

INTERREGNUM
1942

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The mountain crest was cool with the morning's chill and the cowboy's flannel shirt was thin as tissue, yet he wasn't the least bit cold. He hadn't shivered even once through any of the process. But it had drained him. His lined face barely showed it, but he was exhausted. He took a shallow breath between pants, and while staring down the hillside, asked the question again.

"We're...not done, are...we?" he asked.

"Almost," the old man said. He waited to let the cowboy gather strength, and it was quiet between them for several moments. But then the cowboy asked again.

"Isn't there more?"

The old man moved a stub of pencil against a small pad without answering. Except for the hat he looked like one of the cowboy's older hands, in weathered boots and faded pants, a worn blue shirt and frayed hat. The hat looked strangely out of place: made of broken straw, with a broken crown and brittle bits that stuck out where there'd once been a brim.

The two men stood in thick grass along a ridge that curved gently down to the edge of a forest, then fell two thousand steep feet to a pasture at the valley floor. A river twisted its way from the farthest cleft of mountains to the pasture below. A few pale gray root pieces of upturned stumps and gnarled, thicker branches had broken away from the hillsides farther upstream and lay along the distant shore, interrupting the green and flowery riverbank.

They were almost finished. All the other memories were gone: his friendships and military life, his western skills and ranching world, were all gone, torn out and destroyed, completely forgotten. There were vast craters where they'd been, with only a single island that remained. It was larger than the others had been, with deeper roots. A thread strong enough to remove it out would take longer, but once it was gone they'd be finished.

He'd warned the cowboy how it needed to be, how each thread of recollections would start a rush of conversation, how the rush pulled the body of memory, until it began to come away. Once begun the rush was irresistible, and the rending painful, but then, after, the sadness difficult. He explained this carefully to everyone, and had to this man, before asking if the cowboy was ready. The cowboy had listened, then agreed with an immediate tip of his hat.

But the old man hadn't exaggerated. As the process went on the cowboy found himself speaking far more than he was used to, and far more quickly, and as each thread pulled its subject loose of moorings, the pains came. And then, each time after, it left a melancholy wake. For the cowboy that was the worst, for aside from wanting to complete these chores his main concern—and this he tried to hide—was that sadness showed itself here much more readily than he was used to. It had already tightened his jaw several times, saying with no other tell that he was embarrassed.

The old man continued to stand back, pretending to write. But he was just waiting to let the cowboy catch his breath, and rest, and it was quiet between them for several minutes, except for the small sound of pencil scratching paper.

“Should we finish the rest now?” the cowboy finally asked. His eyes were still on the valley, but then he moved, shifting weight from his right leg to the left. Creases in his old Levis found another familiar pattern, but then it was still.

The old man kept at his little distraction for another moment, but then the cowboy signaled it was time. He took a deeper, longer breath and glanced back. “I think I'm ready.”

The small man stepped forward, and pointing to the other side of river, said, “Take a look at that, will you?”

The cowboy tipped the Stetson to shade his eyes, and peered in that direction. He saw what was there.

There's movement there.

And there was. In the long yellow and green rushes on the far side of the river.

He leaned forward for a better look. There were shapes there, and they moved, then moved again. His old eyes began picking them out. Large shapes. Some dark, some light, some spotted, some taller than others, some...*raising their heads.*

They're horses! he thought. He moved his mouth thoughtfully, then nodded twice, confident in the assessment.

“Take your time, Henry,” the old man said.

The cowboy nodded again, but he wasn't paying attention. His eyes followed the horses, and the sight began to excite him. His mind searched along the thread to remember where he'd seen this place before, until it found a portion that held the answer. His mind pulled it forward, and the answer was there.

“I know this place...,” he said, as it hit him. “It was what? It....it was....sixty years ago? Must'a been... When was that? They'd just hung the fella who shot Garfield. It was...”

“1882,” the old man said. That was harmless. Since the first warnings he'd said next to nothing, but his job now was just to listen and wait, and help only with little questions or small expressions.

“About' then,” the cowboy agreed.

“How old were you?”

“I was...fifteen, maybe sixteen...Maybe...It’s when we...,” he said, but his voice trailed off, and now he realized what was left. He grew somber.

“Tell me about her?” the old man said.

The cowboy glanced back at him gravely, then, slowly, he nodded. He turned back and looked down the crest, and was quiet. His mind touched the thread again, and found a young woman there—just a girl, really. It was one of his strongest memories, but one of the best protected. And yet he knew now that this too had to go. His mind circled it warily, then touched it again. The recollections swirled up in a glitter of images, voices and emotions, but then settled around their beginning. He waited as they fell into place, then he went to the first image of her, and went beyond to a piece near the start.

