

Russell Night Horse stood atop the logging cart, the reins behind a team of burnished-gold draft horses gripped in his gloved hands. It was late June. Fires dotted the plains, kindled by the dry, brown grass, and the sun bleached the sky to a faded shade of blue. At times it seemed the only thing moving was the wind. Strong and ever-constant, blowing blistering hot in summer, bone-chilling cold in winter. The wind. The only thing in this uncertain life he could count on to always be present.

Rivulets of sweat escaped the red bandanna tied around his neck and snaked down his back and chest, turning his sleeveless denim vest dark in places and sticking it to his skin. His hair was wet with perspiration beneath a tan beat-up Stetson, the drops trickling along the sides of his unshaven face glistening in the unforgiving sunshine. The discomfort was an annoyance he accepted as a part of life, like the pesky gnats hovering over the horses' summer hides.

At fifteen hands high and weighing close to fifteen hundred pounds each, the horses looked like overgrown chestnut ponies, but with wider shoulders, chunkier rumps and longer, more dignified faces. Fully harnessed, their shaggy hooves zigzagged in tiny steps and pivoted in a tight circle, maneuvering in less space than a tractor, crossing ankles like skaters, responding to the subtle commands on the reins.

Russ loved the musky odor of the horses, the gleaming knobs of their neck yokes, the jingling chains and creaking leather. The winter snow would erase all the ruts and bumps etched into the ground by this team and bury the outbuildings and fences bounding his forty acres of land. His work with this team would be finished in a few weeks, and the team he expected next would be fat and stout and woolly as bears come winter, with snorts of steam blowing out of their nostrils into the frosty air. But today, with the sun scorching the sky, this team was a little leaner but no less willing. Like him, they loved what they were doing. But unlike the man whose gloved hands led them through their paces, their pasts did not haunt them.

It often happened like this. When he was concentrating on a move or contemplating a new exercise, the past would sneak up on him real subtle-like and then pounce with the speed of a starving cougar. Like the South Dakota wind that damn past was always there, gusting hot or slicing icy cold at his heart, making him confront things he struggled to put behind him.

He'd been riding bucking horses at the Standing Rock fairgrounds, hoping to make enough in prize money to buy the equipment needed to train his first team. Ellie Iron Road was a Pine Ridge girl, beautiful and a little wild. At the beginning it was easy to ignore her less-than-enthusiastic reaction when he talked about his dream of training draft horses. He should have known she would not be content with that kind of life, but he asked her to marry him anyway, hoping she would one day come to share his dream. He never realized how wrong he could be. But he knew now a lot of things he didn't know then.

For Ellie, life on the ranch paled in comparison to the excitement of the fairgrounds. She claimed he wasn't the fun-loving, daredevil, bucking horse rider she'd fallen for, that he'd become much too serious, and the horses he trained had none of the spitfire energy of the untamed mustangs he used to ride. In the three years of their marriage he saw her discontent grow from restlessness to resentment. Bored with being the wife of a guy trying to eke out a living training draft horses, she found excitement in other places, like a bottle of beer or the arms of another men.

At first he blamed himself, for the long hours he worked, for the dust and grit he tracked into the house, for the nights he stayed up late pouring over training manuals and tending to the small details of a slowly growing business. When she came home intoxicated, he blamed himself and

vowed to spend more time with her. Who knew? They might even start a family. But when she began not coming home, he had to face the painful truth he'd known all along in his gut.

It all came crashing down around him on a day much like this one, sunny and impossibly hot. He looked up from working a team in the corral to see her standing at the fence. Today, so many years later, her words came back with the same sharp, annihilating blow. She was in love with another man. She was going to have his child. She was leaving.

He had long ago stopped wishing he had the power to go back and change things. If only this hadn't happened, if only that hadn't gone wrong. Well, it did happen, and it did go wrong, and nothing would ever change it. For a long time it hurt, not because he'd been so in love with her—he had mistaken lust for love—but because betrayal in any form cut deep.

