



*Hot, hot, and more hot to come!  
This is days of temperatures over 100° and  
nothing but 100s are forecasted to come.  
Leaf scorch everywhere. How long, O Lord?*

I stepped on something soft and squishy, and it wasn't a sandy beach.

A voice came over the public address speakers. "Folks, we'd like y'all to mosey on over to the barn. The livestock auction starts in five minutes."

"Wait here," Greg ordered as he closed the corral gate behind him.

I scraped what I could from the bottom of my Birkenstock onto a fence rail while Greg joined the owner of a brown horse in the middle of the corral. The men exchanged a volley of horse-speak, and the owner coaxed the horse into a trot at the end of a rope. The horse's coat gleamed with sweat by the time Greg raised a hand to stop the show. He shook his head and spat near the owner's boot.

*Strike two.* No spitting on the first date.

Strike one had been telling me to wait in the sun. I wiped the sweat from my face with the hem of my T-shirt, creating a reddish smear on the hem. I'd probably smudged my face with dirt, too. *Oh well.* My brain screamed, *Get out of the sun, silly!* I looked for a place to sit down.

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My prize was a sliver of shade that fell across a hay bale. I cleaned the treads of my shoes, and then I twisted my hair into a knot and stuck a pencil through it to hold it off my neck. The water in my bottle was too warm to satisfy my thirst, so I rinsed the dust out of my teeth instead. *If I sit very still, maybe the heat won't roost on my shoulders.*

From the center of the corral, the pristine whiteness of Greg's shirt blistered my eyeballs. Translucent with sweat, the shirt was snapped shut at the collar and wrists. If that was cowboy fashion, they definitely needed to revise the dress code of the West. A glint of sunlight flashed off his silver belt buckle as another owner brought his horse into the corral for Greg's scrutiny. I inwardly cheered for the horse, a leggy red with muscled thighs, a kindred spirit.

Greg's face remained expressionless as he inspected each hoof. I turned away from the scene when he shook his head at the horse's owner. One comet of spittle per day satisfied my limit, thank you very much.

After the auction, we ate complimentary burgers at the Western Colorado Emu Society barbecue. The umbrellas above the plastic tables proved useless against the low rays of the afternoon sun. It was too hot to eat or move or even think thoughts faster than a trot. The first bite of the burger sat in my stomach like a stone.

Greg approached his emu burger with the same stoicism he'd expressed while buying horses, so I eavesdropped on the conversations of other diners, all spoken with an economy of words to avoid exertion. A man with a red gingham shirt said, "I stole that horse." His wife replied, "We'll see about that" and took a long drink of iced tea.

At another table, a man bragged to his dining partners, "Greenhorns. California. Didn't know enough to look a horse in the eye. Dang fools." A chorus of grunts agreed with him. A girl of about ten stuffed the last of her burger into her mouth and asked for permission to go see the new mare. She ran off before her mother had a chance to answer. More than anything, I wanted to follow her.

Greg crushed a bundle of French fries into his mouth and gestured toward my plate. "Want 'nother?" he asked, which marked the beginning and end of our supper conversation. He walked off to get another free burger.

Sitting on the edge of a stockyard collecting dust in my teeth and watching a man I barely knew sweat and spit, I realized that dating at thirty-six would be a lot like playing the lottery, something I'd always considered as reckless as eating potato salad left out in the sun. I'd come to dating needy, knowing my chances of striking it rich were, at best, improbable. But there had to be a winner. Why not me? I couldn't win if I didn't play. The same desperation that drove people to buy fistfuls of lottery tickets fortified my optimism. There were men out there, good men; I just knew it. That's why I'd accepted a blind date arranged by a client with her sister's grandson's hunting buddy.

We leaned side-by-side against the rails of the corral watching Greg's new horses nuzzle a bale of hay. I wore a hat I'd folded from the center page of the auction guide. Around us, people loaded horses, cattle, and emus into trailers and drove off trailing plumes of dust. I couldn't think of one good reason why we were still standing there, unless Greg was working up the courage to ask me out again. I prayed he wouldn't. Really, how could he ever hope to top the romance of a livestock auction?

He wiped his brow with his sleeve and fidgeted with his hat.

*Uh-oh.*

He cleared his throat. "I'm looking for a woman with good teeth, a strong back, and one who don't complain much."

I fit the profile, all right, but stifled the urge to volunteer. "It sounds like you'd be happy married to one of your horses." I smiled broadly so he would know I was kidding—mostly.

