

A woman in a white dress and hat is shown from the chest up, looking upwards and to the left. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with a body of water and trees. In the foreground, there is a field of tall, green, spiky flowers, and a dragonfly is perched on one of them.

A SISTERHOOD *of*

FRIENDSHIP *and* FAITH

What Once We Loved

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*poverty flat**Fall 1853*

Whipped-cream clouds danced across a stage of blue before an audience of oak. Shadows softened the sun's glare on the water, allowing Ruth Martin to peer beneath the river's surface. She'd seen that wily trout. Today she'd catch him without getting her feet wet.

She retied the bent sewing needle at the end of the butcher's twine. California morning sun glinted on beads of water dotting the wet string like pearls. "Just one more little nibble and I'll have you," she said. Firm yet slender as a whip handle, Ruth sat astride her horse. Old miner's pants covered her legs. Jumper, her horse, wiggled his ears, lifted a back leg to scratch at a fly, splashed when he set his hoof down. "Don't lose concentration now, Jumper," she whispered, more to herself than the horse.

Certain the needle was firmly attached, she flicked the willow fishing pole and watched as the breeze picked up the string, then set it and the makeshift hook adrift along the riffle. A reddish leaf broke loose from a willow, gentled in the stream following her line to the shaded pool. She eased the hook across the water. Waiting.

She'd have to head back soon. She still had pack boxes only half filled. Flannels needed steaming and hanging, and the wagon wasn't nearly loaded. Then there was that Joe Pepin to contend with. The

wrangler'd said he'd take them north, but he'd been acting scarce of late. Still, Ruth Martin could make it happen on time. She was sure. She just wanted to bring in this last big trout before she headed back. Astride Jumper, she could do it without getting wet. She smiled.

Redwing blackbirds chirped in the tall grasses drooping with their weight. Sun warmed her face. Her eyes closed.

She felt a tug. Sitting straight, she jerked the willow and set the hook. "Gotcha," she said. Skillfully she lifted the pole up and over the horse's head, changed hands, then back again as the trout twisted and tired in the water before her. He was a big one. When it felt right, she said, "Back, Jumper." She barely touched the reins and squeezed her knees, easing the big animal back toward the riverbank. "Just a little more," she said. Then with perfect timing, she slid the trout out of the water and onto the grassy bank. "We did it!" The horse lifted its head up and down as though to agree.

With one leg raised over his mane, Ruth slid off, still holding the pole. She stunned the fish with the hard end of her whip that usually hung coiled at her hip, then slipped the fish into the canvas bag with the others. She had over a dozen. This one alone weighed as much as a pork roast. A good morning's catch. Plenty for them all at the big affair Elizabeth had planned. She tightened the strap of the bag, then draped it over the horse's neck. "You're a good fishing partner," she told Jumper, hugging him and inhaling his scent before gripping his mane in her hands and pulling herself up and astride. "The best I've ever had."

She pressed her knees and set a fast pace back to Poverty Flat. Riding always invigorated, took away any agitation or worry. It was one of the few luxuries she permitted herself, a woman with responsibilities. Today, with so much yet undone, she needed that burst of power.

A flock of geese lifted from the Sacramento as they raced by. She ducked beneath the oaks and through the pines embracing the meadow known as Poverty Flat and home—but not for much longer. She squinted.

Matthew Schmidtke and the children were pushing something on a cart. Coopered barrels. They were all laughing. Surely they hadn't already gotten all their chores completed. She didn't see any blankets on the line, and no one stood near the butter churn. What had they been doing? She squeezed her knees, and Jumper sped forward.

"Hey," Matthew said as she approached. "Brought breakfast, I see."

"Supper," she said. "Have you children finished what I asked you to do?"

"We're helping Matthew," Ruth's nephew Jason told her. His cowlick stuck straight up in the back, and he absently pressed his fingers against it as he talked.

"And it's a surprise," Jessie, her five-year-old daughter, said. "For you."

"Don't tell her," Sarah warned, acting older than her eight years.

"I won't," Jessie answered.

"I don't like surprises much," Ruth said. She removed her floppy felt hat and wiped her forehead with her forearm. Her eyes caught Jessie's troubled look, and she softened. "I'm sure this one will be fine. We just have a lot to do."

"You'll like this one." Matthew smiled at her.

"We have to be out of here this week," Ruth said, squaring her shoulders.

"Maybe some of us wish you weren't in such a hurry," he said, his blue eyes never leaving hers.

