
The Lost & Found
Ron Wilbur

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Inside each person is the profound hope that if you get lost that you will be found.

In fact, the great mystery of life is not whether you will get lost, because that's inevitable at some point, but whether you'll be found.

The journeys and experiences and people in our life are threads that weave our hopes into a fabric.

Your life is not summed up by how you begin, or even what you do, but by where you end up.

And where you end up at any given time is simply where you are at that moment in the journey.

And so, the profound question:

Are you lost or are you found?

Chapter 1. The Rider

He picks up his bedroll from the hard dusty ground, shakes it, rolls it, secures it tightly with bungee cords to the forks of the motorcycle.

It might not be the best start to a day, but it is a beginning.

Last night passed quickly, too quickly for sleep to do much catching up to him. As he lay on the warm ground trying to ignore the incessant buzzing of mosquitoes, he reflected on the chain of events that brought him to this place. Somehow, in mid-thought, sleep finally crept up on him and with the exception of the odd pain from lying on somewhat uneven ground, he slept the rest of the night without great effort or challenge.

Now looking around the campsite he notices things that weren't obvious last night. Or perhaps tequila had obliterated his memory of them, taking with them a few thousand brain cells. Bare ground with few trees, a lazy, almost stagnant stream clogged with weeds on the other side, a faint scent of pine on the breeze, a weathered Harley, a few possessions hurriedly tossed into the saddlebags, and the hated helmet that attacked him on every ride with scalp itch so bad he wanted to personally destroy it with a chain saw.

What he notes in his quick visual survey is the remnants of last night and most of his assets.

"Damn, scrambled eggs and coffee would sure taste good," he mumbles to himself while believing fully that neither of the two are likely prospects in the immediate future.

As he begins moving around the modest campsite, he appreciates one benefit to sleeping in your clothes with your boots on - it is so much simpler getting up in the morning.

When nothing else is left to load on the bike, he plants his butt on the saddle, checks that the transmission is in neutral, turns the fuel petcock to "on," rotates the keyed ignition switch, and pushes "start," smiling with quiet satisfaction as the sound of the V-twin engine rumbles quickly to life.

"Now, that's the sound of happiness," he thinks, instantly mentally correcting the last word of that statement from "happiness" to "good shit."

Yesterday was all a jumbled mess of action, emotion, reaction, doubt, and anger, and he is troubled that he can't reach much of a conclusion about it. What's it all mean and what should he do about it beside ride his Harley out of his pain? He hopes that more thinking, more pondering, more questioning will bring things into better focus. It's a guess.

Pushing down on the shift lever with his left foot while twisting the throttle and releasing the clutch brings the 700-pound machine to life and both rider and bike roll out of the campsite and onto a two-lane asphalt road.

The direction he is taking is the direction he is going. There isn't any more sense to it than that. Sometimes you take life where you want, sometimes life takes you where it wants. This is the latter. It doesn't pay to over complicate things.

The narrow country road is empty except for a few crows picking at the remains of a small critter that attempted an unfortunate and ill-timed crossing that ended abruptly in the middle of the right lane.

He has never liked crows, lumping them together in the same basket as vultures and other carrion-eaters. They squawk continuously, like two young siblings, and they have usually been out of reach of a smooth stone when one has sailed from his fingertips.

He aims straight for the feathered flesh eaters, missing them as they easily fly off in different directions, their "caws" expressing laughter at the rider's vain attempt.

It isn't his first effort to deliberately take another life, and he figures that it won't be his last. Crows deserve whatever he can inflict on them, and that is true of a whole lot of other plagues upon society, he reasons.

It all centers on justice. That's what motivates him. Instinctively and often Impulsively. Much of his life has been the unavoidable result of a visceral need to settle matters fairly.

As the bike settles into a deep bass rumble in fifth gear, the Rider begins making sweeping turns from the right edge of his lane to the left edge of the opposite side of the road, turning the straight road into a series of small S curves. With no traffic in sight, he continues this gentle, rolling wakeup exercise for almost a mile before the first smile forms on his face this morning.

As exhilaration hits him he yells "Good morning, world," at the top of his lungs. It is, indeed, a hell of a great way to begin this day, the beginning of a new chapter in his life.

A car passes him going the other way, and he wonders where it is going. He himself has no particular destination and he is half open to suggestion, even one offered by an oncoming car. The other half of him is not open to anything but walled away inside a secret place that no one will ever see.

The questions enter his mind. Maybe that driver has a good idea of where to go. Maybe the car will arrive at one of these small western towns, pull into a driveway along the road, get shut off alongside a plain frame house, and the driver will go in to be greeted with a scrambled egg and coffee breakfast.

He often has thoughts like this when he is alone and riding the motorcycle, passing other cars or being passed by them. Families inside, kids yelling and fighting in the backseats, parents turning to yell, "stop that right now," the driver growling, "don't make me stop this car," the

veiled threats attempting to stem the cacophony in the back. Men driving pickups, denim jacket, maybe a gun rack in the rear window, hay in the bed of the truck, heading home to a small farm or ranch with feed for the cattle and horses. Moms caravanning an SUV loaded with kids, going to or from some event at some school or sport in a nearby town.

Purposeful. People with a plan. A destination.

None of which the Rider has.

The road sends a backbeat through his arms and legs as old songs play in his mind, some in tempo with the rhythm of tires on asphalt. JJ Cale, Creedence Clearwater, Steppenwolf all bring out their finest traveling music, amplified through the sound system in his head.

“I see the bad moon arising” morphs into “Get your motor running; head out on the highway,” followed by “They call me the breeze, I keep blowing down the road.”

Even his mental stereo is jumbled, unsure if it should play songs of exuberance or dirges of depression. And maybe that’s just true, maybe everything is a mixture of joy and melancholy at the same time. Maybe life is a messed-up playlist offering no direction, no destination, and no meaning, bouncing up and falling down, bouncing up and falling down, over and over until it hits the end.

Or maybe it’s just that he’s messed up.

He can’t be sure.

Chapter 2. The Kid

After a half-hour on the road, the Rider pulls into the wide entrance to the only gas station in a one gas station town, accompanied by a small swirl of dust and the crisp crunch of gravel. The day is already starting to warm up. No grass, trees or other vegetation anywhere in sight at the small gas station and convenience store.

The gas gauge on the big rumbling bike had been moving ominously toward “E” the last five miles before camp last night, and even though he has just switched to the reserve part of the tanks, he is in no mood to test if he can make it much further. Better to just fill up now.

He walks into the station, hands his credit card to the kid behind the counter, goes back to the bike and twists off the dual fuel caps, then inserts the nozzle inside each side of his tank in sequence, first filling the downhill half, capping it, and then the uphill half. As he pushes the fuel nozzle back into its home on the pump he realizes he has to go inside to get a receipt, a habit that he meticulously follows.

“Shit!” under his breath as he walks toward the station. He was hoping to avoid human interaction for a while longer. No coffee, no scrambled eggs, and in no mood for chitchat - a senseless and stupid activity when your stomach is not yet prepared for the day.

But, his one obsessive-compulsive quirk demands that he get a receipt and, resigned to his own regimen, he strides into the small metal building to get the requisite slip of paper with meaningless numbers and useless text.

“Howdy,” greets him from across the room as he steps through the door, the sound emanating from the lone clerk, a tall, gangly kid of maybe 16 with a full face of pimples and a quick smile. The greeting doesn’t mix well with the Rider’s morning surliness, but he fights back the urge to say, “Screw you,” and instead walks to the counter.

“Need a receipt,” he mutters, half expecting the young snot to ask him “Which pump?” He’s the only customer there and there are only two pumps in the station. Will this kid be slow or just follow protocol? Wait, this is the middle of nowhere. There wouldn’t be any protocol here.

“Here ya go,” from the kid proffering a small, printed receipt that said “Harald Kitchen Enterprises” at the top, “Do you need anything else? Coffee, beer, chips?” motioning to the Lottery poster, the three rows of thin shelves with snacks and the wall coolers with beer and soft drinks.

“Yeah, some information. Any place around here that serves breakfast?”

“About 30 miles down the road there’s a café that should be open.”

“Figures,” mumbles the Rider under his breath as he grabs the receipt, stuffs it into the zippered pocket on his leather jacket, and heads toward the door.

“You have a good day,” calls out the kid as the door closes behind the Rider… two seconds later adding, “or not” after the Rider has exited wordlessly and is walking across the concrete to his bike.

You never know what the door will bring into the station, the kid thinks. It could be someone who is as put-on cheery as the artificial sweetener in diet soft drinks, or you could get an old grumpy ass who makes it their life’s work to share their own personal bitterness, or, you could get the silent type like the biker. The kid wonders if the Rider is just lost in his own world, or is having a bad day, or maybe is just not a talker. Doesn’t matter, he thinks, but hell, the guy could at least have been social. Even in the middle of nowhere there is the expectation of civilized social behavior.

The Rider slips onto the saddle and fires up the bike which after a moment settles into a happy, rumbling idle, the two exhaust pipes echoing a throbbing that feels both deep and comforting to the kid behind the counter in the station. “Gotta love the sound of a Harley,” he thinks. “Wish I had one of them,” while somehow resigned to the likelihood that he will never escape this desperate little collection of farms, ranches and dusty fields, and there is no chance he will ever be able to afford a big, loud, “Look At Me,” two-wheeled statement to the world.

The Rider gives the bike a gentle roll on the throttle while smoothly releasing the clutch with his left hand, curving the bike out of the gas station and back onto the asphalt ribbon that leads towards who knows what.

Chapter 3. Sara

Less than a half hour later a rusty metal pole rises from the flat surroundings holding a faded "Jerry's Café" sign and the Rider pulls in to a gravel parking lot and stops in front of a big window. Silently noting the encouraging sign of a parking lot with other cars, the Rider pulls off his helmet, hangs it by the straps from the handlebars, and walks into the café.

The Rider claims an empty stool at the counter, settling down on it like a tired bird on a nest. The interior of the café looks like something out of an old cable travel channel. Formica-topped counters and booth tables, with creased, chromed trim. Vinyl covered chairs and stools. Old Coca Cola clock on the wall, still working, with two neon tubes encircling its stainless-steel exterior. A 5-spindle milkshake mixer on the bar behind the counter area stands next to a rectangular hole in the wall through which the Rider can see a short order cook moving back and forth between griddle and order wheel.

"Order up," the cook says loudly, placing someone's breakfast on the small counter in the empty window to the kitchen, and slipping the order ticket on a revolving wheel for the waitress to take back with the dish.

The Rider lifts a clear plastic covered menu, the kind with the metal corners and cloth spines, out of the chrome stand in front of him. The chrome condiment island also houses a glass sugar dispenser, a small metal cream dispenser with tilt up lid, ketchup bottle, small tabasco bottle and salt and pepper shakers, all clustered around a tall metal napkin dispenser.

When the waitress comes up to him with a cheery "What'll it be?" and a pot of coffee, the Rider quietly says, "Scrambled eggs and coffee." No need to say "please" on a morning like this. He can't think of a single pleasant thing to say at the moment nor any sense of social propriety or decency with which to manufacture one.

"Want some toast with that?" she replies, eliciting an immediate head shaking "no" response. She knows the type. They're always like him: quiet, to themselves, lost in their own thoughts or in the awkward clumsiness of being around strangers. It's probably just a whole lot easier to be perfunctory, just say what you want and be done with it. Come to think of it, most people around here are just like that. You can drag two words out of them if the time is right, but don't press your luck for three. The main exchange between locals is a simple "Howdy," a two-syllable expression that encompasses an entire conversation, and that essentially means "How are you?" "Hope you're doing good. I like you okay. I'm doing okay otherwise I wouldn't have said 'Howdy.' "

Around here "Howdy" says it all.

Still, the waitress wishes that just once in a while she could have a pleasant conversation with another adult - something more personal, like maybe, "How's the family?" "How's your

daughter doing upstate at college?" "How's the farm?" - an actual exchange of humanity that expresses interest and caring and recognition of belonging.

She lives here, but she's never quite felt like she belonged here. Here is where she ended up, not where she planned to be. But, this being what it is, a wide spot in the road and the only real work for miles, "Howdy" does just fine.

In five minutes, she is back with "Here ya are, sweetie. Get you more coffee?" as she sets the plate of scrambled eggs in front of the Rider.

A nod is all he gives, which brings the pot up and the coffee pouring into his cup. He ignores the name tag on her blouse that says "Sara," resisting any attempt at personal communication.

He doesn't look around as he silently adds ketchup to his eggs, shoves a forkful in his mouth, and then sips his coffee, mixing the entire mouthful into a gravy-like consistency before swallowing slowly, almost thoughtfully, savoring the taste.

Chapter 4. Reflection

Less than 24 hours before, the Rider had packed his motorcycle saddlebags and headed out on this trip to nowhere and somewhere.

At the moment, he is filled with one big mess of conflicting thoughts. Memories of the past two days swirl around in his brain like dry weeds in a dust devil. Two days ago his job of 15 years had suddenly been taken from him. Hell, he didn't even like that stinkin' job, but it paid the bills and gave him something to do with his days. That night after he got the news he finished off the last of the tequila in the house and planned his next steps. It wasn't really a plan. Go! Just leave! Go anywhere, just feel like you are doing something.

That next day he went to the ATM and punched in the PIN that will give him a stake for a while. Armed with a thousand bucks in twenties, he knows that he can get some miles behind him before he has to reload his cash.

It wasn't really a plan. Load up the bike, call his sister to tell her she can have anything in the house, and then roll. His sister pressed him for details that he doesn't have.

Her simple, "Where are you going?" doesn't need an answer. Just tell her where the key is and hang up. Then get on the bike.

After the call he had headed east, stopping twice to refill the Harley's gas tanks, winding down a series of blue highways, the kind that issues a siren call to bikers and loners, stretching out toward a wide open land.

When it was almost dark, he spotted a clear field just off the road and laid his bedroll and body down not far from a small stream.

No sense in paying good money for a motel room, even though they are probably not too pricey in this part of the country. Better to save his money and make it last as long as he can. There is more in the bank account, but that's no reason to be foolish. Having no plan, and thus no idea of when or if he will be able to add to his bankroll, it was a simple mandate to be frugal.

Scrambled eggs and coffee are a good way to fill your nutritional bucket and clear your head, he reasons.

What should he do? Where should he go? What hand is the future holding for him? All thoughts that beg answers that he can't as yet provide.

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Sara slips the bill under his rapidly disappearing plate of eggs as he ponders the only deep question so far this morning. Why does a bill say “Check” at the top? Okay, maybe it isn’t so much of a philosophical question as a sardonic observation.

