

# Horse Sense

A young man's life changing adventure

By Don Roundy

Illustrations By Tandra Smith



HORSE SENSE  
BY DON ROUNDY

*IS A STORY ABOUT A BOY FORCED TO DEAL WITH A SUMMER OF  
LIFE LESSONS.*

Experience Western small town life with AJ Todd.

Young readers will relate to his conflicts, older readers will chuckle as they relive the struggles of their own growing years.

Expect to enjoy some adventure, a hint of adolescent romance, a little sadness and humor.

*Don, I read your book in one sitting and really enjoyed it. It's funny, suspenseful, and rings with truth. We live in a small town and your book is the type of story I could imagine a favorite cowboy neighbor spinning over the campfire. I am a novelist aspiring to be published, so I know how hard it is to craft a long piece of fiction with action and heart – and you have achieved both. Congratulations!*

*-- Jewel Punzalan Allen*

*I read your book. Nice job. I appreciated the character build and the storyline. Well worth my reading.*

*-- Stephen J. Simich*

*I came home from getting the oil changed in the car, today and checked mye-mail. Started to read your story and couldn't stop until I finished. I Loved it. It is great and should be published.*

*-- Julia Foster*

*I read "Horse Sense" on the plane while flying to Texas and thoroughly enjoyed it. I kept trying to imagine which parts of the story were actual events and found myself wanting more of the story. You are a great writer! Thanks so much for the labor of love and words of wisdom.*

*--Nancy Anderson*

I met Don Roundy several years ago when he made me the best pair of custom boots that I had ever owned. When he contacted me to read his Book "Horse Sense," I was very intrigued to see what he had to say. First, I must say that I am a firm believer that you get back in life what you give out to the world. This book is the perfect tale of "What goes around comes around".

I enjoyed the story so much as I was able to connect to the characters as an adult who has had life experiences. I feel that it is also very relatable to young people to understand their role in life in being responsible to themselves, families and other people that God puts in their path. Horse Sense is an adventure that incorporates a lot of "Horse Sense" in telling a story of loyalty and believing

in what is just and staying true to who you are.

“Horse Sense” relates to all emotions; laughter, love, sad anger about injustice and finally the triumph of a sensational ending which I must say was unexpected. It was fun, suspenseful and pulled at my heart strings. You cannot read this book without having your emotions stirred.

I would highly recommend this as a great read for adults as well as young people.

~ **Merrill Osmond**, Entertainer

## Author's Note

*This is a little book that I wrote for my grandson.*

*It is a labor of love, written during the otherwise wasted hours in the night when old men don't sleep.*

*I dedicate it to Jesse Drake Hovey with the hope that he might get a little more exposure to and enjoyment from the grandpa that he seldom sees. It has some of his Grandpa Roundy's life values woven into it.*

*You can also expect to experience some adventure, a hint of adolescent romance, a little humor and sadness in its pages.*

*It was created from some settings from my own youth, from my creative imagination and from some inspiration.*

*The settings from my youth were mostly geographical. I was raised in a town the size of the one in the book but the people were good Christian folks. Except for the good qualities of character found in the book, I draw from no example of anyone I knew in my youth.*

*The book called Horse Sense would not be what it is were it not for the support and assistance from my dear wife Cindy.*

*Heartfelt thanks also to her best friend and daughter, Julie Gant for her time, her input and suggestions.*

*Scroll down and start reading chapter 1. There are 167 short chapters, 64 pages of enjoyment. 😊*

## CHAPTER 1

### *A Letter from Dad*

Mr. Aldous Jesse Todd Jr. finished his ascent to the designated spot and sat down to catch his breath after the steep climb. The distant repetitive bawling of a distressed heifer was the only interference of the pleasant sounds of nature that surrounded him. He paused for a moment to take in the view of the beautiful surroundings which he had never before visited. It was loyalty and love for his father that brought him on this peaceful summer day to the top of the T Hill.

The T Hill, so called because of the large rock formation in the shape of a T on its slope, proudly faced the town of Toddsville. No one named it the T hill, but everyone called it such. It was thusly defined as a hill. It is certainly tall for a hill, but not really a mountain. It is the rise, a peak in the topography on the elevated ridge on the west side of the valley.

An updraft of wind from both sides of the crest where he sat cooled his hot face. He broke the seal of the envelope he carried with him and began reading:

*Dear Son,*

*If you have complied with my last request you are reading this on the ridge that overlooks my childhood hometown and the acres that surround it. Because of the responsibility that you have inherited with my death I wanted you to have a better feeling for where it all came from.*

*Up here on the backbone of the T Hill is the proper place for you to read my story. Looking off to the west is the world you came from. To the east is the world I came from. I was made within the confines of that valley below you. All that I have acquired, including you, my son, came from there.*

*I climbed to this ridge occasionally as a boy to look out over both worlds. The one I knew and all I wanted to see of the one I didn't.*

*It all seemed to start in the summer of 1987, about 7 years before you were born. I clearly remember sitting where you are now on a lovely day in my 16th year as summer vacation from school was just beginning.*

*I remember summers to be sweet but short in Toddsville. At an elevation of 7800 feet the hay cuttings were few and the winter months long. However, always active, snow or shine, was the muffled sound of the coal mining equipment changing the landscape of distant Sink Valley.*

*Other than this ongoing ripping apart and patching over of the landscape, nothing much changed in Toddsville. Generations had come and gone from the time it was founded a hundred years before by my great grandfather and the primary means of making a living were still ranching and mining.*

*The last names of the residents in the tiny town remained pretty much the same as they had been from the founding, although the equation had shifted. Shortly after Great Grandpa Todd homesteaded his ranch over ten decades before, the Perdy family came and followed suit. My father often said that in a give and take situation the Todds always gave and the Perdys always took. By the time I came along, all that remained of the original Todd ranch was less than a hundred acres belonging to my Uncle Max. All other surrounding territory, thousands of acres, belonged to the Perdy's Ranch. Not only did they own the acres around the town but the mining business as well.*

*From your vantage point the most spectacular view is across the valley to the wild towering rock formations of the East Ridges and the distant snowcapped peaks behind them. I always thought they looked like city skyscrapers especially at night when the sun wasn't illuminating their magnificent redness. East Ridges always looked to my young eyes somewhat like pictures I had seen of New York City if all the lights were out.*

*The world to the east was the only world I knew as a fifteen year old boy. Toddsville boasted a population of ninety eight. This world consisted of my horse, my dog, and very few people.*

*These people were my old friend Charlie the saddle maker, my parents of course and my dad's brother, Uncle Max, the horse trainer. I had a life of freedom. I could choose to do whatever a boy might want to do who was trapped in a little town with no other boys my age. Others my age were all girls and all Perdys. All three of them.*

*Looking to the West, off the other side of the crest, I could observe the activity of the outside world. The state highway crawled with cars and trucks going to and coming from places that I knew little and cared nothing about. Trucks hauled coal from the mines north on that state road to the train. I had never had occasion to learn how far north they went. These trucks all*

*looked the same. The drivers and other workers in the mine were mostly strange faces to me. They were the parents of fellow school children from nearby Hanks and Holtsville.*

*I was only familiar with the twenty miles of highway going south to Holtsville where most of my young life was spent in the school where my father taught math and science. Your grandfather, Mr. Milo Todd never rode the bus with me and until others from ranch houses or from the town of Hanks were picked up on the way to school in Holtsville, I had to endure the ride with the three Perdy girls who were the most annoying people I knew.*

*But school and the bus ride were the furthest things from my mind on that first summer day of freedom. In fact, as I sat where you are on that day, with my ever present dog, Trekker, by my side, I had little in my mind other than the serenity that comes from knowing there were weeks and weeks ahead with no school and my horse was waiting down in the town below me.*

*Now get comfortable, son, and I'll tell you the story of that fateful summer.*

## CHAPTER 2

### *A Whistle While He Works*

*Trekker ran ahead of me as we descended down the side of the slope. I could see in the distance someone who was obviously mending the fence where I had entered to cross the field on my way to the T hill.*

*Trekker had already found his way to where this person was working. My dog had a way of not staying by my side when we got to the trees. But I never worried about him because I could usually tell how far away he was by his barking. Once, I'd been startled to discover what he was barking at. A deer nearly ran me over with Trekker hot on its heels. Trekker could cover more miles faster than any dog I had known.*

*The fence being worked on in the distance truly needed mending. I had walked up the strands of barbed wire so many times that the fence staples had worked loose. Now it sagged so much that I was able to get through by just stepping over it.*

*Crossing the flat and approaching the man, I could see that it was Dean Perdy mending the fence. Trekker had made his way back to me by the time I approached him. Dean was not my favorite person. A middle aged, self appointed supervisor of all things in town, he would again surely have some 'advice' to remind me that I needed to improve something. This time I expected to be blamed for the fence damage.*

*"Good morning, Dean," I said cheerfully. "Nice morning isn't it?"*

*Dean didn't look up. "Nice morning for mending fences for those who do that kind of thing," was the reply.*

*I said nothing but stood and watched, wondering if I dared climb the fence after that comment or if I should walk the hundred yards out of my way to the gate. It was an awkward moment before he stood and stretched his back.*

*"Is that your colt down there at the bottom of the field with ours?" I strained my eyes to see. "I can't really tell."*

*"Well," Dean said, "there's one down there that isn't ours. Yours keeps getting out through your fence that you need to repair. Think you'll ever get to that?"*



*I responded with my usual youthful and cheerful nature, refusing to let Dean Perdy's sour face ruin such a good day. "Well, if it's mine he'll come to me when I whistle."*

*"Sure he will." Dean answered sarcastically.*

*I thought of how any of the Perdy's horses had to be chased or roped to be used. The Perdys didn't treat or train them the way my uncle Max had taught me. With that thought I whistled loudly several times. This caused Trekker to cock his head and come running from where he had been sunning himself a small distance away. It caused Dean to look at me in a way that a school principal might look at a disrespectful student who had just talked back to him.*

*Trekker stood close against my leg as I focused my attention away from Dean to study the horses in the distance.*

*"Just go get him AJ. And fix your fence." Dean snarled.*

*Anticipating a pending triumph, I didn't move. There was another awkward moment as Dean stretched wire and drove staples. Seeing that I was not moving and not knowing just how to make me do what he had ordered, Dean became more irritated. It showed in the way he worked, fighting the wire and mumbling under his breath. In time he shifted the tension by changing the subject.*

*"I guess I'll have to cut this wire free between these two posts to take out the stretch your climbing caused to it."*

*I, apologizing, asked, "Would you like me to mend your fence, Dean?"*

*"No," came the irritated answer, "Now go get your horse and fix your own fence." Instead, I sat down on the dirt with my dog to wait. I thought about fixing my own fence.*

*The difference between me fixing my fence and Dean Perdy fixing his fence was the difference between the possible and the impossible. My father had no money to buy wire. Besides that, the fence around the acre at our place was mostly tall sage brush. There had been a wire fence in there years ago, but the brush growth had lifted it in places while in others it was lost to years of neglect. Old boards, and in one spot old bed springs we'd wedged and tied in amongst the brush with bailing twine tried to keep the livestock inside. Today mending the fence for me would mean trying to find the place my young gelding had once again gotten through and creating some obstacle in an attempt to preclude further escape.*

*At long last I spoke. "Would it be okay if we cross here where you have cut the wire?" "Do you have a mouse in your pocket or are you asking permission for your dog to cross*

*with you?" Dean said not looking my direction. "Your dog jumps every fence in town." "I don't think my colt can." I responded.*

*Looking up Dean saw the trio now. There standing beside me was my horse. It had responded to my whistle.*

*Dean looked both angry and surprised as he wiped the back of his neck with his hand. "What the...." Moving out of the way to allow us to pass he snarled, "That horse is just a big damned pet, is what it is."*



## CHAPTER 3

### *An Angel Sitting on the Fence*

*I was ecstatic about owning a horse. For some time my father had wanted to cross his brother Max's prize winning quarter horse stud with a mostly thoroughbred mare owned by Charlie the saddle maker. This was a wish that the two kind owners of the parental prospects had granted him. The plan had not failed. The colt, although not holding papers for registered blood line, had satisfied my father's desire for near perfect horse anatomy. Having achieved his eugenic goal he had given the colt to me.*

*I'd learned a lot for a young boy about horse training even before the previous year when I had been endowed with my own horse. I now stood in the center of the round corral at my Uncle Max's stables. I was doing what I had been taught by him. My yearling colt was still too young to be mounted and ridden. So for the present time he was learning basic skills that would apply when I finally could ride him. My unnamed colt, unnamed because no name had seemed good enough yet for this prize possession, was circling the corral close to the fence with me in the center.*

*I called out voice commands to which he quickly responded. The distance between me and the horse had, at one time, involved a rope. Indeed a rope and a rawhide braided bosal around the nose had been the means of training him to respond. Now only voice commands and gestures*

*were necessary to get him to obey. Tethered only with trust and respect, daily lessons of obedience now had only the value of review. After going through a series of lead changes, I asked him to do some sudden stops. The horse responded well to my voice. I coaxed him to stand and face his master. I even successfully ordered him to back up while facing me. Finishing the exercise, I lifted my eyes from the horse, looking toward the sun.*

*What I saw truly startled me. I had been taught about angels in Sunday school, but had never expected to see one myself. The sunlight shown through her hair making a radiant outline around her that looked most heavenly. Dismounting the fence from where she was sitting she started walking towards me. I stepped backward, still believing that I was seeing a vision. Even Trekker whined a small sound and moved away.*

*The presence spoke, "Dude....., ya know, like how'd you get that horse to do that? Man, that was like freak-en awesome! I've gotta learn to do that! You just made sounds and he like obeyed. That was totally gnarly. You gotta teach me to do that fer sure!"*

*"Whoa", I thought, "That's no angel." As the angle from the sun changed I saw the freckles over her nose and the blue jeans. She was mighty pretty, but not an angel after all.*

*Seeing a stranger in Toddsville like this was nearly as unlikely as having a visit from a heavenly being and I was still in shock, mortal creature notwithstanding. I stood speechless, keeping distance from the enthusiastic and strange talking stranger as she continued to inquire and jabber on.*

*"So like, how old are you? Like, how'd you learn to do that with that horse? Ya know I've so gotta learn to do that. I'm so fer sure gonna let you teach me."*

*People in Toddsville talked much slower and with more deliberation than this ....whoever, whatever this person who used strange words mixed into her sentences and spoke with an unnatural tone of voice was. My head was still spinning trying to connect with the reality of seeing this unlikely visitor. Her many questions not being answered, she went on firing words at me at a very rapid pace.*

*Okay, so like, I'm from California and I totally didn't want to come here this summer...as if! But my DAAAAAD," she rolled her eyes while saying the word, "bought the house up by the church and this is now like our 'summer' vacation place what-ever. My dad likes to hunt and fish..... gag me with a spoon! He thinks this place is totally excellent. I, fer sure, didn't want to come. I don't, like, do hunting or fishing and totally don't kill things. Barf me out." She made a huffing sound and jerked her head in a strange way as if to make some unidentifiable point. "I mean like, what was I sposed to do all summer? Then we couldn't get our TV to work which is totally bogus..... Do you have a TV that works? That would be like way awesome. I sooo miss my TV shows and I like totally thought there would be people here. I was fer sure thinkin' that nobody even lived here. I've been walking around like all morning wishin' I could at least hit the mall. But noooo...Like where is everybody? I so didn't see anyone anywhere until I found*

