

House of Mercy

By Erin Healy

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It wasn't every day that an old saddle could improve a horse's life.

This is what Beth Borzoi was thinking as she stood in the dusty tack room that smelled like her favorite pair of leather boots. In the back corner where the splintering-wood walls met, she tugged the faded leather saddle off the bottommost rung of the heavy-duty rack, where it had sat, unused and forgotten, for years.

Her little brother, Danny, would have said she was stealing the saddle. He might have called her a kleptomaniac. That was too strong a word, but Danny was fifteen and liked to throw bold words around, cocky-like, show-off rodeo ropes aimed at snagging people. She loved that about him. It was a cute phase. Even so, she had formed a mental argument against the characterization of herself as a thief, in case she needed to use it, because Danny was too young to understand the true meaning of even stronger words like *sacrifice* or *situational ethics*.

After all, she was working in secret, in the hidden folds of a summer night, so that both she and the saddle could leave the Blazing B unnoticed. In the wrong light, it might look like a theft.

The truth was, it was not her saddle to give away. It was Jacob's saddle, though in the fifteen years Jacob had lived at the ranch she had never seen him use it. The bigger truth was that this saddle abandoned to tarnish and sawdust could be put to better use. The fenders were plated with silver, pure metal that could be melted down and converted into money to save a horse from suffering. Decorative silver bordered the round skirt and framed the rear housing. The precious metal had been hammered to conform to the gentle rise of the cantle

in the back and the swell in the front. The lovely round conchos were studded with turquoise. Hand-tooled impressions of wild mountain flowers covered the leather everywhere that silver didn't.

In its day, it must have been a fine show saddle. And if Jacob valued that at all, he wouldn't have stored it like this.

Under the naked-bulb beams of the tack room, Beth's body cast a shadow over the pretty piece as she hefted it. She blew the dirt and dander off the horn, swiped off the cracked seat with the flat of her hand, then turned away her head and sneezed. Colorado's dry climate had not been kind to the leather.

She wasn't stealing. She was saving an animal's life.

The latch on the barn door released Beth to the midnight air with a click like a stolen kiss. The saddle weighed about thirty-five pounds, which was easy to manage when snatching it off a rack and tossing it onto a horse's back. But it would feel much heavier by the time she reached her destination. She'd parked her truck a ways off where the rumbling old clunker wouldn't raise questions or family members sleeping in the nearby ranch house. She'd left her dog at the foot of Danny's bed with clear orders to stay. She hoped the animal would mind.

Energized, she crossed the horses' yard. A few of them nickered greetings at her, including Hastings, who nuzzled her empty pockets for treats. The horses never slept in the barn's stalls unless they were sick. Even in winter they stayed in the pasture, preferring the outdoor lean-to shelters.

The Blazing B, a 6,500-acre working cattle ranch, lay to the northwest of Colorado's San Luis Valley. The region was called a valley because this portion of the state was a Rocky

Mountain hammock that swung between the San Juans to the west and the Sangre de Cristos to the east. But at more than 7,000 feet, it was no low-lying flatland. It was, in fact, the highest alpine valley in the world. And it was the only place in the world that Beth ever wanted to live. Having graduated from the local community college with honors and saved enough additional money for her continuing education, she planned to leave in the fall to begin her first year of veterinary school. She would be gone as long as it took to earn her license, but her long-term plan was to return as a more valuable person. Her skills would save the family thousands of dollars every year, freeing up funds for their most important task—providing a home and a hard day's work to discarded men who needed the peace the Blazing B had to offer.

On this late May night, a light breeze stirred the alfalfa growing in the pasturelands while the cattle grazed miles away. The herds always spent their summers on public lands in the mountains while their winter feed grew in the valley. They were watched over by a pool rider, a hired man who was a bit like a cow's version of a shepherd. He stayed with them through the summer and would bring them home in the fall.

With the winter calving and spring branding a distant memory, the streams and irrigation wells amply supplied by good mountain runoff, and the healthy alfalfa fields thickening with a June cutting in mind, the mood at the Blazing B was peaceful.

When Beth was a quarter mile beyond the barn, a bobbing light drew her attention to the west side of the pasture, where ancient cottonwood trees formed a barrier against seasonal winds and snows. She paused, her eyes searching the darkness beyond this path that she could walk blindfolded. The light rippled over cottonwood trunks, casting shadows that were indistinguishable from the real thing.