Stuck in his momentary reverie he takes the pen and impulsively writes “Checkmate” at the bottom of the bill, drops six bucks for the eggs, coffee and tip, leaves it all on the Formica counter next to his plate as he walks to the door, opens it, a bell at the top ringing to announce his departure.

In his current state of mind, “Check” is a simple anomaly. Is this a message sent by the future to help him figure out the rest of his life? Check what? Check my life? Check my plan (as if I have one)? Check the weather? Check the bills for accuracy? Check my pockets for winning lottery tickets?

Doesn’t matter.

“I really should check things,” he thinks, as he opens the café door and steps out into the sunlight. Maybe I should have checked before I left yesterday. Should I have stayed and tried to make a go of it, put on my big boy pants and got ready to slug it out?

Check.

These are fair questions that his still murky brain doesn’t want to grapple with. Back here in reality, he is traveling on his bike, a good eight hours ride from home, and on an odyssey to somewhere.

An old riding buddy of his once told him, “When you get more than a day’s ride away from home your cares drop off of your shoulders like yesterday’s news.” And, it has always been true.

His thinking may still be conflicted, but he’s beginning to feel lighter already.

He isn’t sure if he is running away from something, but it’s as obvious as a broken leg that he isn’t running to something. He has no plan. Best to keep going and let things work out as they will.

He fires up the bike and rolls.

Chapter 5. Sara's story

Today started with a rush; cold water shower because the hot water heater is on the blink again. That gets Sara's blood going. Dried off and fluffed into a cozy bathrobe she downs a cup of almost chewable hot coffee, a bad habit she picked up in Seattle. The habit goes like this: you brew your coffee the day before, extra strong, and then let it sit all day and all night. The next morning you heat it to piping hot and sprinkle two teaspoons of instant Café Vienna coffee as a lightener, while stirring. The coffee has plenty of caffeine in it, and the extra bump in the Café Vienna makes it feel like you can do anything, sky's the limit. It is no doubt a drug, but you're only addicted If you can't quit. Sara has no intention of even testing the question.

Caffeine is firing all of her cylinders that morning as Sara fixes her hair, gets dressed in her uniform, puts her makeup on, adding extra mascara to her lashes, checks herself in the full-length mirror, puts on her coat, grabs her purse and keys, and locks the trailer door behind her as she walks to her car.

It's a short drive. The trailer is in a tiny trailer park, only a dozen spaces, 4 miles from the café on the highway and 1 mile up a side road, inside a small stand of shade trees.

Pulling out of the park slowly so as not to disturb her neighbors, she drives to work, no thought required, just doing it.

The café is still dark when she pulls into the parking lot, parking on the side of the cinder block building. The forlorn Jerry's Café sign on the road has spotlights on both sides, but both are off. Jerry is just turning on the interior lights when she walks in the door. It's cold inside, but the big heater will make it warm in less than 15 minutes.

The owner is an interesting person. He's Norwegian, his name spelled Jarie, but everyone knows him as Jerry. He's 12 years older than Sara, bought the café 7 years ago after moving here from Minnesota. He is very good at just about everything, Sara believes, but he still acts like he knows nothing. Jerry is a people pleaser and is always trying to be "less than" to please others. It works well. The café has lots of repeat customers because Jerry treats regulars like they're the greatest people, and they reward him with their regular patronage.

Sara gets the Bun coffeemaker going, filling the filter in the basket with coffee, pushing it in, and hitting the red button, checking to make sure a carafe is on the burner under the basket. The counter has utensils and cups at each location, repositioned at closing every night so the counter will be ready for customers first thing in the morning. She goes to the thermostat and turns it up a notch as Jerry rushes by to get the kitchen set up for the day.

Within 10 minutes the kitchen is in business and Jerry is making a hot griddle breakfast for himself and Sara. It's damned hard to get help out here, is his thinking, and a free breakfast is one of the perks of the job. Besides, he's a single guy and it's kind of nice to have breakfast with a young woman every morning.

Breakfast finished, 6 am, Jerry hits the switch to turn on the spots on the roadside sign as Sara clears the till in anticipation of customers and money.

Two hours later, after a dozen patrons have already eaten and left, a road dust covered man pulls into the parking lot on a Harley, walks in, sits down at the counter and orders scrambled eggs and coffee, no toast. He keeps to himself, like so many people that eat here.

He pays and leaves and she takes away the plate, coffee mug and glass, wipes down the counter, resets the utensils and napkin and mug, all the while wondering exactly what that customer meant when he wrote “Checkmate” on his bill. Some people are like that. Puzzling.

The morning passes, a few more customers here, a regular there, three locals later on, mixed in with a traveler or two and five or six truckers. It slows from 10-11:30 and then picks up for the lunch trade until 1:30 or so. Then it’s slow until she clocks out at 3.

She’s been working at the café for three years. Came through here after a disastrous affair in Seattle with a married co-worker who happened to be the brother of the mayor. Sara thought they were in love, he thought she was just fine for a while, and almost every night he drove home to his wife while she took a bus back to her apartment. She had trouble sleeping, except for the occasional night when she drifted off in his arms in a hotel room. On other nights she tossed and turned for hours before dropping into a sleep of exhaustion, only to wake three hours later with her mind spinning on how to get him to leave his wife and become hers forever. That is what is supposed to happen, right? They were in love, she thought and sometimes believed.

Instead, the only thing she ended up with out of the relationship was unemployment and an insatiable thirst for thick, dark, hot coffee, the last resulting from many early mornings at a coffee shop after nights of either lying awake thinking about him or making love with him. In either case, coffee was not a drug, it was a necessary element of life, giving her energy, interest, attention and vocabulary. In other words, it made her better; she was sure of that.

The day after she is laid off she makes a desperate call to her co-worker, asking him to meet her. When they meet she issues an ultimatum, “I’m leaving unless you have the guts to leave your wife. Then, I might stay.” His answer is swift and harsh, “Look, I don’t intend to leave my wife. I love you, sure I do. But I’d get killed in a divorce and I can’t do that. I’m stuck, so do what you have to do.”

She packs up her clothes and toiletries and kitchen items and leaves. Drives straight south out of Seattle through the little towns of Fife, Lacey, Maytown, on her way back to the even smaller town in Nevada where she grew up.

She drives all day, heading east out of Portland before taking the southeasterly turn toward Nevada. It is about 5pm when she suddenly realizes she is extremely hungry. Out of nowhere a

Café sign pops up and she slows. It looks okay, she thinks. She pulls in, walks to the lunch counter, sits down and orders a burger with fries and a coke. That hits the spot. The counterguy is the only person there. He takes her order and then retreats back into the kitchen and cooks it. Setting the plate up on the pass-thru, he walks back out front, picks up the plate and sets it down in front of her, giving her a big smile. She is very nice-looking, he thinks.

She asks him, "Are there any motels around here?" He replies, "Nope, not really. Well, I guess you could call Shady Hope something like that. It's a trailer park but old Nicolas the owner had some people sell him their trailers when they moved out and he rents 'em out. Kinda like a motel. Why're you asking?"

"I lost my job two days ago and I'm passing through heading home."

"Look, I just lost my server yesterday. He was a young kid, not worth the powder to…," voice trailing off. "I was going to put a 'Help Wanted' sign out. If you decide to stick around, I'd offer you a job. This is a real pretty area for three seasons, and even winter's not bad. To get to Shady Hope just drive east under five minutes and you'll see the sign."

Four miles down the road she sees a wooden sign on the right side of the road.

Shady Hope Trailer Park.
We rent trailers by the night.
Cheaper than a motel!

with an arrow pointing beneath it "--> 1 mile!" She turns right onto the smaller road, drives for another couple minutes until she sees a grove of trees and another sign, pulls into the driveway, walks to the office, rents a trailer for one night.

That was three years ago. And today is today.

Sara was momentarily puzzled by the "Checkmate" written on the bottom of the check but filed it away as someone's amused doodling.

Driving back to the trailer after work, she settles into her rhythm, the routine drive. She parks and locks the car, walks to the door while juggling purse, coat and keys, unlocks and opens the door. It's dark inside. She left the curtains closed this morning. Too little sleep again. It was because of sex, but not because of a man. Two mating squirrels have been scampering around atop her trailer several nights this past week for hours at a time. A couple times she actually got up from her relaxing swivel rocker chair to pound on the wall and yell, "For God's sake, make babies and stop arguing so I can get some peace here!"

She blinks and turns on the light switch, moves around the trailer dropping her coat and purse, setting her keys on the small table along the wall, moving gradually into the transition from work life to home life, which in her case still means "alone life." She's not stuck, she thinks.

There are some nice men around here; not many but a few. And some are not too much older than her. A bunch of ‘em are married, some of them because they banged their girlfriend in high school and had to go to the altar at the end of a shotgun, so to speak, and others because they met a girl, dated for a few years while they went to ag school, came back, worked, saved, bought a little farm and married that girl. A few of the men are shitheads, either dumb as posts or crass and awkward or the “big-man” type. She dated a couple of guys, but they had one thing on their minds and after they got it they were not even pleasant. She was taking a break from dating for a while, hoping for a better crop.

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If the Rider had a family, things would have been much more obvious, he figures. A wife and kids tend to ground a man, give him purpose. But, the only family he has left is his sister. Parents have been dead for years. Ex-wife is a bitch - thank God they didn’t have any kids. The few girlfriends since his divorce never amounted to much, most being fairly shallow with fewer interests outside of bills and loneliness. It’s not that he doesn’t have a shallow side, himself. Sex can be shallow. Bring someone home from a bar, have some human touch with no expectations, say a few gracious things in the morning, and be on your way. Shallow.

He has not made any emotional connection with his hookups. One girlfriend works in the office where he was employed. She tried to get his attention for weeks, smiling when he came into the office, adding a little uplift to her voice when she spoke, pushing her hair back with one hand like a movie starlet from another era. He could tell she was interested in him, but it wasn’t until she invited him to coffee after work that he could see she was really interested. Coffee led to drinks which led to dinner which led to a nice evening of music and eventual lovemaking. God, how he had missed a real woman’s touch. The relationship lasted about as long as a season, ending when he got drunk and told her honestly that while he liked the sex he didn’t think he could love her. So much for telling the truth. She left him like a cat escaping a coyote convention.

Chapter 6. Rebecca

He met the next girlfriend at the grocery store. She was a checker. (Hmm. There's that word again – what do they check?) He shopped at her store every Sunday, gathering the simple prepared foods and staples he would need for the following week. She was always friendly, smiling and greeting everyone in line, as she did with him. Occasionally, as she rang up his purchases and reported the total, she would ask him a somewhat personal question or offer something about her life. Her name badge said her name was Rebecca.

He was in a good mood one Sunday as his purchases moved on the belt to Rebecca's waiting hands. He looked at her and, noticing her sweet disposition, in a moment of weakness he told her she looked very nice. To his surprise, she blushed as her face sent "hello!" messages past the makeup mask she always carefully applied.

He wasn't a dummy. It looked like she might like him. The next Sunday, he told her that he had been thinking about her and would she ever be interested in maybe going to a movie or something.

She didn't respond but simply wrote something on the back of the receipt. It was a phone number. He called her one night after a couple of days and a couple of drinks, and she readily accepted an invitation to go to a movie with him.

Their first date was almost a disaster. He arrived at her house on his Harley with a spare helmet and she couldn't hide her surprise. After he explained that they could walk the 15 blocks to the theater or they could ride the short distance on his bike, she agreed to ride and that was all it took. The movie wasn't much and they did not talk or kiss or even hold hands from opening scene until the credits. The remainder of the date was over after a quick stop for coffee and conversation after the movie. Rebecca was nice, and he regretted that he had waited so long to try to get to know her.

The next Sunday, in the checkout line with his groceries, he asked if she would be interested in going for a ride in the country, to which she quickly responded by mouthing the word, "yes." That ride was the start of several months of riding, picnics, sitting quietly together along nearby streams, rivers or lakes they had ridden to.

It was a relationship built on no need for conversation, sharing quietude and solemnity, soaking in the beauty of the land. What talks they had were somewhat superficial, ineffective attempts to scratch each other's surface so they could get to the deep stuff inside.

Companionship naturally gravitated toward a physical relationship, which surprisingly opened the Rider up for conversation. After that, they had long talks, often in the afterglow of an intimate time, quietly sipping wine with music in the background. Rebecca had every smooth jazz album known to man, and that created an enveloping romantic environment. The

closeness they felt in those moments usually led to more lovemaking, after which they lay together quietly and softly, words not needed, just thoughts and feelings.

At one point, he thought she might be the one to take the place of his ex-wife as a mate for life. But he wasn't as skilled at relationships as he was adept at being blunt, and one or two suggestions about her clothing soon made things uncomfortable between them. He tried to smooth things over with kindness and attention, but she confided that she had just come out of a relationship with a controlling person, and she had no interest in repeating that experience.

Bye bye, number two.

Maybe he was supposed to be a loner. Maybe he just didn't know how to be around women. His first marriage had been a cluster, although it dragged on for four agonizing years, two years after she lost interest and one year after he felt the same. The split had been amicable but left him with a determination to find himself before he found anyone else. And he knew this one thing - anyone he might want to get close to needed to have found themselves, too.

Chapter 7. Riding to Nowhere

The sound of the engine brought him back from his reverie. There was something not quite right. The bike was running rough as though it had gotten bad gas at the station a while back. He needed to concentrate and listen to see if he could figure out what was wrong. It was a carbureted engine, which made some diagnoses a little simpler. Could be a plugged air cleaner, fouled plugs, bad spark plug wire, or possibly a few other things. In any case, it was concerning.

Alone, on two wheels, with what possessions you own on your bike, your only transportation on a quiet country road, couple hundred miles from anyone you know. It is enough to make you nervous, although nerves aren't what he is feeling. It is more of a recognition that "clusters" are called that because they aren't just one thing that goes wrong. Not a single voice singing off-key, but a whole chorus of bad notes, one after the other, each adding to the others. "Don't let this be a damn cluster," he thinks.

He rides on, focusing on the sound coming from his lone companion, the machine.

Fortunately, the problem, whatever it is, gets no worse and he is able to maintain a steady speed.

Traveling through little groups of houses and tiny farm communities in this part of the country is relaxing, exactly what he has been seeking. Along the road, an artery running hundreds of miles from one direction to hundreds in the other, mostly countryside with occasional small towns of smallish, painted, white frame homes set back from front lawns with short fences, maybe a swing set or a child's play pool, the occasional dog barking at the loud machine roaring past them, faded signs on the outside of the occasional outbuilding, and a few small wood-framed buildings and dilapidated storefronts, only half occupied, most of which are sorely in need of paint.