His eyes finally opened wide enough to show his eye color, chestnut brown. Big surprise there. He rubbed his chin, worked his hat into place, and spat in the dirt.

*Strike three.*

"Let's go, then," he said.

Red dirt swirled around the cab of his truck and needled my skin as we drove the fifteen miles back to Orchard City. The air-conditioner control pointed to off. I felt some pride that, even though I'd been edged out by a horse, I didn't complain. I inched toward the open window to catch the hot breeze.

The sky was a faded chambray shirt, dull and lifeless, and for all its

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many washings, still tinted pink, as if it had been washed with red socks when it was new. Smoke from fires throughout the West and a dust storm as far away as Mongolia flattened the Book Cliffs to gradient shades of gray and collected at the base of the Grand Mesa to obscure the eleven-thousand-foot mountain completely. Only one cotton-ball cloud teetered on the Colorado Plateau to the southwest. In the single-digit humidity, the inconsequential cloud was destined to evaporate before one drop of moisture touched the earth. The bank's digital temperature sign read 105 degrees. That seemed understated.

Greg's truck rattled to a stop in front of my house. He leaned over and pushed my door open. "Much obliged."



Andrea's eyes glistened with tears as Louise pulled a strand of hair through the frosting cap with a crochet hook. "She sharpens that thing," Andrea said as I walked into my kitchen. "Look, my ear's bleeding."

Andrea is my stepdaughter. She came to Orchard City the summer after Scott's death, looking for the father she had never met. For whatever reasons, my deceased husband had never told me about his first wife and his baby girl. Fortunately—and I mean that with all my heart—Andrea found my son, Ky, and me. God set her in our family as surely as He sends any child into a family by birth, and with at least as much labor. She had returned to San Francisco and her first year of teaching at the end of the summer. Now she was back with us to recuperate from the popping, patching, and pilfering of her great expectations.

Louise is my neighbor and friend, but mostly a self-appointed ministering angel. When my husband, Scott, was killed in a cycling accident, she lowered herself into the dank well of grief I called home to hold my head above the water. She is the bravest woman I know.

A wannabe hairdresser, Louise worked on Andrea's hair within a circle of electric fans and welcomed me with a private smile. "You look hotter than a sinner at church on the Fourth of July. Pour yourself some iced tea, sugar. We can't wait to hear about your date with Clint Eastwood. Didn't y'all just love Clint in those lasagna westerns?"

Andrea and I shared a knowing glance. “*Spaghetti* westerns, Louise,” Andrea said.

“Really?”

According to Louise, no task was too insignificant to dress accordingly. Today, she wore cropped black leggings and a royal-blue smock with her name stitched in white above the pocket. To complete the thematic ensemble, a sterling silver earring in the shape of a comb swung from one ear and a pair of scissors swayed from the other. The trim fit of the smock emphasized Louise’s new figure. Her red wig lay discarded on the counter.

I petted her downy head on the way to the refrigerator. “Just like a baby.”

“Manley says I look like Sinead O’Connor.”

Manley is Louise’s husband. And I agreed with him. Her features had sharpened with weight loss, first from the chemotherapy and then from an anti-cancer diet, but it would take more than a bald head to make anyone mistake Louise for a nettled rock star.

“Are you sure he didn’t say the Marquis de Sade?” Andrea asked.

Louise rested her hands on Andrea’s shoulders. “Do y’all want me to stop?”

Andrea bit her lip.

“That’s what I thought.” Louise poked through the plastic cap and dug for another strand. Andrea swallowed hard but didn’t say anything.

A collection of silver loops, no two alike, edged Andrea’s ears, and a tiny garnet nestled in the fold of her nostril. Below her delicate collarbone, a tattoo of blue stars floated in her milky complexion. Just recently, she’d added a pointed stud in the fleshy fold between her bottom lip and chin.

She fingered the stud. “At least they numbed my chin first.”

Louise pushed Andrea’s chin to her chest and worked at pulling the hair of her nape through the cap. I told them about the auction and the supper and the quiet ride home. Then I told them about Greg’s dream wife.

“Better not get tied to his hitching post,” Louise drawled, not even

trying to cover her delight in her own cleverness. “Why, he’s tighter than bark on a tree.”

It had been this way since Louise returned from a trip home to Louisiana. After a week of talking to her aunts in the weighted air of the bayou, her speech flowed like an alluvial stream of honey, slow and sweet and littered with colloquialisms and mixed metaphors. She punched the crochet hook through Andrea’s cap.

“Ouch.”

Louise inspected the crochet hook. “The tip’s dull again.” She sharpened the point on a stone and tested it against her finger. “That should do it.”