“All right,” he said.

“Ready?” the old man asked, watching him.

He nodded, took in another deep breath, and began.

“My parents were gone—I don’t remember how that happened, but I...was living in the streets. out of work..., couldn’t find anything. But I heard about Isabel Mays, the daughter of a Buffalo Soldier. She lived in Apache Junction with a bunch of other women, mostly runaways. I went out there, and found it. It was a big white house, with a porch and long columns and a widow’s walk, and a big pasture that fell down to the road.”

He stopped, and took some breaths, then went on with gradually increasing tempo.

“I got up there one morning when she was out on the porch with some of her women, drinking tea or something, I guess, and this dirty looking’ kid came up her drive. She looked

down at me and asked “What you doin’ on my property, boy?” I said, “I’m here to help you out, Ma’am”.

“What kind of help you think I need, boy?”

I nodded toward her pasture, down by the road where there were horses grazing and asked her, “Do you really want to lose some of your horses, Ma’am?”

“Well ‘course not,” she says, and she stood to take a look over there. “Why’d you think that, boy?”

“Because Ma’am,” I said, “you’ve got rails down along the road.” Her pasture was enclosed with long white post and rail fencing, but there was a spot right next to the road, where the rails were down, and the posts broken out. “And I pointed down where that break was. She looked that way for a while, until one of the other women, a lady named Daisy, said, “Horses broke through again.”

Mays nodded, lifted her cup and took a sip of tea while strain’ over the edge at me, then put it down and says ‘So why you telling me this, boy?’

So, I said, “I can fix those sections for you.”

And Daisy smiled her sideways smile and asked me, “How you wantin’ to be paid?” and another of the women said, “And which of us you gonna want to pay it?” and they all laughed.

I said “Thanks, but I plan to marry a girl I just met in town.”

And Daisy kept smiling, and said, “Some of our best customers are married, boy.”

I said I wasn’t going to be married that way and they laughed and said “We’ll see.”

But Mays was hesitating, as if she wasn’t sure she wanted this fifteen year old kid, so I offered to do the work for free. And I said, “If my work’s good, could you use an extra hand?” She already had a couple older hands working the place, but they didn’t have enough hours to get

everything done. And truthfully, I think she saw me as another hard case, and being soft for such as them, she said, “Hell, why not.”

So, I fixed the fence, and before you know it I was a working hand on The Buffalo Equine Ranch and Cathouse. She let me stay in the barn, for free. I’d start at daybreak and work until sundown each day, and every day she gave me ten cents. That was a lot more than I’d ever made, and I made it every single day. It was a big thing for me then, because now I could offer something to my girl,” he said. The tip of his jaw had elevated itself with the last words, but then he caught it as a brag. When it was collected and put away he dropped his face quietly to the valley.

“I’d met this girl, Jeannie, about...two or three weeks before Mrs. Mays. She was fourteen, maybe fifteen, and saw me sleeping under a tree one night on her way home from work. She stopped, and we talked, and man, did I like her. She was beautiful, and smart, and she liked me, too—seemed to, anyway. She was nicer to me than anyone I’d ever met, even before she brought me a meal from the diner she worked at. I didn’t know her more than a week before it was clear she was the one for me. But I had nothing to offer her. I had lots of hopes, of course, but no home, no money, not even a job, but there wasn’t a day went by after we met that I didn’t try to change those hopes into plans. It’s why I showed up at Isabel Mays’ ranch that first day.”

“The first day I got off I went back to the diner to tell Jeannie what I’d done, and what I was doing to improve myself. I washed my face and combed my hair, and straightened up as best I could, and went back to tell her. And she listened, I mean, she didn’t just take it in politely, she really *listened*, like with a little hope of her own that it wasn’t just some kid bragging. It kept me going, and...well, I suppose I was trying to impress her, and I told her about Mays’ horses.”