On weekends there might be families in front yards with barbecues smoking and a picnic in progress, frisbees being thrown, small kids playing in the sprinkler. And just like in most every little town in America, there would be a park with a ballfield and a dozen or so adults and kids playing baseball. It is the definition of community in small town America.

Between towns are mile after mile of fields of wheat, hay, cattle, pastureland, farmhouses, barns, sheep, horses, irrigation ponds. The heartland. Or near enough to look like it.

The salt of the earth lives in places like this, he thinks.

About an hour after the bike started running rough, the engine coughs a couple of times, shudders, and then suddenly, mysteriously begins to run normally as an even-sounding rhythm drumbeats through the large machine. This brings instant relief to the Rider, who has been concerned about the mechanical dysfunction for the last 60 miles.

One problem down, three hundred million to go, he thinks. In a blazing forest fire, a cup of water doesn't mean much to the outcome, too small and inconsequential, but it is still comforting. The whole place can burn down, but at least your throat won't be parched, and that is something isn't it? He doesn't count the engine's return to apparent health as a wholesale miracle, but it is one small, positive thing, like getting the first matching number on a lottery ticket. The key from here is to not jinx the outcome by wondering if there will be a second matching number. You simply continue on. It will be what it will be, a lesson the Rider has learned the hard way.

Today's blue highway ribbons through miles of low hills alternating with more miles of broad western vistas, as the Rider steals occasional glances at dirt and sagebrush and other small plants able to gain precious purchase in the semi-arid landscape. Cinder cones stand up proudly above cascading skirts of loose rocks at each base, the result of millennia of nature's pruning.

There is something timeless about much of the west, as though the milieu of movies, books and art have only been successful in capturing a tiny slice of time, leaving all the rest to the imagination. Where were artists when all of this landscaping was underway? Why aren't galleries filled with paintings imagining erosion in various stages? Is it because there were no witnesses, or did any indigenous depictions fall victim to the same changes that brought the rest of the landscape to its present stage? Did the creatures that roamed what once had been a vast ocean shoreline and marshland simply not have any artistic bones in their bodies, with no ability to capture their surroundings?

"Deep thought, man," thinks the Rider, and not really worth pondering – it is simply an idle escape from searching for meaning in his present troubles.

He hasn't concluded how he has even come to this point in his life. Did nature sculpt him into this position with an unseen artist's knife or did humanity beat him into shape with a blunt weapon?

His childhood wasn't a cakewalk. He and his sister grew up with their mother, Betty, in a less than idyllic lifestyle. A no milk and cookies, do your homework and be kind to the neighbor kids, upbringing.

Elizabeth, the name he called her all his life, seemed perpetually distracted, working hard most of her life, clutching to simple pleasures like a child to a blanket, the product of her own childhood.

His father, whom he had rarely seen, didn't have a real name. Of course, other people had called him JT, but his given name had been Rose which no one called him. The Rider had no thought on what went through a parent's mind that would cause them to name their son Rose, but then it wasn't worth much thought. A rose is still a rose, he thought. He never met either set of grandparents, and given how his parents turned out, that seemed just as well.

Elizabeth had died the way we all come into the world, naked and alone. His sister had called with the news that their mother had a fatal heart attack while soaking in the bathtub. Her boss had called the police when she didn't show up for work the next day, and when the cops did a welfare check (there was that word again) they discovered her body. Elizabeth would have been appalled that she was seen in that condition, had she been in any condition to know.

There wasn't really a funeral, just a few people at the small office where she worked that said a few nice things about her over the next few days. The Rider's sister made the arrangements for cremation with a non-profit organization, which saved some of Elizabeth's miniscule, hard-earned savings. The two siblings had dinner in a diner a day later, as a form of memorialization of the only mother either knew, like a distant relative that you felt should be recognized but that you couldn't bring yourself to immortalize.

JT was a wandering soul, coming back into their lives every few years before disappearing again to crawl back under whatever rock he crawled out of. Over the years the Rider idly wondered what had become of his father until the letter from his uncle that shared the news of JT's demise in some distant city, essentially death by alcohol. There was no sibling dinner over the news. Both parents gone. It hardly mattered. Neither of them had been emotionally around for their kids.

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The road's lonely ribbon has been hypnotic, but the Rider is pulled out of his thoughts by the urgent call of a bodily function - the coffee he consumed is desperately trying to find a way out.

A "Roadside Rest Area" sign signals that he won't need to pull off on a shoulder and find a tree or other visual obstacle behind which to relieve himself. There is now a little traffic on the road, coming in clumps of two or three cars and then nothing. Still, two or three cars is enough to make the Rider want to avoid peeing in public.

He turns in to the rest area lot, parking in an empty spot right next to the restrooms, his good fortune in finding relief, clearly signaling that everything hasn't totally gone to shit.

The big machine gives a sigh and a short dying cough as he hits the kill switch and turns off both ignition and fuel.

"I bet you wish you could take a piss break too, don't you?" he mutters to the machine as he pulls the key out and walks to the small building leaving the bike to shudder a couple of times before falling silent.

It is a typical low-cost cinder block restroom in the hinterlands, with no door anywhere, just a Men's sign and a Women's sign. Actually, neither said that – outside of one opening there was

an outlined character of a stick figure and the other a stick figure with a skirt. Without thinking he walks into the male stick figure opening and takes aim at a porcelain urinal.

As he stands in front of the urinal, momentarily freed from paying attention to his two-wheeled machine companion, he takes stock of his situation. Just past noon, starting to get hungry, bike will need gas in about 30 miles, no rain on the horizon and temperature in the comfortable range. That all registers on his scale as “okay.” He’s too distracted with the journey to consign more than “just okay” to the day.

Walking back outside through the maze-like entrance the Rider notices a large brown wooden sign on which the word, “Overlook” is headlined. Below the headline is a painting of the surrounding countryside, a two-dimensional diorama of the terrain just beyond. Behind the sign, the land plays out horizontally, with sky, land, light and shade in dimensions that could never be totally captured by camera.

In an earlier life, he had tried repeatedly to bottle the beauty he saw through his eyes onto an image on film, but the resulting photographs always looked like a huge sky and foreground, with the real object, a dramatic landscape, reduced to a pencil thin detail, pinched between the two. So much for “capture.” He always threw those photographs away, as neither dramatic nor distinguishable, nor for that matter, depicting reality. It was like looking back at his life. The moments that he felt should be preserved were reduced by his two-dimensional memory to thin, indistinguishable details with not much around them. The rest of it, what didn’t matter and would never be remembered or recounted, was the bulk of his life to date. Inconsequential.

It’s not that he hadn’t tried to create beauty and wholeness and drama. Sometimes one or more of those qualities appeared in his life, but almost never the product of his doing. He is not a sculptor. He is not an architect. Those require vision and forethought. Instead, he is a builder without a plan, taking the materials he is given and trying to make something out of them.

Circumstances being what they are, he is a reactionary, a responder, a participant in the moment, going where life takes him and making what he can out of it.

Now relieved and once more on the bike, engine again alive, the Rider pulls out on the highway to resume his journey to nowhere and anywhere.

Chapter 8. The Cowboy

In 30 minutes, he stops again, this time at a relatively new 76 station with a Subway and mini-mart in its building. He refills the tanks of his metal beast with high octane gas and then pulls up to the parking spaces in front of the Subway, kicking down the jersey stand and leaning the bike over once again for a short break. It's a two-fer, he decides, lunch and an afternoon snack for later.

Walking into the building, he goes first to the mini-mart counter and pays for two Snickers bars, which he then secures in a zippered pocket before walking over to the Subway counter.

"Tuna fish on whole wheat toasted with the works" he says quietly to the counterperson who goes quickly to work crafting his noon meal. "Want oil or vinegar?" he is asked, to which he agrees with a nod. He pours a soft drink from the machine, favoring Mountain Dew for its taste and caffeine boost, pays the counterperson, and then settles down into a stiff-backed booth to eat.

Tuna fish on toast. It's like God created tuna and mayonnaise and toast to go together. Just too good to have been divined by man. Every bite is followed by a swallow of sweet, citrusy soft drink, both gently blending together in a delicious and satisfying combination that equates to a one plus one equals more than two.

The booth next to him is occupied by a man several years older, cowboy hat on his head, tanned and weathered face, hands that look like they know hard work.

The Cowboy nods to him and says, "Pretty good lunch, I'd say."

"Not bad, not bad at all," the Rider replies as the Mountain Dew caffeine kicks in with a little social juice for him. "You can't go too far wrong with a meal like this."

"That's for sure. I been working all morning with one thought and that was to come here and get me a big roast beef sandwich and a glass of milk. Made me work quicker, you know, but sure didn't make the clock move any faster. Where you headed?"

"Don't know. Just headed."

"Well, that's a hell of a long way from here," says the Cowboy with a slight wrinkle in his smile.

"Yeah, it doesn't matter much. I'll go until I get there."

"What you got planned once you get there?"

"Don't know. Haven't got there yet."

“You lookin’ for work?”

“Not really, I think I’m just looking for life.”

“Well, I got a spread over here about 20 mile away and I could use some help. If you like physical work I got some. Don’t have much need for big ideas, but I’m looking to hire a hand. It don’t take much talent but it’s good, honest work.”

The Rider looks at the Cowboy, trying to size him up. Graying hair showing in his sideburns, a big handlebar moustache and a few strands of remaining hair peeking out from under the western hat. Plaid shirt with pearl buttons. There has to be a big rodeo belt buckle holding up an industrial strength pair of Wrangler jeans, he thinks. Probably some boots of some kind underneath the table, maybe Tony Lama’s. The Cowboy has just enough dust on him to be respectable in these parts.

The Rider continues his meal in silence. There had been no “check” from the Subway counterperson, but the memory of his thoughts at this morning’s breakfast stops him. What kind of work does a hand do, he wonders between bites. Sounds like physical labor, something he has done a fair bit of. I can still do it, he affirms, but do I want to? Okay, it is something offered without me seeking it. I don’t have any place to go, no one is expecting me, and no one will miss me if I disappear, he thinks, before he suddenly stops, recognizing the significance of his thinking. His father might have had moments like these.

And, what else is there to do? He has neither plan nor purpose. In many ways this moment in time is as much about the going as it is the getting to. Life handed him some cards. It’s his hand. How should he play it?

“You know, I might be interested. I don’t have to be anywhere for a few weeks,” he lies, knowing full well that he could have said any timeframe in place of weeks. He has no place to be, period.

“Well, son, let’s talk about it,” said the Cowboy, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. “I got a bunkhouse sleeps four, no one in it. You could sleep there. The wife feeds pretty good, except on a day when I want a store-bought meal like this. We got about 100 head of cattle, some horses and 150 acres of range and farmland. Don’t have much money but we’re good company, we don’t bother a man much, and it don’t look like you need a lot of gas money.”

“Sounds like a nice spread,” acknowledges the Rider, dismissing any talk of negotiating the compensation. To his thinking, he is traveling to nowhere on a journey that takes money every day, and it might be enough to just live for a while and not have to dip into what he has left.

“It is, it is. There’s a stream goes through one portion of the land and the wife has a little garden next to the house,” continued the Cowboy. “Tried growing grapes and fruit trees on the uphill part, but it’s not what I know and I couldn’t get anything out of ‘em. Weather here is

purty good for ‘em, though, if I didn’t have my darned head so far up my ass,” the Cowboy chuckles.

“I grew up in a grape and fruit tree area and worked in fields since I was 10.”

“Well then, I guess you’re the man that God brought me, aren’t you?”

“Don’t know about that. I could come take a look if you’re heading back. Don’t have much on my calendar today,” the humor of that statement cracking up the Rider as his face fashions a wry smile.

“Well then, let’s get to it. Say, you aren’t a heavy drinker, are you?”

“I’ve been known to take a shot of tequila from time to time, and woke up with a bad headache a few times, usually after a fight with my ex-wife.”

“Hell, that’s not drinking. I mean do you get all pissy-eyed and break stuff up, beat up friends, cuss old ladies and shoot the dog?”

“Been tempted but never gave into it,” admitted the Rider. “I guess I haven’t quite measured up to a bad drunk. The worst I ever did was cry for two hours, or at least that’s what the barmaid said I did. That memory got flushed down the toilet with what I threw up. Didn’t do it anymore after that.”

“Okay then. You ready?”

“Yep, just gotta pee and start the bike. I’ll follow you, if you can wait.”

Minutes later the Cowboy gets in his pickup as the Rider fires up the Harley. The two take to the road with a roar and a small cloud of dust.

The ride isn’t far. The pickup’s V8 chews up road, with the Rider following far enough behind to be respectful.

Chapter 9. The Cowboy's perspective

He was the damndest guy that day we met. Wouldn't talk much. Kind of like a drifter. He was like a pig in a poke. Hell, Fern and I were just scrapin' by after having a real bad year. I didn't know if she'd throw me out for bringing this feller back to the ranch, but there was just something about him that made me take that chance.

That first year we were in the ranch we had a real bad rainstorm, lasted all of two whole days. I come running out of the house after a loud rumble practically shook us off our feet. I looked up at the hills and all I could see was water spray and dust. Got my horse, rode out to where it was and it was a mess of boulders, and water, and dirt, and trees all tangled up and right in part of our prime pasture.

Came back and told Fern about it. She looked like someone just struck her with lightning. Wide eyes, starting to tear up a bit. And I said, "Honey, what's the matter?" She replied that she was scared half to death that there would be a bigger landslide that would dam up the stream even worse and then break through and sweep our land clean. I told her then, "I've still got the same feeling about this place that I had when we first looked at it. Nothing has changed my mind about it. We took a chance and got this ranch and it's gonna' pay off. You can count on that."

She wasn't too sure at the time, but she accepted it. We've been here for a bunch of years since then and it hasn't paid off big, but it's given us a living, honest work to do, food on the table, and some pretty happy days, even with a few bad times. You can't ask for more than that.

So, when I saw that fellow on the motorcycle and he told me what he was up to, and how he didn't really care where he went, I looked at him as though God did himself bring him to me. Yeah, he was different. Motorcycle jacket, dirty jeans, bug splattered helmet, road dirt face. But when he said, "I'm just looking for life," I could see he fit in. That's what me and Fern are doing. Looking for life. Might as well have some company.