Soon a day passed without thinking about it, then a week, then a month. Time went by, and although the wound healed, it left a rough scar on his heart that burned white-hot whenever the past returned like a prodigal son. Maybe one day he would come to terms with the jagged contours of his life, yet he could not help but wonder if it was just a worn-out wish not meant to come true.

Russ ran a bare forearm across his eyes, wiping away the perspiration dampening his lashes and stinging his eyes. Caught up in remembering and too busy cautioning himself never to make the same mistake again, he didn't realize someone was watching him.

Kate peered through the viewfinder of the camera at the team on the far side of the dusty corral. The horses were magnificent, their coats shining like bright copper pennies as they went through their paces. Suddenly, they halted. With a deft twist, she snapped on a close-up lens and focused on the man atop the logging cart. Standing stock still, face scowling, a lean muscle jumped at his jaw, signaling much going on inside of him.

His hair had grown longer since the day he showed up on her doorstep. Dampened with perspiration, it brushed his shoulders. One black lock fell from beneath his hat to slice a high-boned cheek in the wind. The lines etched into the corners of his eyes and the grizzly bear stubble spiking his chin made him appear both attractive and a bit dangerous. His eyes looked distrustful, and as she peered at him through the lens, she felt a chill in spite of the heat of the day.

The eye of the camera moved slowly downward, past the corded neck to the broad shoulders and chest muscles tensing beneath the thin, wet fabric of his vest. His jeans were faded and noticeably frayed by the press of his anatomy against the soft fabric, his boots scuffed and dusty.

There was a small catch in her breath when the lens returned to his face and she found those dark, distrusting eyes trained on her from across the dust-filled distance. A warm blush of embarrassment rushed to her cheeks at having been caught watching him.

She let the camera fall against her chest from its strap and stepped into the corral, nodding to the horses as she approached. "They're beautiful."

Russ resented her intrusion. "You might want to keep back," his deep voice cautioned. "They don't realize how big they are. You can say goodbye to your foot if one of them steps on it."

Kate rolled her eyes at the undisguised hostility. When she and Mary Beth arrived yesterday, he had barely spoken to them as she showed them around.

The house had wide-planked floors and a ceiling of rough-hewn beams, with nothing superfluous or unnecessary. And yet, it exuded comfort. A couch with well-worn upholstery and throw pillows in colors reminiscent of the prairie sat before a stone fireplace. Against one wall a bookcase was crammed with hard covers and paperbacks. A cursory examination as they

passed through the living room revealed fictional titles of well-known authors and many books on horse training and animal husbandry. Beside it stood an old roll-top desk. In as few words as possible he explained where things were and showed them to their room. Kate had looked around at the simple furnishings, the oak dresser, the bed with its chenille cover and neat pillows, and when she turned back to him, he was gone.

He'd been conspicuously absent the rest of the day, so she and Mary Beth ate dinner alone. She was surprised to find the refrigerator filled with fresh fruits and vegetables, meats in the small freezer and boxes of macaroni and cheese on the pantry shelf. It had been a long, tiring ride to Standing Rock so after eating they went to bed early. This morning when she came downstairs, he was already out of the house.

"How's the kid?" he asked.

Kate bristled. "The kid has a name."

"Sorry. I didn't mean for it to sound so—"

"Unfriendly?" she cut in. "Impersonal? Maybe even rude?"

He didn't care for her choice of words, but had to admit she was right. "How's Mary Beth?"

"She's fine. She's still sleeping."

He jumped off the logging cart and began to undo the rigging. With the team no longer attached to the cart, he took the long leather reins in his hands and turned them in the direction of the barn.

His tight-lipped silence began to grate on Kate's nerves. He was certainly a disagreeable sort, but for Mary Beth's sake she put her uncharitable assessment of him aside and sought to engage him in small talk as she trailed him to the barn. "What kind of horses are they?"

He answered without breaking stride. "Suffolk Punch."

"I've never heard of them."

"There are maybe a thousand in North America. Even less in their native England. The big one's Dancer. The other one's Stella."

These were the most words he'd spoken to her since yesterday, so she made a mental note to remember it was the horses that drew the words out of him.