A man was muttering in a low voice, jabbing his light around as if it were a stick. She couldn't make out his words. Then the yellow beam stilled low to the ground, and she heard a metallic thrust, the scraping ring of a shovel's blade being jammed into the dirt.

Beth worried. It had to be Wally, but what was he doing out at this hour, and at this place? The bunkhouse was two miles away, and the men had curfews, not to mention strict rules about their access to horses and vehicles.

She left the path and approached the trees without a misstep. The moonlight was enough to guide her over the uneven terrain.

“Wally?”

The cutting of the shovel ceased. “Who wants to know?”

“It's Beth.”

“Beth who?”

“Beth Borzoi. Abel's daughter. I'm the one who rides Hastings.”

“Well, sure! Right, right. Beth. I'm sorry you have to keep telling me. You're awfully nice about it.”

The light that Wally had set on the ground rose and pointed itself at her, as if to confirm her claims, then dropped to the saddle resting against her thighs. Wally had been at the ranch for three years, since a stroke left his body unaffected but struck his brain with a short-term memory disorder. It was called anterograde amnesia, a forgetfulness of experiences but not skills. He could work hard but couldn't hold a job because he was always forgetting where and when he was supposed to show up. Here at the ranch he didn't have to worry about those details. He had psychologists and strategies to guide him through his days, a community of brothers who reminded him of everything he really needed to know. Well,

most things. He had been on more than one occasion the butt of hurtful pranks orchestrated by the men who shared the bunkhouse with him. It was both a curse and a blessing that he was able to forget such incidents so easily.

Beth was the only Beth at the Blazing B, and the only female resident besides her mother, but these facts regularly eluded Wally. He never forgot her father, though, and he knew the names of all the horses, so this was how Beth had learned to keep putting herself back into the context of his life.

“You’re working hard,” she said. “You know it’s after eleven.”

“Looking for my lockbox. I saw him take it. I followed him here just an hour ago, but now it’s gone.”

Sometimes it was money that had gone missing. Sometimes it was a glove or a photograph, or a piece of cake from her mother’s dinner table that was already in his belly. All the schedules and organizational systems in the world were not enough to help Wally with this bizarre side effect of his disorder: whenever a piece of his mind went missing, he would search for it by digging. Dr. Roy Davis, Wally’s psychiatrist, had curtailed much of Wally’s compulsive need to overturn the earth by having him perform many of the Blazing B’s endless irrigation tasks. Even so, the ten square miles of ranch were riddled with the chinks of Wally’s efforts to find what he had lost.

“That must be really frustrating,” she said. “I hate it when I lose my stuff.”

“I didn’t lose it. A gray wolf ran off with it. I had it safe in a secret spot, and he dug it up and carried off the box in his teeth. Hauled it all the way up here and reburied it. Now tell me, what’s a wolf gonna do with my legal tender? Buy himself a turkey leg down at the supermarket?”

Wally must have kept a little cash in his box. She could understand his frustration. But this claim stirred up disquiet at the back of her mind. Dr. Roy would need to know if Wally was seeing things. First off, gray wolves were hardly ever spotted in Colorado. They'd been run out of the state before World War II by poachers and hostile ranchers, and their return in recent years was little more than a rumor. Wally might have seen a coyote. But for another thing, no wild animal dug up a man's buried treasure and relocated it. Except maybe a raccoon.

A raccoon trying to run off with a heavy lockbox might actually be entertaining.

“Tell you what, Wally. If he's buried it here we'll have a better chance of finding it in the morning. When the sun comes up, I'll help you. But they'll be missing you at the bunkhouse about now. Let me take you back so no one gets upset when they see you're gone.” Jacob or Dr. Roy would do bunk checks at midnight.

“Upset? No one can be as upset as I am right now.” He thrust the shovel into the soft dirt at his feet. “I saw the dog do it. I tracked him all the way here, like he thought I wouldn't see him under this full moon. Fool dog—but who'd believe me? It's like a freaky fairy tale, isn't it? Well, I'd have put that box in a local vault if I didn't have to keep so many stinkin' web addresses and passwords and account numbers and security questions at my fingertips.” He withdrew a small notebook from his hip pocket and waved the pages around. It was one of the things he used to keep track of details. “Maybe I'll have to rethink that.”

