

## To Keep A Promise

The wind blew day and night, a banshee call, wailing, shrieking, heralding death. Maggie stood by the window, peeked out the edge of the damp curtain and spoke back to the keening wind.

“Not this day, hag. Not my family.”

They had battled the dust, the darkness, and the relentless wind, but were losing the war. They could not see the neighbor’s farm, the stars at night, or the sun at day. It was as though time had stopped. The worst part was not the dark, or the hunger, but the loneliness.

“Worst depression in history,” President Roosevelt had said. That was when they still had electricity and could listen to the radio. Now it sat on the small mahogany table, silent and sooty.

Kevin lifted the lid of the soup pot and looked in. Maggie’s chest grew tight. He reached into the cupboard, grabbed a quart jar, and dipped the ladle in and out of the pot, filling the jar with the thin broth, bits of meat and broth a swirling tornado.

“Darlin’, don’t do this. We’ve barely got enough for ourselves—and nothing for tomorrow.”

“I’m giving him my share.”

Maggie watched, unblinking, as he put on his threadbare winter coat, opened the door, and stepped quickly outside.

Danny was a broken spirit—no doubt about it. But why was it their responsibility to take care of him? He wasn’t even kin.

Maggie wrapped her sweater tighter around her thin waist and turned back to the window, keeping watch as Kevin disappeared into the black cloud.

The dust had become a living thing—like the giant octopus in Joe’s favorite book. Or was it a squid? Tendrils of fine, black, powder snuck in everywhere, crept under the window sills, sifted down the chimney, or burst through the door each time it was opened.

Each night Maggie knelt by the bed and prayed to God for respite. But each morning her dream of waking to the gentle patter of rain on the tin roof, or to billowing, soft, white snowflakes were crushed again and again.

She tried to be strong—it was her job to be strong. But there seemed to be no end in sight. No end to the dust, the heat, the frigid winters, and the sameness—each new day like the last.

She walked down the short hall and looked into the bedroom where her three children were huddled under the covers. It was almost noon, but still so cold in the house. Joe, the oldest, was reading aloud—‘20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.’ The book was worn and tattered and often Erin recited along as he read, she’d heard the story so many times that it was imprinted on her brain.

At age nine Joe felt the hunger and the sadness far more than the two little ones. Patrick pushed his wooden truck up and over the mountains created by his quilt-covered legs. They were twins—Erin and Patrick—born five years ago this month but so thin they could pass for three-year-olds.

Joe glanced up from his book, and saw her standing in the doorway. His lips formed a grim line, his eyes became slits, perhaps anticipating more bad news. A young boy facing death. She gave him a smile and a small nod. “The soup is ready.”

She'd lied to Kevin—there was food for tomorrow and even perhaps the next day if she was very careful. She'd only wanted to see if he would change his mind, if he would put her and the children first.

As Joe fed the twins, she put on Kevin's barn coat—so big on her now that it billowed in the wind—and slipped out the back door and into the attached chicken coop. The red hen ran to the far corner, sensing what was coming—she'd seen her coop mates disappear one after the other. Until two weeks ago she'd managed to push out an egg every other day. But she was old, her laying days were over. And there was no more feed for her, not even crusts of bread. Maggie took a deep breath, whispered an apology and grabbed the hen by the neck, whipping the animal in a quick circle, feeling the stacked bones snap. The animal suffered only the seconds of knowing. Maggie saw to it that there was no pain. The wind shrieked through the gaps in the wood, then calmed a bit.

She hung the scrawny bird to cool and bleed out while she put a pot of water on to boil. She'd have it dipped, plucked, and simmering in the black kettle before Kevin came home. It would take hours to soften the meat.

Then she took the rickety wooden steps down to the root cellar for the last of the vegetables—two potatoes, three limp carrots, and a big onion. A sharp odor told her the onion was beginning to turn bad, but she'd use it anyway. She made a pocket of her apron, tossed the vegetables inside and climbed back up the stairs, eyes squinting against the dust.

When she stacked the vegetables on the kitchen counter a tiny moan issued from her cracked lips. A rat had gotten into the bin, its long, yellow teeth leaving grooves in one end of the potato. She grabbed the cleaver, chopped off the chewed end and took it out to the woodshed. She sprinkled poison on the cut surface and went back down into the root cellar. 'It's silly,

really,' she thought. 'There's nothing left for it to eat,' then suddenly— 'except the children.' She'd heard stories of rats sneaking into houses and biting sleeping children. She shuddered, then placed the poison potato in the bin and rushed back upstairs.

They wouldn't have had any rats if the cat was still here. She'd told the children that it had run off. Just like she'd told them the meat in the stewpot was a rabbit she had managed to trap. Lies were coming easily to her now.

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Kevin poured some of the soup into a mug and placed it on the table. "Sit here, Danny, while it's still warm." Then he turned and looked out the window, so Danny could not hear his stomach growl.

"I hear the Travers are pulling out," Danny said, lifting the mug with a shaking hand, the fingers bent in odd angles.

"His well dried up," said Kevin. "Said I could have what's left of his firewood, though." Neither man had to say what was on their minds—if Jed Traver's well was done, theirs would be next.

Kevin put a small log on the fire and stirred the coals. "It can't last much longer. The snow will come. It'll tamp down the dust. Never seen a drought last this long. It'll end soon." This was the same prayer repeated in one form or another the past five years by thousands of desperate families across the Midwest.

Danny nodded. Of the four men, they were the only two left. Bert had been beaten, robbed, and thrown to his death riding the rails to California, hoping for a picking job.