“I can’t believe that Neanderthal had a list of requirements,” Andrea said. “I’m surprised he didn’t ask for a dowry of cattle—or emus. Louise!”

“Sorry, sugar.” Louise rested her hands on Andrea’s head as she spoke. “Having a checklist isn’t such a bad idea. Seems to me a thinking woman would know what kind of man she wants in her life—and the life of her son.”

“No way. Where’s the romance in that?” countered Andrea.

In the shadowed places where my dreams huddled, shaken and jumbled, I had a checklist, but it needed revision. I added *thoughtful* and *good conversationalist* to the bottom and crossed off *strong, silent type*, which had lingered on the list unchallenged from my teens. And you couldn’t overestimate the value of a working air-conditioner, especially in what was proving to be one of western Colorado’s hottest summers on record.

Andrea winced in pain again, so I excused myself.

She beseeched me with her eyes. “You’re coming right back, aren’t you? I want someone here in case Louise nicks an artery.”

I assured her I’d be back as soon as I changed into shorts.

Louise called after me, “You’d best check on Ky. He skipped dinner to play a computer game.”

The evaporative cooler clattered valiantly at the top of the stairs, but it was losing the battle against the heat. With each stair, the temperature climbed another degree. By the time I stopped at Ky’s door, the heat encased me in its woolly grasp. He sat at his computer; the monitor’s glow

lit the room. I knocked on the doorframe with no response and entered.

“It’s sweltering in here.” I lifted the blinds and opened the window. A shaft of sunlight illuminated the chaos of a fourteen-year-old’s life.

“Hey!”

“Son, Louise says you didn’t eat.”

Ky looked at me and I stifled a gasp. He could have been his father sitting there. When had his face narrowed and his nose lengthened and his blond hair dimmed to a muddy brown, just like Scott’s? His ears—they were huge—and beads of sweat clung to the coarse hair of his lip and sideburns. When had facial hair appeared?

“You won’t believe what she cooked for dinner. She called it tofu aspic, said it tasted like meatloaf. I thought I was gonna spew.” He turned his attention back to the monitor.

I promised Ky some decadent macaroni and cheese when Louise went home.

“Thanks, Mom.”



I crawled into Scott’s closet and closed the door behind me. In the dim light, the world’s dizzy dance slowed. Staring up at Scott’s golf shirts, a revelation surprised me. Love would be different, if it showed up at all, the second time around. Greg may have understood that better than I. Second love was more practical, and a draft horse shouldn’t be excluded so easily. That was depressing.

In the twenty months since Scott’s death, I’d tiptoed through all of the anniversaries and holidays and birthdays, most of them twice. Anniversaries were now would-have-been anniversaries. Last August would have been our sixteenth anniversary, but no one had asked. When I’d turned the calendar to April, there was no need to hunt for the perfect birthday card with an innuendo only Scott would’ve understood. There was no one to notice when I took three ibuprofen tablets for a headache, or when I sighed over the credit card bill, or when I slammed a car door harder than necessary. And when Ky had bulletted a throw to home plate to make the last out, Scott hadn’t been there to squeeze my hand in a

way that meant *We sure have a great kid.*

Just because Scott was dead didn't mean he was absolutely gone. He still showed up whenever I presumed his opinion about a news story or a neighbor's house paint or the way an intersection had been reconfigured. Sometimes his presence was so real, I'd have to say good-bye to him all over again, but that was happening less and less, and I wasn't sure how to feel about it. Part of me wanted to hold him closer; part of me wanted to shoo him away; part of me wanted to scold him for being so careless with his life. And the part of me that insisted on thinking about all of this stuff was driving me crazy.

It wasn't like I didn't believe I would see Scott again. I did. I believed in heaven. Scott was there now, and someday, I would be too. For now, though, I only got to see the hurting side of death. That was faith, Louise kept telling me, to see one thing before my eyes but to live with a certainty that there was something better beyond my seeing. And someday, she promised me, I would bubble with joy just thinking about our eventual reunion. Until then, my greatest sorrow bisected my greatest hope.

A knock on the closet door startled me.

"Are you in there?" Louise knocked again. "Mibby, are you in there? Open up, now."

I obeyed because experience had taught me, if nothing else, Louise knew the meaning of perseverance.

"Honey lamb, you've got to stop doing this."

I couldn't argue with that, not in the heat and not after a date with Hopalong Cassidy.

