through our gate with Pal in their trailer, I waved goodbye hoping I'd see them all soon.

But it wasn't to be. Not long after that, Dad decided to move our family west. With my grandfather now dead and my grandmother ailing, we sold the ranch, the cattle and my new horse—lock, stock and saddle—and set out for the foreign land of urban living. Likewise, after my uncle suffered a financial setback, Pal was auctioned off to a stranger; I had no idea where he'd ended up.

Then following a decade of city dwelling, my husband and I settled in the Hill Country of Central Texas in 2005. We were expecting our second child when we learned of Grandma's death, three years later. We had driven nearly four hours to attend her service, mourn her passing and visit family in my hometown, even taking a turn down the old dirt road so our daughter could see the ranch. We had begun to head home when I spied the pony in the pasture and asked my husband to stop the car. It could be Pal, I thought as I climbed out, knowing ponies often live a long time.

Now heavily pregnant and nearly fainting from the heat and humidity, I took a chance and whistled, long and high. The pony's head came up and unbelievably, he nickered, trotting towards me. Drawing nearer, I caught a glimpse of two white

stockings where Pal's legs had been solid. I laughed at the realization, hoping that whoever owned this fellow would have equal joy of him.

“What is it, Mama?” my daughter called from her car seat, her eyes wide.

“Nothing,” I smiled back at her. “Just thought I saw someone I knew.”

Thanks & Giving

Our father:

The Mighty Bargain Hunter

Lord of the Saturday Sale

I got you something, he'd sometimes say,

It isn't much.

He was right.

Knit gloves from the five and dime,

A wooden penguin with rhinestone eyes,

Roughneck coveralls, size small

Then came the jewels—

Shining and splendid—

The treasures of our childhood:

A go-cart for the older kids,

A tree fort for us all,

A pony of my own.

It wasn't much,

To the seven of us—

It was everything.

CHAPTER XIII

CONCLUSION

Initially, I found this work difficult to classify. It is a female coming of age story comprised of a story suite, a narrative novella, a piece of autobiographical fiction. It is all these things, yet none of them, and as such, models for this particular form of storytelling—a human story with horses as a literary vehicle—have been difficult to come by.

But there may indeed be one similar, extant work. Recently, I discovered Jeannette Walls' *Half Broke Horses*, a true-life novel chronicling the memoirs of Walls' grandmother, Lily Casey Smith. That said, I direct readers to Ms. Walls' masterful work for another storyteller's look at the independent spirit of a Texan horsewoman.

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