The barn was a cool, musky, cobwebby place, with streams of diffused sunlight from the high loft window stippling the hay-strewn floor. Swallows dive bombed from the rafters when they entered, and a gray kitten scampered beneath the hay to watch them.

He led the horses to their stalls and as he removed their harnesses, Kate glanced around the barn. There was something beautiful and a little surreal in the way the shafts of sunlight filtered in through the high window to dapple the wide wooden planks of the stalls. The peaceful silence was broken by Russell's soft murmurings to Dancer in his native language as he ran a curry comb over her burnished coat and her soft whinnies of pleasure.

"What's all this stuff?" Kate asked of the equipment hanging from nails and posts.

His deep voice spliced the stillness as he worked. "Whoever thinks this work is simple should try harnessing these girls." He was grateful for the small talk, if for no other reason, than to drown out with words the pulse pounding at his temples. "They come with a ton of equipment. Those long reins on the post over there are the lines. The collar goes on before the belly band, britching, crupper and about a hundred other parts that have to be threaded through the buckles and rings. These days the equipment's made of nylon so it's lighter, but I like leather."

She stood off to the side while he finished with Dancer and moved into the next stall. With the horses combed and fed, he hoisted onto posts outside each stall the two-pronged

arrangements that fit over their collars and began to sort the heavy tangled harness, his calloused hands working the leather with a reverence reserved for the finest silk.

Kate observed him working quietly in the diffused light. It took a strong man to work the equipment and drive the horses, and the muscles flexing in his bare arms were obvious proof of his strength. It seemed to run contrary to the look in his eyes that darted away whenever their gazes met. Was it her imagination, or did she detect something vulnerable in those easily wounded eyes, something speaking of silent hurt while warning her to keep away? Didn't he realize the more he tried to hide himself, the more she wanted to find out?

She guessed somewhere inside of him lay a secret or a memory that made him keep his distance. Even now she felt him straining away from her, although neither his body nor his posture showed it.

The intoxicating scent of male perspiration and energy drifted into her nostrils, mingling with hay and horseflesh to turn her throat dry. Praying her voice would not betray her unease, she asked, "How long have you been training draft horses?"

He answered without looking up, "About ten years."

"What made you get started?"

He didn't like questions by nature. There was no telling what memories they would unearth. "I read about it in a book when I was a kid, and since then I always wanted to do it."

"I don't mean to sound glib, but is there much demand for work horses outside of Amish country?"

"You'd be surprised. Loggers, farmers, a lot of people are interested in draft horses these days as a form of alternative power. You could call it a working animal renaissance. This work doesn't make me rich, but I do okay." He was growing uncomfortable talking about himself. Who knew where it would lead, and some things were better left unsaid.

"I know what you mean," she said. "I stopped taking free-lance photo assignments that took me away from home when Mary Beth came into my life. I work locally now, grabbing assignments where I can. And I teach a photography course at the local community college. Like you, it doesn't make me rich, but I do okay."

"It must be hard raising a kid alone," he said.

"It's easier raising her alone than it was with Richard." She answered matter-of-factly, with no rancor in her voice, just a little sigh of resignation causing him look up from his work to study her from beneath the brim of his hat as she turned her face away.

The mottled light filtered in through the loft window, falling across her face. He wondered if she realized how beautiful she looked with her profile caught in shadow and light and her hair still a little tossed by the wind. He was glad she hadn't bothered to smooth it. He found her naturalness beguiling, and annoying. A woman like her was dangerous to a man like him, not just because of her physical appeal, but because of her intelligence and realness and her ability to make him feel things he'd sworn never to feel again, like lust busting at the seams for one particular woman, and a growing curiosity to know what it would be like to hold her in his arms.

Was it because she'd been his brother's wife? To have her would certainly be good revenge. But did he really hate his brother that much? In truth, no, he didn't. After all this time what he felt for him was a sense of loss and sadness and the residual love left in the cold ashes of betrayal. No, it wasn't for revenge that he found himself staring at her and wishing she were beneath him on the floor of the barn right now. It was the pent-up need inside of him and the sudden intrusion into his life of a woman who stoked that need and brought the painful memories crashing to the surface.