*you. There's like literally nothing to do here, Dude.....BORing!" Her voice trailed off in a strange way when she said the word. "But now I'm like so gonna let you show me how to teach horses like you do! I'm totally gonna be a horse teacher!" She clapped her hands together and kind of jumped up and down in a weird way. "We'll have a way fun summer together after all.*

*My friends back home so won't believe it! They'll be like 'no way' and I'll be like 'way' and they'll totally be all jealous and want horses too, so way cool!"*

*She stepped boldly towards me extending her hand. "I'm like Katrina Casey Barlow. I'm fourteen. How old are you? You can totally just call me KC. That's what my friends in Concord call me. Just KC. It totally sounds like Casey but it's not... It's K.C. I'm like named after my Grandma and my Grandpa. Which is totally rad, but if my name were Casey instead of KC then you'd be like calling me a boy's name because Casey is my Grandpa's name. So, well it's KC and not Casey."*

*I felt a little dizzy from hearing that she was Casey but not Casey so call her Casey because her Grandpa's name is Casey and she doesn't want to be called her Grandpa's name so call her by her grandpa's name anyway.*

*"This is one strange girl." I thought to myself, "Does she never stop talking?"*

*Observing the blank look on my face KC suddenly changed her demeanor, standing stone silent. After a brief time her mind shifted into another direction. She started talking again. "You haven't said one freaken word! Oh no, you can't talk, can you? But you can make horse sounds. I did hear you make horse sounds. Oh no, I'll bet you're deaf! Oh, those weren't horse sounds, you were totally doing deaf talk. But that's okay, the horse understood, that's for sure. Oh, you poor dear boy! So talented with horses..... and soooo cute. Oops, I shouldn't have said that. I hope you don't read lips."*

*Trekker seemed to want to give her support as he stepped up to her side. Nervously she reached out and scratched his ears.*

*She was finally allowing the appropriate lapse between sentences required for any Toddsville resident to respond. So I responded.*

*"Take a breath why don't you? My name is AJ. I'm fifteen. We don't have TV reception in this town. Only a few people live here because we have short summers and long winters and we definitely don't have a mall. I don't remember the rest of all the questions that you asked me and no, I won't teach you to train horses."*

*My new self-appointed friend blinked her long lashes and smiled a pretty smile. Curling her toe into the dirt she answered flirtatiously.*

*"Sure you'll teach me. Hey, what's with the AJ name? Are you mocking me because I said my name was KC? What's your real name? What does the A stand for? What does the J stand for?" Her voice was now starting to sound a little more normal.*

*I felt a little crowded, and still confused about her presentation of her own name. I didn't see why telling her to call me what everyone in town and at school called me was mocking her.*

*"Nobody calls me my full name unless it's my mom when she's mad. It's a name inherited from her grandpa," I answered. "I don't like to tell people what it really is."*

*"Okay already," she persisted, "but what is it?" I wanted to escape from the subject at hand.*

*"My name is AJ Todd. If you want it spelled out it's spelled A.A.A. ----- JEIGH" I was only a little concerned that I was sounding rude.*

*"Okay, AaaaaJ, whatever! Why do you say that you won't teach me to train horses? It's totally not fair if you don't."*

*I called upon my better manners to come forth as I presented a more patient side. "Well," I said calmly, "because a horse trainer needs to have a cool, level head. He... she, needs to be focused on the moment. She needs to be able to listen, and to learn."*

*"Oh, I can focus and listen and I can totally learn." She responded enthusiastically.*

*I decided it was time to end this discussion. "Oh, I don't think so. Your mouth shows me that your head is all over the place. Not a good thing for horse training. You have successfully shown me that you can't learn to do what I do with horses." She glared back at me.*

*I continued. "Listen,.... Princess." I guessed that I had properly defined her self-image with the term princess. "I'm not the only one our age in town. Lucky for you there are some girls close to your age. Twin sisters and a cousin. They would love to meet you, I'm sure. I think their dads can teach you to train horses with a style that meets your ability to focus on the task. And you can teach them to say, what is it you say, 'gnarly, what-ever and bogus' this and that, and those other 'rad' California expressions. They'd love the strange way you talk! They identify well with strange. I'm sure you could have a fun summer with them."*

*I knew full well I was being rude and dismissive but didn't know just how to undo it at this point. However, I was surprised to see a smile cross her face.*

*"AJ, I don't have to talk like that. I just talk like that when I'm with my friends. My parents hate it. I thought you....well, I guess you're right. It must just be California talk." She smiled a little half smile. "As for the girls you mentioned," she went on, "I might meet them later. But now, I've met you. I admire your skills and I want to learn. What else is there to do all summer? There's no TV reception and it isn't like there's anything in town for entertainment."*

*I shook my head, a little disgusted with the fact that she had presented herself in two different ways by the way she spoke. "I won't teach you. I can't teach you, and that's final." I replied.*

*Her pretty nose wrinkled and her big eyes narrowed angrily. "Are you saying I'm not smart enough?" She challenged.*

*"Yep, something like that." I concluded.*

*"Well, you're rude and you're wrong." She stormed. "I am smart. My head is 'all over the place' in such a way that I get straight A's. I have a high IQ. My dad is a professor and my mom is an attorney. I can learn and I can do whatever I decide and with or without you I am going to be a horse teacher!"*

*She kicked a little of the dirt in the corral my direction and marched to the fence, volleying over it by placing her hands on the top rail. Looking back she pursed her lips and squinted her eyes at me.*

*I didn't know how to feel. I consoled myself that I'd done the right thing. "She acts on emotion rather than acting rationally," I said aloud to Trekker. "That's not a good feature for a horse trainer."*

*Sitting down in the dirt, I tried to recover from the encounter. I had just blown it with the best looking girl I'd ever seen.*

## CHAPTER 4

### *It Beats Working for a Living*

*As I came in from my morning chores of milking the cow and feeding the animals I noted the usual setting in the house. My mother was cooking eggs and my father was in his den writing his book. This was my father's ongoing summer project. While other teachers might spend their time in the summer with a side job or working their farm, my Dad only sat and wrote on his unfinished book. Mother and I had concluded that if he ever finished it he would actually have to get a summer job. There was no indication, however, that it would ever be completed.*

*This morning he called me into his summer domicile and closed the door behind us. "Son," he looked unusually concerned, "Your mother and I have decided that we will need to move to Holtsville."*

*I sat stunned looking at my father. "What?" I gasped. "Why? I don't want to live there! I love it here. What would I do with my horse?"*

*In spite of the fact that it was apparent that my Father didn't like telling his son this abhorrent news, I felt angry towards him for saying it. He continued his grave explanation.*

*"Son, we're going to lose our house. We owe thousands of dollars in back taxes. Our place is going to go to the county and be sold off. We've made plans to live in the apartments in Holtsville and I'm afraid that means you're going to have to sell your colt."*

*That was all I could stand to hear. I bolted from the room and from the house.*

*I was not my cheerful self as I walked into Charlie the saddle maker's workshop. I hoped that my eyes didn't show that I'd been crying. Anyone who knew me at the time would have known that the saddle shop would be where I would go under the circumstances. Charlie always listened to me and always helped me see things more clearly. Today I didn't see how Charlie could help, but I truly needed a friend to talk to nonetheless. Charlie was the best human friend that I had ever known.*

*My old friend was finishing the process of pulling in a seat on a saddle he was making. When I entered he was carefully shaping the cheyenne roll that sloped off the cantle at the back of the seat. I had observed the entire saddle making process many times but never from start to finish.*



*"AJ my boy." Charlie called out cheerfully, "What have you been up to?" My silence caused him to give me his full attention,*

*"I have to move." I blurted out.*

*"You have to move? What are you talking about?" Charlie looked too amused and not enough concerned to be comforting.*

*"Really." I continued. "My dad owes a million dollars in back taxes and the county people are going to take our property from us. I'm sure the Perdys will end up with it and tear the house down to enlarge their hayfield. Dad says we have to live in the apartments in Holtsville, of all places. I hate Holtsville! That's not even the worst part. Charlie, I have to sell my horse." I put my face in my hands as the anger overwhelmed me. "It's just so unfair! If Dad would only get a summer job in the mines instead of wasting his time on that stupid book."*

*Charlie reprimanded, "Your dad plans on making a lot of money when he finishes his book.*

*You should be supportive and not critical, don't you think?"*

*I didn't think about what Charlie said, but instead presented him with an idea that had found its way into my head.*

*"Charlie, could I live with you in the summer? Could you keep my horse with your mare and your mules in the winter and let me live here in the summer? I would work for you here in the shop and pay you back."*

*Charlie smiled at this idea. "I would surely enjoy your company, AJ, but I don't think your folks would allow it. How much does your dad owe in back taxes, really? It can't truly be a million dollars."*

*"I don't know exactly. Dad said thousands. Saying it was a million dollars was hyperbole."*

*In my present state, I found little comfort in the opportunity to use a big word that I had learned in English class. Charlie seemed to understand what hyperbole was, however. He stopped what he was working on and came over and put his hand on my shoulder.*

*"I want you to trust me with what I'm going to tell you AJ. Your dad isn't going to lose the house and you won't have to move to Holtsville."*

*"How do you know that?" I blasted. "What do you know that Dad doesn't know?"*

*I knew Charlie to be a level headed old man. Everyone in town said about Charlie that 'one could take what he said to the bank.' I even rehearsed this in my mind at that moment but*

*concluded that it didn't apply now, because not taking things to the bank was the problem with my dad. With his hand still on my shoulder, Charlie looked deep into my eyes.*

*"Sometimes old men like me know things that young men like you or even other adults might not know. I just happen to know something that your father doesn't yet know but you mustn't say a word to him about that."*

*To me, Charlie sounded strangely believable. I actually felt comforted. I had no idea what Charlie was implying, but trusted that he knew something I didn't and that things were going to be okay.*

*"Now, back to what I asked when you came in," Charlie said, shifting the subject to a lighter mood, "What have you been up to? Been helping your Uncle Max with that filly colt?"*

*"No," I replied, "I've been working my own horse. That filly needs working soon, but I've been busy with my own project."*

*Charlie chided me. "Is your colt a full time job? You usually help lay the groundwork with Max's colts, have you quit him?"*

*I couldn't help but think about the fact that helping my Uncle would be another thing I would miss if I had to move to Holtsville. I forced myself to hold to the trust I had felt in Charlie's promise.*

*"I don't intend to work full time." I responded, "I have other things to do." Charlie continued his teasing; "Retired before you start your career?" he asked.*

*Not to be outdone I chided back. "I'm going to become a saddle maker like you and then I won't ever have to work."*

*"Yep," old Charlie replied, "Beats working for a living."*

## CHAPTER 5

### *Vexed at a Vixen*

*With my mind at ease from what Charlie had told me, only one other thing occupied my thoughts.*

*"She's like nothing I've ever seen." I reported to my mother over breakfast. "What's her name?"*

*"It's Casey. And that's another thing, she told me to call her that and to not call her that several times in the same breath. She's delusional. She kind of speaks two languages. Her Californian is different. It's like she can change from one person to another at will. Very strange."*

*"Does she look like she's a stable person?" Mother looked a bit baffled.*

*"Oh, looks? She looks wonderful!" I surprised myself with the way I had said the word wonderful to my mother. "She says she's smart. She can sound sort of.....smart. She just had that one episode with her name."*

*"So otherwise, how does she act?" She inquired.*

*"She acts like she's the center of the universe and that she's being kind to me by allowing me to spend my summer helping her become a horse trainer. Except that she calls it a horse teacher instead of trainer. She doesn't even know what to call what she wants to be. She doesn't know that she can't do it. The problem is that she's here for the summer and won't take no for an answer."*

*My mother must have been curious about, yet cautiously relieved that I was not talking about having to move to Holtsville. She was clearly amused with my present plight.*

*Unsuccessfully trying to hide her grin she asked, "Well, how do you plan on handling this problem?"*

*Undaunted by her smirk, I answered, "I actually don't know, really. Maybe she'll give up. She seemed pretty determined though. She isn't going to learn on my horse, that's for sure. She doesn't have a horse of her own so I think she'll have to give up on the idea and leave me alone."*

*My mother sighed. "I don't know what her parents expected her to do all summer. Didn't they know what they were bringing her to? A city girl like that won't be happy in a small town with nothing to do. I wonder if the girls would accept her."*

*There was no need to define what girls she meant. There were only the three Perdy girls in town and the concern about if they would accept her or not was a valid one. Natural kindness or acceptance of outsiders without something to gain for themselves was not characteristic of the 'girls'.*

*I responded. "Oh, I tried to head her in their direction but she was all about becoming a horse teacher."*

*Excusing myself from the table I announced, "I'm going to go to the round corral. I hope she doesn't invade my space again."*

*Even while saying this I had to admit to myself that I actually hoped there would be another encounter. I was secretly intrigued with this pretty newcomer. I thought that when I saw her again I would ask her to make sense of the 'call me Casey, don't call me Casey,' debacle.*

*With my pony friend at my shoulder and my best friend at my heels I walked towards my uncle's round corral. It soon became apparent that I would have my wish. Little miss California was again sitting on the top rail alone.*

*"Is this the only spot in town that you hang out?" I was proud of myself for the clever line. "Yes." Was her simple answer.*

*I couldn't help but grin at her response. I thought of my mother's concern that this city gal wouldn't have anything to do all summer. I actually felt a little of my mother's compassion for a small moment. Her next words changed my feelings quickly.*

*"AJ, I need you to help me start teaching. We bought that horse right over there." She pointed to the very filly old Charlie had brought up in conversation the day before. "I need to start teaching her. You're supposed to help me."*

*I felt a flood of emotion that I'm sure showed on my face. I choked for words, there being so many things I wanted to say at once. I concluded that I would sort out my frustrations with Uncle Max.*

*"I'll be back." I promised, tying the lead rope of my colt to the fence. "Don't touch my horse!"*

*My Uncle was in the house. The following conversation ensued:*

*"That dumb girl out there says she's the owner of the filly." I was nearly shouting the words.*

*"She is." Uncle Max answered quickly.*

*"How could you sell such a good horse to that kind of person."*

*"What do you mean, 'that kind of person'. I found her and her folks to be wonderful people. "She doesn't know anything about horses."*

*"So, teach her."*

*"How can I teach her?" "Teach her like I taught you."*

*"There's a huge difference between her and me. Trust me." "It's obvious." Uncle Max chuckled. "She's a girl."*

*"This isn't funny. I had a conversation with her the other day and clearly told her that I wouldn't teach her."*