Beth's hands had become sweaty and a little cramped under the saddle's weight. She used her right knee to balance the saddle and fix her grip. The soft leather suddenly felt like heavy gold bricks out of someone else's bank vault.

“Well, let's go,” she said. “I've got my truck right on down the lane.”

“What do you have there?” Wally returned the notebook to his pocket, hefted the shovel, and picked his way out of the underbrush, finding his way by flashlight.

“An old saddle. It’s been in the tack room for years.” She expected Wally to forget the saddle just as quickly as he would forget this night’s adventure and her promise to help him dig in the morning.

He lifted one of the fenders and stroked the silver with his thumb. “Pretty thing. Probably worth something. Not as much as that box is worth to me, though.”

“We’ll find it,” Beth said.

“You bet we will.” Wally fell into step beside her. “Thanks for the ride back, Beth. You’re a good girl. You got your daddy in you.”

With Jacob’s old saddle resting on a blanket in the bed of her rusty white pickup, Beth followed an access road from the horse pasture by her own home down into the heart of the Blazing B.

The property’s second ranch house was located more strategically to the cattle operation, and so it was known to all as the Hub. The Hub was a practical bachelor pad. Outside, the branding pens and calving sheds and squeeze chutes and cattle trucks filled up a dusty clearing around the house. Inside, the carpets and old leather furniture, even when clean, smelled like men who believed that a hard day’s work followed by a dead sleep—in any location—was far more gratifying than a hot shower. The house was steeped in the scent stains of sweat and hay, horses and manure, tanned leather and barbecue smoke. The men

who slept here lived like the bachelors they were. If their daily labors weren't enough to impress a woman, the cowboys couldn't be bothered with her.

Dr. Roy Davis, known affectionately by all as Dr. Roy, was a lifelong friend of Beth's father. Years ago, after the death of Roy's wife, Abel and Roy merged their professional passions of ranching and psychiatry and expanded the Blazing B's purpose. It became an outreach to functional but wounded men like Wally who needed a home and a job. Dr. Roy brought his teenage son Jacob along. Now thirty-one, Jacob had never found reason to leave, except for the years he'd spent away at college earning multiple degrees in agriculture and animal management. Jacob had been the Blazing B's general operations manager for more than five years.

Jacob and his father shared the Hub with Pastor Eric, a divorced minister, and Emory, a therapist who was once a gang leader. These men were the Borzois' four full-time employees.

The other men who lived at the Blazing B were called "associates." They occupied the bunkhouse, some for a few weeks and some for years. At present there were six, including Wally.

When Beth stopped her truck in front of the Hub's porch, Wally slipped off the seat of her cab, closed the rusty door, and went directly around back to the bunkhouse. She pulled away and had reached the end of the drive when a rut jarred the truck and rattled the shovel he'd left in the truck bed.

In spite of her hurry to take Jacob's saddle to the people who needed it, she put the truck in park, jumped out, and jogged the tool up to the house. The porch light lit the squeaky wood steps, and she took them two at a time. Jacob would see the tool in the

morning when he came out to start up his own truck and head out to whatever project was on the schedule. She'd phone him to make sure.

She was tipping the handle into the corner where the porch rail met the siding when the Hub's front door opened and Jacob leaned out.

"Past your bedtime, isn't it?" he said, but he was smiling at her. Over the years they had settled into a comfortable big-brother-little-sister relationship, though Beth had never fully outgrown her adolescent crush on him.

"Found Wally digging up by the barn," she said.

Surprise pulled his dark brows together. "Now? Where is he?"

"Back in bed, I guess. He said he followed a wolf up to our place. You might want Dr. Roy to look into that. Your dad should know if Wally's . . . seeing things."

Jacob nodded as he stepped out the door and leaned against the house. He crossed his arms. "Coyote maybe?"

"Try suggesting that to him. And when was the last time we had a coyote down here? It's been ages—not since Danny gave up his chicken coop."

"I'll mention that to Dad. It's probably nothing. What had you out at the barn at this hour? Horses okay?"