By the sudden tense stillness about him Kate knew the mention of Richard's name had touched a sensitive nerve in him. But Richard had been a part of all their lives, his, hers and Mary Beth's, and it was impossible to pretend otherwise.

When she turned back to him, the look in his eyes sent a chill along her spine. Pain, regret, disappointment, anger. She guessed it was all those things, and things she could not know. It was gone in the ensuing moment beneath a sweep of black lashes.

He finished with the horses and equipment and walked with her to the barn door. Emerging into the bright sunlight, the hot breath of the wind blew Kate's hair into her face, tangling a golden-brown strand in her lashes.

"Is it always like this?" she complained.

"The wind?" He shrugged. "I find it comforting. It's always there. You can count on it." *Unlike things that come and go with casual cruelty, he thought, and change your life in ways you can never imagine.* "You'll get used to it. Strong and steady things have a way of growing on you out here."

Kate looked at him skeptically. "I don't plan to be here long enough to get used to it." She moved past him, but stopped and turned back. Her gaze met his in a look both forthright and fatalistic. "I don't like this any more than you do, Russell. But this isn't about me or you. It's about Mary Beth. So, for her sake, dinner will be at six tonight, and I would appreciate it if you would be there."

Her request sounded more like a command, causing his black eyes to flare, then soften a little. His deeply resonant voice elicited an unwanted response inside of her when he said, "For Mary Beth's sake. Sure."

The prospect of dinner with Kate and Mary Beth made him uncomfortable. He had no idea what to say to a kid, much less make small talk with a woman who set his nerves on edge. He returned to the barn, and hanging his hat on a peg, pitched more hay into the horses' troughs and then played with the gray kitten that emerged from its hiding place. He cleaned the stalls and straightened the equipment, purposely lingering as long as possible. A glance toward the loft window told him it was almost six o'clock. Giving the horses a few final pats, he swiped his hat from the peg and headed for the house.

The screen door squeaked on rusted hinges when he entered. He went automatically to the kitchen where he usually washed up in the sink after a hot, dusty day in the corral. But something stopped him in his tracks. With his leather gloves dangling from his hand and his hat pushed back on his head, he stood in the kitchen doorway, rooted to his spot.

Kate was at the stove stirring a pot of something that smelled real good. He was surprised she could cook and wondered what else about her would surprise him. With her back to him, he had ample time to study her. Her hair that shone golden when kissed by the sun was dark chestnut in the interior light of the kitchen. His fingers twitched involuntarily at the thought of crushing those loose, dark tresses in his hands. Her shoulders were slender beneath her tee-shirt, her hips softly flared beneath her jeans. He had trouble swallowing the lump constricting his throat. It felt suddenly hot in the room, and the heat wasn't coming from the stove.

Seated at the table, Mary Beth ventured, "Maybe he's been around horses so long, he doesn't know how to be with people."

Turning away from the stove, Kate smiled and ventured, "I suppose. But something tells me his grumpiness has nothing to do with the horses."

Her whole face lit up when she smiled, and a thought flitted through his mind. He could look at that face for the rest of his life.

"You think he's ever seen a kid?" Mary Beth asked.

"Oh, sure. On TV."

They both dissolved into laughter.

Their laughter sounded out of place, like something from someone else's life. They were having a good laugh at his expense. He should have been furious at their mocking humor, but strangely, he wasn't. On the contrary, the laughter filling the room put a grin on his usually laconic face.

The corners of Mary Beth's eyes crinkled with delight when she laughed and the upturned smile looked so familiar. But it was Kate to whom his dark eyes strayed and lingered.

"Mom?"

Kate looked in the direction Mary Beth was staring.

Russ suddenly found their eyes on him. "I, uh, I'll go wash up for dinner." He disappeared from the doorway.

Mary Beth stifled a giggle. "Boy, was he checking you out."

Kate's cheeks reddened. "Don't be ridiculous. Come on, help me set the table."

When he reappeared dressed in a clean tee-shirt and jeans, he found the table set for three and Kate ladling stew into the dishes.