*"Well, this is funny." Uncle Max echoed. "She said that you'd be happy to."*

*"She said what? " I threw my hands into the air. "Is that what she said to get you to sell her the colt?"*

*"No, what was said to get me to sell her the colt was the word 'yes,' said by her father when I asked if he was willing to pay the asking price. AJ, I can see you're obviously upset. I don't blame you for being ticked off at her for misrepresenting you."*

*Exasperated I declared, "She's the devil's daughter."*

*"I don't think Mr. Barlow is the devil." My uncle commented. " He's going to pay me for keeping the colt here through the winter. He even said I could breed her and sell the foal off in years to come. This is the best deal I have ever made. He just wants his little girl to have a horse of her own when they come in the summers. She needs to have something to do."*

*"Why didn't you just rent it to her." I said with disgust in my voice.*

*"Well, there you have it." He replied. "It's kind of like I am renting it to her. The mare will be here for our use when they're gone. And her non-devilish daddy will pay me to feed her year round for years to come! His daughter, KC, will have a great horse to ride every summer. It's a win/win."*

*"Oh I see how it is," I snapped. "The spoiled princess just says, 'I want', and her daddy gives. She wants her very own horse and she gets it. Just like that. And now she wants her very own horse trainer.....horse teacher trainer. Maybe her daddy can't afford me! And why did she need a bloodline like that in her very first horse? Any horse would do."*

*Max answered calmly. "They wanted the best and they were willing to pay for it. I sell horses. This was a good deal for both of us. I wouldn't have wanted them to buy the colt and take it away without proper training. This will be your opportunity to teach her about horses. Later when you grow up a little bit you might thank me. She's going to be a pretty gal. Trust me."*

*I was not in the mood to consider trusting my uncle at all. I was presently not thinking about the future. I was thinking about my ruined summer. I felt used, I felt cornered and very angry.*

*Uncle Max went on, "AJ, I want you to calm down and consider what I'm saying. Secretly, between you and me, the filly can be your project. KC will be here for only three short months.*

*That's it."*

*"You sold out on that filly." I mumbled.*

*"That's enough of that kind of talk! Uncle Max spoke firmly. "This is what I do for a living. I want you to change your attitude." His voice softened. "If she learns, fine. Remember, if she does well, you come out looking like an excellent trainer. If she doesn't, well, you can still take this horse all the way. You'll get valuable experience in training. I'll show you how to train it to do some high school things, roping, cutting, whatever you want to do."*

*I considered what he was telling me. "And I'll be learning it all? I have my own horse too.*

*You're saying you'll take some time to help me with the advanced stuff?" "I'll do that." He promised.*

*The thought of the opportunity of learning to be a trainer like my Uncle was softening my heart. "Maybe I'll take up roping competition." I smiled. "Okay," I responded, "I'll teach her. But let me tell her myself. Don't tell her that I will, even if she asks you. I am not going to start teaching her today."*

*I had no intention of walking out of the house looking like my uncle had made me do her bidding. After all, I had to save a little pride. Instead, I walked straight to my tied up colt. Without looking in her direction, I said, "It's your arena, princess."*

*I led my horse down the same road I'd come on. Tempted as I was, I didn't look back to see her reaction.*

## CHAPTER 6

### *Shoveling it Out*

*The only reason I went anywhere close to home after leaving Casey standing there was to put my colt behind a fence. I was anxious to report to the one soul who always lent me a welcoming ear. Charlie was cutting straps and billets for a custom saddle project. He looked towards the door as the bell tinkled, signaling that I was entering.*

*“What’s going on today champ?”*

*“What do you know about women?” I surprised my old friend with the question.*

*“Well, I was married to a good one for 53 years before she passed on. I learned enough to keep peace with her for the most part. Why do you ask, AJ? Do you have women problems?”*

*“Yes I do! I’ve been enlisted to train one.” My boldness obviously amused my old friend.*

*“Well, good luck with that. There are certainly easier things to train!” He replied.*

*“I have to train one to train horses.”*

*Hoping for advice on how to put things into the proper order in my life I poured out my heart to the old cowboy. He heard the complete report of my view on how my turf had been trespassed and my space had been intruded on. He was briefed on her tactics in getting her way from the time I first met her to the deal my Uncle had made with me. Lastly, I reported how I had put her in her place by leaving her standing helpless in the training pen. Charlie listened intently. Characteristic of Charlie, he spent a good deal of time working in silence before answering.*

*“Well, AJ, it sounds like a good deal to me.” He replied in time. “It seems like your uncle Max made it worth your effort to help her. He’s willing to give you his time to teach you with two horses that he really can’t profit from, yours and hers. Knowing his reputation as a trainer, I don’t see him ever being willing to let you do that kind of training with his clients’ horses. You’re handy with horses, but this is an opportunity to learn some advanced skills that I don’t see coming your way otherwise. You should thank her for that.”*

*I was feeling a little disappointed at the direction the conversation had shifted. “Thank her?”*

*I can thank Uncle Max for that! I don’t see how she did anything for anyone but herself. She didn’t arrange that deal. It was circumstantial. She wasn’t trying to be nice.”*

*Charlie continued to work. In that moment of silence, while I waited for Charlie to prepare his reply the door burst open. KC carried herself towards us with a power walk that spoke her intent before she opened her mouth.*

*“Listen to me Mr. ‘own the town’ AJ Todd. You don’t get to treat me like I’m an unwelcome....” her pause for words did little to detract from her mission. “....mosquito, fly or something. You clearly don’t like me and I wish you did. Like me or not you can be nice to me.*

*Your Uncle made a deal with us and it involves your helping me. When you came out of his house and made your snide little remark I thought you were either acting like a jerk or that you were a spoiled brat that had refused to do your part. What did you think I would do when you left me like that? Give up on my summer goal and go home and do nothing? Well, I don’t know what kind of woman you think I am but maybe I’m different than the girls...women that you know. If you had any common sense you would have known that I would ask your Uncle Max what you meant by ‘it’s your arena princess.’ When I told him what you said he looked disappointed in you. Do you care if he’s disappointed in you AJ?”*

*At this point I did start to worry about what my Uncle thought of me and I felt smaller than I ever remembered feeling. She was hitting me where it hurt. Not only did I not want to disappoint my Uncle Max, I didn’t like the fact that Charlie was hearing this.*

*“Your Uncle told me not to worry but to talk to you about it. Well, that’s what I’m doing now.*

*Are we going to play little girl games like this all summer or are you going to show me how to lunge my colt?”*

*She was calling me a little girl! She had been wrong from the jump, and now she was rubbing my nose in the dirt. I felt like I was being overpowered by a powder puff princess that had somehow managed to upgrade her horsemanship vocabulary from saying ‘horse teacher’ to asking if I was going to help her ‘lunge the colt.’*

*Help her I knew I must, but I had stated my intentions of not helping her on this day to both my uncle and to the silent old witness of this tongue lashing and I wasn’t about to budge from my position. Somehow I had thought that having impressed her with my skills the first day we met had given me a right to her respect. I cared deeply about both what my Uncle and Charlie thought of me. I was coming to realize that I also cared about what she thought of me.*

*“I asked you a question AJ.” She continued mercilessly. “Are we going to work my colt today or are you going to act like an emotional little girl?”*



*I looked over at Charlie, hoping that maybe he would throw in on my side. The old craftsman was working on edging leather straps as if he hadn't heard anything. I had just enough moxie left to maintain some composure. In an attempt to diminish her artillery by reacting as if her tirade hadn't bothered me, I spoke as calmly as I could.*

*"Casey, please don't get your feathers ruffled. I'm going to help you train your colt. I'm just not going to do it today."*

*"Okay then. Thank-you. I'll be looking forward to working with you." Her soft response surprised me. She turned to walk out but then turned back.*

*"AJ, why not today? What do you have going on today? I would love us to do something together?"*

*I didn't transform as easily from my wounds as she apparently had from her anger. I thought quickly and wildly. Holding onto my stubbornness I conjured up the project that I thought she'd be most repulsed by.*

*"I was just going to go out and clean the manure from Charlie's stables. Those mules have piled it up pretty high through the winter."*

*"I'd love to help you if you don't mind."*

*I couldn't believe my ears. I again looked over to where my old friend was working, hoping for some kind of salvation from my total defeat. Charlie looked up from his work this time and spoke. "Thanks AJ. I appreciate you guys doing that for me."*

## CHAPTER 7

### *Talking to the Animals*

*Our cow was named Marva. She was the namesake of the principal at our school, my father's boss. Dad saw facial similarities.*

*My visits with Marva, the cow, were thankfully more frequent than with Marva the principal. She would munch on hay and grain from her stall gratefully as I relieved the built up pressure from her udder. I had two appointments a day with her where I could have therapeutic release of what was on my mind. During these sessions I complained to her, sometimes sang to her, and always she was kind. This morning I had KC Barlow on my mind.*

*"I was saying her name wrong all along without knowing I was saying it wrong." I told Marva. "I mean, it sounds the same, so it wasn't really wrong. But it was wrong in my head when I said it. She says there is a difference in the way she says K.....C..... and Casey. I didn't notice any difference in the way she said it. She says she didn't blame me for thinking she was goofy considering what I thought she was sounding like. I don't know how she could have thought she was not saying Casey when she said K.C. I still think it sounds the same, but she thought I was the goofy one. KC. KC Barlow.*

*"KC Barlow is a good hand with shoveling manure. She'd be a good country gal. Better than the Perdy twins or their ugly cousin. She could outwork the Perdy girls and the Perdy girls are supposed to be ranch gals. She nearly outworked me!"*

*For a spell I sat silent on the three legged stool with my head in Marva's flank working towards filling the pail.*

*"KC isn't such a prissy little city girl after all." I continued to inform Marva. "She pitched right in and worked like a guy all day long. She talks a lot, but not that crazy talk like at first. Turns out she's accomplished. And she played piano at the Recital. I've never heard of the Recital because I'm not from California. It must be an important hall or some kind of place that she got to perform piano at. I would've asked her but she was talking. She also plays a flute in the school band and she sings pretty too. Yes, she's musical. She was mad at me yesterday but then she got nice. I think she's nice unless I'm acting like, well.....not acting decent. I think acting decent is a*

*good thing for her. I guess it's a good thing for anyone. I think if I had a sister I'd want her to be like KC Barlow. The way I'm chattering I sound just like KC Barlow."*

*I finished milking, and went into the coop and found some fresh eggs in the nests and headed for the house in good spirits. I was looking forward to the horse training lesson with KC.*

*I was feeling that my summer might be a good one after all. I had no inclination that I was headed for entering the house.*



*Mother's face showed the same grave sorrow that I had seen only once before when she told me that grandpa had died. Indeed, today another life was in peril.*

*"Son, we need to talk about Trekker. Dean Perdy says he saw him chasing his cows. Not just any cows, the ones that calved this spring. He was furious. The problem is if they are run hard they could dry up and then they won't be able to nurse the calves. He says Trekker was on their heels making them run all around the place and that if he sees him doing it again he'll shoot him. He told me to tell you to keep him tied or on a leash all the time."*

*I stood looking into my mother's face. I knew that Dean would truly shoot Trekker. I could see that Mother also believed it. We stood for a long moment with our eyes locked.*

*"AJ, have you ever seen him chase cows?"*

*I thought carefully about my next words. I knew Trekker could go anywhere and do anything he wanted so if he had a hankering for chasing more than deer he could. "I've never seen him chase cows but he runs through the hills and barks at deer all the time. Remember when*

*I told you he chased one into my path?" My mom gave me one of her knowing looks. "I'm just afraid mom, I'm afraid that he could be chasing the cows. Yes, I'm afraid it could be true."*

*Mother pulled me into her arms. "Son, your father has an idea that I think you should consider."*

*Father, who was now standing near us joined the circle of embrace. I didn't want to cry but all this compassion for my feelings about Trekker was too much.*

*"Son," my father said, presenting his idea, "I know that Trekker is your best friend. I don't think he or you would be happy if he had to be tied up for the rest of his life."*

*"I can't think of it," I sniffled. "I can't imagine having to hold him back on a leash when we get out into the woods together."*

*"I know son. And I have a hard time thinking of you and Trekker not being together. I have an idea that I'm sure would give Trekker a happy life. He's a cow dog, you know, a blue heeler. I know of someone who lives out of state that has a cattle ranch and he's here visiting a student of mine. You know Penny Bush, it's her uncle. He's visiting the Bush's in Hanks today. He'd be happy to have Trekker to train as a cow dog. Trekker would be happy on a ranch where he could run free and do what he's bred for. He can chase cows to his heart content, but he'll be trained and disciplined in it, same as the Perdy dogs."*

*I knew this was what had to happen. It was the best thing, but I protested nonetheless. "Maybe it isn't Trekker that's chasing the cows," I said. "The Perdys have blue heelers too. From a distance blue heelers all look the same. Maybe it's one of the Perdy dogs that's chasing his cows."*

*"Do you really think that's true?" Mother asked in a gentle voice. "You know that the Perdy dogs are kept penned up when they're not being used. Besides, do you think they would chase cows just to chase them without being commanded to?"*

*The embrace had broken by this time and my tears were under control. Father spoke. "I think we need to get that dog to Hanks today, son. I don't want to risk him getting shot. You can come with us and see what a nice owner he'll have."*

*"No, dad. I'll tell him goodbye now and you go ahead and take him. Can I have a moment to talk to Trekker?" My tears were welling up again.*

*Trekker was in his usual friendly, accepting mood when I went to him to tell him the bad news. He seemed to sense that something wasn't in harmony in my heart as he cocked his head and sat on his haunches at attention while I approached.*

*"I have to tell you goodbye, old boy. You and I are not meant to be together after all.*

*You've been chasing the wrong things. It isn't your fault, you're just being what you are. We're going to send you to a place where you'll be happy being a cow dog." My faithful friend whimpered a little and licked my face. I pulled him into my arms.*

*"Trekker, Oh Trekker," I wept, "I took for granted that we'd always be together. You've always been my best friend. You've earned my loyalty but now I have to send you away. I don't know anyone who has been as good to me as you've been. I feel like there's a big chunk of my heart being ripped away."*

*I held his head in my hands and looked into his big sad eyes.*

*"I'm happy to have known you old boy." I went on with my eulogy. "I'm glad that you'll be able to run free and do what you were born to do. When I feel sad missing you, I'll think of you working with the cows on that ranch, and I'll be proud of you. You're a good dog, Trekker. I love you. I'll remember you for the rest of my life. Thank-you for being my dog! Thank-you for being such a good dog!"*

*I sat on the back porch of our house with Trekker captured in my arms for a long time.*

*When Mother came out to give me the support that mothers inherently want to give I took a long last look at my best friend, told him to stay and walked away.*

*"I have work to do." I told her as I was leaving. "I have to fill a commitment with a client at the round corral."*

## CHAPTER 8

### *A Forced Lesson*

*KC had been waiting for some time. I was making a concerted effort to hide my sad feelings from her as I approached.*

*She greeted me with a friendly smile. "AJ, you're late." "Sorry, I had a little family business to attend to."*