“See, the *Buffalo Equine Ranch and Cathouse* was a home for hard cases, not just kids like me or the women who ran away from husbands or fathers or the brothel in town, but for broken down military stock. Her father Isaiah started it. He was army cavalry, and they worked

horses hard. When the animals soured the army had always paid a knacker to cart them off for glue, but Isaiah was around horses all his life, and saw something there. So, he worked a deal to take them off the army's hands for less than they'd paid knackers. He'd nurse them back to the point their own dam wouldn't recognize them, and sell them back to the army to make even more. He did that for nearly twenty years, made enough to buy the ranch, and then some. When he died Isabel kept the deal going, but she was a soft touch, and never wanted to sell a single animal. By that point she had enough money that she didn't have to, so she kept the horses as pets." He smiled faintly. "When I got there she had at least fifty head of what had been condemned horses. They were all pretty old, stiff and gray—but healthy. At night she'd keep them in a couple of barns, with clean stalls that I mucked, otherwise she'd let them graze in pastures. It was a great end for horses that had lived hard lives."

"When I told Jeannie I was working on a horse ranch she told me she loved horses, so I went on forever about them. And she seemed happy and even a little excited about that. She seemed truly happy I'd got such a wonderful job, and didn't laugh when I said I wanted to be able to offer something to someone like her. It was a conversation I remembered all my life—sitting out by this big old Mesquite tree in town, feeling so good, so full of hope, thinking I could make this girl so happy. Hell, she seemed happy even talking with me! It was to the point I figured I'd save my dimes until I could go down to the department store and buy her a ring. I hoped to God she'd accept it, because if she did we'd get married."

"Thinking back, I know I bragged a little too much that day, at least about things I was doing, and what I was seeing at the ranch." He sighed deeply. "That turned out to be a mistake, I guess. And it happened the very next Saturday after all my big talk."

He stopped, and looking down, scuffed at the grass with his boot, then went on, shaking his head sadly.

“Every so often Mays would let all her horses out together in the biggest pasture, just to play. And she did that Saturday. It was that time of year when a low fog came in at night, and laid around the pastures like an old blanket, thin in some spots, thicker in others, with only the tops of the fence and the house sticking up through it. Mays came out onto her porch that morning with her ladies, like they always did, and sat down with cups of hot tea, then Mays hollered up at us.

“Bring ‘em out!”

So, the other hands told me what to do, and pretty soon we were all back and forth between the barns and the big pasture. Each of us started leading three or four horses at a time through the fog, to the gate. We let them loose and went back for more, back and forth through that fog for more and more horses, until all fifty had their heads poking up out of the fog up there,” he said. He smiled ruefully as the image came through for the last time.

“Lovely,” the old man said.

“And it got even better—for a while,” the cowboy said quietly. He dropped his voice to a whisper: “A short while.” He paused, his mind fully in the sights and smells and sounds of that morning, as if for the first time, not the last. He took a deep breath, then turned to face the old man.

“When those old horses were let out of their stalls all together they got to be like kids on a playground. At first they’d look around, not sure of what to do with themselves while more and more of them were let loose, but pretty soon they got excited at being back in a herd, and started snortin’ and millin’ around like they were younger. After a little bit one would stretch out a rickety trot from the rest, and maybe one or two others would follow, and one of those might kick at another—just playing—and then try to run off a little ways, and the one that got kicked said hell no you don’t and started after the other, and before you knew it they were running like

they were kids again. It all happened that day. The others saw what they were doing and pretty soon the rest of the horses were running too, running after the first few, trying to catch up, until all fifty of those animals were running in a big herd, just like the herds their ancestors had spent their lives in, a herd that started down that pasture faster than you'd ever think old horses could move, streaming down in a charge mostly hid under the fog."

His right hand slapped softly at the side of his Levis, once, then again, as memory of the stampede flooded through for the last time.

"It was something to see, for a while, fifty heads and manes and maybe the tops of their backs flyin' down above the fog, until they'd hit a thicker patch and the only way you could tell what was happening was that rumble off in the distance, and the feel of ground shaking when a stampede's nearby."

His smile faded, and he stopped. It was quiet for several seconds.

"What?" the old man finally asked.

The cowboy didn't respond. He sighed deeply at what he'd come to along this thread. It was something he'd never wanted to remember, something which had nevertheless come back to him so many times, in so many nightmares, since that morning.

"Tell me," the old man said softly.

The cowboy drew in another breath, nodded grimly, and started up again with regret.

"I was coiling my ropes and hadn't been paying attention until I heard Daisy yell. I looked over, and she was pointing, and Mays and the other women were up on their feet, and

pointing, and they started yelling, so I turned, and.... God Almighty—” he stopped again, and bit his lip.