Chapter 10. The Ranch

In just over 15 minutes an angled arm snakes out the driver's side window of the Cowboy's pickup, signaling a right turn at a break in the roadside fence line, and then the truck turns onto a rutted dirt road carved out between fields of hay. Two vertical poles straddle the dirt road holding up a large horizontal pole from which hangs a sign proclaiming this to be the "Lost & Found Ranch." The pickup slows to a crawl forcing the motorcycle to brake to avoid colliding with the pickup's rear bumper, as the cloud of dust from their tires slowly drifts away on a slight breeze.

A two-story farmhouse is visible and behind it a couple of short wood buildings and a barn, set among a small stand of trees. A windmill makes a rhythmic clanking as it slowly rotates in the breeze. Birds that have been sitting on the fenceposts along the road fly away at the dust and commotion. In front of the farmhouse a dog stands barking, its loud intruder alarm drowned out by the two approaching machines.

The Rider wonders what he is getting himself into, but he concludes that there is no harm in checking it out. Given his current temperament, and the signal at breakfast this morning, it reminds him that life seems to want him to check out something, anything.

As they stop in front of the farmhouse, the Rider shuts the bike off, lays it over on its jersey stand and lifts off the saddle. The dog sniffs the Rider's leg, as if to make sure no other dog has peed on it, and then wanders casually away with disinterest as the Cowboy climbs out of the pickup.

"Fern's in the house. Come say, howdy," from the Cowboy as both men begin to walk toward the vintage farmhouse. The structure has white paint covering most but not all the wood. The porch runs the width of the house, topped by a white rail on white spindles fronting the entire house, its fencing continuous except for breaks for steps. The screen door has an old-fashioned carved wood pattern, and as they walk into the house it clacks closed confidently against the door frame.

Stepping inside, the Rider can see that whoever Fern is she is tidy with her housekeeping. The furniture looks like something out of an old 1950's magazine; plenty of exposed wood and cushions with neat little bows tying them to chairs and crocheted doilies on the arms. A large couch sits in front of the front windows facing a small-ish television of tube vintage.

"Cyrus? That you?" a voice calls from the kitchen followed closely by a pleasant looking woman.

The Rider guesses that Cyrus is in his fifties and Fern is in her forties. She has her hair tied up in a bun and her sleeves rolled up like she has been doing dishes.

"Yeah, it's me. I did drag someone home with me, though. Meet Fern, uh, what did you say your name was?" he says with a sheepish grin and a nod to the Rider.

“Didn’t say. My friends call me Mack.”

His birth name had been something way different, a name that outside of school, the government and a short stint in the military, he had never used.

“Fern, this here is Mack. He was riding that motorcycle through here and stopped off at Whitsett’s for gas and a sandwich. I told him we needed a hand, and he followed me home. Guess he must have heard about your famous peach cobbler.”

“Nice to meet you, Mack. Did Cyrus tell you that we don’t have much money to pay you with, but we can provide a decent place to stay, good food, and a few bucks to help out?”

“Yes, ma’am. He did. I wasn’t much interested in a job but he made it sound like you could use some help, and I confessed that I did know a little about grapes and fruit trees. And I didn’t have any place I needed to be anytime soon, or anyone that wanted me there.”

“You can call me Fern. And, we’re sure in need of help. Cyrus thinks he’s still a young football player with muscles the size of boxcars. You’d be welcome here.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” says Mack, ignoring the more personal first name. “Cyrus looks like he can handle himself okay, but some good, honest work won’t hurt me none.”

With a “Let me show you around,” Cyrus grabs Mack by the elbow and takes him through the house, and out the back door.

“That over there’s the bunkhouse. Used to house a bunch of hands when this was a young farm. Haven’t had much work for more than just me for the last four or five years. Things fell off when so many people moved out of the area. The Co-op shut down, a lot of farmers folded and the few ranchers like me kept at it until the beef market went to hell. It’s coming back a bit, but we didn’t have no call to hire hands until you.”

“The bunks are all still there. You can take your pick and Fern will get you some bedding. I put a little fridge in there a few years back when Jimmy at the garage in Grainger pulled one out of an old trailer. Still runs and I figured I could put beer in there and get away from Fern if she got mad at me. Whitsett’s is about the only place around here to eat but they don’t serve anything except sandwiches and pop. I quit drinking gasoline a long time ago,” he adds with a laugh. “There’s a bathroom with a working sink and tub with shower curtain, and there’s a big floor fan you can bring out when it stays too hot at night. The hot water heater is small but it works and you’ll be able to get a hot shower when you need one.”

Walking through the two-room bunkhouse, Cyrus has a wistful look as he shows Mack around, suggesting that he isn’t the first stranger that Cyrus has introduced to the place. Sometimes, life

happens in a way that doesn't meet our expectations, Mack muses, knowing how many times he felt as disillusioned and disappointed as Cyrus must have been over the last several years.

The bunks are serviceable, meaning you could technically sleep on them. Each has a thin mattress on a single metal frame, a spring-loaded wire frame holding up the mattress. Bare striped pillows rest on two of the three bunks. Mack looks the bunks over and remembers that sleep is never elusive when you put in a good day of work.

The tour of the ranch continues on through the barn, with hay stacked up in the hayloft, and horse stalls down below. A large square hole in the ceiling above is apparently for throwing down hay. Mack remembered that before they entered the barn he had seen a large opening on the outside front wall at the second level, with hinged wood doors that could open wide or close and lock to secure what was inside. That must be how they get the hay up there, he guesses.

As for equipment, the ranch has a fifty-year-old tractor that still runs well, more than adequate for this size of property. There are also some implements for general farming and ranching - a disc, harrow, plows, and a hay wagon - plus a power take-off for running the augur and hay bale elevator with the tractor.

A quick walkaround the yard includes a nod toward the windmill and water trough, a corral in need of repair, a pig pen, chicken house and the garden, which is the one thing that seems to be flourishing. Something in this place is doing okay, he guesses.

"That's about it," says Cyrus. "Want to saddle up a couple of horses and see the land?"

"Why not." And they walk back to the barn.

The ride reveals the ranch is situated on a nice piece of land. Most of the fields gently slope away from the hillside, ensuring fair drainage. Medium height hay in one field, silage in another, milo and barley in a third, cattle on grass pastureland in a fourth, sweet corn in a fifth. Large shade trees surround the farmhouse, twins to a grove that spreads comfortably on both sides of the stream. The fact that there is year-round ground water on the property is another good sign.

"How long have you had this property, Cyrus?" asks Mack, as they stable the horses after the ride, pulling off tack and hanging it around each stall.

"We bought it about ten years ago, about long enough to pay it down a whole bunch, until we hit the downturn and had to take out a second to make it through. Now, it's us and the bank that has this property, and the bank ain't much of a partner."

"Curious about the name. Lost and Found Ranch. What's that about?"

“I’ll tell you, when Fern and I come across this place we were pretty messed up. She had just come out of a bad divorce and I had just lost my job. We decided to take a few short road trips to shake off the cobwebs and look for our future. We were looking for a farm or ranch where I could do what I have spent most of my life doing and where me and Fern could begin to set down some roots. On the third day of one trip we came upon this place with a big “For Sale” sign out front. Fern looked at me and I looked at her and we decided right then and there that we would put our money together and see if we could make a go of it. Up until that time we both could safely say we were lost. We found a purpose here. I made the sign right after that and it stuck.”

“The old couple that owned this place built the farmhouse, barn and buildings, raised all seven of their kids here. The kids grew up and moved away, the couple kept it up for a while and the last ten years before they died the property just went to hell. They couldn’t keep it up. It was in desperate need of help and so we got it for not a bad price from the son that was getting rid of the estate. They had lived a fine life on this land and it was a shame that they just couldn’t keep things up as they got older. Fern and me figured we should rescue the place and in the end it kinda rescued us.”

Cyrus and Fern are practically a throwback, even their old-fashioned names bringing up pictures of a more steady and predictable time. Mack imagines them standing in front of the house with a pitchfork in Cyrus’s hand and Fern standing stolidly at his side, mimicking the famous Grant Wood painting.

As they walk back to the house in silence Mack thinks back on his former marriage. Six weeks of heaven followed by four years of hell. His ex-wife’s name has been erased from his memory, but not with indelible ink. Maddy, she had called herself, he recalled, a truncated version of Madrigal, her given name. She was as vexing as any woman, with fetching looks but a mean streak when she felt tied down, a recurring condition that claimed her within two months of their wedding.

Chapter 11. Madrigal

Their courtship began on a dreary day in Portland, inside Powell's bookstore, where he was desperately looking for a birthday gift for his mother. He had just settled on a cookbook, titled Southern Cooking, and turned around, gift in hand, to locate where to pay, bumping into a lady's arm, loaded down with a dozen books, in a collision that created an avalanche of hardcovers.

"Excuse me. I'm really sorry," was the best he could offer to the brown-eyed young woman, bending down to recover her scattered selections. He knelt down beside her to help, clumsily bumping her head with his own, adding injury to insult. She laughed at the awkwardness of it all, smiling as she said, "That's a hell of a pickup approach. I hope you don't do this with every girl you meet," her attempt at humor bringing a smile of relief to his face.

"Not with ones as pretty as you," he replied, surprised at how quickly he blurted out such an honest answer. "I was just about to leave. Can I buy you a cup of coffee to apologize?"

"That's a much better line, but I have to get back to work. Maybe another time."

Encouraged, he responded, "How can I find you again?"

"Here's my card," she said, extending a card that read "Maddy Finnigan, Last Chance Flowers." The address was just two blocks away from Powell's, on the corner of 12th and Burnside. "What's your name, Mr. Bumpy?"

"It's Mack. My friends call me Mack."

"And what do your enemies call you?"

"Mack," came the straight answer.

"Well, that doesn't seem to fit. How about if I just call you Bumpy?"

"Suits me. That way I'll know that it's you when you call me in the middle of the night to complain about a torn page in one of your new books."

"Actually, these are all used, the main reason I buy books here. The prices are better and the words are still as good," she said, smiling.

They exchange phone numbers and walk away from their short encounter, with Mack determined to set up a coffee date in the next couple of days.

Six months later they are married in a brief civil ceremony and become Mr. and Mrs. Bumpy Stangel, a somewhat odd but totally appropriate name.

The honeymoon is short. Mack works at a downtown garage, once one of the mechanics, now a behind the counter guy, a service writer inscribing whatever repairs are needed on repair orders and preparing the final bills for customers. The job doesn't pay as well as wrenching, but it's easy and it suits him. When Franz, the owner, suggests that he change from mechanic to service writer Mack is momentarily quieted. He warms to the idea after a recalcitrant Ford sedan defies every bit of his mechanical ability, coughing like a tubercular amalgamation of scrap metal, and failing every diagnostic test after two days of work.

Getting time off for a honeymoon doesn't fly well with Franz in the heat of the busy summer season as Portlanders vacation and head out on weekend trips to the mountains or the Coast. Mack and Maddy settle for a two-day drive up the Columbia Gorge, staying at the historic Columbia Gorge hotel, a half hour away from Multnomah Falls.

It's a good start. Mack finds Maddy interesting and fun. Maddy sees Mack as a steady and comfortable companion.

After the honeymoon they settle into joint tenancy in Maddy's small apartment in the Burnside area overlooking the Willamette River, a markedly better place than Mack's man-hovel on the other side of the river. Mack has traveled light through life after the military and it's quick and easy to move his possessions to Maddy's place, requiring one of the smallest trucks that U-Haul offers.

Marriage, the first for each of them, starts off as they had hoped and imagined, with long walks, lingering coffee shop visits, occasional trips to Powell's to reload Maddy's supply, and even the odd tv show. Both work a fair number of hours, and often it feels like they are two strangers that touch occasionally, like their first encounter, before being hurled apart like particles in a nuclear reaction to continue their individual lives. Deep conversations elude them, for neither of them are deep thinkers or romantics. After the blush and rush of the first month and a half, they settle into a comfortable, if not cozy, life together. The service writer and the florist have simple thoughts and simple needs, often not shared or totally compatible.

In perhaps an indication of how shallow their relationship, neither has developed an endearing nickname for the other, although he often thinks of her as Shithead. Wisely, he filters that moniker until, toward the end of the marriage when it is obvious that the name is much more fitting than either Maddy or Madrigal. Bumpy started as a cute term of affection that she called him, but it increasingly feels more derogatory with every use.

Two months after their marriage Shithead is officially diagnosed with bipolar disorder, ushering in a new reality for the young couple. Mack doesn't know the clinical definition, but his new wife has become a walking, breathing, somber/raging illustration of the diagnosis in the two weeks before the evaluation. Her disposition flips back and forth between dark, moody depression and fun-seeking, laughing ebullience, interspersed with anger, wild drinking and pills. The daydream of their marriage turns nightmare without notice, a Hitchcockian twist that

continues without abatement until four years later when Maddy leaves. He is served with papers at his work and short months later he is simply Mack, again. Bumpy has been retired. Maddy is free once more.

Chapter 12. Maddy's Perspective

That guy was smothering me, Maddy reflects. He was a bump on a log, so I called him that. And he was controlling. If I want to go party, he says I should stay home or go to a movie with him. If I feel like crap and want to lay around the house in a bathrobe, he tries to push me to do stuff I don't want to do. I don't want to go to work when I feel like that. I don't want to make floral arrangements or talk to customers or take orders. I just want to stay low to the ground. Bumpy never got that.

I remember when we first got together, we went on a date. Bumpy took me to dinner at a chophouse, a place I had never been to or had any idea about. It was an okay place. Kinda dark, soft music, dark wood, carpet, wooden tables with small lamps on them. It was okay. I ordered the prime rib, medium rare. Bumpy ordered a porterhouse steak. We had a beer, Bumpy didn't drink wine, and we waited. I was hungry and I started to get really upset. He kept trying to settle me down. I was just needing food and was anxious and was trying to fix things. He didn't want me to make a scene. I didn't get it. I wanted service and needed service and that rat face of a server wasn't even thinking of anything but how his hair looked and all I wanted was my damned prime rib, and I could have gotten it. I was in the middle of rat face's face when Bumpy pulled me back. It was okay. I was really happy anyway, just wanted my steak. When we went home I stayed up all night and then woke him up at 4:30 am for sex. I don't know what I was thinking. I just thought we should get together and he should wake up. It was almost daylight. What's the problem? But he just told me to go to sleep. So controlling. I wanted to be free to do what I knew was right for me at the time, and he wanted some kind of flat-lined chick that would be exactly the way he wanted. Put me in a box. Make me into his image of me. Change me from the me I know to the me he wanted.