"Wait'll you see it," Ned said. Her younger nephew pulled at his stockings tucking them up to his knickers. He stood with his hands at his hips just the way Matthew did. Neither wore a hat this morning. "It's gonna be real chirk."

"Let's let her tend to her business while we take care of those fish, boys. Then we can finish up here." Matthew sniffed the air. "Is that you or the fish?" he teased. The children giggled. "Must be the fish. You'll like our surprise for sure, if it isn't."

Ruth grunted, never quite sure how to take his teasing. She didn't have much practice with friendships with men. Mostly they were obstacles to her finding the independence and peace of mind she sought. Matthew approached the horse, patted Jumper's neck, then lifted the canvas bag of fish. A breeze brushed at the strip of white hair that faded into black above Matthew's eye. He winked, then headed toward the porch. "Let's get these cleaned, boys," he said. "Then it's back to hard labor and Ruth's surprise."

"Surprises leave me cold," Ruth said as she reined the horse toward the barn.

"This one'll warm you to your toes," Matthew called after her. The children's laughter only added to her irritation.



Mazy Bacon drove the milk wagon from Poverty Flat into Shasta City. It was morning, and by midafternoon she'd be riding back again to milk her cows and tend to the calves she kept at Ruth's place. She felt tired. Probably from all the people out there right now. The Schmidtkes bustled about, all three of them. And of course, Ruth and her four until they headed north. Pack strings showed up and pitched tents before heading into Shasta. Even wagon trains found the wide flat inviting, giving people a place to catch their breath before dispersing to places north and south and farther west, seeking new lives, drifting like leaves to the fall winds.

Mazy had stayed at Ruth's when her cows were calving. But then Matthew Schmidtke and the wrangler Joe Pepin arrived, bringing the rest of Ruth's mares and yearlings and the Schmidtkes' Durham cows. And they brought Marvel, the Ayrshire bull that belonged to Mazy. Or did until she'd discovered that bovine was really owned by her dead husband's brother living in Sacramento. Another of her husband's betrayals uncovered. She'd have to get the bull to her brother-in-law before long.

Ruth had even asked that Mazy move the bull out now. Find a pen for him in town.

“He could injure the mares or colts,” Ruth said. “I know you wouldn’t want that to happen.”

Marvel’s long horns were worthy of respect. Mazy knew that firsthand. But Ruth would be gone in a day or two, and then the bull would have free range with Mazy’s cows and the Schmidtkes’, too, if they wanted. After they were bred, she’d take the cow brute south. Until then the pen of split rails seemed sturdy enough to hold him. Mazy had said as much to Ruth. Ruth had set her jaw, then stalked off.

Mazy pulled up the milk cart, tied the mule to the hitching rail, then dropped off the tins of milk at Washington’s Market in Shasta City. “We’ll take all you can give us,” the proprietor told her. “Cheese be coming one of these days?”

“I’m just doing milk and butter for now,” Mazy said. She wiped her hands on her apron, lifted another tin.

“Shasta’s a growing city,” Washington reminded her, taking the milk from her hands. “We need your busy cows to supplement the food shipped in from Oregon. How else we going to feed the hordes of miners spackling this country like flies on tent canvas?”

Mazy smiled. “I’m doing my best.”

Mazy finished her delivery, taking some tins to the St. Charles Hotel, another to a new boardinghouse, which had sprung up almost overnight. She accepted the final payment for the day, wrote down new orders, and promised to bring more butter tomorrow. She stuffed the coins into a bag kept beneath her seat and caught a scent of her own perspiration. The work was hard but invigorating. She had a strong back and firm hands. “Formed of sturdy stock” her husband had always said. She needed to be sturdy to survive as a widow in this West. Fragrant sturdy stock, she thought, as she unhitched the mule from the rail. A bath would feel good.

Back at her mother’s small room above the bakery, Mazy dabbed at

her upper body with water from the flowered washbowl with a rough huck towel, her eyes glancing at the quilt pieces. Ruth had drawn the design Suzanne had described, and Mazy had promised to sew it for their blind friend. Each of the women had made a block to symbolize their experiences together coming across from the States to California last year. Mazy hadn't even decided what her own block would say, but she liked the idea of making a story out of the pieces, making it look like the pages of a book.