"Fine." Beth's eyes swiveled down to her truck, to Jacob's saddle, both well beyond reach of the porch light. She tried to recall all her justifications for taking the saddle, but in that moment all she could think was that she should get his permission to do it. She'd known this man more than half her life. He was kind. He was wise. He'd say yes. He'd want her to take it.

But she said, “I’m headed out to the Kandinskys’ place. They’ve got a horse who injured his eye, and it’s pretty bad. They let it go too long, you know, hoping it would correct itself, maybe wouldn’t need a big vet bill.”

“The Kandinskys have their own vet on the premises. Who called you out?”

“It’s not one of their horses, actually. It’s Phil’s. Remember him?”

“Your friend from high school?”

“He’s been working there a year or so. They let him keep the horse on the property. One of the perks.”

“But he can’t use their vet?”

Beth looked at her feet. “Phil’s family can’t afford their vet. You know how that goes. *We* couldn’t afford him. His family doesn’t even have pets, you know. They run a grocery store. The horse is his little sister’s project. A 4H thing.”

“Well, tell Phil I said he called the right gal for the job.”

“I don’t know, Jacob. It sounds really bad. These eye things—the horse might need surgery.”

She found it unusually difficult to look at him, though she was sure he was studying her with a suspicious stare by now. But she couldn’t look at the truck either. Her eyes couldn’t find an object to rest on.

“All you can do is all you can do, Beth. That’ll be as true after you’re licensed as it is now.”

“But I want to do miracles,” she said.

He chuckled at that, though she hadn’t been joking. “Don’t we all.” He uncrossed his arms and put his hand on the doorknob, preparing to go back inside. “I heard some big-

shot Thoroughbred breeder is boarding some of his studs there,” Jacob said. “Some friend of theirs passing through.”

“I heard that too.”

“Maybe that’ll be Phil’s miracle this time—an unexpected guest, someone with the right know-how or the right resources who will come to his horse’s rescue.”

“Angels unaware,” Beth said.

“Something like that. Night, Beth.”

Beth didn’t want him to go just yet. “Night.”

She lingered at the door while it closed, hoping he might intuit what she didn’t have the courage to say.

When he didn’t, she committed to her original plan. She descended the steps in a quiet rush, wanting to whisk the saddle away before he could object to what he didn’t know. She wanted to be the one who did the good works, who made the incredible rescue. She couldn’t help herself. It was her father’s blood running through her heart.

On the driveway, her smooth-soled boots skimmed the dirt, whispering back to her truck.

“It’s not your right to do it,” Jacob said. Beth gasped and whirled at the sound of his voice, unexpected and loud and straight into her ear, as if he’d been standing on her shoulder. “It’s not your gift to give.”

But the ranch house door was shut tight under the cone of the porch light, and the bright window revealed nothing inside but heavy furniture and cluttered tabletops. At the back of the house, a different door closed heavily. Jacob was headed out to the bunkhouse to check on Wally already.

Beth let her captured breath leave her lungs. She looked around for an explanation, because she didn't want to accept that the words might have been uttered by a guilty conscience.

At the base of the porch steps, crouching in such darkness that its black center sank into its surroundings, was the form of an unusually large dog. Erect ears, broad head, slender body. A wolf. She had passed that spot so closely seconds ago that she could have reached out and stroked its neck.

She took one step backward. Of course, her mind was dreaming this up because Wally had suggested a wolf to her. If he hadn't, she might have said the silhouette had the outline of a snowman. An inverted snowman guarding the house from her lies. In May.

Beth stared at it for several seconds, oddly unable to recall the landscape where she'd spent her entire life. She was distressed not to be able to say from this distance and angle whether that was a shrub planted there, or a fence post, or an old piece of equipment that hadn't made it back into the supply shed. When the shape of its edges seemed to shift and shudder without actually moving at all, she decided that her eyes were being tricked by the darkness.

Convincing herself of this was almost as easy as justifying her saddle theft.

She turned away from the house and hurried onward, looking back only once.