I thought Bumpy was bad. But after Bumpy I met Dick the Head, or that's what I called him. I think his name was Richard. We got married. What the hell, right? Why not?

Well, I'm a book worm and he turned out to be just a worm. We made it a year and then I just drove off one night, kinda the way Bumpy and I ended.

And after Dick the Head there was Cuke, short for cucumber. He had a fat member, if you know what I mean. I can't remember his name but he was terrible in bed, a whole lot of promise if he ever figured it out. He didn't and I drove off one night and kept going.

Anyway, I'm talking too much, which I've been accused of more than a few times.

Bumpy? Yeah, he was a trip. I did like him, loved him, I think. It's just, you know, he was controlling, and I have to be me.

Chapter 13. Fern

Fern seems, at early glance, to be the opposite of Shithead. Calm, levelheaded, even-keeled, predictable. Mack doesn't allow himself the luxury of categorizing Fern in the short hours of this first day, but he imagines that she is probably as consistent and constant as Portland rain, now hundreds of miles and another life away. You could probably count on her, no matter what was happening.

Returning to the house, Cyrus tells Mack to go ahead and put his few belongings in the bunkhouse and relax a bit; Fern will have some supper ready in an hour. "Just wander up to the house about that time and we'll sit down for the evening meal and discuss the job."

The bunkhouse is clean, if spartan. It is an apt name, with two bunkbeds and a single bed in the main room, a queen bed in a separate room, and a small bathroom with hot water heater, wash basin, mirror, and bathtub on the other side of a bare wood door that no longer closes securely.

As Mack carries his saddlebags into the bunkhouse, Fern walks up carrying sheets, blankets and a pillow. "These should get you going. Let me know if you need anything special. We probably won't have it but I like to get a giggle out of the things some people find necessary," she says with a wink. Good, she does have a little humor in her, Mack thinks. Out here in the real American west, humor is an important part of a happy life. Maddy wouldn't have lasted through one episode of depression.

He toys with the idea of sleeping in his familiar bedroll on top of a bed, but the darned thing is undoubtedly dirty, dusty and bug-ridden from last night and the stretches of highway, having stopped all manner of flying insects while rolled up and tied to the front of his handlebars.

He decides on the bottom bunkbed and quickly makes up the bed, then walks to the house.

Supper is wholesome, if not altogether healthy. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and chicken gravy, canned green beans ("the garden didn't produce many this year"), and iced tea, followed by homemade ice cream. "Best dang meal I've had in years," proclaims a satisfied Mack, surprising himself with his openness. "Say, are you married, young lady?," he says to Fern with a wink to Cyrus.

"Look, buster, I have enough trouble with this man here so don't be stirring up any more."

"Well, I wasn't thinking for myself. I have a cousin who is pretty lonely, and the poor sod is starving to death in Walla Walla. Can't even open a can of corn."

Laughter.

Fern and Cyrus seemed genuinely interested in their new hand as they gently prod him for details about his life. They seem like pretty decent people and after they persist in asking

questions he finds himself telling them more about himself than he would ever have in any other first meeting. Who knows, he may not stick around here long and then he'll never see them again. What's the harm in giving them a few details?

In between his own answers, Mack asks the couple about their lives.

Fern grew up on a farm. During junior high school, she was starting to think about her future, what a life on her own might look like someday, when a new farmhand showed up at the family farm, freshly hired by her father. Cyrus was a head-turner, she said, and they had easily come together, first as friends, talking and dreaming together, and years later as something more. He was twelve years older than her and sure of himself, and she was a young woman crossing the stream of life looking for the next rock to step on.

Cyrus describes their first meeting as though he is recalling the best dream he ever had. She was a pretty thing, with long hair and a twinkle in her eyes, prone to whispering to him as though she was afraid of being scorned if overheard by others. He loved the way she dressed, the way she smelled, the carefree way she would pick wildflowers and weave them into her hair. Hell, he loved everything about her. "She knocked this old cowboy out of his boots and into a life," he laughs, as though it was the best thing that ever happened to him. Mack's guess is that it probably was.

Cyrus most certainly was not the rock Fern had first thought he was, she says with a distant look, remembering how he had left her to go work for a ranch in Wyoming when she was 16. "Well of course I couldn't just quit school, pick up and go with some cowboy to Wyoming of all places," she said with a scornful huff.

Instead, she mourned the loss of her friend and first crush but was resigned to pour herself into school and trying to imagine the future, while Cyrus, well Cyrus was having to deal with a bad windstorm during his first days of work in Wyoming. He was too busy to think about Fern, and besides, she was behind him and all of this life was in front of him.

So, Fern and Cyrus were separated by several states and, as time and hormones would have it, within a couple of years each were in a relationship with other people. Oh, they remembered each other, in fact they each thought of the other frequently during the first years. Most often it was late at night staring at a dark ceiling, trying to imagine the other's face and almost, just almost making it out in the shadows of the paint. And the memory of the scent of young love lingered in each of them.

Then Fern frowned, remembering the trials and troubles they experienced after they finally got together years later.

And they did finally get together, first as friends, then as lovers and later as friends and partners. The fondness was still there between them but the love they thought they had when they were younger became firmly evident as having been simply trust and comfort. They knew

each other, they liked each other, and they got along really well. That was enough for each of them.

Chapter 14. The Reunion

On the day Fern and Cyrus met again, Cyrus is out of work, Fern is a waitress in a diner, the kind with railroad dining car architecture and a simple burger-joint menu. Cyrus is coming back to town after the ranch in Wyoming got sold to a large corporation. He happens into the diner around noon on the day he arrives on the Greyhound. As he steps off the bus tired and hungry the first thing he sees is the diner's windows displaying two signs, "Air-Conditioned Comfort" and "Best Food in Town."

He grabs his suitcase and heads straight across the street and into Ted's Diner, taking a seat at the open counter. Fern walks up to him wearing a black skirt and blouse with a white apron. She automatically says the opening line uttered by every waitress around the world in every language, "What can I get ya?" Cyrus glances up quickly because he recognizes the voice and seeing her face he hears himself answer, "Anything you're willing to freely give, Fern!"

Startled to hear her name and his voice, she looks down and then freezes, staring across the counter, past the menu and other items, at the man she loved when she was a young woman.

"Cyrus, oh my God! What are you doing here?"

"Well, I just come back from Wyoming because there was nothing for me there but I knew there was something worth coming back for here. I walked in here to get something to eat after the bus ride and here you were."

"Well, are you here to eat or did you have something else in mind?"

"I'm here to eat and I have a lot of other things on my mind. What time do you get off today?"

"4:00 o'clock. I just work the day shift, 7:30 to 4."

"Okay, I'll have a hamburger, with some crisp French fries and a coke. After I leave I'll be back around 4 to walk you home."

Fern walks away, puts the order in, sets a napkin with utensils in front him, pours and serves the coke, and then stops.

"You don't have to do that, Cyrus. Besides, I drive. Where're you stayin'?"

"Haven't settled that yet. Just got in town twenty minutes ago. See, my suitcase is waiting right beside me, kinda like a dog that don't eat, don't crap, and carries all your stuff," with a chuckle.

"Cyrus, do you need a place to stay?"

“Yeah, but what money I have coming is about a month out. I’ll find something. I’m plannin’ to call around and see who’s still in town.”

“Oh no, you won’t. You’ll come to my house. It’s about the only decent thing that came out of my divorce.”

That was settled, Cyrus knew. When Fern says, “Yes you will” or “No you won’t” you best be doing or not doing what she says. She is strong and smart and nothing if not decisive.

At 4:00 pm he walks back into Ted’s, having wandered around town for a good three hours, even sitting on a park bench for an entertaining two of those hours, watching kids play on the swings and merry go-round. It’s always so interesting to him, having grown up in a dusty country area where the only swing was a tire hanging on a rope from a tree and the only merry go round was when you were playing the game where they told you to keep your eyes closely shut and then you were spun around six times.

When Cyrus walks back into Ted’s, Fern is just finishing her shift, wiping down and tidying up the counter, cleaning off the back bar, rinsing out the washcloths. Spotting Cyrus, she flashes a quick smile and walks into the employee’s room retrieving her coat and purse. Returning to the front, she grabs his well-worn hand and they walk out to her car in the parking lot alongside the building.

Fern had meant that he could “stay” at her place. That meant as friends without benefits. She shows him the guest bedroom, heats a couple of slices of frozen meatloaf, puts some instant mashed potatoes and gravy mix on the stove, opens a can of beans, puts them in a bowl and heats them up in the microwave - altogether a good dinner while they catch up on each other’s lives. After dinner, Fern shows Cyrus the guest bathroom and the living room. Touring the latter includes a quick instruction on the tv and how to operate the remote, and then she excuses herself to her room to take a nice hot bath. Cyrus sits on the living room couch flipping channels unsure on how the rest of the evening will play out.

That becomes apparent in less than half an hour.

After the sound of a hairdryer went on for what seemed like an eternity, Fern’s bedroom door opens and out she walks wearing a big bathrobe with fuzzy slippers on her feet.

“Gotta early shift tomorrow, so have a good night. I showed you where the towels and stuff are, right? If I’m gone when you get up, help yourself to some coffee. The coffeemaker is on a timer and it’ll shut off after I’m gone, but you can figure that out. There’s cereal in the cupboard, milk in the fridge, and probably a muffin or cupcake somewhere in the kitchen. Help yourself. Oh yeah, feel free to use the phone, and there is probably some lunch fixings that you can find. Other than that, if I don’t see you in the morning, I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon when I get off.”

“What if I get lonely and miss the sound of your voice?” he asks hopefully.

“You got two choices. One, you can sing to yourself in a high voice, or two, only in case of emergency, you can call me at Ted’s Diner. The number is pinned on the corkboard next to the phone. I can’t jeopardize my job so don’t call me there unless it’s an emergency.”

“I got it, Fern. And thanks for putting me up. I don’t know how to thank you, but I’ll try to make it up to you.”

“You’re welcome, honeybunch,” she says, smiling and patting his cheek before turning and heading for her bedroom.

He does make it up to her. He gets his severance paycheck in three weeks, gives Fern $300 for rent, and starts cooking at night, usually barbecue on the somewhat rusty old black Weber grill on the back porch. He also goes shopping during the day, picking up fresh groceries and paying for them as his contribution to the household. Four or five days a week he walks to the state employment office hoping to find work.

He and Fern gradually grow closer. She’s wary of men, hardened from a marriage that shouldn’t have been and that took longer than it should have to get finished. Her ex-husband had been abusive and throughout her marriage she had to use makeup and lies to avoid too many questions and gossip. It wasn’t a bitter divorce. Her ex was a jerk during the marriage, and he remained a jerk through the divorce. Now, after a few years, she recognized that some people spend their whole life and never change. A crocodile has a nasty bite until it dies. Poisonous plants remain poisonous even after they’re dead. A skunk is a skunk is a skunk. And Aaron did stink. And was secretive. And treated her like crap.

Cyrus is an open book. He is a pretty basic man with simple interests, a strong back, and decent principles. He has never married, but he did have two dogs at one time, which in his mind is somewhat equivalent. He has met a number of women, but he never really liked the city and most of them were looking to get out of the country. His dream is to get a ranch that he can call his own, one that will be his home forever, where he can work and breathe clean air and have a life.

As Cyrus talks, Fern remembers her childhood days growing up on the farm, the warm summer smell of manure on the air, the scent of fresh mown hay, the dust devils and butterflies and squash and apples right off the tree. Ranch, farm, didn’t matter. Grow what you can and raise what you can. That’s when life falls into place.

One evening, the two are sitting drinking a cup of coffee at the dinner table when Cyrus asks, “D’you ever think about buying a place like we’ve talked about? Maybe get a house with a little land where we could raise some cattle and have a nice garden?”

“Can’t even imagine that, Cyrus. Wouldn’t even know how to go about it.”

“You know, I didn’t tell you, but I got a nice severance check from that corporation that bought the Wyoming ranch from the owners. I got enough to put a nice down payment on a spread somewhere. We could go see what’s out there.”

“I don’t even want to dream like that, Cyrus. I can’t handle disappointment like I used to. I don’t want to get my hopes up.”

That’s that. For a week.

Fern works weekdays and that Saturday morning on her day off, as they sit together at breakfast, Cyrus gives Fern a sheet of paper. On it are addresses, real estate listings from a real estate company that specializes in farm and ranch properties. Cyrus has called them and told them a little of what they would be interested in, and they gave him the rundown on five properties. Most of them are from several hours to most of one day’s drive from Fern’s house. Cyrus said he has figured out a route to the most promising places - they can see two properties that day and three the next day. Both days will be long days, but they will get an idea of what is out there.

This is the first of three weekends in a row, spent in the car, tromping over dirt, looking at fences and ground and buildings. The weekends are all overnight trips. Travel most of the first day, look at a property, spend the night in a traveler’s motel near a second property, look at it the next morning and then drive back home.

On the Monday after the third weekend, Cyrus tells Fern at breakfast that he wants to talk to her that night about one of the properties.

That evening after dinner, Cyrus lays out the plan.

“See, that ranch near Grainger that we saw on Saturday would work real well. It’s situated in a good spot, has a fair bit of land, there’s year-round stream on the property, a deep well with lots of water, power to the house and barn, and good fences. The price is real good. I think they havta get out of there to offer it for that price.”

“But that will take more money than you have.” She pauses thoughtfully before continuing, “I have some money set aside from the divorce, and if we put both of our stakes together we could probably put 40% down.”

“Can’t have it, Fern. We’d be equal partners. What if we can’t get along?

“Well, then, I guess we’ll just have to have sex. That should keep things together.” She laughs after she says it, but he hopes there is more truth than humor in her statement.

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Continuing their stories with Mack, Fern shares that after they bought the ranch nothing rattled Cyrus, not even when the blizzard hit and killed the horses, or when beef prices dropped and they had to get a second mortgage on the property to pay the bills the next year.

Cyrus adds that it turns out that the only rock they have to stand on is their common and steadfast dream of having a ranch worth having, one that they can give their lives to, a place they can not only call home but that will provide them with a reasonably good life.

With supper finished, Cyrus and Mack move to the front room while Fern clears the table. Dishes washed, she joins them. The front room is comfortable, if a little old fashioned. Cyrus sits in a rocking chair, the kind built from a well-cushioned fabric chair positioned on a fixed wooden base with a rocking mechanism and bare, wood arms. Mack sits opposite on the over-stuffed couch and Fern is in an easy chair between the men. A fake oil lamp with lighted globe below and an incandescent bulb under a harped lampshade sits on a low, wooden side table between the couch and easy chair. The side table is home to a few magazines that Mack notices are not only several years old but look as though they have so far escaped the touch of human hands. A single overhead light fixture provides diffused light for the room, casting neither strong shadow nor much illumination. “Not much reading going on here,” he thinks.