A dream she'd had the night before came to her mind. Usually her dreams were like hiccups, disrupting without rhythm. This one had actually been a story. It had a beginning, middle, and end. Even color. Her bath completed, she dried, then treated herself with a cup of spring water. She sat to stitch, remembering the dream's sequence.

She was in a schoolhouse, taking lessons. The teacher was her old pastor. He wore his long frock coat and on his feet the mud-stained boots of a farmer. Someone had a photo book they shared, and across the room, people carrying carpetbags on their arms bought tickets to take a stage somewhere. Mazy knew she belonged at that schoolhouse, was there to learn something. Yet she was suddenly striding out, kicking up the hem of her dress, the fringe of her shawl tickling her bare arms as she walked, her shoulders square and sure. She felt happy knowing where she was headed, the wind blowing her auburn hair. She met a wagon loaded with candle tins and wooden buckets and trunks like those the women had brought across the trail. A woman stood from the still-moving seat. She remembered her now; it was an acquaintance from back in Wisconsin, Kay Krall! Kay pulled the red-seated Studebaker wagon to a stop. She spoke to Mazy, "Are you in service?"

Mazy had answered with great joy, "Yes! I am!"

The woman had smiled and moved on, saying as she waved good-bye, "That's good. Because it's my job to make sure that everyone is in service."

Again Mazy had hurried on, sure of what she sought as she made

her way through fields of buttercups and purple birdbeak blooms. At a log cabin she'd stopped, knowing this was where she was meant to be. She knocked on the door. When it opened, there stood a young man with a wife and child. "Do you need service?" Mazy'd asked. "Yes," he'd told her and invited her in. They'd walked through the house to the back, and Mazy was so happy, so pleased to be doing just what she was meant to do in life. He opened the back door, and they stepped into the blazing sunlight. Mazy looked down. They were in a hog's pen. "Can you clean up this mess?" the young man had asked, and Mazy had smiled, nodded yes, and then woke up.

She was still shaking her head when her mother walked in. "What're you smiling about, Daughter?" Elizabeth Mueller asked. The older woman puffed a bit, from the stair climb, Mazy imagined.

"Oh, one of my crazy dreams," Mazy said. "But this one told like a story."

"Something to ponder," her mother said. "What was it about?"

Mazy thought. "Travel, I guess. Securing tickets, going somewhere. Arriving. There were old photographs and some new ones in it too. And pigs." She laughed. "And a woman from Wisconsin, Kay Krall."

"Ah," her mother said.

"Ah, what?"

"You're missing Ruth, I'll ponder... Dreaming of old friends left behind and someone going on a trip. Here, I brought you a biscuit. Feed your tummy, and maybe your heart won't feel so empty."

"I don't feel empty," Mazy said. She put the quilt piece down. "I'm happy for Ruth. Glad she's doing what she always wanted to do and feeling strong enough to do it. I'm doing what I want now too. I'll be expanding the dairy. I'm a...businesswoman." She thought of her stepson recently met. "Maybe I'll even see if David Taylor has an interest in what was his father's idea."

Elizabeth's voice quieted. "You can be happy for Ruth and still feel sad she's leaving you behind."

“I’m looking forward to living there, closer to my cows,” Mazy said. “We’re both getting something we said we wanted.”

“It don’t hurt much to tell yourself the truth,” her mother said.

“Ouch,” Mazy said, realizing she’d poked herself with the needle. She sucked on the bleeding finger and said, “Now see what you’ve made me do?”

“Not made you do anything except notice you’ve started saying good-bye,” her mother said. “And that can bring a body some pain.”



Ruth watched the performance of the changing California sky as she shivered inside her wooden cubicle. Her husband’s old pants, her shirt, and drawers hung over the rough-sawn boards. Dozens of details awaited her before she could head north to Oregon with the children, but something Elizabeth Mueller had told her clanged in her ears right then, as loudly as a cowbell. “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten. If you want something different to happen, you’ve got to make the change, not wait for someone else. Some folks just never get that figured out.”

Ruth swallowed. What she had always done was take life seriously and assume it was best lived alone with work as its hub. What she anticipated daily was not the delight Elizabeth seemed to bathe in, but the delivery of bad news sure to come. Ruth’d decided to let today be different. Maybe she was worthy of richness. She’d had a good morning fishing, had made progress on gathering things up, and had given in to the children’s lament that she close her eyes and let them lead her to these four walls that made up the shower, their surprise.