The Kandinskys' horse ranch lay a half hour's drive from the Blazing B. It seemed to belong in the rolling hills of Kentucky or New York, not to these simple plains. The white fences and ornamental gates were out of place in this land of wood posts and steel rails. The Rolls Royces parked in house-sized garages were entirely impractical, too good to drive down the two-lane highways. But the family members, though a bit standoffish, were nationally respected breeders of Fox Trotters and Morgans. They made good money in this valley acquiring reliable working stock for the ranchers. It seemed reasonable that Mr. Kandinsky's brother-in-law, a Thoroughbred breeder transferring some of his livelihood to a new ranch in California, would pick this place for a rest stop along the way.

Phil had given Beth directions to the horse breeder's secondary stables, a barn reserved for the workhorses rather than the studs. She parked near the sliding door that opened onto the stable alley.

Beth kept a first-aid kit for animals behind the driver's seat. She withdrew it, not sure if the ointments and disinfectants and dressings and poultices would be at all relevant. But the weight of the bag felt good in her hands, like confidence.

She entered the barn. Hay scattered across the ground silenced her footsteps. The entire facility, which boasted twelve stalls, was lined with fresh wheat straw and thick rubber mats and shining pine tongue-and-groove siding. If these quarters were for the lowly workers, the studs must have been housed in a crystal palace. Several of the stalls were occupied, but Phil leaned out of the box at the far end and motioned her to come.

She hoped that the horse's condition was not as bad as he had made it out to be over the phone.

Beth kept her voice low so as not to startle the animals. "Hey, Phil. Fiona," she said to his teenage sister who, judging by her sleeping bag, intended to spend the night with poor Marigold. Both Phil and Fiona had willowy statures and fine brown hair that fell into their eyes. Fiona sat on the ground, hugging her knees. Beth looked at the horse. "How's she doing?"

Fiona shook her head and bit her lip. She rocked herself gently.

"You tell us," Phil said. "It's her left eye." His tone was hopeful. For Fiona's sake, Beth thought.

Marigold lay on her side on a bank of straw, her eyes closed, and Beth took heart in the mare's peaceful appearance. There was no indication that the eyelid had been damaged. Her eyelashes were horizontal, as they ought to be. The contour of Marigold's head was smooth and free of swelling. Quite possibly, Phil and Fiona's inexperience had overstated the trouble.

Beth made a gentle clucking noise to alert Marigold to her presence before kneeling and stroking the mare's shoulder. The horse allowed it, approving with a deep sigh as Beth's fingers moved upward on the neck, caressing the jaw in the comforting way that Hastings liked so much.

When her hands approached the mare's eye, intending to lift the lid for a closer look, Marigold tossed her head away from Beth's probing. She nickered a warning and shot an open-eyed glare that caused Beth's hope to drop. The protective tissue over Marigold's eye, which should have been water clear, was a white cloud so dense that the pupil and iris were

nearly invisible. And toward the rear corner of the eye, the surface was uneven and waxy, like the dribbles of a melting candle.

“Her cornea has an ulcer,” Beth began.

“Is that bad?” Phil asked.

“Not normally.” Corneal ulcers were one of the more common injuries a horse might receive in its lifetime. Hastings had suffered his share. “I’m sorry, girl,” she said to the mare. “How long has she been like this?”

“The cloudiness—two weeks?” Phil said.

“Sixteen days,” Fiona said. Beth groaned inwardly.

“But that oozing, it just started yesterday.”

“Day before,” Fiona corrected.

Beth shook her head at Phil’s optimism. “Sixteen days ago we could have turned this around with topical antibiotics. She might have improved in a few days. But this—this is called a melting ulcer. They’re wicked. Somewhere along the line that plain vanilla ulcer picked up some bacteria or a fungus. The infection is only going to get worse.”

Her first-aid kit sat in the straw beside her, worthless.

Phil glanced at Fiona. “What do we do?”

“You get a vet on this right now. A licensed vet. Tonight. I can call someone for you.”

“What’s he going to tell us?”

“That you waited too long to call him. That Marigold might need surgery to reverse this, depending on how deep it’s gone. Two weeks is a long time, you guys.”

“She just didn’t give any sign that it really bothered her,” Fiona said.

Beth was sure the horse had. It was more likely that Phil and Fiona didn't recognize what they were seeing. "I don't mean to be cruel, but you need to understand how serious this is. She could lose her eye if you don't treat it aggressively."