Cyrus turns toward Mack and asks, “So, what do you think? Think you might stay a while?”

Reluctantly, Mack brings up the topic of pay, bringing questioning looks between the two ranch owners.

They settle on $200 a month plus food and bunkhouse, a pittance of what he used to make before losing his job. But, after all, he reasons, he lost that job and can’t count that goose now that it’s cooked.

The deal is struck. He will be able to put gas in the bike and have some money left over for the few sundries and extras that he might need. And, he’ll be off the road and in a place where he might actually do some good for other people, while being in a safe place to consider his future.

After a few more exchanges of a non-contractual nature, Mack excuses himself and prepares to leave.

“What time should we start tomorrow?” he asks Cyrus.

“We get up about 5 and breakfast is ready at 5:30. We’ll be ready to go after that.”

“Okie dokie,” Mack acknowledges, instantly realizing how corny that sounds, but feeling as though it somehow fits the surroundings and loosely counts as a reasonable cap to the day.

Saying his “good nights,” Mack walks slowly back to the bunkhouse, twists the round switch on the wall turning on the lone bare lightbulb, and gets ready for bed. He is not a toothbrusher, but he has one, and it comes to him that the act of cleanup is a perfectly good end to the day. Probably time to start a good habit, he thinks.

After his teeth are brushed he splashes some water on his face and smiles as the dirt from the day’s ride colors the water circling the drain.

“What have I got myself into,” he says to himself in a low voice as he clicks off the light and crawls into the first bunk, not even caring to think of an answer.

The night comes on him quickly and he is carried away in a dream of horses, land, work and his motorcycle, swirling around like food in a blender.

In the ranch house, Cyrus and Fern have a strenuous conversation before going to bed.

“I don’t understand, Cyrus. We’re barely making it and you want to pay him $200 a month? Where are we going to get that money?”

“Fern, c’mon. We’ve got to turn this thing around and this guy seems more capable than any of the five hands we had before. Besides, he seems like a loner and if this doesn’t turn out to be his cup of tea I wouldn’t be surprised to wake up any morning to the sound of that Harley of his firing up and carrying him on down the road.”

“I guess we’ll see. I sure hope you’re right. You know I’m happy here but it’s been a battle to keep this place. Let’s give it a couple of weeks and then see if we made the right decision.”

Business concluded, the two partners turn in for the night with rhythmic breathing and soft snoring soon signaling both are asleep.

Chapter 15. The first morning

Five o'clock is a god-awful time to wake up, let alone get up. Opening one eye, looking around the room, trying to figure out exactly where he is, Mack finds the bathroom, drains a leg, and looks in the mirror.

How in hell did I get here, he wonders to himself. I was just going to wander for a few weeks to collect my thoughts. Now I'm about to start working at a ranch with people I just met and hardly know, doing work I have never done, except for the fruit trees and grapes. He wonders where those are, having not seen them on the tour yesterday afternoon.

Well, I'll give it a couple of weeks and see how it goes. I can just jump on the bike and roll on if it doesn't suit me, he thinks.

He also wonders if he can get Cyrus or Fern to spring for an electric percolator and some coffee grounds so he can at least feel awake in the mornings before walking over for breakfast. Best not to push too much, he reasons, having bumped Cyrus from $150 a month to $200 the night before. Besides, he can probably buy one himself after his first paycheck from the ranch, that is if he stays around long enough to collect the first paycheck.

Paycheck. There's that word, check. All these cryptic messages. Is "paycheck" telling him he should check his pay or should he check where he spends it? Well, it isn't an expense check, so maybe when he gets it a simple visual confirmation of the amount is enough. He doesn't think he will get an actual check but will probably see his monthly pay in the form of a small stack of twenties. A picture of him biting the folding money flashes in his mind, bringing a smile to his face, recalling that old-timers used to do that to confirm the gold in twenty-dollar gold pieces. Bet Cyrus and Fern won't get the humor in that, he thinks, imagining the couple staring at him in disbelief as he chomps down on greenbacks.

He casts a moving shadow on this early sunny morning as he walks across to the house, opens the screen door and knocks on the back door.

"C'mon in," a woman's voice calls from inside.

The inside of the kitchen smells like food, breakfast food, as he walks across the room uttering a soft "good morning" to Fern before entering the eating area, a table and four chairs in a room just off the kitchen. Cyrus is already seated at the table, glancing up to acknowledge Mack's arrival.

"Mornin', Mack. Sleep okay?," Cyrus asks his new ranch hand, barely looking up from an expressionless stare at his coffee cup.

"You bet. A mattress and bed springs feels like high livin' compared to a bedroll on the ground."

“Well, what the hell would you be doing that for?” questions Cyrus. “We got rattlers in these parts that would much rather curl up next to you for warmth during the night than sleep under a rock. You’re lucky you didn’t roll over and get bit on the butt.”

“Didn’t have any choice. I couldn’t exactly fit a bed on the back of the Harley,” Mack replied, “although that notion did cross my mind two nights ago.”

And with that, both men start filling their plates with bacon, fried potatoes, and eggs. Hot coffee is poured in Mack’s cup as Fern joins them at the table.

Mack reaches for the clear glass milk bottle, pouring the cold white liquid into his coffee, creating a swirling caramel color within the black liquid that slowly blends, fusing the two colors into one.

Watching this, Fern says, “Don’t like my coffee, either?” with a smile signaling she is joking.

“I’ve had worse,” he says, recalling the stomach troubles that used to plague him when he drank his coffee black. He never developed a taste for the coffee mixes you could buy that had sugar and all kinds of oils and other ingredients in them. And he didn’t need cream, just a little milk to cut the acid and move the taste from a bitterness at the front of the tongue to a smooth flavor towards the back.

“Breakfast is good. Thank you, Fern,” he says as recompense for his quip about her coffee, the payment not needed among the three of them, since they now know more about each other and have some comfort with that.

“You’re welcome. Wouldn’t want to think I was poisoning either one of you fine gents before you put in a day’s work,” with a smile.

Breakfast consumed, the men walk out the screen door, boots clomping across the wooden porch, and head to the barn.

“We got to fix some of the fence line over on the 48,” says Cyrus, referring to a fairly large section of ranch land that currently is grazed by cattle. “Cattle got restless a week ago during a lightning storm and run into some of the fenceposts. We need to dig a bit and reset ‘em, and then make the wire tight so it don’t sag.”

They saddle two horses, load a few tools into saddlebags and climb up, Cyrus on “Ranger” and Mack on “Curly.” Once in the saddles the two horses need no encouragement but begin moving almost immediately. A quick check of the reins and Cyrus leads Ranger toward the 48.

It’s a quiet morning. There’s a soft dew on the grasses as birds are working to get the first meal of the day. A pleasant temperature at this early hour suggests that it’s going to get much warmer by afternoon.

Reaching the fence line, they dismount and examine the damaged fenceposts. Cyrus easily pulls the first one out of the ground, setting the bottom end on the ground, tilted crazily toward the sky, the wire preventing it from falling completely over.

“This is what you gotta do. You gotta dig the hole a little deeper, place the post back into the hole, hold it straight up, and pack some of these rocks around the post. Then we’re gonna’ fill in all the dirt and make sure the post is good and solid and wires level before we move on. You hold the post straight and I’ll tighten the wires. Make sense? You got the wire stapler, right.”

As Mack nods, the cattle mill around nearby, not watching but aware of the two men.

The first post goes in easily and is soon packed and wire made tight. The second is a bigger problem. The hole and area around it are soggy, making it hard to create a stable foundation for the post. The two men work at it and within a half hour that post is in and standing tall.

For the rest of the first day the men ride from one parcel of land to another, Cyrus describing what needs to be done.

Once done with the fenceline, Mack asks, “Care to show me those fruit trees and grapevines, Cyrus?”

“You bet. They’re in the section right behind the house”

As they ride around the side of the house, Mack sees a small, weed-infested grove of fruit trees in one area, and five rows of gnarled old grapevines in another. Grass grows tall throughout the section. It’s obvious that no one has tended to the orchard and vineyard for several years.

“You know, I just haven’t had the time,” admits Cyrus sheepishly. “The damned place just eats every minute up and spits it out without chewing. These trees and vines are the last priority, which means they never get any attention from me. I’m hoping you can make a difference here.”

“Well, I’ll give it a try, but I don’t want to get your hopes up. A couple of those trees look like they have canker and the grapevines don’t look like they have been pruned for several years. This’ll take some work.”

“Well, this here is Fern’s baby. She loves fresh fruit and grapes and always wanted to have both. I promised her when we bought this place that she would get her wish. This is all the further we got down that road. She’ll be a much happier woman if you can straighten things out.”

“I’ll do my best. Can we sit down and write down all the work that needs to be done on the ranch, and roughly when it needs to be done and in what order? That’ll help me to get to what you want done and also figure out how to best put in my time.”

“Let’s do that over supper. Fern can also tell you some of what she needs done. God knows I never have time to do any of her things…” his voice tapering off.

At the evening meal, the three people eat and talk while Mack jots down notes on a piece of paper he carries in his front pocket.

From what Cyrus and Fern describe there is a definite seasonality to the work.

Spring is the time for readying the land; branding, vaccinating and castrating calves; fertilizing, planting, and cleaning up and fixing any damage from the winter, restoring the ranch functionally. It’s also the season when rains and snow melt bring more water than the land can handle, with flooding and soggy fields vexing every rancher and farmer around.

Summer is weeding and fertilizing, moving the cattle around to fresh grazing grounds, moving irrigation, and doing regular maintenance and upkeep, including vehicles, buildings, and fields.

Fall is busy with harvest time and getting the earth ready for winter’s sleep and weather’s temperament.

Winter, well winter is a time for working on the inside of buildings, repairing and cleaning, and a time for watching over the cattle, moving them to shelter during ice and snow, and making sure they have water and feed. During some winters there are challenges requiring fortitude, experience and plain dumb luck to keep the ranch from the brink of disaster.

As they talk about what needs to be done Fern and Cyrus argue about the priorities, but in most contentious issues Cyrus shrugs and accedes to Fern’s wishes.

Mack now has a game plan and he feels much more settled about what’s expected of him and what he figures he can get done.

Chapter 16. First Opportunity

About three weeks into Mack's stay at the ranch things slowly start to come together. The major needs of both land and equipment have been largely remedied. Cyrus is a man with a fixed mind, not too open to new ideas but also willing to let Mack try a few things that might not normally be done on the ranch. It's a typical, "the boss is always right" scenario except that Cyrus isn't a jackass about it. He's just "straight-minded," which simply means that it is hard for him to come off of his way of thinking. Much easier to just plod ahead, he reasons, even if it's not the perfect way to do things. Slowly, Mack begins to win over his confidence.

During supper one night, Mack tells Cyrus that he's ready to tackle the trees and grapevines. Reluctantly, Cyrus agrees to allow it, and Mack describes the plan he's worked out. First, he's going to mow and dig out all the tall grass growing around trees and vines. This will also take out the weeds but leave nutrients in the soil to be used for growth and health of the orchard and vineyard. Then he's going to work the soil around both areas, ensuring aeration and good drainage. After that, it's pruning and fertilizer time. Throughout this time, he'll be inspecting for insects and disease. If he can use the tractor, he'll be finished within two weeks and then it will just require regular inspections and seasonal maintenance.

Fern is clearly tickled. She has a quiet smile but a sparkle to her eyes that says that her itch is finally going to get scratched. "That looks good, doesn't it, Cyrus?"

Cyrus slowly wipes a spot of gravy off of his chin and says, "Let's give her a go, Mack."

Fern, seeing that she is going to get what she has been wanting, quickly jumps in with, "Any way you could also till the garden, Mack? I'd sure like to get some fall crops going, but the ground has to be turned over."

"That'll probably take just half a day if Cyrus is okay with it."

Cyrus looks from one to the other, and with a look of resignation says, "Okay, but don't decide you're going to be a gardener, Mack. We got a ranch to run here."

"I'm here to do what you need me to do."

"Okay, well then do it, but don't take too long. Just git her done."

With that settled, the next day Cyrus and Mack head into the nearest town. Grainger is the county seat, with a couple of blocks of brick buildings along the road that run through town, some buildings still showing fading painted ads on the side from a time long past. At one corner of the first block is a western wear store, which draws both men in. Boots, Wranglers, more work gloves and a couple of shirts get rung up, wrapped in paper with twine and handed over. Mack feels better prepared for life and work on the ranch now. He's liking the feeling from

doing honest labor every day, muscles first complaining but his body now responding to the daily exercise.

The next day, Mack fires up the tractor after he and Cyrus lubricate the machine, and with the mower attachment he makes short work of the grass and weeds. The next step is more labor intensive as he manually hoes around each tree and grapevine to expose good soil without damaging the roots. Within three days the small orchard and vineyard have taken on a clean new look. As Mack aerates the soil with a pitchfork, he spots a disturbing clump on the side of a few of the trees. It's a parasite. He remembers seeing these as a kid and he knows there is only one thing to do – cut out those trees and burn them. Even with that unexpected interruption, the reclamation project is progressing at a good pace.

For the next week Mack researches tree varieties and grapes, finding that half of the trees and one variety of grapes aren't well suited for this climate zone. No reason to keep those alive since the seasons will eventually kill them or thwart them anyway. So, he cuts and digs up the trees and grape vines that can't thrive, including the ones that he can see are diseased.

The weather has turned hot and dry. Dust devils dance across bare dirt like dervishes, casting up dust and debris in tight cones swirling into the sky.

After a week of drying out, the torn-out growth makes for a great bonfire in the middle of the dirt yard one night late in August, complete with beers, chairs to watch and hose and implements handy.

It's almost like a campfire but they have neither hot dogs nor marshmallows. Some campfire, Mack thinks. Fern's face has an expression somewhere between grief and interest as she watches much of her dream go up in flames. She's hopeful that like many lessons in life you have to let go of some things in order to make everything better.

For the next four days Mack works on the remaining trees and vines, carrying pruning shears, pruning saw and wound dressing, going slowly from tree to tree, and then from vine to vine, taking them back to the solid stock from which, hopefully, a good harvest will spring. Another few days in the vineyard are spent tying up the trellis wires and tightening the posts and steady wires at the end of each row. Finally, he takes a tour of the newly restored orchard and vineyard and concedes that he has done all he knows what to do. The rest is up to nature and God.