She stood in a copper tub that would collect water for later baths. It was private behind her wooden screen. Still she felt exposed. She resisted the urge to just get dressed again and get to work. Instead she pulled back her tawny hair and tied it with a section of yarn. Over the top of

the boards, she gazed out at her herd of horses and the yearling foals. Her nephew and daughter now headed with a bucket of grain to feed Jumper, her “horse of high hopes.” Jessie skipped, looked happy. Good. How long it might last was anyone’s guess.

She took a deep breath and looked up, her hazel eyes squinting into the sunlight dappling the oak leaves. Matthew and the boys had placed a coopered barrel on a shelf they’d build up in that tree, and a hemp rope hung from a plug that had a leather latch on it. She moved her whip and boots well out of the way, then tugged on the rope. She pinched her eyes shut and waited for the shock.

She gasped. Cold water cascaded down over her face, her bare shoulders, and splashed at her feet. Goose bumps answered the water, and she laughed out loud then, sputtering as she patted, eyes closed, for the small shelf in front of her. She was like her blind friend, Suzanne, patting for things she couldn’t see.

She smelled the mint, and her fingers found the partial soap cake her daughter Jessie’d made the day she’d been seized by Zane Randolph, Jessie’s...father. The faint scent reminded her of Jessie’s caution in things since she’d returned.

Ruth lathered her body. Jessie must have added sugar to her soap to make it suds up like it did. Ruth loosened her hair and scrubbed it as well. She wouldn’t think of Jessie’s pain now, nor of all she had to do yet. She wouldn’t expect only the worst. A second pull on the rope and another blast of icy water. Next time she’d ask them to sun heat this spring water. She cupped her hand and pushed the soap and water down her arms, her belly, and legs. Next time, she remembered. There wouldn’t be a next time. They were leaving.

That fact made the effort of this shower creation all the more frivolous; perhaps all the more precious. She patted for the huck towel that hung on a nail over the side of the boards and pressed it against her eyes. She wouldn’t think sad things. She’d practice doing something different as Elizabeth advised. She’d enjoy a gift given and laugh out loud, alone.



"We're 'posed to feed Marvel, too," Jessie reminded her older cousin. "Mama said. So don't let Jumper have all the grain." The children approached the stallion grazing in the meadow.

"I know it," Ned told her. "There's plenty."

Jumper lowered his head into the bucket and pushed it to the ground. "He likes me," Jessie said, patting the place between his ears.

"Me, too," Ned said. He scratched the sorrel's neck as the big animal crunched away at his feed. "Mrs. Schmidtke says stallions aren't usually so gentle as this one is."

"I could ride him, I bet," Jessie said.

"Have you ever?"

"Not by myself, but I could." She stuck her chin out. "There are all kinds of things I can do by myself."

"Me, too," Ned said. "Here, we better pull the bucket from him, so we got some left to pitch over the fence for the bull."

"I guess," Jessie said, yanking back on the bucket. Jumper resisted, stretching his neck and pressing the side of the bucket with his nose. Jessie's apron snagged in the bucket's rope handle as the children pulled his feed away. Ned released it, and Jessie stepped backward, almost tripping over the long meadow grass, brown from the lack of rain. She caught herself and giggled. "He'll trail like a lamb," she said. "Wanna see?" She skipped away with the bucket then while the big horse whinnied, lowered his head, and raised his feet to follow.



With the soap out of her eyes, Ruth watched Jessie and Ned make their way across the meadow, Jumper following. A Quarter-Pather breed, he had Copperbottom blood in him, from her father's Virginia strain. Bred with the thoroughbred mares she had, Jumper's offspring would make

good army mounts—nice, easy dispositions; sturdy animals with endurance as the military liked. She couldn't have picked a better horse on which to build her future. Strong, long-legged, yet gentle enough for Jessie to ride with her. Mariah Schmidtke had even ridden him alone. Jumper had been harder to handle with the mares back from Oregon. Even Koda, Ruth's gelding, acted proud cut, as though he had to compete with the big animal now that mares were around. She'd have to let Mariah ride Jumper a few times more before they left. The girl would miss the horses more than she'd miss Ruth and her kin, Ruth guessed.

She pulled her wet hair back and squeezed it over her shoulder, watching the water dribble in the tub now nearly full at her feet. Matthew was right; she had needed a shower, and this had been a pleasant surprise. Her task was to accept it, a joy as worthy and true as the tuned freighter bells she heard jingle just then, announcing the arrival of a pack string. She dried herself. She'd let Jessie know she had water to bathe in from the copper tub. The girl liked to bathe. Was that new, her wanting to sit in the tub and just soak?