"Smells good," he said, pulling out a chair. "I didn't know what you two like to eat, so I stocked up on whatever I could think of."

"Mom makes a mean beef stew," said Mary Beth.

"Why don't you let your uncle decide for himself," Kate suggested.

She placed the dish in front of him and detected the scent of soap clinging to his skin, masking the earthy aroma that had unsettled her senses earlier.

Mary Beth shrugged and began to eat with relish. Looking up from her dish, she said, "What do you think, Uncle Russell? Do you like it?"

He hadn't tasted food this good in a long time. Dinner was hardly a daily occurrence for him. Sometimes he ate, sometimes he didn't. Usually, he'd just heat up the leftovers his mother sent him home with whenever he visited her, or the frozen dinners he cooked in the microwave. But it wasn't the food rendering him momentarily speechless. He wasn't accustomed to seeing more than one plate on the table or hearing any voice other than his own in the house, or having anyone for company beside the crushing weight of a silence so deep it had a sound of its own.

They were staring at him, waiting for a response. "It's good. I mean, it's delicious." He rubbed his temple. "I have a headache from being out in the sun all day."

"Uncle, did you know that smoke from anemone flowers on hot coals can cure a headache?"

He looked askance at her. "How do you know that?"

"Mom told me it's an old Indian remedy. She says lots of things can be cured with stuff like plants."

His gaze shifted to Kate. "What else does she tell you?"

"Neat stuff, like stories and legends."

And back to the kid. "Do you like the stories?"

"Yeah. My favorite is the one about the man killed by the buffalo. His daughter made a promise that if her father would come back to her, she would marry the buffalo chief. And he did, come back, I mean. So the buffalo chief asked her if she would bring back all the buffalo her people had killed. And she did."

"That's one of the oldest Lakota legends," he said. "It carries the promise of renewal, a bringing back of all lost ones. Do you wish your father would come back?"

He was instantly sorry he'd asked when her expression saddened. Hell, what did he know about talking to a kid? With her eyes downcast, she looked so much like her biological mother. His vision suddenly stung from the image. Don't go there, his heart warned, there are too many memories, too much hurt and regret.

"Sure," Mary Beth said, smiling. "Don't you?"

The answer lodged in his throat along with the bitterness and unresolved issues and words left unsaid between him and his brother.

Kate saw him struggling to answer. "Isn't that the same message they celebrated in the Sun Dance in the old days?"

He was grateful for the diversion. How could she know he needed saving just then?

"Mom told me about that, too. The way the men used to put sticks in their skin and then hang from ropes until the skin broke. Oh, gross." She grimaced. "That must've hurt a lot."

"I'm sure it does," he said.

Her eyes widened. "You mean they still do it?"

"There's a Sun Dance every year in August."

The spoon dropped from Mary Beth's hand and clanged on the plate when she leaned forward and asked eagerly, "What's it like?"

"Well, first the men fell a cottonwood tree specially chosen and erect it at the center of the Sun Dance circle and decorate it with colorful ties containing tobacco and other offerings. Then the medicine man guides some of the men in making their solemn offering."

"Oh, you mean the sticks and all," Mary Beth said, making a face. "Why do they do that?"

"It's meant to show continuity between life and death," Russ explained. "There's no true end to life, but a cycle of true deaths and rebirths. It teaches us that all of nature is intertwined and dependent on one another. A man dances to pray for a relative or a friend and to determine his place in the universe."

"Wow. How cool is that? Can we go, mom?"

"We'll see," Kate hedged. "It's more than a month away."

Russ knew there was slim chance of them going because Kate told him in no uncertain terms she didn't plan on being around by then. To dissuade Mary Beth, he said, "It's more like a sideshow these days. Lots of tourists."

"Do you do it, Uncle? Put sticks in your skin and all?"

Dangling from leather thongs attached at one end to the skewers and at the other end to the Sun Dance Pole, singing, chanting, dancing beneath the hot sun until the skewers broke loose, left ugly scars. Many men wore them proudly, but he needed no scars on his chest to remind himself of who and what he was, or to know that the Great Spirit dwelled within him despite all his failings. "No," he replied, "I don't do it."