What a thought. God! Who thinks of God anymore? But here, on the land, with a steady lifestyle, good exercise, fresh air and new friends, the idea of God comes back to him.

He remembers the old joke about the preacher and the farmer. The newly posted preacher is riding around to the nearby farms to invite folks to church when he spots a tough old farmer laboring mightily in a field next to the road. Climbing off his horse, he walks over to the fence line and calls out, "Howdy, I'm the new parson. Can I lend a hand?" After a nod from the

farmer, they work together on the fence in total silence for an hour or two. Finally, the preacher says, “God has certainly gifted you with some mighty nice land here,” at which the farmer replies, “Well, that may be true but he sure wasn’t doing much with it before I come here.”

God, land, work, new friends, steady food, fresh air. It all seems to go together, but the connections between them all are somewhat complicated. Yet they are all connected. Could it be that some supreme being actually made all of this, and that somehow it is all orchestrated for the benefit of the people that reside here?

And then the skeptic in him appears with this thought, “If God were real then all the evil in the world would never happen. Any proud creator would certainly not allow the shit and nastiness that happens all the time.”

Still, the thought is there. Somehow, in the midst of nature, when everything is working together, the idea of some superior power or divine force naturally crosses his mind. It’s an idea that he doesn’t share with Cyrus and Fern.

Chapter 17. Falling Into Winter

The Lost and Found starts to reflect the change in the seasons. The nights have cooled off a bit and eventually so do the days. Grape leaves turn golden and then brown as do the leaves on trees in the orchard.

Over the next several months as fall progresses toward winter, Mack works with Cyrus to ready other parts of the ranch and his work on the orchard and vineyard begin to pay off. The vines are going dormant, and they have been cleaned up and cut back in preparation for winter. New vines and young trees have been ordered and will get planted early next spring, each one selected to thrive in this zone.

The oncoming winter brings with it a host of other challenges. Late fall the hay is cut and baled, then stacked and stored in the fields under tarps. The men distribute haystacks around the property to be available for the cattle during the worst of the coming weather.

Rains wash over the land, followed in December by snow. After several snowstorms, drifts start to pile up and fence lines become difficult to see. The men move cattle closer to the house and small shelters are erected to protect hayricks from the weather.

Mack toys with the idea of heading off and leaving the Lost and Found behind, but it's not the best time to be riding a motorcycle around the countryside, and he's grown comfortable with the ranch. The work is hard but good. Fern and Cyrus are easy to get along with. He feels like he's actually making a difference. Good evidence of that is when the two men deliver bales of hay to other ranchers in the area and return with money, which Cyrus says is a first.

"Fern," Cyrus says one night over supper, "this is one of the best years we've had in a while. I think this man here might work out. Think we should keep him around?" The question evokes a quizzical look from Mack and he scans the faces of the two ranch owners to see the smile curling from the lips of Cyrus, making him realize that it was a joke – he fits in here.

Evening meals are longer and more conversational now that the days are shorter. Cyrus indulges in rare introspection, sharing details of his life growing up, a process that started quite early for him and accelerated until he joined the Marines at 17.

"I wasn't fit for much back then except work," said Cyrus at one meal. "They tried to make me into a Marine and I'll admit I did give it a try, but the best I could do was to play the game so I could get along until I got out. The Corps did teach me how to take care of myself thanks to a Lance Corporal that kept making me do pushups. Of course, I also picked up some bad habits, most of which I was able to shake. I still wonder why some of those guys stayed in, but I guess a man has to do something with his life and I can think of worse things to do."

Fern was usually quiet at meals, perhaps because she was so busy preparing them that she was grateful for the opportunity to just sit.

With shorter days and colder weather, the outside work is limited so Mack and Cyrus work on the inside of the ranch buildings. The barn is a fair place to start. Horse stalls are strengthened, doors are oiled, and everything is cleaned up. The equipment shed is open to the weather on three sides, so all equipment is brought inside the barn for maintenance, repair and storage for the winter.

Despite some heavy snowfall and drenching rains, the winter passes without too much incident and gradually the days warm as spring arrives. Mack and Cyrus get busy readying fields for planting.

With the spring sun, old and new grape vines are growing and Mack takes a day to train them to the wires. Branches and blossoms form on the older fruit trees, with bees flitting around to do their work of pollen gathering and pollination. An occasional couple of hours here and there find him weeding and applying fertilizer. New fruit trees require extra care to give them a good start on life and ensure they'll be productive later. He is attentive to Fern's favorite areas, which earns him big points with her.

Fern is adamant that she will not allow any pesticides, chemicals or poisons of any kind on any plants. That complicates things a bit, requiring Mack to visit the feed and seed store in Grainger to get ideas on how to deal with pests, blight, scale and other maladies without resorting to nuclear options. And, of course, pests are what they get. Not bad. Just a whole variety of insects and birds and grubs and borers and other chewing, eating, killing creatures. All of which require good, natural remedies to fend them off.

Fortunately, Mack is learning fast, reading as much as he can find on the subject. He is able to get pamphlets from the county extension agent who comes around every couple of months. The feed store is another great source of wisdom on just about anything related to ranching and farming.

It's become somewhat of an obsession with Mack to show Fern that her ideas matter and that she has good ones. From what he can see in his day-to-day dealings with the couple, Fern impresses him the most because she can juggle all of the ranch house operations, the food and upkeep, manage the finances, and many times suggest ideas that turn out to be success stories.

Chapter 18. Deerfork

One spring Sunday afternoon the sky starts turning dark, a storm arriving quickly. Mack is out with the cattle when he sees the clouds spilling over the top of the hills, first as small outliers, and then as massive storm clouds. He's about to go round up the cattle and drive them to shelter when Cyrus rides up.

Fern was missing from dinner last night and breakfast this morning, Cyrus explaining that she isn't feeling well.

"I'll shelter the animals, but I need you to go over the pass to get some medicine. Fern is real sick and I called the doctor. He thinks it's stomach flu. I called a pharmacist up in Deerfork and he can make up a quick remedy for her, but we gotta move quick because of this storm. Your motorcycle is probably the fastest way to get there and back."

"Got it. Just tell me how to get there and I'll be rolling."

"Go out to the highway and turn right, about 4 miles down the road you'll see a gravel road heading up over the hills. The sign on the road has an arrow pointing to the right that says, 'Deerfork.' Turn up the road and Deerfork is about 15 mile further. You can't miss the pharmacy. It's right on the road and has a sign that says 'Medicine.' Hurry. Fern is in a pretty bad way and I'm worried about her."

Mack rides Curly back to the barn and puts him in his stall with a feedbag and blanket, having taken off saddle and tack. Grabbing a helmet, he jumps on the Harley and fires her up. Then, with an eye on the approaching storm, he roars off to the main road.

It is a little more than four miles until he sees the Deerfork sign, and turning he's on the gravel road and traveling as quickly as he can. Thunder is rocking the hills and another mile later he sees the lightning. The road is rutted and the gravel hasn't been graded in a few years, but it's fairly stable ground and he is making good time. The old county road is actually a gravel pass over the hills, fairly steep in some places, with no guardrails, reflectors or other ways of warning if disaster waits just beyond.

Rain starts and stops, then big splatting drops of rain hit him and finally lightning strikes where he can see it. Thunder is almost immediate, signaling that the massive electrical discharges are striking the ground close by. He pushes the Harley faster, only slowing down for tight curves or steep grades or declines. "This is taking forever," he mutters, "I have to go faster." He is getting drenched. "Damn it, I should have worn my leathers," he thinks. Too late for that. Wet is wet. Just hunch over and keep going. A small hailstone hits his helmet. "Pock!" And now another one. Within a moment he's being pelted by hailstones the size of peas. He slows because going fast is painful. The hail doesn't just hurt where it hits his torso, but his face is hot from the impact of the icy stones. Thank God he thought to carry goggles with him.

God?

Hmm. God, can you help? I don't know what to say, but if you're really there I could sure use a hand. Help me get this medicine and get it back to Fern quickly. I would sure appreciate it and I promise you I'll give you some more thought if this all works out.

Another five minutes of rain, hail and snow and Mack crests the top of the range of hills and just as quickly is going down the other side. The sky is dark. The smell of wet dust fills the air. The wind is blowing the grass on each side of the road into the waves of a green ocean, swirling, washing, tossed up and then blown down. Rain now pours steadily. Lightning is moving east now. He's almost there.

Deerfork barely qualifies as a town. He races past two houses with old white fences and then a few more houses and finally he spots a small wood frame storefront building with a sign "Medicine." Beneath that descriptive word in small letters are the words, "Compounding Pharmacy."

Doesn't that beat all. A compounding pharmacy out in the middle of nowhere.

Mack pulls the bike as close as he can to the building, shuts the machine off, and walks to the door, knocking on the front door, peeking through the glass window with crocheted curtain, and calling "Hello." Trying the doorknob, and finding it unlocked, he opens the door and steps into a brightly lit interior. Standing in front of him is a tall man in western cut clothes with long sideburns and a small mustache.

"You must be the man that Cyrus sent," handing Mack a plastic bag and continuing, "You need to get this package back to Fern right away. This'll drop her fever and help her to rest. Tell Cyrus to call me if she isn't better in the morning and I'll come over."

"Thanks, what do we owe you?" asks Mack.

"Tell Cy I'd like one of those prized pullets when he's over next."

"Okay, thank you!" And with that, Mack gets quickly on his bike, starts the motor and makes his way noisily out of the little outpost.

The trip back is difficult. Water is rushing down the gravel road creating rivulets and ruts. Rain is heavy and steady. Every part of him is soaked but he ignores the signs of momentary bodily discomfort. Lightning strikes once very close, followed instantly by a rolling, crackling peel of thunder.

The bike is surefooted, but the gravel is of little help since torrents of water are now running towards him, crossing the road everywhere. Mack has the package tucked under his denim jacket and he suddenly wonders how he can protect his precious cargo from damage if the bike

should go down. If it happens, he reasons that the trick is to land on his back and keep his arms wrapped around the package. At least in theory it sounds like it could work.

Twice, the front tire slips and he has to put light pressure on the rear brake to keep the bike upright and shift pressure from the front tire. As he tops the crown of the pass he can see nothing below. Clouds and rain obscure everything in front of him, with the small road only visible for thirty feet ahead. He slows the bike and cranes his neck to see better, occasionally wiping a hand across his rain-soaked goggles.

Water is now coming off of the hillside like waterfalls, pouring onto the road and making it difficult to see even the roadbed. He is shivering heavily, his denim jacket a cold, wet compress sticking to his upper body, his jeans plastered to his legs.

Suddenly, out of the mist, a large figure looms in front of the bike. “What the…!” Mack yells, applying both brakes as hard as he can without throwing the bike into a slide. He is coming up on the creature quickly and he isn’t sure he will be able to stop the bike before he collides. It’s a steer. Someone’s fence line is down and the bull has decided to saunter on to the road to get out of the wet, sticky grass, or something.

The bike stops not more than two feet away from a large, angus steer standing in middle of the road.

Mack yells, pushes the horn button and revs up the loud V-Twin motor. Slowly, the large animal begins to move toward the west side of the road and then, nonchalantly steps over the downed area of fence and walks back into the field.

Shivering from cold has now been eclipsed by shuddering at the thought of what would have happened if he hadn’t been able to stop, or if he hadn’t picked the steer out of the mist because of his rain splattered googles, or…

The thought trails away. A mechanical part of his brain forces determination, “Gotta keep going. Gotta get back. Just keep going.”

Clunking the bike out of neutral and back into gear, Mack and bike continue down the twisty gravel road. In another fifteen minutes he is back on the main road and speeding toward the ranch, pulling into the long dirt driveway and then running quickly to the ranchhouse porch clutching the important package.

His impending return has been announced by the rumbling Harley engine, bringing Cyrus to the front porch before Mack can even dismount.

“Here,” Mack, thrusts his hand into his jacket and pulls out the plastic bag. “Pharmacist says you owe him a chicken, I think.”

Cyrus grabs the bag and runs inside while Mack rolls the motorcycle back to the equipment shed. No time to wipe it down, he thinks. I gotta get out of these soaking clothes.

Moving quickly into the bunkhouse, Mack strips down, fills the old clawfoot bathtub with hot water, then slides into it. “Oh yeah,” he exclaims slowly. “Oh man,” his thoughts turning back to the desperate ride over the gravel pass and back, running in the face of a severe storm with virtually no protection other than a helmet, jeans and denim jacket. He winces as he remembers the near miss with the steer. Somehow he got back to the ranch with the medicine that he hopes Fern will soon be getting benefit from. He has grown to like her a lot. She’s a steady person and the first almost sane woman he’s known in a long time. It’s a revelation to him and he wonders what it all means. Slowly, the realization of the danger of the trip is erased by the hot water and the comfort of knowing that he got the medicine here and now he can relax and soak up a little “medicine” himself.

For a moment he thinks of Fern’s many good qualities, and he imagines how it might be if it were just him and her working the ranch. She’s some kind of woman, he thinks.

Shaking his head at the idea the thought is quickly erased.

After a leisurely soak, he eases himself out of the tub, towels off and puts on a dry set of clothes. His ever present but now soaking denim jacket is replaced by his leather motorcycle jacket. A bit much, but it is warm and dry and it’ll have to do because he doesn’t have a third jacket.

He walks quickly to the ranch house and going inside, sees Cyrus standing by the window staring out.

“How is she?,” Mack asks.

“I don’t know. I give her the medicine but it’s too early. I can’t tell if it’s going to work or not. I’m worried, I’ll tell ya.”

“I’m sorry, Cyrus. I went as quick as I could. The pharmacist said to call him in the morning if she’s not better yet and he’ll drive over. I guess that’s what we can do.”

The thought quickly flits through Mack’s brain, is this time for God? If there is a God does he play a role in things like this? If there was a God he would surely take care of nice people like Fern.

Cyrus and Mack rustle around the ranch house to make some supper. They settle for heating up a pot of beans and ham, Cyrus taking some to Fern.

“She has to keep eating to keep her strength up for this fight. She ate a little,” he says softly as he returns to the table.

With that, both men withdraw into themselves and finish the meal in silence, each to his own thoughts.