*"Was it anything that you want to talk about?" she chirped cheerfully. "No." I answered, trying not to be too somber. "Let's get to work."*

*She shrugged her shoulders and followed me to the tack shed where I retrieved a long rope, a head stall with a bosal attached and a long stick whip.*

*"Are you going to whip my horse?" She asked with true concern in her voice.*

*"Nope, I was going to let you use this on me." I hoped that I was doing a good job of not showing my sadness regarding Trekker.*

*My comment made her laugh. "Don't worry AJ. I'm done beating up on you. I'm not angry at you anymore."*

*I launched quickly into the lesson. "KC, the goal is to make life uncomfortable for your colt when she's not doing what you want and to make life easy for her when she is. Make this kind of clicking sound with your tongue and say get-up. She won't know what it means at first but she'll learn. You're going to teach her what it means by tapping her on the rump with the whip after you click and say get-up. That's what the whip is for. You don't whip her, you just give her an annoying tap on the butt. She'll want to get away from it and will start moving. Moving is good. If she stops do the same thing again. As soon as she shows any sign of moving, stop with the whip immediately.*

*"Timing is important. Consistency is important. What you want is to teach her to move in a circle around the rail of the corral without stopping. After she learns that, you're going to teach her to stop and face you when you say whoa. She won't know what whoa means at first either. You're going to teach her with the rope. If you shake the rope a little it will send a snake type wake all the way to that rawhide thing around her nose. It's called a bosal. The dried rawhide is as hard as a rock. It will bump against her nose. She won't like how that feels anymore than she*

*likes being tapped on the rump with the whip. When she feels that bump she'll probably stop and face you. That's what you want her to do. When she does that, walk up and rub her nose and speak in a calm reassuring voice. Give her a little break. If she doesn't do it right get her moving again and keep trying until she does."*

*I was reciting a process that was as common as breathing to me. I was more involved with my effort to not reveal the sadness that weighed heavy on my heart than my words. "Remember to let a few seconds pass between telling her get-up and tapping her on the rump. Also let a few seconds pass after you say whoa before you shake the rope. In time she'll anticipate what's coming and will respond before you tap or shake."*

*KC giggled, "Tap and shake sounds like a mixture of a couple different dancing styles." Although I had laughed at her word games the day before, today I wasn't in the mood. "Stay on task here, KC. It's important to get this," I replied in a somewhat authoritative way.*

*"I'm getting it, really. It makes perfect sense to me," she assured me.*

*"What I was saying that I want you to appreciate is that in time she'll anticipate that if she responds first she won't get the little punishment. She won't want to have to feel the tap on the rump or the bump on the nose."*

*"I can do this!" she informed me. "I get it AJ, I'm excited!"*

*I felt only a little bit sorry that I wasn't sharing her excitement.*

*"Well, that's the first lesson to teach her. You'll also be teaching her to respect you. She'll see you as the one in charge. But you need to teach her one thing at a time. Make sure she totally learns the first thing before moving on to the next. I actually told you about two different lessons today. You need to teach her to 'get-up' before you start teaching her 'whoa'. Horses are not too receptive to having more than one thing at a time thrown at them."*

*I knew that I should have taken the time to demonstrate what I was telling her to do. However, I consoled myself that if I ended the lesson I'd be able to fix any damage that she could cause to her colt in the short time she had to do that damage. Maybe the next lesson could be a demonstration on how I undo problems caused by training mistakes.*

*"KC, I'm going to leave you alone with your horse. Don't work her too long. You don't want her to lock up."*

*"What does lock up mean?" KC asked.*

*"If you crowd her she'll get confused and lock up. I mean she'll shut down in her ability to learn," I answered. "Whipping too much is another sure fire way to make a horse lock up. That's*

*the problem with some trainers I know in town. Just work on teaching 'get-up' this morning and maybe review it a little with her this afternoon. Next time we'll see how she's doing. I have my own things to deal with so I'm going to leave."*

*"Your personal family stuff?" She asked.*

*For a moment I wanted to open my heart up to her. I wanted to trust her as a friend and not shut her out. Fearing I would cry again, however, I didn't answer her question.*

*"What you've told me sounds simple enough." She kindly didn't press me to explain my anxiousness to leave.*

*"Well, sometimes with some horses it's rather simple," I answered, "others take a while."*

*"Which kind are you?" She asked.*

*"Which kind of what? I'm not a horse." My tone of voice signaled a desire to discontinue the subject. I'd hoped that leaving would be an easy exit.*

*"But isn't it the same for people?" She continued. "Isn't that what 'horse sense' means? Learning to make good choices so that life works for us instead of against us? Doesn't horse sense just mean common sense?"*

*I didn't think she was asking the question for herself. It seemed that she was trying to start a discussion. Maybe she wanted to help with what she thought might be bothering me. If her intent was good, her timing wasn't. Especially if she was alluding to my behavior the day before when I left her alone after talking to Uncle Max. The last thing I wanted was to be reminded of that experience, especially today. What I needed was to talk to Charlie.*

*"Good luck with the exercise." I said, turning and walking away.*

*"AJ!" she called after me, "Where's your dog. Why isn't Trekker with you today?" "He went with my dad." I answered as I continued leaving. "I'll see you later."*

*"Where'd your dad go?" She seemed as interested in holding me back with questions as I was in leaving.*

*"He went to Hanks Town. He went to Penny Bush's house. That's all I can tell you right now. I've got to go."*

*"The name Penny Bush sounds like a downgrade from Money Tree." She quickly responded. "Good one," I mumbled soberly. "Good bye."*



*With my head down and my heart likewise sinking I drug myself to the saddle shop. Charlie was not there. With Charlie gone and my folks in Hanks I had nowhere to go. Trekker was gone. I knew that this day was going to go down as the worst of my life.*

*Left on my own, I continued to think dark thoughts. What a terrible summer it had been. So many things going wrong for me!*

*At length I decided I would feel better if I walked my horse. It felt like salt in a wound to discover that he had gotten out again. I sat down on the back porch of our house where I'd spent my last moments with Trekker. With my head in my hands I delved deeper into how sad I was, and what an awful summer I was having. There I remained for the biggest part of the rest of the day.*

## CHAPTER 9

### *Teaching a Lesson*

*I immersed myself in self-pity for two days. It wasn't so much the concern and encouragement from my parents that turned my thoughts back to the round corral as it was my concern for KC's colt. Actually it was a selfish concern. I was worried that the longer I waited the more difficult it would be to correct the bad habits KC was surely teaching her.*

*I had also worried that KC might have given up on coming for lessons. We had agreed to meet daily at 9:00 AM. Twice had that time rolled by without my attendance or any word from my client. Perhaps she had grown impatient with my absence and found a new interest to occupy her time. Possibly she was angry. I didn't look forward to her scolding me again.*

*As I walked down the road towards the round corral I could see that KC had already settled into the task. I concluded that she had assumed that I expected her to carry on with the lessons without me. Perhaps she thought that she had graduated already.*

*I was met with enthusiasm. "I have a name for my colt. I'm going to call her Lucy." Feeling confused but grateful about her cheerful nature I was happy to talk about the subject at hand.*

*"Your colt already has a registered name" I responded. "It's Delta Cowgirl. You see, the sire's name is Tony Cowboy and the Dam is Delta Maiden. Your filly's name is a combination of the two. And their names came from the grandsire and the damsire. Odd names are given to registered horses because they have to have a name that nobody has already used and it has to include parts of names from their pedigree. You could just call her Delta for short, or something like that. Or you can just call her a regular name if you want." I continued, happy to drive the conversation away from any subject of my irresponsibility. "Or how about naming her..."*

*She cut me off, "I know all about that registered stuff, I don't care about those names because I didn't choose those names. The name I chose for her is Lucy."*

*"That could be a problem on a different level," I answered "One of the Perdy twins is named Lucy and you wouldn't want to offend anyone...especially your colt."*

*She giggled, "Well, who is nice in town with a pretty name that wouldn't offend my colt?" "There just aren't that many names to choose from if you're going to name her after*

someone in town." I assured her. "Call her Money Tree." I said, paying tribute to her clever word game that I had selfishly ignored before.

"Sounds like a good name, actually." she answered. "I'll think about it. I do like it better than calling her Delta."

"I think it's appropriate." I responded, thinking it described the role of the colt as cash flow where my Uncle was concerned.

Unaware of all that, she responded, "Yea, it sounds appropriate!"

She had already gotten the training gear and had somehow managed to put the headstall on the colt. She didn't have the whip, however, so I went and got it for her.

Returning I said "Well, let's see what we need to undo today." I stepped back to give her room.

KC handed me the whip back. "Get-up." she commanded, giving the colt a generous length of rope. The colt immediately responded, cantering around the rail. She allowed it to circle a full circle before she said. "whoa." The colt stopped on a dime and faced her.

"I'm astonished!" I admitted, "I can't believe my eyes. That is one smart filly you're the proud owner of."

"Maybe I'm the smart filly." She answered. "And so are you. I only did what you told me to do."

"Well, I don't think I'm a smart filly per se." I mumbled, still baffled at what I had witnessed. "Oh," she corrected herself, "You're a smart gelding. I'm a smart filly and you're a smart gelding!"

I shook my head. "You need a different lesson. Someone other than me needs to explain to you why I don't want to be called a gelding."

"But, see, I call myself a filly so we call you a gelding. That's fair, right?" She innocently chattered.

"Wrong!" I responded in a definite tone.

The subject at hand was interrupted by the approaching sound of the girls. "Looks like you're going to meet Lucy." I said.

The three Perdy girls climbed up and sat on the top rail of the corral.

"Who's your girl friend AJ?" Rebecca, the cousin to the other two called out.

*"She isn't my girl friend." I retorted without thinking. "KC meet Rebecca, Lacy and Lucy." "Isn't she your friend? Isn't she a girl?" Ignoring these last comments KC handed me the lunge rope and approached the intruders.*

*"Hello." KC said politely, holding out her hand in a token of friendship. None of the three offered to shake her hand, but instead glared at it.*

*"We were just training my filly." KC spoke politely in spite of the snobby reception they had given her.*

*"Training her to do what? Can she do circus tricks? We came to watch."*

*KC turned and walked away from them. Taking the rope from me she shouted "Get-up." The filly trotted around the rail. However, when the colt got a few feet away from the girls all six legs extended into its path, causing the colt to balk.*



*KC threw the end of the rope she was holding at me and wasted no time getting in front of them. "I will thank you to get behind the fence. You should know better than to spook a horse when she's being trained." She said sternly.*

*"Oh." Lacy mocked, "When you said training we thought you meant your training bra." They all giggled in unison.*

*Everyone there knew that KC was past the stage of wearing a training bra and that they had only come to make trouble. They defiantly remained on the fence.*

*"If you want to sit on the fence keep your feet and voices to yourself." KC spoke with a clear definite tone. She retrieved the rope from me and commanded her horse to 'get-up.' As the filly circled towards them, the legs extended again and the colt jumped to a stop.*

*KC handed me the rope. I watched with interest, wondering what she would tell them now. She calmly walked back to them. Then, without any sign of her intent she managed one swift motion with her hands that somehow caught all six legs at once, toppling the three girls backwards and off the rail.*

*From the dirt on the other side of the fence came the angry response; "We were only teasing, you evil witch!"*

*KC was halfway back for the rope exchange by this time. "Oh, and I was just teasing too." she responded, "But I am starting to get serious." She turned around and faced the thrashing limbs trying to climb out of the tangle. "You might want to leave this evil, black belt in Taekwondo witch alone from now on. I always welcome a good work out. But then, you three were just now leaving, right?"*

*From someone in the tangle came the faint response. "Yes." KC finished her victory march towards me.*

*"I didn't know you were a black belt." I said, sharing her pride.*

*She sidled up close to me with her face directly under mine and whispered; "I'm not. But those three can sure keep thinking I am."*

## CHAPTER 10

### *A Shot on the Mark*

*The next training lesson involved an old yellow canvas. The object was to get the filly used to movement around her without spooking. We tested her willingness to stand still while we raised it into the air at her side. Before long she trusted us to flap it about wildly. She allowed us to lay it on and pull it off of her back. We felt confident that we could introduce her to a saddle in the next lesson.*

*When the colt had had enough for the day we both seemed to realize that we had not. We decided to walk to the lake south of town.*

*As we made footprints through the Perdy's alfalfa field towards the trees we talked casually. "AJ, I'm sorry about what happened to Trekker."*

*"We don't have to talk about Trekker." I replied firmly.*

*"But," she said, "it just seems that something is missing. I miss having him with us." "We don't have to talk about Trekker." I repeated.*

*Changing the subject KC asked, "Before I came what did you do with your summertime?"*

*"Well," I responded, "I've always had my chores to do."*

*"Wow!" she mocked. "Is that the extent of your adventures?"*

*"No, I have adventures!" I said in my most self assured voice. "Every summer I get to ride up through East Ridges with Charlie and let the high water down.*

*"Why do they call them ridges? They look more like towers. She commented.*

*"They look like towers from town. If you get up in them you see the towers are ends of ridges that go upwards in altitude. There's a lot of wild life up there." I answered.*

*"So, you say that you and Charlie let what down?" "The high water." I repeated.*

*I could tell by KC's smile that something was entertaining her from inside her own head. "High water sounds like something you shouldn't be drinking, AJ. Do you pack it in with you or do you make it after you get up there?"*

*I chuckled. "No, high water means the water that comes down from high altitudes. See up behind the East Ridges?" We stopped walking to look. "See the snow on the tops of those mountains behind them?"*

*"Sure do." She answered. "Snow in the summer. I keep wondering how long it will take for it to melt. "*

*"Awhile." I answered. "That snow holds the high water. As it gradually melts it goes into the streams. Some of that goes into our lakes and reservoirs. The water that irrigates this field comes from a reservoir that is filled from the runoff of that snow."*

*She studied the distant mountains. "Is there a river that comes from there to here? A river to the reservoir I mean?"*

*"No, not a river really," I explained. "That's why Charlie and I go up there. Years ago a very long ditch was dug from the higher reservoir that's up above the Ridges to the lower reservoir north of town. Early in the year the lower one fills from a spring above it and with low run off. But, that doesn't last long. Charlie and I have to go up and let down the water from the high reservoir.*

*"How do you let it down? How do you get it into the ditch? Does it take a lot of digging?"*  
*"No," I answered. "It's the easiest job in the world. We just turn a weir. We open up the gate and the water comes down. Long trip for a little job."*

*"Do you hike all that way?" she asked after we started walking again towards the trees.*  
*"No, we ride his mules. It's too much of a climb for a person or a horse. We're going up there in a couple of days."*

*"Can I come?" she asked.*

*I thought of how fun it would be to take KC up into that beautiful country. "I wish you could, but Charlie only has those two mules. We couldn't ride double up through there. It's about all those old critters can do to carry a single rider."*

*"What's it like up there?"*

*"Lots of little wild creatures. The sky is full of buzzards, hawks and eagles all circling around looking for something to eat. Ever see eagles in the wild?" I asked. "You wouldn't believe how beautiful it is up there. I really do wish you could see it. We see mountain sheep almost every time we go. It's like going into another world."*