Fiona dropped her head onto her knees. Phil paled. He didn't have to say what Beth knew was running through his mind. The cost of an equine surgery on a grocer's salary would hurt. Even if surgery wasn't part of the equation, the antibiotics, the anti-inflammatories, the medications to control the enzymes that were destroying the eye tissues would all add up.

Beth placed a hand on Phil's arm. "Come with me for a second. I brought something that might help."

Over the next several minutes, Beth focused on restoring hope to the siblings. She took them out to her truck and showed them the saddle's silver.

"You can remove it from the leather," she explained. "Sell it for cash. I'm sure there's enough here to cover whatever Marigold needs." It took some effort, but she eventually coaxed them into accepting the gift for Marigold's sake. Then Beth called the Blazing B's own vet and asked his phone service to rouse him from his sleep. While the threesome waited for Dr. O'Conner's return call, she sang his praises. By the time he agreed to come out in spite of the hour, Phil and Fiona had regained some of their optimism.

"We thought of the perfect way to thank you," Fiona said as Beth closed her cell phone. There was excitement in the light touch she placed on Beth's arm. "Wait here. It'll just take a few minutes."

"You don't need to do anything. Really."

"We do, we do. Give us five."

Five minutes was nothing to ask. The vet wouldn't arrive for forty-five at least.

Beth opened the tailgate and sat under the bright moon while she waited. Phil had carried the silver-clad saddle back through the stables to his own truck on the other side, and already she was having second thoughts about whether offering that up had been the right thing to do. She was disappointed in herself for not bringing it up to Jacob. And she could think of a dozen things that silver might have paid for at her very own ranch. Why hadn't she considered any of them in the hour between Phil's concerned phone call and her brilliant idea to foot Marigold's bill?

Because her idea had been inspired. Two hours ago she had no doubt that it was exactly what she ought to do. Beth sent her memory in search of that certainty so that she could hold onto it more firmly this time.

"It's not your right to do it," Jacob said, loud and close, and Beth jerked out of her reverie, expecting to see him standing beside the truck. Instead she found Fiona. The girl seized Beth's wrist and yanked her right off the tailgate, then tugged her back into the bright stables.

Phil was grinning at her, standing in the alley next to the tallest, glossiest, most beautiful Thoroughbred horse Beth had ever seen. She felt her lips form an O as admiration filled her next breath.

"What d'ya think?" he said.

Beth's sigh was awed and contented at the same time. "He's amazing," she breathed.

"Beth, meet Java Java Go Joe. Joe, meet Beth."

The horse's name was appropriate, considering the sheen of his coat, an oily dark-roasted coffee bean. The stud's track record at the races and in siring winners had lived up to the moniker too.

"Your reputation precedes you, sire," Beth said. The stallion before her, the Kandinskys' guest, was more than seventeen hands high and glistening, majestic. His lean legs made up most of the size difference between him and the ranch horses. Her father's geldings, including Hastings, averaged fourteen to fifteen hands. Those sturdy beasts saved many a cowboy's head while driving cattle through the forested mountains, where low-hanging tree limbs could steal hats and dent foreheads.

Her father objected to Thoroughbreds on the ranch. "They're too tall, too fast, and they don't have good cow sense," he always said. Beth knew a couple of ranchers who didn't seem to mind these shortcomings in their own horses, but her father was immovable.

It took Beth a long time to notice that Joe was saddled and ready to ride.

"No," her mouth said, while her heart cried *yes*.

Phil gestured to the blocks at Joe's side. "A small gesture of our appreciation," he said.

Beth stroked the animal's neck, and his muscles flickered under the skin. He seemed peaceful, easygoing, as if getting dressed out at this hour were an everyday thing.

"I shouldn't. I can't."

"Sure you can," Phil said.

"He's not even Mr. Kandinsky's."

"He's still family."

Beth shook her head. "It's wrong."

“What’s wrong with giving a champion like him any excuse to relive the glory days? He’s retired, you know. He resents that they only love him for his stud fees anymore. He told me so. But I said you’d love him for all the right reasons.”

Beth laughed and found herself standing on the blocks.

“I guessed at your stirrup length,” he said.

“Then we should see how good at guesswork you are,” she said, and she was astride Joe’s strong back before she could decide not to be. Her adrenaline kicked in. Beth felt him shift, evaluating her size and weight. She inserted her feet in the stirrups. Phil’s estimate was perfect.