Louise knelt before me. "Let me help you empty out this closet. You know, don't you, that Scott is clothed in righteousness, walking on golden streets with Jesus, the only light he'll ever need? If Scott plays golf in heaven—and why anyone would think hitting a teeny tiny ball a zillion times is fun—" Our eyes met, and whatever she saw stopped her cold.

"Oh, sweet pea, I'm so sorry. All I'm saying is Scott has a generous clothing allowance in his Father's house. He wouldn't mind one bit if you got rid of his golfing togs or his skateboard."

The skateboard was Ky's, off limits until school started again because

he'd forgotten to wear his helmet. "Maybe after Ky goes back to school this fall."

"When you're right, you're right, sugar. Fall is a perfect time for fresh starts and new beginnings. First, we'll clean out Scott's closet, make sure these things get to someone deservin' and all, and once that's done, we'll purge your closet of denim and hippie sandals, which means we'll have to wrap you in a towel to go shopping."

The timer on her apron buzzed. "Phooey. I better go get Li'l Miss Tender Head neutralized. You'd think someone with that much metal in her head would be a lot tougher." Louise stopped to look at Scott's golf clubs in the corner of the room. "For heaven's sake, Mibby, there are cobwebs all over these golf clubs."

"I was going to—"

Louise covered her mouth with her hand. "I honestly don't know where my heart is today. I'm so sorry. Don't you go worrying about cleaning out Scott's closet. When the time is right, you'll know what to do." She closed the closet door on me and whispered through the crack. "If you keep the clubs so close to your bed, you might want to check the bag for spiders. I heard a story about a gal in Beauregard Parish who died when a nest of black widow spiders hatched in her hair."

Finally, some information I could use.

Her steps receded down the hallway and then returned. "Listen, Mibby. Manley's at that plumber's convention in Orlando all week. Do y'all mind if I ask Andrea to stay with me? The house is so quiet."

"No problem."



I woke up craving shish kebabs, but the hankering faded once I removed Scott's golf shoe from under my back. No light shone under the closet door. A happy thumping by the door told me Blink, my faithful black Labrador, was posted outside.

"I'm coming out," I warned him. His broad tongue lapped the sweat off my cheek. He deserved a belly rub for his kindness.

I found Ky in front of his computer. "Hungry?"

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"I ate." He laughed at the monitor and typed frantically.

"What's up?"

"It's Salvador. His sister ran the car through the garage. Oh man, this is good."

The computer pinged. Over Ky's shoulder I watched another installment of Salvador's story appear—sans punctuation—on the screen, something about his dad grounding Theresa for the rest of her life. Ky leaned forward with his hands poised to respond.

"I'm going downstairs for some ice cream. Want some?" I asked.

Ky typed a response to Salvador and waited.

"Ky? Did you hear me?"

"What? Uh, yeah. I said no thanks."

I knew better than to argue with him. It was one of those guy things. He honestly believed thinking something meant he'd said it, especially when talking to his mother. The *Living and Thriving with Teens* book I was reading said I had two choices in situations like this. I could be flattered that my male teen thought I was telepathic or be angry over his rudeness. The latter seemed a more genuine response, but sometimes my genuine responses stirred a hornet's nest.

*More pralines and caramel for me.*

In the kitchen, Ky's dinner dishes filled the sink and an empty box of cheesy macaroni mix lay by the stove with an empty carton of milk. I scooped some ice cream into a bowl and then attacked Ky's mess. On the way to the sink, I stepped in powdered cheese sauce, but the thought of confronting him about the mess, especially after a long, hot day with my fellow beasts of burden, seemed overwhelming. Besides, I was the one who had broken my promise to fix him dinner. I filled the sink with soapy water and massaged the growing headache over my eyes.

A mound of bubbles rose in the sink, but my arms grew leaden. Soon, the tears flowed. Since when had dishes in the sink demoralized me? Or for that matter, the dried rings of iced tea on the counter? Or a bill coming the day after I'd paid the others? Or the dust on an end table? Or a recall notice from a car manufacturer?

I was God's right-hand woman on Crawford Avenue. He kept the planets and stars in their places, and I did the rest, or so it seemed. Every-

thing that happened in the Garrett household happened because of me or by me. And sadly, it wasn't enough. No breaks, no bouncing of ideas, and absolutely no divvying of chores. I would have ended up back in the closet for sure if I'd allowed myself to think about the dwindling bank account.

*I'm so tired, Lord.*

Blink lapped at the ice cream that had melted into praline soup. I shook my finger at him. "And you'd better put that bowl in the sink when you're finished, young man."

*Right.*

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