Pneumonia took Eugene—a slow, creeping, unmanly way to die.

So now it was left to Kevin to keep the promise.

Danny took another sip, spilling a little down his shirtfront. The four years in jail had ruined him. It might not have ruined another man, but Danny was the youngest

“I still don’t know where we went wrong,” Danny said, for the hundredth time.

Kevin sighed and sat. He put his elbows on the table carefully—one leg was loose and he didn’t want to jiggle the cup.

“We didn’t figure on that corrupt, lazy, Jack Belfour finally getting off his fat butt and doing something,” he said, reciting the well-told story. “We forgot it was an election year. Folks were tired of him—wanted a new sheriff. He needed votes and you were an easy mark

Their plan had been perfect—invite Mac Dugan to go deer hunting with them. A terrible accident and Mac’s battered, pregnant wife, Reva, could sell the farm and move back east to her family. Bert’s cattle would quit disappearing. And Eugene’s stream would fill again. Mac had diverted the water. They’d found where he’d dammed it up but Mac had angrily denied doing any such thing and two nights later Eugene’s chicken coop burned to the ground.

No one ever found out what Mac Dugan had on Jack Belfour, but the sheriff seemed to have a blind eye and a deaf ear when it came to Dugan. “Now, Bert, I walked over every inch of Mac’s land,” Belfour lied. “Every cow there has his brand. Keep your fences tight and they won’t go wandering off.”

A week later all four tires on Bert’s truck had been slashed.

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October 29, 1929—the beginning of the end of everything. It was a cool, sweet-smelling autumn day. Not a hint of wind—perfect weather to bring home venison for the long winter ahead. Little did the four men know it would be the last best day they would ever have.

Before they headed out they put their hands together, bowed their heads and made the promise. Then they loaded the ammo and rifles into the truck and drove silently to Mac Dugan's. "We'll not come home until each of us has hit his mark," Kevin told Mac as he climbed into the front of the truck. He handed him the flask and Mac took a long pull, handing it through the window to the three men riding in the back. They passed it around freely all morning, each man but Mac taking only tiny sips as they sat on the hillside, scanning for deer. Finally a buck, a doe, and a yearling stepped out into the clearing and began to warily nibble on the sweet grass. "Mac," whispered Kevin, "we'll swing around to the backside. Count to a hundred before you shoot."

Mac wasn't one who liked to take orders, but since he'd be getting the best shot at the buck, he didn't argue.

The three men did swing around, but not to the side of the clearing. One hundred counts later, Mac Dugan stood and took a bullet to the back of his head.

Each man stuck to the story—Mac had been drinking and suddenly stepped into the line of fire. It had been an accident, pure and simple. No way to tell which gun was responsible and Reva wasn't making any fuss.

But Sheriff Belfour would not let it go. Solving this case might mean another four years in office. So he trumped up some evidence and charged Danny with reckless discharge of a firearm and manslaughter. Danny—the only one of the three men who didn't have a wife and

family counting on him at home. Danny—the smallest of the four and least able to defend himself. Danny—who went into jail one kind of man and came out another.

In turns Kevin, Eugene, and Bert had done for him—chopped his wood, fed him, and held him when he woke up screaming. Because even though Danny was bent, he never broke. He'd stuck to the story—during the beatings—and worse. Things had been done to him no man would admit. Three years of humiliation, wormy food, and isolation.

And now only Kevin was left to keep the promise.

He trudged the two miles back home and for the first time truly thought about Danny's question. What *had* gone wrong? The day after the shooting, when half the county secretly rejoiced the death of Mac Dugan, the news on the radio was grim. The stock market had crashed. Hundreds of businessmen were jumping to their deaths. Kevin and the rest of his neighbors mistakenly believed that it had no bearing on them. They had no money in the market. Their future was in the crops now safely stored in the silos.

But within weeks it all started to turn around. Hot winds picked up the dry top soil and carried it away. Not a bit of snow fell that winter, nor any rain that spring. What few resilient plants that emerged were quickly devoured by locusts.

And each winter and every summer were worse than the last.

Kevin's mind told him that the shooting of Mac Dugan and the horrific years following were not related. But his heart told him another story.

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The next morning the keening of the wind woke Maggie. She rose, but this time did not step to the window. She quietly put small logs into the stove and soon had a respectable fire going. She made a cup of weak tea from the last of the mint leaves. Then she rocked and read her bible while her family hibernated. No need to wake Kevin. There was no work for him to do. It was the moaning wind that finally roused him from his sleep.

“What’s in the pot?”

“The old hen. She quit laying. Don’t tell Erin. It was her favorite.”

Kevin nodded and walked to the stove. Maggie sighed. “Get your coat,” she said. “I’ll fill a jar.”

Kevin’s shoulders dropped, grateful he wouldn’t hear her soft, womanly pleading. She handed him the jar wrapped in a rag to keep it warm. After he stepped out the door she again watched him disappear into the swirling darkness, then tugged the packet of rat poison from her apron pocket, ran to the outhouse, and dropped it through the hole.

She’d made a promise to her children the day she brought them into the world—that she would always protect them.

This would was the last food Danny Callahan would be taking from her children’s mouths.

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“This is good, Kevin. Tell Maggie I said so and, and—I appreciate all you are doing for me.”

Kevin watched Danny suck the broth into his toothless mouth. “You did for us, Danny. Your sacrifice was greater. You did not let us down and I will not let you down.”



“Eat with me, Kevin. Like the old days.”

Kevin shook his head.

“Just a cup.”

Kevin smiled and sat. “Perhaps a little won’t hurt.”