He hoped Mary Beth wouldn't press him for an explanation. How could he put into words what it was to be Lakota? Despite what Kate tried to teach her, some things couldn't be taught. They were a part of you, instilled at birth, reinforced around winter fires, not to run away from as his brother had tried in vain to do, but embraced as an essential part of life, as vital as breathing. His past mistakes and the scars he carried on his heart ran hard and deep, like the furrows made by the hooves of the horses he trained. But they were changeable, sometimes receding, sometimes, like earlier today, catching up with him, whereas being Lakota was ever-constant. Like the wind, always there.

Mary Beth shrugged. "Okay. Mom can I go inside and watch TV?"

"Maybe your uncle would like to watch something."

“Me? No. I don’t watch much television.” He’d bought the TV for Ellie, thinking it might keep her home at night, but of course it didn’t. “Go ahead. Watch whatever you want.”

Kate got up and began to remove the dishes from the table.

Russ rose to help her. “I’m not used to being called uncle, much less being one,” he admitted.

“Mary Beth’s a smart kid. She knows when someone’s trying.”

He handed her one of the plates to put into the sink, and as he did, his fingers brushed hers. A current shot through him as if he’d stuck his finger in a light socket. The hairs at the back of his neck and all along his arms stood on end. In that one second in time he imagined himself reaching for her, turning her around to face him, burying his hand in the deep dark fullness of her hair and pulling her mouth towards his. He imagined taking her right there on the kitchen table, her legs opening for him, him inside of her, her hips arching, pulling him in deeper. It took only a moment to be overwhelmed by a longing unlike any he’d felt in a long time, a need gone too long unfulfilled.

My God, what was he thinking? He forced himself to remember the little girl watching television in the living room, and to harshly remind himself that Kate wasn’t likely to want him if she knew the truth about Mary Beth’s biological mother.

Kate saw the change come over him. One moment his eyes were dark and unreadable, then suddenly burning with undisguised lust. An unexpected thrill seized her at the realization of how fiercely he appeared to want her. It had been a long time since she’d been held in a man’s arms. She had put that part of herself on hold. She couldn’t risk loving a man again. But who said anything about love? What about fulfilling the basic primal need every woman had to be taken by a man about whom she secretly fantasized?

She would never admit it, of course, but since his visit to her house she had awakened more than once in the middle of the night from dreams filled with his image. She told herself it was how any woman would react to a virile man. But it was more than his physical appeal that jolted her. For a man this attractive, the awkward refusal to be charming was the ultimate charm and hard to resist. She’d been attracted to men before, but never like this. She wanted to be touched, held, kissed, stroked, petted, not by just any man, but by this one. Was she crazy? Of all the men on the planet, the last one she could afford to get involved with was this one, even if solely to fill a sexual longing. Too much was at stake.

The ring of the telephone in the other room sent her wild thoughts scattering and gave her a chance to catch her breath when he turned and walked away.

He returned a few minutes later wearing a somber look on his face. “That was a member of the tribal council. They want to see us tomorrow.”

Kate dried her hands on a dish towel and started for the door. “I’ll tell Mary Beth.”

“Not Mary Beth. Just us.”

She bit her lip and her brows drew together in a worried expression. “Mary Beth can’t stay here by herself.”

“We can drop her off at my mother’s on the way. It would be a good opportunity for her to spend some time with her grandmother.”

Her heart skipped a nervous beat. “Maybe they’re relaxing their stance. What do you think?”

“I don’t know.” He turned abruptly to go. “I have to check on the horses.”

But what he really needed was air and space away from her and the undisciplined thoughts she aroused in him. Crazy, impulsive thoughts that made him feel more like a seventeen year old kid, and not the disillusioned, jaded, suspicious man he had become.

Outside, the night wind blew warm against his heated skin. He ran his hand through his hair, sweeping the ebony locks from his forehead as he gulped in the air, filling his lungs with much-needed support. The phone call wasn't as innocent as it seemed. With every fiber of his being and every instinct he possessed, he knew this wasn't good.