“Ten minutes,” Phil urged. “No harm, no foul. In the three days he’s been here he’s blazed a trail all his own around the center pasture. Let him show you around. I guarantee you’ve never been on anything like him.”

“I’ve never been thanked for terrible news quite like this before.”

“It’s not for that. It’s for the saddle. Duh,” Fiona said kindly.

On her perch, Beth towered over the pair. Taking the horse out to the pasture at this hour was a risky and maybe even stupid idea. And yet their upturned faces held so much expectancy. It seemed wrong to deny them. And she had often dreamed of riding a horse like this.

“He’s not too old to have forgotten his top speeds, is he?”

“You’re a good rider,” Phil said, “but you’ll be better off if he’s forgotten at least a little bit.”

“Are you saying he’s too much horse for me?”

“Did I say that? I didn’t say that.” He whispered to Joe, “Go easy on her, old man.”

The horse snorted as if even Phil didn't have the inside track on whatever joke he planned to pull.

"Here." Phil handed her a helmet.

"I don't need one of those for a little canter."

"Yeah yeah. I know how these things start."

She snatched up the helmet and strapped it under her chin.

"I hope you don't lose your job over this," she whispered to him so Fiona wouldn't hear.

"I won't. This is you: Princess Borzoi, Her Majesty the animal whisperer. I'm not worried about a thing. Let Joe lead the way."

That would be the easiest thing she'd done all night. Her understanding of an animal's spirit was what would make her a great veterinarian some day, her father often said to her. She could sense, in the light dance of Joe's feet as she leaned forward in the saddle, that the creature was happy to go for a ride this evening. She could sense, in the patient way he waited for her to attend to the details, that he was pleased to share the adventure.

With a gentle heel, she nudged Joe toward the fresh air. He needed no other prompt. They passed through the wide doors and then navigated a few gates, and Joe told her with his confident stride that his heart would be a reliable compass on this sky-lit night.

In the Thoroughbreds, God had married strength and grace and created a magnificent breed that few people could appreciate firsthand. *Let's go for a ride.* Beth closed her eyes. There was little for her to see, and her efforts to guide the horse might lead him into dangers worse than mere shadows cast by the moon.

She did as Phil suggested, gave Joe the reins, and trusted the animal's instincts. In seconds his walk shifted to a trot and then to a canter, and then to a gallop as pleasant as a swiftly flowing creek. Joe was an eagle born to glide above water. The surface of the pastures fell away. She leaned into the horse's neck and tucked her head and couldn't remember any sensation as wild and reckless as this.

If she gave in to her urge to grin, the bugs would hit her teeth. The thought of it, the sheer joy of this rush, brought a laugh out of her throat, and then a gasp that invited some witless insect to ride the stiff air straight back down.

The shock jolted her eyes open. Phil should have given her goggles and a mask along with the helmet, she thought. But Joe took no note of her comic sputtering, and after recovering from her coughing fit, she laughed some more. His neck stretched out and so did his stride. Together they picked up speed.

I'll love you always, Hastings, she thought, but you're an old British butler compared to this rock star.

She wondered how much faster than this Joe had gone in his youth, on a refined racetrack, with the jockey he trusted most. Next on her list of dreams would be to find someone who might make that experience a reality. Maybe she could arrange some kind of reality-TV career-swap with a jockey for a week, or however that worked.

She envisioned a short jockey in all his pink and yellow silks, up to his armpit in the backside of a cow, testing by hand as was traditionally done to see if the bovine was pregnant or open. The image buoyed her good mood.

The horse had reached a pace that Beth understood was beyond her ability to contain. Joe was in charge of her fate now. A flicker of fear passed over her but then flew

away from her mind like a rooftop in a high wind. She surrendered to Joe's confidence, and to the thrill of being out of control.

But Joe's mood shifted.

Beth noticed it first in a sudden deviation from his course, a quick and not-so-graceful dig into the earth that thrust his weight off center. The angle of his ears changed as he moved off the perimeter of the fence; they stood erect now and resisted the rushing air. And though Beth hadn't thought it possible on this unrefined terrain, the Thoroughbred accelerated, fueled by an energy that came off his back like fear.