*"It looks distant. I mean, if you went to the top. How long does it take to ride up there?" she asked.*

*"We do it in one day. We don't ride the mules all the way. We haul them to the meadow at the base of the climb in Charlie's horse trailer.*

*"She smiled. "Are there flowers in the meadow?"*

*"Never noticed." I answered. "There are cows in the meadow. They probably ate all the flowers. There's a lone wolf that eats the cows. Everyone wants him dead. Charlie always brings his 30-06 in case we see him. I hope we can kill him this year."*

*"I hate shooting things. It's cruel!" She stated vehemently. "Couldn't you capture the wolf instead of shooting it?"*

*"Sure, we could capture it." I mocked. "Maybe we could reform it and put it back in the meadow to make recompense by loving the cows better. Do you know what that wolf does to cows?" I asked.*

*She didn't answer, but continued to defend her platform. "Well, the wolf was there first, you know."*

*"No he wasn't! The wolf came there to kill cows. That wolf is cruel. What he does is he chews the udder off the cows while they are still alive. This wolf is one that even you should want dead." I defended.*

*KC squirmed at what I had said. She looked away from me. In time she conceded; "I didn't realize that they would hurt the cows like that. That's hard to hear. Poor cows!"*

*We walked for a while without saying anything. I broke the silence.*

*"We'll have to miss our horse training session on the day I go with Charlie to the East Ridges."*

*"Well, I'll just stay home alone." She sighed. "All alone, all day long. I'll spend the day reading, I guess. Or maybe I could practice my flute. I don't have a piano to play. I miss my piano."*

*Ignoring her little dramatic pathos I decided to confront her about something that had been bothering me.*

*"KC, I had such a different first impression of you. Now that you've shown me who you really are the change is amazing. How is it that you started out talking all goofy Californian but changed it later? Do you talk like that when you're at home?"*

*"Around my friends I do." She answered. "It's how we 'roll.'"*

*"But you're rolling downhill taking on two different roles. Split personality isn't the KC that I've learned to like so much." I blushed a little when I realized that I had actually told her that I liked her.*

*After an amused glance in my direction, she responded. "It's survival. It works best to be accepted by my peers. I fit in better talking like they do."*



*"Is that what your life is like back home? Just survival? How do you know if others would accept you if you are not.....being you?"*

*KC gazed at me with an adoring expression on her face. "AJ, it's different here. That's why I like you....., I mean, why I like being here so much. I can just be myself and feel good about it."*

*Looking off towards the trees ahead she continued. "Everything is real here. Slow. Honest. Just real" She paused then spoke softly. AJ, I think that I am beginning to....." She stopped short of finishing her thought.*

*We finished crossing the field in silence and climbed over the fence, starting into the trees. We continued to walk quietly together for a few paces. I felt like we both wanted to express something that neither of us could. I was wondering about the sentence she hadn't finished, but hoped I could guess what she wanted to say. I never have been one to hide what was in my heart. Taking a deep breath I decided I just had to tell her how I was beginning to feel about her. I stopped walking and turned to face her. With the birds serenading in the background I stood with heart racing, waiting for words to come, but none did. Instead, a sweet, mutual agreement bonded our feelings as we gazed into each other's eyes for a few long seconds.*

*It was KC who lightened the mood and changed the unspoken subject. "So, you haul hay, train horses, do chores and turn weird."*

*There was a lilt in her voice that I did not miss. However, I participated in her escaping from our intense eye contact. "Not weird, weir." We started walking again. "A weir is like a big wheel that raises the head gate up." I continued to make distance from the moment. "The head gate is like a big metal dam. The weir lifts it up."*

*She showed little interest in my explanation. "Don't you ever have fun adventures? Ever do anything wild?"*

*I truly didn't know where she was going with her question. "I like to hike through the woods. If I do that in silence then wild things might appear. Does that count?" I teased.*

*After shooting a disgusted look in my direction, she continued; "Do you ever do anything that puts you on the edge? Something a little risky?" She seemed to relish the mentioning of such a thing. "Something fun because if you got caught you'd be in trouble." She looked my direction for a reaction. "Not something bad," she went on. "Not like anything dumb, just adventure, you know?"*

*"Well," I confessed, "There are a couple of vacant houses..." I stopped myself, realizing that her family occupied one of them. "There's a vacant house up north of town towards the reservoir that has stuff in it. I got in there once and looked through it."*

*"What kind of stuff?" she asked.*

*"Things like old phonograph records, old clothes, and a piano."*

*"A piano!" she interrupted. It might be the only one in town! I want to go there and play it. "I don't know why they left all their things. " I continued, ignoring her desire for mischief.*

*"Maybe they died and nobody came and got it. We would sure be in trouble with our parents if we got caught going in there. My folks would be disappointed in me. Would that make you happy?"*

*"Yea!" she seemed satisfied. "Let's do it. I want to play the piano!" "No," I replied. "I don't want to get in trouble."*

*"But you said you went in there before."*

*"Yes, I did. How else would I know what was in there?" I answered. "So, did you get in trouble?" she asked.*

*"No, I didn't get caught." "How did it feel? Was it fun?" "No, I felt bad about doing it."*

*"Why did you feel bad? Did you steal some of the stuff?" She pressed.*

*"No!" I answered. "I did it because I was curious but I knew I was trespassing. I felt bad about it after."*

*She looked at me in silence with a little grin on her face as we walked side by side. I wondered what she was thinking.*

*In time she asked, "So, if trespassing is against your principles, is there anything you do for a little excitement?"*

*"Well," I goaded her, "We put up hay a couple of times during the summer." "Put the hay up? Where do you put the hay?" she asked.*

*"We put it in the barn."*

*She rewarded my comments with a friendly punch on the arm and a roll of her eyes.*

*The lake came into view. We stopped to observe the several varieties of water birds that graced the surface of the water.*

*"Look!, There on the bank at the other side of the lake, can you see the deer drinking?" I pointed.*

*"Oh, wow! I do. They're such beautiful creatures." Her face glowed with satisfaction. We stood in silence taking in the sounds of nature and feeling the soft breeze.*

*Suddenly the peaceful moment was disrupted by the sound of a not so distant gunshot.*

*The deer sprang up and bounded away.*

*"That sounded like a gun!" She grabbed my arm. "I hate guns. Were they shooting at the deer?"*

*"No," I concluded, "that shot came from the other side of that knoll behind the far bank there. Whatever they were shooting at they hit." "I hope not!" she exclaimed.*

*"Oh, they hit it." I promised.*

*"How do you know that?" She looked very concerned*

*"I know from the sound after the bang. There was no ringing sound. That shot was right on target. Something died." I was not so disturbed with that fact as she obviously was and was even enjoying making her squirm with having to deal with this truth.*

*"What do you think they shot?" she asked with continued concern.*

*"Maybe a beef. Deer are out of season. Although, I wouldn't put it past Dean Perdy, or his brother Craig to shoot a deer out of season. They figure that if it's on their property it's theirs. Everywhere is their property."*

*"Guns should be outlawed. Shooting animals should be outlawed." She stated firmly. "Can I ask you a question?" I countered. "Do you like hamburgers?"*

*"Sure I do. Are you going to tell me there's a hamburger joint around here? Why are you changing the subject? Something died!" She was near tears.*

*I went on to make my point. "I'm not changing the subject. I'll bet the Perdys sell a million dollars a year of hamburger on the hoof." I couldn't tell if she was even listening to what I was saying.*

*"AJ, have you ever killed anything?" She asked.*

*"You mean other than cows to put in our freezer, chickens that stop laying eggs, porcupines that kill the trees, raccoons that steal eggs, skunks that are afar off, mosquitoes that bite me, sure I have."*

*KC looked shocked.*

*"KC! Come on! Don't look like that. I'm a country boy and we live from what we raise. We protect it with our guns and we slaughter it. Some of it is sent to Concord California and you*

*buy it at the local burger joint. It's just a fact of life. It has been ever since Adam's kid Able started raising sheep. But, I don't kill just to kill. I find no pleasure in it.*

*Not seeming to be getting through to her, I was glad for the opportunity to change the subject.*

*"Hey look!" I pointed through a clearing of the trees where the knoll crested. "See that dust? Whoever it was that shot something is driving off without taking it. They obviously weren't planning to use it for meat."*

## CHAPTER 11

### *Bury Your Dog*

*I arrived at the round corral the next morning with a note in my hand. "KC, What do you make of this? It was tacked to the front door when I left." KC read the note aloud. "AJ, bury your dog."*

*Under the words was a crude map with an X marking the spot where the words 'dead dog' were scribbled.*

*"Isn't this the place where we heard the shot yesterday?" KC asked in alarm. "But, they couldn't have shot your dog, AJ, your dog isn't here. Who put this on your door?"*

*"I have to assume that it was Dean Perdy. I'm starting to wonder if he did actually shoot my dog!"*

*"But your dog is over a hundred miles away." She looked at my bewildered face with concern in her eyes.*

*"I think that maybe Trekker came home." I explained. "I think he ran away from that ranch and came all the way home." A sick feeling was starting to overpower me. "But why would he take the time to chase cows when he was almost home to me?" I mumbled.*

*KC walked towards me and pulled me into her arms. It felt nice to have her hold me. "AJ, Let's go get him and bury him." she said softly.*

*Charlie was willing to let us borrow his mare, the mother of my colt, without any questions.*

*We saddled her up and rode double to the spot where we had heard the shot the day before.*

*There he lay. Dead!*

*As I fought back tears I loosened the saddle strings, untying the same yellow canvas that we had used in our horse training exercise the day before. Lifting the lifeless body we laid him on the canvas. Just as we were going to fold the corners over him I discovered something surprising.*

*"KC, this isn't Trekker! That fool shot his own dog. Trekker isn't dead!" I was greatly relieved that Trekker was alive. However, a dark realization turned my joy to anger.*

*“Dean Perdy made me give Trekker away and it was this dead dog, a stupid Perdy cow dog, that was chasing his cows all along! I hate Dean Perdy!” My anger mounted inside me with every thought that came into my head. It grew until it caused my ears to ring. Then I totally lost control. I rushed to the canvas and kicked the corpse. Then I kicked it several more times. Foul words found their way out of my mouth. Profane words. Words that I shouldn’t have said, especially in front of KC. Alas, having exhausted the full list of all the curse words I had at my disposal I started screaming.”*

*“AJ! Stop it! Calm down! Your angry tirade won’t change anything.” KC yelled.*

*I sat down in the dirt. “I hate Dean Perdy.” I repeated. “ He’s a fool and he’s mean. I want to get even with him. I want to make him pay.”*

*“Let’s give him his dead dog.” KC said. “ Let’s take it to him and let him see what he’s done. Make him apologize.”*

*“Apologize? A Perdy apologize? Not in this town! I have a better idea.” I growled. “Let’s leave him a note like he left me. Let’s take this dog and leave it on his front door step with a note that says, ‘bury your own dog.’”*

*This we did.*

*After our retaliatory deed was done we again escaped back into the woods. This time we went west, climbing to the top of the T hill. I had much more to say about how I felt about Dean Perdy, his twin daughters and his brother and his brother’s daughter too. I cursed everything ‘Perdy’. I expressed my concern about my horse condescending to mix with their horses when he got out of our yard. I had never seen KC so wordless. She spent a great deal of time just listening to me vent. She only occasionally gave words of support and validation. At last KC went home and I returned to do chores.*

*That evening, as we were eating dinner I told my Father about the note on our front door. I told him that I had gone down to get the dog and that it wasn’t Trekker. I was just getting to the part of my revenge with the dead dog when we were interrupted by a loud pounding on the door. Dad went to the door and there stood the devil himself.*

*“Milo,” Dean Perdy spoke like a man on a mission. “Your boy shot my dog!”*

*“My boy shot no dog. You shot your own dog, you fool! You thought you were shooting his dog and you shot your own.”*

*“Oh, I shot his dog alright,” Dean said proudly. “And he shot mine to get even. He put it on my porch with this note.”*

*"If AJ shot your dog," Dad rebutted, "What gun would he have used? The only gun we have in the house is an old 22 bolt action rifle that hasn't been moved for days."*

*Dean didn't answer, but instead shoved the note at my father. Dad read the note and turned to me. "Did you put the dog on his porch, son?"*

*"Yes I did." I answered in a matter of fact tone. "Mine wasn't dead. His was. So I thought he should bury his own dog."*

*"That boy is lying!" Dean shouted. "His dog was chasing the cows and I shot it like I told you I would. I had a good reason to shoot his dog. He had no reason to shoot mine."*

*Dad yelled back in a tone meant to overpower Dean. "Dean! Did my son borrow your gun to shoot your dog or what? He didn't take ours. If you say he's lying then you're saying that I'm lying."*

*"I don't know where he got the gun, but he shot my dog and he put it on my porch." Dean yelled all the louder.*

*"Come on Dean! Don't be an ass." Dad was beside himself with frustration. "Trying to reason with you is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall."*

*"Dean," I jumped in with a voice raised to match both his and dad's, "remember when you told me my dog jumps fences? I guess I have seen him jump a fence or two, but not every fence in town like you said he does. But, the dog you shot was probably a pretty good fence jumper before you wasted him. Good enough that he jumped out of his pen and chased your cows. You robbed me of my dog and you shot one of your own!"*

*Dean continued to defend without reason. "AJ, If you think I shot my own dog then where's yours?"*

*Dad had had enough. "He's over a hundred miles away on a ranch. We gave him away after you complained about him. That's the kind of people we are. You, on the other hand, are the kind of person that insists that an honest boy is lying when you're too stupid to see that he clearly isn't. You decided that AJ's dog was the villain before you even considered checking to see if your dogs were all in their pens. How are you ever going to repay this boy?"*

*Dean stood speechless, surely knowing that dad was right, but not man enough to accept the fact.*

*Dad continued. "I'll tell you what you can do. You can get out of my house and go bury your dog!"*

*I had never been more proud of my dad.*





## CHAPTER 12

### *Learning the Obvious*

*As the mules strained against their loads a variety of small animals scattered from our path. It was the abundance of these that was reflected in the number of birds of prey soaring above watching for opportunities to strike. The sweet fresh air, the serenity of the sounds from within the heart of this isolated world of East Ridges was presently being polluted by my ranting about the Perdys. Charlie endured my telling him of the injustices inflicted upon me. He heard about the dead dog, about the girls getting what they deserved when KC went all martial arts on them. In conclusion I said; "If Dean Perdy is not the devil himself he is the son of the devil."*

*"Oh, I hope that's not true," Charlie sighed.*

*"He's an evil man," I defended. "He was surely raised by an evil man."*

*Charlie's expression revealed his age. He looked grave and worn. "I think he was raised by a man that learned too late how to be a father," He commented.*

*"Do you know his father?" I asked with interest.*

*"I'm getting to know him better and better the older I get," He answered.*

*"Well, what's he like? What do you mean he learned to be a father too late?" I was interested.*