“My girl was down there. It was Jeannie, sitting on the fencing I’d fixed the first day I came to the ranch. She just wanted to see what I’d told her so much about, and she’d decided to go the first day she had off, to see for herself, and maybe surprise me. So, she’d put on a pretty dress, and walked there all that way from town, and got there just as we were letting all those horses out. And she climbed up on the top rail of that fence, and was watching, as they herded up and began heading down.”

“It was my own fault, luring her out there with all my big talk. But there she was, on that fence with nowhere to run, and a stampede coming down towards her. I’m not sure she realized what was happening yet, but they were coming fast, and as they got closer not one of those horses slowed at all.”

“I started running and yelling, and the other hands did, too, and the women were all running now, waving their arms and yelling, but it was like shouting into a hurricane. She couldn’t have heard over the sound of those horses, and couldn’t have seen us except when we came out of thicker spots of fog. Christ, that fence probably started banging before I really got started, shaking as if an earthquake was coming. I came out of a thicker part of the fog and saw Jeannie trying to get down off the fence, and then she seemed to fall—” His voice broke. He tightened, and coughed, and went on. “The fog was thinner about fifty feet from the fence, and I could see the horses come out of it at a dead run straight for the fence, and then I saw Jeannie again. She’d fallen, but was getting to her feet, and then just stood there, facing those horses!”

He stopped, and let the old man feel the pause he'd allowed so many times at this point in the story. When he was satisfied at its length, he went on.

“But at the very last minute the lead horses began to turn. And the others followed, They swept around like they were tied to huge wheel, with the outside edge pounding not five feet from that fence, rattling it to pieces and shaking the ground beneath Jeannie, ripping up clods of dirt and grass everywhere, with the roar of fifty horses at a dead run coming by, hooves flying, dirt scattering, all their breathing mixed in, and they ripped by, and were gone, all those heads and manes moving back up the hill. And Jeannie was still standing there. She looked a little pale, but she was still standing there.”

“I got to her at the same time as the women, and we were all around her, not expecting she'd still be alive, but there she was, standing in the middle of fence poles. I started apologizing, but she said she was fine. I kept saying ‘I'm so sorry’, but then she patted my arm, and *she* apologized, and we were each trying to out apologize the other for several moments until she reached up, pulled my head down and kissed me! And then she looked past me, and pointed up the hill.”

“Would you look at that, Henry!” she said. So, I turned, and we all turned, and saw the horses get back to the top of the hill and slow, and stop, and stand around, nickering and snorting and sweating right about the same time the sun stretched through the fog from the east, and reached across the top meadow and lit the steam coming off the tops of their backs and the little clouds of their breaths from behind. And Jeannie smiled one of the best smiles I ever saw, through all our lives, and all those decades.”

He sighed weakly. “It was a sight,” he said, and a last bit of admiration flickered across his face, but then the recollection broke away, and the thread drew from the larger piece, and the larger piece began to move. The pull grew stronger, until the entire memory began to tear itself away, and the pains hit him.

He winced, though the ache was sharp and stabbing. He tightened his body, but then greater pain hit him. “Oh Jesus!” he whispered, and he turned away from the other man to hide the effect. The skin around his eyes and mouth came taut, and he clenched his hands into fists and pulled them against the sides of his legs.

“You’re almost done, Henry,” the old man said sadly. He put down his notes and took hold of the cowboy’s arm. The cowboy jerked two nods and bent forward to fight the pains. But they hit him more strongly. His knees buckled, and he began to fall. The old man caught him, and helped lower him to his knees.

“Oh.... oh...oh!” he whispered. It kept on for several moments, but then began to subside. The pains ebbed slowly, but then were gone. The old man helped him to his feet, and he stood unsteadily, looking around without any recollection of what had happened, until the melancholy came. It flowed back more quickly this time, filling every space and corner of his mind.

His jaw tightened, and within moments there was moisture in the deep lines below his eyes. “Sorry,” he whispered. His arm went up and brushed at the wet with his sleeve, but the sadness came deeper inside him. He forced himself to turn away, then bent and pretended to pick at the grass. He knelt, and bent further, but a muffled sob came from his chest. He tried coughing to hide it, but couldn’t. His shoulders shook and he began to lose his balance. The old man caught him.

“Lie down, Henry,” he said quietly, and he helped lower him to the grass. He turned him

onto his back, and laid him face up in the tall grass. The cowboy's eyes were glazed with wet, but now the sadness too began to leave him. The cowboy's breathing slowed, then seemed to stop. But then he forced out more in a whisper.

“It was...a sight,” he said weakly, but the words came only by force of repetition, for he'd already forgotten the story, and no part of him would remember it again.