Matthew stepped out of the cabin heading toward the new arrivals. "Need any help?" He grinned.

She wrapped the towel around her head. "Not from the likes of you," she said.

He tipped his hat at Ruth as he walked a discreet distance past her wooden cubicle, toward the meadow. Ruth blushed and dropped her head. It was good that she had plans to leave. Matthew could become a distraction from the dream she had for Oregon. She wasn't ready for that.

Dressed, she stepped out from behind the walls of the shower. She looked for a tree stump to sit on to pull on her socks and boots. This little bathhouse operation could use a good milking stool, she thought.

She heard the shout, almost a scream, and stood up. Jessie? Was that Jessie? Her hazel eyes scanned the meadow. And then as though walking in oozing mud, she turned, aware not of goose bumps refreshing her skin, but of needles of dread.



Mazy made her way to the garden. With a twig she pushed out dirt stuffed beneath her fingernails. That feeling of packed earth at her nails was always a bother. She should have borrowed a pair of Ruth's gloves for this. The lamb's ears did not like to have their roots separated, she decided. They resisted. But unless she broke them up now they wouldn't flourish, and then she and her mother would have no soft leaves next spring to use for bandages. Lamb's ears leaves were better than muslin, soaked up more, and she was sure there was some healing quality in those leaves. But come fall, the roots had to be divided and replanted and this plant, at least, didn't like it.

In her diary that morning, Mazy'd written *gardener* as she thought of a quality of God's character. It was one of the things she let herself take time for, this morning musing. Any dream she'd had would get written down there. Maybe even her mother's observation about what it meant. She found it helped to write when she wandered in her "wilderness places" as she called them, times of struggle and indecision.

She did so like the peacefulness of gardening. Gardeners changed the earth, but the soil changed them as well. Perhaps more. Take her little herb garden. After the Shasta fire scorched her plant starts last year, she'd thought she'd lost everything. But they'd come back, the lamb's ear, the lemon balm. The balm she planned to send to Mei-Ling, as she'd heard it attracted swarms if a hive was rubbed with it. It supposedly eased gout, too, and drove away depression. "Strong courage" her mother described that kind of wilderness time. She needed that right now, strong courage. She disliked change, that much of what her mother said was true. And Ruth's leaving meant change.

The clods resisted her fingers. She'd let them go too long. Some gardener she was: lazy and self-indulgent and—

No, she wouldn't say those hurtful things to herself anymore. She wouldn't talk to other people that way, so why mumble to her own

mind like that? *Mind mumbling*. She'd make a note to tell herself that was what it was, mind mumbling, whenever it happened. What mattered was that she was out here, doing what must be done. She looked at her hands, then retied the kerchief beneath her chestnut hair right at the back of her neck, feeling the perspiration of the heavy braid and the afternoon sun.

At least Matthew and Lura and Mariah would still be here along with Mazy and her mother and Adora and her son, Charles—Dear Despicable Charles, as Mazy thought of him. Still, that was all that remained of their wagon group here in this place. Why did everything have to change? Why did Charles Wilson decide to stay and take advantage of his mother? He always leered at Mazy when she walked by their mercantile. Had she done something to invite his interest? Maybe the lemon balm would work for his gout, and he'd stop showing up at Poverty Flat asking for fresh manure for his foot treatment and then spending the day watching others work. Or maybe she was destined to attract men she didn't favor. *Mind mumbling*, that was what she was doing again. Useless.

She just didn't want Ruth to go, that was why she was mind mumbling. Her mother was right. Ruth'd become like a sister to Mazy. She brushed at her eyes. She took a deep breath, kept pushing at the roots of the medicinal plant.

She'd made a friend, a lifelong one forged from the difficult days along the trail and since. Friends were new for Mazy. Even Kay Krall from her dream had been someone Mazy admired more from a distance. That woman had two children, helped midwife the arrival of others. Kay always had time to listen to people, and now that Mazy remembered, she'd been a fine gardener, too. She and her husband actually held hands across their horses when they rode together, though they must have been married for several years. Mazy hadn't revealed much of herself to this woman, now that she thought of it. She wished now that she had.