*We covered a stretch of the trail in silence. I had concluded that either Charlie hadn't heard me, or didn't care to talk about the man.*

*Then out of the blue he spoke. "Well, it's like your horse training, AJ. Good parenting involves horse sense. A father shouldn't deprive his offspring of learning experiences by thinking that making things easy for them is what loving them is about. He shouldn't give them everything just because he can. A good parent should allow them to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. That's the best lesson. Let them know you love them while they're struggling and learning, but don't fix the consequences of their choices. I gave my children too much without their earning it. I defended them and protected them too much. I should have let them own what their actions brought about naturally." Charlie continued in a rambling fashion. "If I'd been a good parent I would have taught correct principles and then let them succeed or*

*fail on their own until they learned that embracing those correct principles is what really served them best. Without meaning to I have raised a couple of monsters.”*

*I had never thought of Charlie as a father. To me he was just Charlie the saddle maker.*

*That was his name. That was who he was. Now, thinking of him as a father I could not imagine that he would raise ‘monsters.’*

*“Tell me about your children.” I asked naively.*

*“You’ve been telling me about them all morning. I’m afraid that you’re pretty much on the mark with what you say about them. Like I told you, my attempts to show compassion for them when they were young has led to their not having a lot of compassion for others. I guess you could rightly say I spoiled them rotten.”*

*I felt shocked as what he was saying finally sunk in. I had never thought it possible that the Perdy brothers were Charlie’s sons. The kind, old soul in front of me on the trail had allowed me to speak much ill without defending his family. I rode behind, speechless.*

*“Charlie, I’m sorry……I didn’t……you are…… I never……”*

*“AJ,” he reassured me. “Don’t worry yourself. Toddsville is a small town. Older folks know how everyone is connected here but to you it wasn’t obvious. I mean, why would your folks bother to talk about what they probably think you just know because it’s common knowledge to them.*

*Why would you ask them about what you didn’t think about. Your dad would remember me having a family but you don’t. You would know the pedigree of the colts your Uncle trains but not mine.*

*Truth be told, I knew that you didn’t know who I was a long time ago. Today, however, there’s a reason for you to know.”*

*“But, you didn’t stop me from saying all those things about……”*

*Charlie interrupted. “I’m telling you, don’t worry about it. You were being honest and I appreciate your speaking your feelings. I like honesty. Besides, I deserve hearing the truth. Like*

*I said, I could have done a better job parenting. I gave those boys more than I made them earn. It’s in large part my fault that they are the way they are, thinking that life is only about what they want. You, on the other hand, are young and can still save yourself from the hate that is growing within you.”*

*“Me? Hate?” I stopped myself, realizing that I no longer had anyone to complain to. At another time I would have told Charlie that I’m the one who gets the bum end of things. I’m*

*entitled to feel angry about people who are responsible for making me hate them. But now I had something else to consider. For the first time that I could remember I felt like a repentant recipient deserving retribution. I waited for Charlie to deliver that retribution.*

*He remained speechless for the last section of the climb. When we reached the summit Charlie dismounted and walked to the ledge where we always sat to watch the water spill down the rocks after we released it. I silently joined him. I had never felt uncomfortable around Charlie until then.*

*As we sat together, looking out over the panorama of the valley that I now realized he owned, Charlie spoke softly. "AJ, I see a lot of potential in you. You're an honest and trustworthy young man. You have a loyal character. Can I tell you a few things that would make you a happier person?"*

*"Sure," I answered, "tell me." I was thinking that Charlie showed more concern about how my anger was hurting me than about the fact that I had said insulting things about him and his family.*

*Rather than listing the 'few things' that he had asked permission to tell, Charlie surprised me with a question. "What is going to happen to those rocks after we turn the water on?"*

*I thought carefully, wanting to give a correct answer. "They'll get wet, for sure." I was wishing I had more insight into where he was going with his analogy.*

*Charlie went on. "Other than water, what's not here that is here at the end of the year after the last hay cutting when we come up to shut off the weir?"*

*"Oh, the algae, that green stuff."*

*Charlie nodded his head. "The algae is proof of the presence of water. It grows because of nutrients that come from the water. You see, water makes things grow. It gives life."*

*He allowed a few 'Charlie minutes' to pass before continuing. "The goodness that comes from a character of integrity is like water. Both water and the good things that come out of us gives life. The water we release today when we turn that weir will make the hay and other life giving essentials grow. Both water and kindness make good things happen."*

*He sat quietly again, allowing me time to take in what he had said.*

*At the right time he continued. "Water makes a happy sound as it tumbles down the ledges here. Words from a calm kind nature also make a good welcome sound. People love to hear both. When people want to have you around them then things go better for you in every*

way." Charlie retreated again to his silence for a spell before asking, "What do you think is the opposite of water, AJ?"

"Maybe fire?" I spoke timidly.

Charlie nodded his head. He spoke in a thoughtful tone, looking down on the sky beneath, gazing over the tops of the eagles circling above the ledges. "Fire is like hate and greed. It destroys. It kills. It's like those things inside of us that aren't good. When there's ugly feelings inside of us ugly things come out. That can't bring good results. It never does. It destroys everything in its path. But first, and worst, it destroys us."

"Charlie," I broke the long silence after his last statement. "Do you hate anyone?"

This time he answered quickly. "I hate the devil." He twitched a little when he said the word. "And all those devilish things he's about doing."

With that Charlie stood, indicating that he was going to start the trek up the dike to the weir.

I followed. We climbed the complete distance in silence.

"No, AJ, I don't hate anyone." Charlie belatedly answered my question. "I'm kind of selfish about that. It doesn't serve me well to hate. If I choose to let anyone be my enemy, well, then I have an enemy. I'd rather have friends. I'd rather have peace inside myself than hate. Peace makes me happy. Hate is ugly. I don't want to live an ugly life. Peace makes life better. I choose to have a better life. Yep. I'm selfish in that way."

With that Charlie started cranking the big wheel open and the water started to trickle out. A few more cranks and it gushed out in loud fury.

"Sometimes people don't give me a choice." I shouted above the sound of the force. "They make me hate them."

"Do you enjoy that?" Charlie shouted back.

This time it was me that waited to answer. We were sitting again, watching the water tumble into a great waterfall over the ledges before I said; "Charlie, I don't enjoy hating. I just don't see how I have a choice when people hurt me."

"Sure you do." Charlie answered. "Happiness is a choice. Nobody controls that about us except ourselves."

I could see how that worked for Charlie. It seemed near impossible to apply it to myself. "Charlie," I said, "I've been thinking about what you said in regard to water and fire, kindness

*and hate. Why haven't you told me those things before? You've listened to a lot of hate and 'fire' without saying anything to me before."*

*"Because I didn't think you would listen before. You would've just locked up in your head and defended yourself."*

*"Like a horse that has locked up." I answered without thinking. "You were using horse sense."*

*Charlie grinned. "A little horse sense is good for all of us. What's known as horse sense means learning to make good choices so that life works for us instead of against us."*

*I recalled hearing KC speak the same words to me the day I lost Trekker. "I have two friends with horse sense," I thought to myself.*

*"Charlie," I said, looking out over the view with him, "I don't want to hate anymore. I don't want to destroy myself. If I can somehow start being more like you, if I start..... not hating but being....." I paused, reaching for the right words.*

*"If you could find inner peace, you mean? If you could be someone you want to live with?" Charlie assisted.*

*"If I can have inner peace," I repeated, "then will people start treating me decently so I won't need...won't feel like I need to be angry?"*

*Again Charlie didn't answer directly. "AJ, this water we are watching is surely already at the bottom of the ridges. But we'll be in town long before it gets to the reservoir. Sometimes it backs up and overflows the ditch and we have to hike back and dig out debris. Things sometimes get in the way, but it still keeps flowing out of the upper reservoir." He squinted a little as if he was digging deeply for the right words. "Algae won't form on the rocks here for some time. Do you get what I'm saying?"*

*"I guess that you're saying that sometimes things go smooth and easy and sometimes they don't. Sometimes it takes a while for good to come back to us. Sometimes we have to live with some debris and the obstacles in our lives."*

*"And the only person we can change is ourselves." Charlie said. "But, if you keep planting good seeds they will grow in time. Happiness is a choice. You can choose to be happy. Nobody has control over your attitude except you. AJ, remember that you'll be happy when you can truly be happy for others."*

## CHAPTER 13

### *Red Rock Above, Black Rock Beneath*

*We got the lunches mother had prepared for both of us out of the saddle bags and returned to our favorite spot.*

*"Where does the Perdy property end?" I inquired "Does it go as far as the highway on the other side of the T hill?"*

*"Further." Charlie mumbled. His mind was elsewhere.*

*Seeing that I was pretty much alone in the conversation I sat back, basking in my surroundings. I exclaimed ; " I don't think there's a place on earth as pretty as the Ridges. I can see eagles above us and eagles beneath us. I love this spot! The ridges are amazing from below, but up here is a completely different view looking down on them with the valley and town spread out beneath."*

*"I must preserve the ridges." Charlie declared.*

*"Preserve them from what?" I answered. "They look rock solid to me." KC's style of humor seemed to be rubbing off on me.*

*"Red rocks above and black rock beneath," Charlie announced. "There's a rich coal vein under them."*

*The thought of what Charlie said brought on a somber feeling.*

*"So you mean you must preserve them from being mined?" I asked, "But, don't you own the mines? And you own East Ridges."*

*"I have always felt that only God should own this place," Charlie sighed. "The problem is the vein of coal down in Sink Valley is running out. The mining business is coming to an end down there. Craig has his sights on the vein beneath the ridges. In time the Ridges will no longer exist."*

*"But, can't you stop him? What are you going to do?" I felt a sick feeling rising from my gut.*

*"Oh, they can't legally do a thing without my go ahead. But I'm getting old. Soon as I'm dead they'll start mining here."*

*We both sat silent, I because of shock, he because he was Charlie. Finally he turned to me and said, " I have a plan, AJ, and it involves you."*

*"Tell me. If I can do anything to keep them from mining here I will."*

*Charlie was looking into my eyes. "What I want you to do is nothing." he answered*

*"I want you to say nothing and do nothing. I'm afraid I need to ask you to take on a huge responsibility. I think you're the person I can trust."*

*"You can trust me, Charlie. I promise you that!"*

*Charlie continued; "I was talking with your father about what I'm going to say. He was rightfully concerned about putting you in this position. He agrees, however, that it's what we have to do." He paused for a moment and looked at me. "I want to sign over the deed to East Ridges to you."*

*My heart started pounding in my chest, "What? Give me the East Ridges?"*

*"Don't be too excited, AJ. It isn't like you can do anything with it. The coal beneath them is worth millions and that's what's important to my boys. It must not be important to you. The coal is the only monetary value of the East Ridges and it's their only value as far as Craig is concerned.*

*I'm trusting that you'll never let it be mined. Until I am dead, I can continue to stop the mining. When I'm gone, however, you'll have to take on that responsibility. I trust that you'll be man enough to do that and not be tempted to betray my dead soul by allowing it to be mined, even if you're offered great sums of money."*

*"I promise!" I said with youthful zeal.*

*"I expect you'll be in your late twenties when I finally croak." He looked my direction with concern. "I'm still pretty strong for an old man but after I die you'll be the target for a lot of pressure. By then you might not like living in Toddsville when it becomes evident that you're the one standing in the way of the mining. You might want to be much further away than Holtsville."*

*"Whatever it takes," I answered. I felt more important than I had ever felt. I loved that Charlie trusted me with such a big responsibility. "Charlie," I emphasized, "I would die before I let anyone mess with the Ridges."*

*Charlie laughed out loud. "And I'll die before you have to worry about it."*

*Charlie continued to look off into the sky beneath. "I already called Sam Raby about writing it up"*

*"Who's Sam Raby?" I asked.*

*"Oh, that's our attorney. He isn't anybody you'd know. He doesn't live around here. It might take a while before he gets everything put together. Not more than a few weeks, I think.*

*I'll bring a copy of the agreement over for your parents to keep in a secure place for you." Again, Charlie turned and looked deep into my eyes. "AJ, I can't say enough about how important it is that you tell no one." Charlie put his hand on my shoulder and emphasized. "No one!"*

*"I won't mention it to anyone. But you said that you talked to Dad about it. Does Mother know?"*

*"Only them." Charlie answered. "Dean and Craig mustn't find out."*

*I basked in that moment of feeling like a very choice and important person. We sat in silence again. My mind was on the fact that I had just been endowed with manhood. Charlie, once again, was most likely just having a typical silent Charlie moment.*

*In time I inquired; "Speaking of no one knowing but me and my parents, how is it that you could promise that I wouldn't have to move to Holtsville? Can you tell me about that now?"*

*"Oh, yes. Some anonymous person paid the back taxes and I happened to know about it." Charlie answered with a twinkle. "Didn't your folks tell you?"*

*"No. They tell me things when I ask. I didn't ask about your family and I didn't ask about that. You told me to not worry so I stopped worrying."*

*"Well, it hasn't been that long since those taxes were paid off." Charlie defended. "Maybe they don't know yet."*

*I sat looking at my old friend as he surveyed the many miles of his estate. I was seeing him in a different light, aware of the millions of dollars he was worth. "Charlie, did you pay it? Were you the anonymous person?"*

*Charlie shook his head, indicating that he wasn't. However, his answer didn't validate the gesture. "AJ, think about what anonymous means. If it were me, and I'm not saying it was, but if it were, and if I told you that it was, then I couldn't be the anonymous person because you would know. So, either way, if I said that I'm the anonymous person I'd be lying. Why ask?"*

*"If you say that you aren't would you be lying?" I pressed.*

*Charlie shook his head again. I didn't know if he was shaking his head because he didn't want me to continue questioning or if he was saying no to my inquiry.*

*"I'm sure that whoever paid those taxes wanted to remain anonymous." he replied. "I think you should allow that much and stop wondering and asking about it."*

*I leaned back to recline myself. I breathed in the fresh air deeply. Maybe it was a new view on life that I was breathing in. This was the day that my old friend had taught me about not letting hate destroy me. He had done so without scolding or accusing. He demonstrated the*



*peace he had told me about with his example. He had taught me truths out of his concern for my wellbeing. He had treated me kindly in spite of the fact that I had said ugly things about his own family.*

*More than that, he had trusted me with a big responsibility. From that day forward I believed for the rest of my life that it was Charlie who paid the back taxes and made it so we could keep our house in Toddsville. I concluded that Charlie was the best man in the world. As I proudly sat beside him on a high ledge, watching life-giving water tumble into my world beneath, I silently determined to live my life so that I could be worthy of Charlie.*

## CHAPTER 14

### *A Terrible Discovery*

*“AJ, Charlie would have done it when he was your age. Come on, I want to play the piano.” KC was not supportive of my new determination to be like Charlie. “We won’t hurt anything in the house. We won’t take anything. It’ll be fun, I promise.”*

*“But what if someone hears you playing the piano?” Even while saying this I knew that there truly was not much chance of that happening. The town was almost always devoid of people on the streets and the abandoned house was secluded, removed from the rest of town. A piano being played in it was not likely to be heard by anyone.*