The muscles on the inside of her thighs began to burn as she held her weight off the saddle. She took back the reins, but Joe did not respond to them. Her fingers, entwined in the leather, found the saddle horn. Her eyes, squinting and dry and unexpectedly disoriented, looked for the light of the stables. She thought they might be behind her.

Joe changed course again, zigging to the previous zag. Beth slipped an inch before she recovered her center.

"Whoa," she instructed. She didn't share his fear yet. He might respond to her steady calm. "Settle down, boy."

She attuned her own ears to the surroundings, trying to get a clue for what had upset Joe. Excitement no longer energized the horse. It was replaced by panic, frantic and panting. Beth couldn't imagine what, on this secure and sheltered land, would be so terrifying. She uttered the soothing tongue clicks and hums that Hastings liked. The sounds were trampled by the pummeling of hooves tearing up the ground, thumping like helicopter blades. Wind whistling over her ears.

A ghost-gray form floated into the periphery of Beth's vision. She glanced twice, and then a third time. The hulking spirit hovered just above the ground, gliding with a swift and otherworldly intention toward Joe's flank.

That rooftop of fear crashed back down on Beth's mind, knocking the breath out of her. She felt Joe's terror as if it were her own. His foaming sweat flew off his neck and spattered her arms, and into the vacancy of her imagination rushed Wally's wolf.

It can't be a wolf, she told herself.

Whatever it was dashed behind Joe, there and gone like the memory of a dream.

She tried to twist in the saddle, wanting to see what it really was and where it was going, but the power of the horse's speed forced her to stay forward, low above the Thoroughbred's back. All she could do was hold on, with weakening thighs and floppy ankles and fingers soft as cooked spaghetti.

Joe's desperate footwork jerked Beth awry again. Clods of dirt were flying up from behind his hooves, smacking her in the back.

Then the ghost she had lost sight of snarled, and the noise pierced all the other sounds bouncing around her ears. This sound, this primal shriek, declared that this wild dog was neither a phantom nor a fiction dreamed up by a Blazing B associate. It was physical, and it was robust, and it had performed the astonishing feat of predicting how the horse would move to evade the hunt.

The wolf had overtaken them and now came from the front, head-on. It was lunging for Joe's neck, taking an impossible leap.

The wolf's weight struck her in the face. One second Joe was solid under Beth and the next she was plunging, gasping, choking on a mouthful of fur. The leather rein caught

hold of her wrist and snapped taut, shocked by the weight of her falling body as she left Joe's back. She felt the joints in her arm and wrist popping as her insignificant mass yanked against Joe's, which was a bullet train moving in the opposite direction.

She stayed connected to him by that stubborn strap. And the wild animal stayed connected to her, its claws curled into her collarbone.

Beth and beast hit the ground and bounced. She heard rocks connecting with the helmet Phil had insisted she wear. Her body flipped over onto the dog as they rolled, her distended arm still tangled in the reins, and then the animal emerged on top, teeth snapping so close to her face.

Joe might have dragged her to her death if the sudden impact hadn't jerked his neck sideways and led his hooves into a terrible misstep.

His mountainous body toppled inches from hers, but by now she was deafened by firecrackers in her skull, and she didn't hear Joe's collapse. Instead she felt the vibrations of his fall, and his heaving body pulsed atop her forearm, the one roped and pinned under Joe's shoulder like a calf tossed by a cowboy.

Beth's mind piled up sandbags against the rising flood of pain. She couldn't move.

She expected the wolf to tear into her, to finish her off. And it was a wolf. The weight, the coat, the claws—it could be nothing else. It stood on her chest, its padded feet the size of her own hands, but the animal didn't rip into her jugular or try to dig out her heart, if that was normal wolf behavior. Beth had no point of reference. If she'd been asked before this moment, she would have said no wolf could unseat a rider from a fully extended horse.

His concentrated weight bore down on her ribs so that she couldn't take a full breath. Beth prayed. *God have mercy.*

The beastly breath, full of heat and moisture and the scent of blood, caressed her chin and floated over her lips and rose through her nose into the panic centers of her mind.

She heard a voice within her ringing head say *I will show you mercy.*

She decided the voice belonged to God.

She thought it would be a mercy to die.