Mazy had taken a risk with Ruth. They'd been through much together. But her friend was leaving. Mazy didn't know if she could make another friend like Ruth nor maintain their friendship once they were separated by a mountain range and miles. Oh, she did want Ruth to have a good life, to follow this dream she had to build up a herd and sell horses to the military, to be a good mother and auntie, a woman, standing alone. A friend supported another's dream, didn't she?

But still, Mazy felt, oh...envy maybe, that Ruth had the excitement of something new in her life. She had a daughter and kin to grow old with. Mazy would miss Ned and Jason and Sarah and Jessie, too, when they were gone. They said funny things and saw the world through spring-fed eyes. Mazy sighed. Ruth was a woman she didn't have to winnow her words with. Who would understand her as well as Ruth did? Ruth, too, had made a poor decision in choosing a mate.

Mazy pushed against the root-bound plant, spoke out loud to it. Her mother told her to talk to plants and tell them what she'd be doing to them so they'd cooperate. Not likely, Mazy thought, but she did it anyway. Maybe she'd become some old crazy lady that the children whispered about, someone who had no friends and talked to plants and scratched at herself without remembering where she was.

"Let go now," Mazy said out loud. "I'm just going to replant you. It'll feel new, but the place I picked is nice soil. Let go," she told the roots, forcing her thumb between the clods. She gave extra pressure this time and, with a crunch, the ball broke free.

"Well," Mazy said, sitting back on her knees. "Maybe you'd like to be transplanted in...Oregon, with Ruth and the children?" Now there was a worthy plan, a way for Ruth to take something with her, a reminder that strength came from clods, sometimes from being broken and planted in new soil.

Smiling, she held both clumps in her hand and was about to place one new root in the hole she'd dug, then find a container for the other to take out to Ruth, when she felt a small hand warm against her back.

“You again,” Mazy said. It was one of the orphaned Indian children who’d become regular partakers of her mother’s breads that they’d been leaving out. “I don’t think she has any here, right now,” Mazy told the child. She was never certain how much English they really understood. Most of them slipped in at nighttime, took the food, and disappeared. So it surprised Mazy to actually recognize this round face with a scar beneath her right eye and an upturned nose. And her face was puffed up as though full of air. Was she ill? The mumps? Mazy’d never seen that look on any of the children before. An epidemic would be the worst thing possible! However would they get medicine and a physician willing to treat them? Where could they house them? Her mind raced with the possibilities of all a major illness could mean before she recognized a flicker of mischief crossing the child’s brown eyes.

The girl clapped her cheeks with her palms, spraying water right into Mazy’s face.

“Hey!” Mazy screeched, standing.

The child crouched back.

“It’s all right,” Mazy said, when she saw the fear in the child’s eyes. “Cooling me down, are you? It’s hot enough, that’s sure.” Mazy smiled broadly, wiping her face of the water with her dirty hands. The child laughed then and pointed, and Mazy guessed she was streaked with earth. Mazy chuckled too and then turned. She moved toward the little pool where a spring dribbled down the side of the rockface that marked one border of her herb garden. She willed the child to stay, could feel the dark eyes on her back. Mazy lifted the heavy braid at the back of her neck, then cupped her hands. She caught the cold liquid in them, then quick as a fawn’s tail twisting, she turned and threw the water at the girl. Mazy smiled as she watched the spray cascade toward the child’s wide eyes.

“Ayee,” the girl said, lurching out of her crouch, but she didn’t run. Instead her eyes held Mazy’s for just a moment before she grinned, revealing an open space where two front teeth should have been.

Must be six years old, maybe seven, Mazy thought. Jessie's age. The girl giggled and slipped past Mazy toward the spring, began splashing water at Mazy. Mazy showered her back until both she and the girl stood dripping wet.

"I'm hungry," Mazy said then. "Want a cookie that looks just like a dog?"

The girl's face became still, then she nodded just once.

Mazy reached out her hand. "Let's go inside and get one," she said.

The child pulled back, hesitated, then dropped her brown palm into Mazy's. She stood still.

"Well, come along," Mazy said. From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of another in the shadows. A woman in tattered clothes. The adults rarely came close. Her heart pounded. The child's mother? An auntie? Mazy reached her free hand out. "You come too," she said.

The girl pulled on Mazy's hand then, and the woman followed quiet as the morning dew.

Good enough, Mazy thought. That was how friendships began. One step at a time, often led by a child.