*“If they hear it they’ll like the sound of it. I play beautifully! You’ll like it too.” she smiled her sweetest smile at me. “I’ll play softly, I promise.”*

*Clearly she wanted me to hear her play and I wanted to please her. “Okay, we can go.” I said, reluctantly giving in.*

*KC’s delight was evidenced in the way she bounced as we walked the distance to the old house.*

*“We’ll have to go through the window.” I explained. “The door is locked but the window on the east side will lift up.”*

*We found our way through the overgrown brush of the unkempt yard and worked ourselves inside. Dusty but stately, an old piano was waiting.*

*KC sprang over to it, pulled out the stool and started playing an obviously difficult piece. She stopped after only a few strains.*

*“It’s badly out of tune. I’m sorry about the way I sound.” she apologized. “I think it sounds great! I didn’t imagine you could play like that.”*

*With that she proudly continued in a masterful way. At the finish she lifted her left hand high and crossing over her right hand she let it down on the finishing note. It made no sound.*

*Laughing, she said, “And that note is more than out of tune. It has no tune. That piece is called Concerto in C minor by Rachmaninoff.”*

*"It was wonderful!" I had no sooner said so when we heard the engine of a vehicle approaching. We stood frozen, astonished and tense. Our anxiety peaked when we heard it slow and stop.*

*Staring at each other wide eyed, we heard the fateful sound of two slamming doors. We looked around wildly for an escape, then simultaneously bolted for the stairs. We stumbled over each other hoping to hide before we were seen. Barely making it to the top level we heard a key in the lock and the creak of the door opening. We lay flat on the landing together, looking out through the banister down on the room from which we had just fled. It was Craig and Dean Perdy who entered. Did they know we were here? Had Dean found his chance for revenge? I was sick inside with fear and worry. But it soon became apparent that they were on their own mission.*

*"Where's the stuff?" Craig asked.*

*"In the piano bench." replied Dean. "I'll get it." Dean retrieved a razor blade that had been laying by the bag inside the bench and sliced the plastic bag open. He sprinkled white powder from it onto the glass table top in front of the sofa, lining it up into two neat rows with the razor blade. He then did the strangest thing I had ever seen a grown man do. He leaned down and sucked it up his nose! I was bewildered and confused at what I was seeing. He sat back on the sofa, red faced. His body shuddered strangely. Then his brother did the same thing. I looked at KC who didn't seem as baffled as I was with what they had done. She did, however, look very frightened. Leaning back on the sofa the Perdy brothers started talking.*

*"Sam Raby says that there's no money in it for him or us if dad does this fool headed thing.*

*I agreed with him that the old man is going fuzzy in the head. Giving away millions to that little creep, AJ, just to keep the eagles flying and to preserve the bee-youuu-tea-full rocks. Well, in my opinion coal has been our most beautiful rock and there's money in the bank to prove it. We can't let this happen, Craig. But the old toad just won't croak."*

*"Not on his own." Craig answered. "Do you think he's gone up to East Ridges yet? You know, accidents can happen."*

*"I hear you brother. Problem is he takes the little Todd creep with him when he goes up there."*

*Craig's face went dark as he said, "Well, maybe he just went without him this year. If there's not water in the ditch feeding the lower reservoir then I'm guessing that they haven't gone yet. I think we need to do what we need to do."*

*KC kicked me in the leg. I looked at her and she gestured with her head toward the closest room at the top of the stairs. She carefully started to worm her way towards it. I followed. We managed to get through the open door without bumping it and making it creak. Inside the room she whispered to me. "We have to get out of here now. Can we get out the window?" I nodded silently. I remembered there was a lean-to shed attached to the back of the house. I was hoping we could lower ourselves to its roof and get down that way. I moved over to the window and peered out through the grimy pane of glass.*

*We were in luck, the shed roof was less than five feet below. I turned the latch on top of the window and lifted. It was stuck. I hefted it with all my strength. KC stepped over and added her strength. With our desperate effort, the window came unstuck and slammed open with a bump. We quickly climbed through it, jumping to the shed roof and then down to the ground.*

*Our roof landing had made two more thud sounds. Without any hesitation we ran down the road. "Quick, this way," I pulled KC's arm. "They probably heard us. We can't be on the road where we can be seen."*

*We disappeared deep into the brush away from the road, hunkered down and stayed very still. Now the loudest sounds were our hearts beating in our chests, then the sound of a truck engine starting. We heard them drive past us and on towards the reservoir.*

*It was then I noticed that KC was holding my hand. "What were they talking about?" she asked in a panic. Then noticing that she was holding my hand, she quickly let go. "They called you a little creep. What is it they were saying about Charlie giving you millions to preserve beautiful rocks and eagles? What was that all about?"*

*Remembering that Charlie had sworn me to silence I hesitated answering. KC had heard, however, and apparently the trusted attorney had betrayed Charlie and tipped off his sons.*

*"It's a secret I swore I'd keep." I answered. "It's something both awesome and awful. I can't tell you, but I'm worried because Dean and Craig must already know the secret. I know I need to tell you, but I swore on my life not to tell."*

*I was not coherent with my words or my thoughts. I resorted to changing the subject. "What were they doing sucking that powdered sugar, or whatever it was up their noses. That was the strangest thing I have ever seen."*

*"Don't you know? They were snorting coke!" "Coke? Isn't coke a soft drink?" I asked.*

*"AJ, it's okay that you don't know. It's short for cocaine, it's bad drugs. Now, answer my question. What were they saying about you? What did they mean Charlie could have an accident?"*

*I realized that I had to tell. And tell I did, every last thing. When I had finished explaining and answering the many questions she asked, I felt like I was no longer alone. I had an ally in deciding what to do.*

*"Your parents know about East Ridges. We have to go to them." She announced.*

*"But then they'll know I was trespassing," I answered. "Dean and Craig might have just been talking under the influence of that coke stuff they snorted up their noses. If we make a big deal out of it maybe it won't be a good thing. Maybe they aren't really going to make any accident happen."*

*"AJ, we should tell your parents. Their knowing that you trespassed is the smaller problem here! If we tell them they can decide what to do," KC scolded. "We have to tell them."*

## CHAPTER 15

### *The Bigger Problem*

*KC was worried about one thing, Charlie's safety. I was worried about two things. My head was spinning, trying to think of how to save Charlie without having to involve my parents and tell them where I'd heard what would surely be an unbelievable story to them. They trusted me to make right choices. That had earned me an enormous amount of cherished freedom. I was afraid of losing that. While my first concern, of course, was for Charlie, to me the 'smaller problem' was also big.*

*During the summer with KC, I had hoped that there would never be a reason for her to come to my house. Mother kept the place clean, but it was run down. In places the plaster had left the wall exposing the old lath construction underneath. Today, as we hurried towards my house, however, I had greater concerns on my mind.*

*It was the excitement and jubilation of the unexpected return of a friend that made me forget, momentarily, every concern of the day.*

*"AJ!, Trekker came home!" Mother yelled to us as we approached. She dropped her hand trowel where she stood into the flower bed.*

*"He what? Where is he?"*

*"He's in the house." My mother's smile was broad. She nearly skipped towards us as she spoke. "His feet were swollen and bleeding. I dressed them up and bandaged them. He's waiting for you in the house. Hello KC."*

*I ran past my mother and into the house, leaving KC standing with her. When Trekker saw me he stood on his bandaged feet, nearly falling over himself to greet me. "Trekker, my old friend. You came back to me. You didn't want to chase cows on that old ranch after all, did you? You're not a cow chaser. You're a deer chaser." Trekker was licking my face ferociously.*

*"I can't believe you walked all those many miles and came home to me. You kept coming even with sore and bleeding feet. What a loyal friend you are. I'm so sorry that I put you through all that." I nearly pulled his ears off rubbing them and scratching them. "When you heal up you can go chase all the deer you want."*

*KC entered with mother and joined me in the petting and hugging of Trekker.*

*“Trekker, you can blame Dean Perdy for all you went through!” she commented. “I want you to bite him!”*

*Dad came into the room from his den and observed the three of us with satisfaction. He must have thought that we would be happier if we were left alone to enjoy the reunion.*



*“Your mother used the last of the iodine on Trekker’s feet,” he told us. “Maybe she and I will take a ride to Holtsville and pick up some more. We can do a little grocery shopping while we’re there. In fact, I think we might just make it a date night and take in a late movie while we’re out.” Mother smiled in agreement. “KC, you should go home by about nine. AJ, don’t you and old Trekker stay up too late.”*

KC nudged me. "AJ, don't you have something to say to your parents?" she whispered. "Oh," I barely acknowledged her, "Have a nice time," I said.

They left quickly.

KC angrily lit into me "I can't believe you didn't tell them. Think about what happened today, AJ. I mean, think about what happened besides Trekker coming home. Remember the conversation we overheard in the abandoned house? Remember the greater problem? What if Charlie gets hurt?"

I started to think again through the fog and excitement in my head. "We should go over to Charlie's place and check on him." I said. "But what am I going to do with Trekker? Mom has his feet all bandaged up and if I try and leave him behind, he'll just find a way to follow."

"I'll go check on Charlie," KC said. "You wait here with Trekker."

"What will you tell him?" I stewed. "You can't tell him that I told you about East Ridges. You know, he made me promise not to tell anyone! And if you tell him that we think his sons are planning to kill him he won't believe it. I don't know if I believe it myself. He'll think we're both crazy."

"I'll just go and see if he's there," she answered. "I'll tell him I'm looking for you and ask if he's seen you. I'll be right back."

KC returned within a half hour. "I didn't see him anywhere. His mules are saddled and just standing in the corral. Why do you think he would leave them there like that?"

"Saddles? Both of them?" I exclaimed.

"One had an actual saddle on it. The other had a sort of double canvas pouch thing. A big one." she reported.

"Pack panniers. Charlie's in danger! Charlie used to pack up like that when he went alone, before I started going to East Ridges with him. He would ride all the way to the ridges, checking the ditch on the way up. He camped overnight because it took two days. They're trying to make it look like he went alone." I explained. "The water wasn't down to the lower reservoir yet when they checked, so they don't know that Charlie and I went up yesterday and turned the weir. They've taken Charlie! They're planning to kill him and make it look like an accident. They'll put the mules outside the gate to make it look like they came back to the barn without Charlie."

KC grabbed my arm. "AJ, we have to tell my Mom. She's an attorney. She won't disclose your secret and she can protect you. We can't do this alone."

"You're right," I conceded. "Go get her KC. Bring her here."



*KC left again and I remained with Trekker. It was another thirty minutes before she returned, alone. KC looked exhausted and distressed as she spoke. "Mom and Dad aren't home. They left a note saying they had joined friends and gone camping for a couple of days, but they didn't say where. The problem with this town is that everyone thinks it's a safe place." She was near tears.*

*"KC," I insisted, "we have to go up there and find Charlie, dead or alive! We have to take the mules and ride up there ourselves."*

*"We can get up there quicker if we wait for your folks to return and drive us." she protested. "KC!" I spoke urgently, "The problem with telling dad and mom about this incident is that they didn't hear what we heard. They'll only be hearing what we tell them, which I'm afraid will sound unbelievable. They'll question and stall and probably insist on waiting until daylight to do anything. Without the mules, it'd be almost impossible for us to get Charlie out of there. And how would we get the use of the mules unless we just take them? Dad would have to get Dean or Craig to haul them. I can't see that happening."*

*"Ok, we should go", she agreed.*

*"They'll think that I'm asleep in my room." I said. "They'll just go to bed themselves. They won't know I'm gone until morning. When they start looking for me they won't be able to check with your folks because they won't be home. They'll assume that you're with them. They might conclude that I went with you and your parents somewhere."*

*"AJ," KC instructed. "Leave a note saying you left with us. That way they for sure won't worry or stop us."*

*"No." I answered. "I can't do that." "Why?"*

*"Because that would be a lie. I can't lie to my parents. It's bad enough that I'm a trespasser, I broke my promise to Charlie, and now I'm going to steal his mules. I can't be a liar too, I just can't."*

*"AJ!" KC was frustrated, "focus on the big picture."*

*Ignoring her last statement I exclaimed. "It'll be cold up there. Go home quickly and get a coat. I'll exchange the panniers for a second saddle. I'll tie Trekker up and corral him, hopefully that'll keep him in. He's walked enough today."*

## CHAPTER 16

### *Death Ride*

*With the full moon lighting our way we encountered several nocturnal animal sightings on the way. Many raccoons crossed our paths or scurried away as we passed. We saw other things move from the road and heard rustling sounds in the underbrush from things that we couldn't see. It was an ominous ride, but we arrived safely at the meadow just as shadows were disappearing over the valley behind us and the sun was peeking over the top of the Ridges. Through the night the mules had plodded along at a steady pace and showed no indication that they weren't up to the strain that awaited them.*

*"The meadow is just on the other side of those trees." I pointed. "It's where Charlie and I unload the mules to start the climb into the ridges,"*

*"I see what you mean about the Ridges being a different world," KC said, raising her gaze up to the towering rocks.*

*"What you'll see when you get up into them is even more spectacular. Except today I'm too afraid about what we might find to enjoy the view," I responded. We rounded the corner ahead and began our ascent.*

*"Look at those buzzards circling up there. Are they always grouped together like that?" KC asked.*

*"I noticed them too," I answered. "The fact that they are grouped up isn't a good sign. They see something. I hate to think that maybe they see what we've come up here to find."*

*"I'm so scared, AJ. I'm afraid of finding him injured, or worse. I've never dealt with this kind of thing before. I wish that our dads were with us now. What were we thinking coming up here alone?" The expression on KC's face was that of a little girl as she spoke.*

*"We can do this, KC. We have to." I encouraged.*

*After we had climbed for part of an hour I noticed something unusual. "Look at that side trail, KC. It's been swept clean." I pointed. "Probably with that pine bow right over there. Someone has taken great pains to erase their tracks. I'll bet that trail leads us straight to Charlie. I swallowed a big lump in my throat. I'm afraid this isn't going to be pretty."*

*"Well, this is what we came up here for." she choked. "If we hadn't thought that he might be in bad shape we wouldn't have come in the first place, right?" KC bravely replied. Noticing the break in her voice I looked back at her. It was then I noticed the big tears streaming down her face.*

*I didn't comment about the tears. Instead I led the way up the trail. Suddenly the mules spooked, jumping sideways and nearly spilling us off their backs. Before us in the middle of the trail was a big condor. It attempted flight. However, the narrow trail and uneven terrain restricted it from getting a full wing span. It awkwardly got itself away from us. Then I saw what the bird had been waiting for. Lying just at the side of the trail was Charlie.*

*It was obvious they had tried to make it look like a small rock slide. Several rocks surrounded him. There was blood on the path where he lay and his arms and legs were at odd angles. KC gasped at the sight of the large stone that lay on his head. Charlie was motionless.*

*"AJ, is he dead?" KC cried out.*

*Quickly dismounting I ran to where he lay and hefted the rock away. His head was badly injured.*

*"Charlie! Can you hear me?" I said in a panic.*

*His right hand lifted slightly off the ground and fell back into the dirt. "KC, we've got to get him on the mule. Help me lift him."*

*Working together the two of us managed to worm him up onto the saddle in spite of our shaking hands. He laid crosswise on his stomach with his legs down one side and his arms the other. We secured him so he wouldn't slide off by tying his hands and legs with the saddle strings.*

*"KC, you walk beside him. I'll stay mounted and lead us out of here."*

*Handing me the reins of the trailing mule, she spoke softly, "I hope he makes it. I'm so worried we didn't get here in time and he'll die."*

*"He won't die!" I said sternly. "Charlie, you won't die. You're going to be okay." Now that we had actually found Charlie alive, I could better control my emotions and focus on taking the necessary action of trying to get him back to town.*

*It was a steep and slow descent. KC kept her balance by holding onto the stirrup leather next to Charlie's head. She spoke constantly to him, tenderly assuring him that he would be okay.*

*As we finally came out of the rocks to where we could see beyond the meadow I noticed a welcome sight. "Look KC, someone is coming. See the dust rising up from the road? Someone is driving towards us."*

*"But, AJ, that might not be so good. Think about who it is that would know we're here?"*

*Perhaps when they went to the corral to turn the mules out they figured out who took them. It isn't like we managed to be totally silent getting away from the abandoned house. If they're coming for us it's probably because they want all three of us dead!"*

*"We have to take that chance." I responded. "Maybe you should hide until we see who it is."*

*"Maybe you should." She snapped back at me with an expression of forced courage.*

*By the time the truck arrived we had reached the trees next to the meadow. It was indeed Craig and Dean that got out of the truck cab to greet us.*

*"Well I'll be go to hell. We've found the horse thieves." Dean showed no alarm over the fact that his father was lying bleeding on top of the mule. "AJ" he continued, "have you been hanging out with your new little girlfriend in abandoned houses lately?" Turning to Craig he commented, "I think you were right about them being there. You should have been a damned detective. These two just might know too much to go home."*

*My eyes fell upon the 30-30 rifle on the rack behind the seat of the truck. I wondered if we would die by the same means that his dog had.*

*Ignoring his question I tried to appeal to what I hoped were their nobler motives. "Help me get your father into the back of the truck. He needs medical help desperately." I said as I bravely as I could.*

*My request brought surprised concern to their faces, obviously from the fact that their father was still alive. Then without showing evidence of anything noble, Craig continued interrogating us. "How'd you know where to find the old man?"*

*KC spoke up. "Sir, we haven't met. I'm sure that you've heard that I'm here for the summer with my family. My name is KC Barlow. I have a special gift. You see, I'm psychic."*

*It was difficult for me to keep the surprise I felt at KC's improvised explanation from showing on my face. I remained quiet as she continued,*

*"I know things that others don't know. I get premonitions of things and I saw a clear vision of exactly where your father was and that he needed help. I didn't think anyone in town would believe me if I told them, me being a stranger and all. But AJ believed me and knew*

*exactly where I was talking about. So he and I borrowed Charlie's mules and came to the spot that I had seen in my vision. We found your father and I was right. He has had a terrible accident. Now let's get him some help!"*

*The brother's faces looked confused. Mine probably looked confused too. Then they did something I never expected. Dean motioned Craig to follow him around to the front of the truck away from us to talk. As they consulted between themselves, KC and I wrestled old Charlie into the back of the idling truck.*

*"That was brilliant," I whispered "Do you think they believed me?"*

*"Either way," I shrugged, "it bought us some time."*

*Coming back from their planning session Dean instructed us. "You two ride in the cab. I'll ride back here with Dad." KC and I exchanged concerned glances.*

*"It's okay," KC said. "I don't mind riding back here with him." With that she piled into the back of the truck.*

*Dean grabbed her arm and yanked her back out. "I'll ride back here." He spoke sternly. "You ride in the front."*

*KC popped right back into the bed of the truck. Dean pulled her right back out again.*



*“Do what I tell you.” he yelled. “I’m going to ride back here with my father. You and AJ are going to ride in the cab. Craig is going to drive.”*

*“Okay.” KC agreed. “But I really, really have to go pee first!” “Go then!” Dean barked.*

*She disappeared into the trees and brush towards the meadow. It was less than two minutes before she returned yelling with alarm in her voice.”*

*“Oh my! It’s awful! There’s a wolf out there in the meadow and he’s eating a cow. He’s chewing her udder right off. It’s terrible! Do something!”*

*Dean grabbed the rifle from the truck and the two of them disappeared into the trees.“Get in the back,” KC shoved me. With that she piled into the truck. She managed to get it into drive and was pulling away before I could get entirely in. Grabbing onto the bed I rolled myself in besides Charlie as she sped away.*

*KC made rapid distance away from the brothers. The truck weaved and swayed as she sped dangerously down the dirt road. I held onto Charlie with one hand and onto the side of the truck bed with the other. Trees streamed by in a blur. Somehow KC managed to miss piling into any of them as we actually became airborne over some of the bumps.*

*“KC!” I yelled. “Slow down! They’ll never catch us now. “*

*Ignoring me, she continued driving at the same wild speed all the way to the front of my house, where, to my relief, she managed to skid to a stop.*

*I jumped out of the back of the truck and started to the house. KC jumped out and intercepting me threw her arms around me. She was shaking from head to toe. I couldn’t believe what we had just done.*

*Dad ran out of the house yelling, “What the hell is going on here?”*

## CHAPTER 17

### *Sirens and Calf Roping Arenas*

Mr. Aldous Jesse Todd Junior lifted his eyes from the document that he had been reading to gaze upon the valley below. He noticed that a crowd had gathered around the chopper that had brought him to the valley. "Townspeople," he thought to himself, "they've probably never seen a helicopter in this town before." Noting that he had only a few more pages left to read, he elected to let the pilot deal with them until he finished reading his father's long letter.

He had enjoyed reading alone in the seclusion of the surrounding forest on such a peaceful summer day. It certainly had been a welcome break from his otherwise demanding schedule. He stood and gazed down on the town that he had never before visited.

"So this is where my roots came from," he said to a squirrel that had continually grown braver in his presence.

He spent a moment looking across the valley to the spectacular view of the wild towering rock formations of East Ridges and the distant snowcapped peaks behind them. He thought about what had happened there years ago. He thought of the young man his father had been with his horse, his dog and his few close friends. He tried to envision his young father roaming the streets in the town below and through the surrounding woods. He thought about old Charlie and how he had been a great influence on his father's ethical business practices. He felt gratitude inside for the opportunity to learn a little bit more of what his mother had been like as a young girl.

He sat down again and continued reading:

*It took a while to get Dad settled down enough to explain the emergency at hand. It took less than an hour before sirens from several vehicles came screaming into Toddsville. The paramedics took Charlie away and the police just waited for the mules to deliver the criminals into town. After watching Dean and Craig be cuffed and taken away, I only saw them one more time, and that was when I testified in court.*

*Well, son, that's about it. That's how I came to own the East Ridges. And that's how I came to love your mother. I knew I was in love with her the minute she started in on that psychic*



*business. Still can't believe those boys bought it. That woman could think and talk faster than anyone I ever met. She loved life and found joy in everything she did. I missed her everyday she was gone.*

*There's a reason that I wanted you to read this story in this location. Before I go over that, however, perhaps I should tie up some loose ends.*

*Sam Raby was disbarred for breach of attorney/client privilege. After Charlie had called him, Sam had called the boys and let them know that their plan of mining the ridges was going down because the old man had the hair brained scheme of giving it away to a kid.*

*I did hear about not trespassing and about my parents being able to trust me from my father, but other than that there were no other consequences inflicted upon me. When they found out what happened they had been horrified with the thought of what could have become of us.*

*Both sets of parents agreed it was a blessing that we had been in the abandoned house at the time we were. I heard later that several people around town considered us heroes.*

*Charlie recovered and lived 5 more years. He never was quite the same, however. He grew older faster after the terrible things his sons had done to him. He shut down the shop and never did make another saddle after that fateful summer. His mind was keen, however, up until his death. Until that sad day I took over doing the chores for him around his place. He and I continued to spend a lot of time together visiting. He continued to teach me valuable life principles when I asked his opinion on things and even when I didn't.*

*I never did name my colt. KC named him for me. We called him VIP, an acronym for Very Important Pony. I thought it was corny, but never bothered to tell her that. She named her colt Money Tree. I never did explain to her why the name was so appropriate.*

*Dad worked on his book off and on up until his death. Needless to say, it was never published. Mother never did suggest that I read it and I never did bother to ask. If you have any interest in reading it for yourself I'm sorry to say that I don't know how you could get your hands on it at this point.*

*The coal mines closed down shortly after Dean and Craig went to prison. The Perdy Cattle Ranch survived due to a manager that Dean's wife hired. After the Perdy girls married their husbands worked it.*

*KC came to Toddsville every summer and she learned to be an excellent horse trainer, a skill she profited from in California as well.*

*Shortly after Charlie's death I received a call from KC's mother. She said that we had the business of the will to settle. I traveled to her office in California. My main purpose for going, however, was to propose to your mother. After we married, we never returned to Toddsville.*

*As you know, she left the both of us the day you were born to become that angel that I first mistook her for.*

*Some of what you read today I'm sure you already knew. I'm now going to tell you something that I've never told anyone. The will that KC's mother showed me that day was a huge surprise. Charlie had not only willed the ridges to me, he had willed everything he owned. The land that is spread out below you, north, south, east and some of what is on the west you are now the rightful owner of. You can do with it what you want.*

*We have worked closely together with the dealings of AJ Enterprises and you have proven to be an excellent businessman. There's a reason that I have never disclosed this parcel of real estate to you or anyone else before. You see, I've had strong feelings about guarding it. I wanted you to read my little story today hoping that you might also feel the same. I believe that it has served its purpose and should be left alone. I'll tell you what that purpose was.*

*As you know, I've always held true to the business motto to never risk more than I'm willing to lose. Let me tell you where that practice started. In light of the fact that I had to start paying the property taxes on the Perdy Cattle Ranch and in light of what Dean and Craig Perdy did to their father, I decided that I could afford to lose that property if my plans failed. The plan was to borrow money against the ranch and invest in money making ventures. That is how AJ Enterprises got started.*

*As a result, you have inherited hundreds of millions of dollars, son. I see no need for the life of Charlie's grandchildren and great grandchildren to be disrupted. It's my wish that you leave things as they have been for so many years. Consider the idea of allowing them to remain on the ranch and to profit from their labors. Obviously, the ranch is worth millions and I have no idea how much the coal under the Ridges is worth. Enough that evil men were willing to kill their own for it.*

*Through the years, AJ Enterprises has been successful enough to contribute to the world without tapping into this corner of it. I know you well son; I know you'll do the right thing.*

*I love you,*

*Dad*

*Oh, and P.S., please remember that your first name wasn't my idea. It was your mother who insisted the family tradition be carried forward.*

Chuckling at the post script, AJ Todd Jr. returned the pages of the story into the envelope and began his descent down the slope of the T Hill. His thoughts were still in the past. He thought of his father making the same descent towards the likes of Dean Perdy mending the fence some 65 years before.

Crossing the flat he noted that there was quite a little gathering around the chopper and the pilot. As he became exposed to their view the crowd seemed to line up and watch him as he approached. As he neared, several children ran over to him.

"Hello children, what are your names?" They told him their names one by one. "Any of you have the last name Perdy?" he asked.

Perdy is the name of the ranch our family owns," One of the older girls reported. "Our grandmothers were Perdy's before they married."

Mr. Todd smiled at his mistake. He realized that his mind had been caught up in the long ago past of his father's letter. They all walked together until they reached their serious faced mothers.

Speaking to the pilot Mr. Todd commented, "Thanks for waiting so long for me Bill." "No problem boss," Bill answered. "I work for you. We have some complaints from these town folk for you to handle. They say I've landed in their field without permission. They're rather upset about that. They also aren't happy that you were trespassing on their property."

Mr. Todd had to smile at the irony of the situation. "What did you tell them, Bill?" "I told them that I landed where you told me to and they'd have to deal with you."

Mr. Todd walked over to the stony faced women. "Are any of you daughters of Lucy, Lacy or Rebecca?"

"Yes, we're their daughters. Though Rebecca is no longer with us and Lucy isn't well." One of the mothers answered.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Mr. Todd said with sincerity in his voice. "I certainly apologize for the intrusion." he continued. "I believe that you'll forgive me when I explain my reason for landing in the field. I notice that it isn't irrigated and that there's only wild grass here. Seems a little bit too rocky to bother with plowing, am I right?"

"It is rocky, but that isn't the point," one of the women snapped.

“Perhaps I should have asked permission,” Mr. Todd continued. “I’m sorry that I made a poor introduction. Let me tell you what I have in mind. You see, my father grew up in this town years ago. You probably haven’t heard of him, but grandmas Lucy and Lacy would know him. He enjoyed the sport of roping calves. Any of you kids like calf roping?”

“We sure do, mister,” one of the boys answered.

“Well, with the long winters and short summers he wasn’t able to practice much until he moved away. I’m guessing you have the same problem. I’m in a position to make it possible for any aspiring young ropers to practice year round. You see, I’d like to build an inside roping arena right at this spot and dedicate it to the town in my Dad’s name. Would you be willing to allow that in your field?”

*The end*

What does a craftsman do when he is too busy filling orders to take the time to write the stories that are rattling around in his head, yearning to come out? If a craftsman is a shoe, boot and saddle maker, Don Roundy, he takes the time to write this little book to test the waters. If you have comments or suggestions please feel free to contact the author from [roundyboots.com](http://roundyboots.com). While you are at the site please take the time to read and comment on his cowboy poetry as well.

**HORSE SENSE**  
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***IS A STORY ABOUT A BOY FORCED TO DEAL WITH A SUMMER OF  
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Experience Western small town life with AJ Todd.  
Young readers will relate to his conflicts, older readers will chuckle as they relive the struggles of  
their own growing years.

Expect to enjoy some adventure, a hint of adolescent romance, a little sadness and humor.

*Don, I read your book in one sitting and really enjoyed it. It's funny, suspenseful, and rings with truth. We live in a small town and your book is the type of story I could imagine a favorite cowboy neighbor spinning over the campfire. I am a novelist aspiring to be published, so I know how hard it is to craft a long piece of fiction with action and heart – and you have achieved both. Congratulations!*

*-- Jewel Punzalan Allen*

*I read your book. Nice job. I appreciated the character build and the storyline. Well worth my reading.*

*-- Stephen J. Simich*

*I came home from getting the oil changed in the car, today and checked mye-mail. Started to read your story and couldn't stop until I finished. I Loved it. It is great and should be published.*

*-- Julia Foster*

*I read "Horse Sense" on the plane while flying to Texas and thoroughly enjoyed it. I kept trying to imagine which parts of the story were actual events and found myself wanting more of the story. You are a great writer! Thanks so much for the labor of love and words of wisdom.*

*--Nancy Anderson*