Ruth's eyes scanned for the children, the source of the screams. She heard neighing horses and a bellowing bull, then shrieks and groans. Dust filled the air near the barn. Ruth swore later she heard the ripping of flesh, but of course, she couldn't have, not from where she stood, not with the towel about her head. She could see Matthew run, his boots kicking up red dirt near the corral. His face looked strained, and her eyes searched for Jessie and Ned, Jason and Sarah.

"What is it, Auntie?" Sarah asked, stepping out from the house.

"I don't know," Ruth said, moving forward, searching.

She saw the two youngest out in the meadow now, close together. She wondered why Matthew pushed at them, moved them toward the

freighters while one of the Mexican handlers turned a string of mules away from the corrals. The animals bucked and brayed in upset over what? Ruth didn't know.

Her eyes worked across the meadow. She could see Koda and the mares running into each other. Odd. Then the dusty fog near Marvel's pen cleared. Ruth watched as Matthew grabbed a goading stick to push at the big bull. He was loose? The bull was loose? The animal's nose lifted to the dusty air. She heard him bellow as though in triumph. Clods of dirt pelted the ground like rain as the brute pawed and twisted raising a red-earth cloud.

Had Matthew stumbled? She couldn't see! When it cleared, the bull lowered his head, his horns angled to attack. Her heart pounded. She heard a crack, wood against flesh, and Marvel's bellow. That high-pitched scream again. Matthew's goading stick lunged, and the animal moved back, the ground throbbing with his agitated weight. The brute was so large, and yet he twisted with the ease of a dog snapping at meat thrown in midair. Matthew shouted. The brute circled, disappeared inside the dirty cloud.

When it cleared, the bull was in the pen next to his own, and Matthew rushed forward to slide the oak latch. The animal pawed, head lowered. He bellowed but didn't lunge the gate.

Good, Ruth thought. He was back in. Everyone was all right. But what was that screaming, that— She stepped forward, barefooted, onto the warm earth and moved as though sleepwalking toward the corral, aware that her body knew something her mind would not admit.

"Ruth, stay back!" Matthew shouted to her now, his palms extended, his hat held as though to shield her eyes.

"Why? What's wrong?"

And then her eyes slid down to the lurching form just inside the log corrals, the struggling sorrel form of Jumper.

The horse lay groaning, snorting, a muffled scream now, weakened. His head lifted, then dropped. His hooves carved graves into the dust.

She let her eyes move like sunset sinking, threatening blackness. She smelled the acrid scent of blood, of seeping life, heard the bellowing of the cow brute, long horns held high as he circled the paddock, heightened too by the smells, the sounds of groans and dying.

“Ruth, please...” Matthew said as she neared him. He grasped her arms, urging her to stay back. “The bull...it’s gored him in the... artery...”

“I’ve got to,” Ruth said, her voice far away and aching like a dream lost to the morning. She shook free of Matthew’s hand.

“He could be...could hurt you. Not meaning too. I’ll put him down, Ruth. No need—”

But she was already beside the stud, sobbing now, a deep and awful bawling broken by gasps of choked air like a child exhaling in anguish with her loss. Then she met his eyes, her Jumper’s eyes. Her grieving must have frightened the stallion as he lay in the pool of blood, red and black beneath his belly, the horn-rip of his belly, gaping like fresh meat, laid bare. A shiver of horror swelled through her in a raging wave. Eyes wild and staring, the horse tried to rise when he saw her, as if he longed for her to take the pain, to set him free.

She bent to his big head, barely touched his jaw and his ears twitched back, the pain so great. Her eyes throbbed with the knowing. She pulled the towel from her head, tried to push it against the blood flow.

“Let me,” Matthew said. Ruth couldn’t answer. Matthew held the towel to the horse’s sheath but was unable to stop the bleeding. The big horse tried once more to rise, to lift his head with a gasping snort.

Ruth wept into Jumper’s neck, a selfish moment taken before she’d free him: have to free him.

But even in his dying, the big horse gave. Jumper strained his neck, tried to lift his head as she crooned to him, “No, no, stay still, stay still,” until he seemed to sigh, his legs no longer scraping, the screams of pain lessened. His breaths came shorter. His nostrils moved in and out; his

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heaving slowed. His eyes wide with fright, he sighed once more, then died.

Ruth stayed with him that way, wrapped around his neck until she felt only brittle cold. She stayed until the moon came up, until the stars filled the night sky like distant, dying fires. She stayed until she felt the blanket Matthew draped around her shoulders while he sat beside her in silence, while she said good-bye to a dream and what once she'd loved.