Look how things are going, thinks Mack. I've been here for almost a year, doing pretty good at everything Cyrus has given me to do. I'm feeling stronger and more settled with each month. The cattle are doing well. Fern's orchard and vineyard are doing really good. This ranch is shaping up, about to do okay, but now this. Is this what life is like? Just downs for every up, no escaping it? Am I cursed? It's like life has a vendetta against me, spoiling every good thing that starts to come my way. Maybe I should just accept it so I'm not disappointed. But, damn it, I am disappointed. I have dreams, too. Why shouldn't I get to experience my dreams and feel satisfaction with my life?

Excusing himself, still stuck in his own head, Mack walks back to the bunkhouse. No matter what today holds, tomorrow is another day. He needs a good night's rest to get ready for it.

God, you're in charge of Fern. Take care of her, buddy!

The next day arrives early, bright sunshine, birds singing, the pleasant crispness of freshly cleaned air, as though the storm never happened. The earth has been renewed.

Mack wakes up with a splitting headache. All the previous night he tossed and turned, going over the harrowing journey to Deerfork in his mind, replaying the near miss with the steer, returning with medicine to help the very ill Fern, picturing her face and smile. He has been in a battle all night for her life, more of a challenge than he realized and yet somehow it is morning and he is alive and the sunlight streaming into the bunkhouse windows looks like the light of heaven illuminating the room.

He dresses and walks over to the ranch house, expecting to see rainbows filling the sky but not disappointed that they are not in evidence.

"Mornin'," he says to Cyrus as he walks into the house. "How's Fern?"

"She had a tough night last night. She kept talking and thrashing about on the bed. I put cold washcloths on her head every time I woke up. About 1 am she started sleeping peacefully. She's still asleep. Her fever's gone down some. I checked her temperature an hour ago and it was right at 100, which is a lot better than when you left to go get the medicine. We'll make our own breakfast this morning and we'll probably be doing the cooking until she gets back on her feet."

The day is filled with work, Cyrus heading back to the house every couple of hours to check on Fern. The rain, wind and hail have done real damage around the ranch. The cattle are fine, but the orchard and vineyard are a mess, and Fern's garden looks like someone has trampled it into mud.

The men mend two fence lines and then Mack goes to work cleaning up the orchard, vineyard and garden. Fortunately, the damage looks worse than it actually is, and after two days of work things are starting to get pretty much back to where they had been.

Fern is in bed for another three days, just getting up to go to the bathroom and wash up before going back under the covers. The fourth morning she gets up and sits down to breakfast with Cyrus and Mack, before conceding defeat and heading back to bed. The two men added cooking to their list of chores when Fern went down and now they have kind of a rhythm going, cooking and cleaning up dishes for each meal.

Cyrus drives 45 miles into Grainger for some needed groceries, a task Fern did. It's how it goes in the country. The people are equipment. When one piece of human equipment needs service or repair, the others have to stand in or the work doesn't get done. But the work always must be done. You just gotta figure it out.

After a week, Fern is finally strong enough to stay up all day, gradually adding back the chores she always does. The rhythm of life goes on, with the third member of the little ranch family back in the saddle.

Chapter 19. Entertainment

Mack has been at the ranch for a year. He works hard, sleeps easy, has stopped talking to himself as much, and he seems to have settled in. One Friday night he decides to seek a little human companionship outside of Cyrus and Fern, so he jumps on the Harley and rides into Grainger. There's not much to do in town, but there's one saloon that has a loud jukebox, a beat-up pool table with a colorful plastic Budweiser light over it, and cold beer. Turns out, there are a few women there, too.

Mack spots one gal that looks really familiar. It's Sara, the waitress that waited on him at the diner when he first rode into the area. After a couple of beers she looks pretty good, and she must be drinking too because she walks up to Mack and says, "Hey handsome, looks like you stuck around."

"Yep. Couldn't figure out where to go from here which is probably why you're still here, too."

"Maybe," she says with a sad smirk of a smile.

"Want to dance?" Mack asks, as if he dances all the time.

"Not really. But I'd be up for talking a while."

Just as they're getting into sharing a few stories with each other, a man with a huge belt buckle and a plaid shirt with pearl buttons walks up and says, "Hey Sara. How about a dance, sweetheart?"

"Not my type, Cowboy," she replies but smiles at the end as though she doesn't want to make a future café customer mad.

"Oh come on. You know you want to twirl with me."

At which Mack stands up and says strong but firm, "The lady doesn't want to dance and you sure as hell don't want me to teach you how to tap dance."

"Well, look at this, the little man can talk. Y'know I don't need you to teach me anything, but I'd be glad to teach you how to arm wrestle, big shot."

Mack orders another beer, clears off one side of the table, and the two men sit down facing each other, elbows locked, hands straight up with interlocked fingers.

Mack nods at Sara and she raises one hand and then drops it suddenly. The match is on.

It's pretty even at the outset. Mack has an early advantage but can't get his opponent's hand down to the table. Then Mr. Plaid Shirt grimaces and pushes back hard. Their arms are straight

up. Mack starts to waver slightly, and Plaid Shirt has the advantage. The back and forth brings people craning their necks to see who is winning. Two guys are betting on the outcome. A couple others are bringing beers from the bar to catch the action. Sara is watching as though this happens all the time.

Mack hasn't arm wrestled in a lot of years, but he has been working pretty hard and his muscles are well toned. His confidence is solid, and the beers boost it even higher.

"Here ya go, buddy!" he says, and he throws his full leverage into the pivot arm.

It's a momentary advantage, quickly offset by Plaid Shirt who suddenly has the strength of three men. Mack grunts and pushes hard but his arm is quickly slammed down to the table with his hand and some of his forearm hanging off the edge of the table. There is an audible "snap" and Mack's face turns from red to white. His hand and wrist are hanging down off the table but the rest of his arm sticks straight out. The victor lets go of Mack's hand and raises both arms above his head, shouting, "Yeah, baby! That's how you do it!"

Sara drives Mack to the local hospital, a two-hour trip, where the doctor sets his broken arm and plaster casts it. The doctor tells him that he has a clean break of both the radius and ulna, gives him some pain pills, and says to go home and rest, and return in six weeks.

"That's an easy thing to say, Doc, but I'm a ranch hand. Rest isn't on the menu."

"Young man, you have two options. One is to do what I tell you so you can live to fight another day. The other is to do the opposite and find yourself with a crippled arm that has mended poorly. You might have a harder time being a ranch hand with the second option. But it's your choice."

The recovery period is agonizing for Mack. Sara drives to the ranch once to check on him and to also show him that she didn't abandon him when he lost the arm-wrestling match. Mack is grateful but doesn't really welcome the company. He also notices that Fern is unusually curious about why Sara is there. Cyrus takes the truck in to Grainger to bring Mack's bike back, which requires more than a bit of muscle to get it up a ramp into the pickup bed. Mack is able to do some work with his one good arm, but he isn't much use for the real work of the ranch. Cyrus takes on some of what Mack isn't able to do and the rest just doesn't get done.

After six weeks the plaster cast is taken off and replaced with a soft cast, which is a huge relief because Mack's arm has been itching like crazy under the cast for several weeks. More than a few times he has been tempted to cut the damn cast off himself just so he can drag fingernails across the irritated skin. The only other alternative he can imagine is to just cut the arm off. Fortunately, with the soft cast he can now reach some of the affected skin and also check the knitting bone below. It is tender, especially at the point of the break. In another two weeks the soft cast is removed with the doctor giving him quick instruction, "Don't do any heavy lifting for the next month and no arm wrestling ever again. I can use a new fishing boat, but I don't want

to earn it by casting you up." Mack pays the doctor realizing the ill-fated trip to the tavern two months ago cost him two month's pay.

Things gradually return to normal as Mack's arm slowly regains its previous strength. Sara never comes back, and Mack doesn't go looking for her, either. Instead, life returns to what it was.

Chapter 20. Sara's Reflection

I liked that guy Mack, thinks Sara. He was trying to protect me from that loudmouth cowboy and that was really kind. I thought maybe we could be friends or something more. For damned sure, this area doesn't have a lot of men to choose from.

He seemed pretty sure of himself and he looks strong and well-muscled. I guess he didn't know that Terry pulls shit like that. I remember when Terry sucker punched a stranger in the café who said something that no one but Terry could hear. Jerry kicked him out and handed a cold wash rag to the customer to apply to his lip. That was the end of it, but most people in the area knew that Terry wasn't just big, he was unpredictable and had an angry streak to him.

When I went to see Mack at the ranch he was kind and thanked me, and we talked a bit. But there was just something about him that I couldn't put my finger on - like he was distracted or thinking of someone else all the time I was there. I tried to coax him into telling me about his life, but he wouldn't take the bait. Some guys are to themselves, but I hoped this one was different. I don't remember much about the first time we met, when he stopped at the café as he was riding through the area, but I remembered his face right away when I saw him that night at the bar. It wasn't hard, like most of the men around here. It was soft and almost vulnerable. Like the face of a seeker looking for something but not sure of what.

I didn't go back after that one visit because it just didn't seem to matter. He wasn't interested, he was healing up pretty good, and I don't need to waste my time with loners or angry men or guys that are too lost in their own thoughts to care about me.

Chapter 21. Cattle Drive

One morning over breakfast, Cyrus tells Mack that they need to move the cattle up to higher pasture. Tomorrow morning they'll get started on the drive to pastureland leased from a distant neighbor that no longer farms it. It's good grazing land but it's a full-day trip up in the hills. On the land is a small shed that serves as a sleepover shelter for just this purpose so the men will carry bedrolls, some hardtack, and other provisions to pack in for the night. They spend the day preparing the cattle and their pack material and the following morning they start out.

It is an iconic western scene. Two men in Wrangler jeans, on horses, driving cattle up paths and dirt roads to pasture, silhouetted on a hillside. The only thing missing from the scene is cigarettes, but since neither men smoke that imagery is left incomplete.

The cattle are not in any hurry. There is lots of tall grass along the paths and road to distract them. They're constantly needing to be yelled at, whistled at and clapped at as they stop to chew at particularly good stretches of vegetation.

The day is cooler, having been warm for several weeks. Wind gently toys with the fields, flies buzz, little clouds of dust rise from the hooves, calves now older are still easily distracted, bringing the ire of their mothers.

Both men carry rifles in scabbards on their saddles. Cyrus also has a pistol in a waist holster. There are plenty of reasons to need to protect yourself or your livestock, one of which shows up within the first hour when a calf almost steps on a rattler. Fortunately, the calf sees it in time and freezes in its tracks. Without stopping for a moment, Cyrus rides up to the calf, pulls out his rifle and taking aim, shoots the snake, the bullet cleaving its head from its still coiled body. Startled at the loud bang, the calf runs back to its mother and continues with the herd. Another near miss recorded in the annals of ranching.

That night, after settling the herd in at the new pasture and getting to the little cabin, Cyrus brings out an old metal coffee pot, fills it with water and coffee grounds and sets it on top of a pot-bellied stove.

"Okay, now we'll be ready for the morning," he tells Mack. Mack pulls out a harmonica that he hasn't played for twenty years, but still carries around. The plaintive music of the instrument is fitting, though it's obvious that Mack is pretty rusty.

Twenty minutes later both men silently go about getting ready for bed and gratefully drop off to sleep. The sound of peaceful snoring soon fills the wooden structure, and the occasional nearby call of coyotes provides a backup choir.

In the morning, fresh coffee perking on the wood stove, Cyrus talks over the day's work ahead.

“We’ll check all the fence lines and I also want to look at the little pond up here and make sure it’s full enough to take care of these cattle for a while. Once those are good, we’ll head back down.”

By 10 am, tasks accomplished, they mount up and ride back to the ranch, entering the yard that afternoon by 3:00, Fern standing on the porch to greet them.

After checking on each other’s well-being they sit down for an early supper, recounting their respective day. Fern has washed and cleaned the ranch house, and even cleaned the bunkhouse. Clothes are washed and stacked on beds that have been made with clean sheets and blankets. The men share stories, including the intersection of rattlesnake and calf, and Cyrus lets out the secret that Mack has a harmonica and can play it. Fern tells them with a smile that it’s been nice and quiet at the ranch without their bellowing and stomping.

That evening they gather in the front room of the ranch house, Cyrus lights a fire in the fireplace and Fern prevails on Mack to play something on his harmonica. Mack walks to the bunkhouse and returns with the small shiny Hohner mouth harp. Within a few minutes after settling into a big, overstuffed chair, the notes of a lonesome cowboy tune emanate from the harmonica bringing smiles to Fern and Cyrus and relief to Mack that he remembers how to play it. The last time he played that tune was for Shithead after which she told him where he could stick his damned mouth harp. He followed directions, putting it in a drawer “where the sun doesn’t shine.” This time his audience is much more appreciative.

Couple of songs, his entire repertoire, and the music is over. The three people sit sipping hot coffee before calling it a night. There is an easiness about them, the benefit of time wearing off the rough edges. It seems that more often they don’t have to communicate with words, because they have an understanding.

It’s not always been this way for Mack. His friends were people he worked with or people he met while working on cars or standing out in the yard. Most were purely casual. A nod, a slight wave, maybe share a beer in the front yard. Talk a little sports and weather. Nothing deep, no emotion, no heat. Just the way Mack likes it. But here at the ranch with Cyrus and Fern there are fewer pressures. As Fern often says, “You can’t control much. Sometimes you just have to let things be.” Her philosophy is set in the realities of country life. No complexities of poor relationships, no railing against the rains and snows and challenges of nature, no ponderous schedule with appointments and expectations. Sometimes you just have to let things be.

Chapter 22. Deeper Things

Usually after supper the conversation moves to the chairs in the front room. Cyrus chews, a disgusting habit in Mack's mind, a conclusion that he never mentions. Fern likes to sip coffee and look off in the distance as though she is focusing on an image in her mind that requires regular concentration, occasionally offering a thought or reaction to a discussion. Mack is generally quiet, sharing a few of his ideas about life in general, but nothing personal. Cyrus is like an open book. Ask any question, get a direct answer. His ever-present cowboy hat is more than a head covering. It's a statement.

Mack is interested in making sense of life. Cyrus and Fern are simply settled. Life is what life is, in their philosophy. You can give it a lot of thought, or you can accept what comes and try to make the best of it. In their lives, not many grand plans have worked out the way they hoped, yet lots of good things have happened for them, most without their choosing or involvement. It is a conundrum of sorts, with the usual spirals and swirls of thinking not connecting to anything tangible. Both long ago made peace with the way things rolled, the cards that were dealt them from an eternal deck, the luck of the draw.

Fern held onto some wisdom she memorized in a Vacation Bible School she attended in fifth grade. It was a Bible verse that went something like, "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with everyone." Her interpretation was simple. Keep the peace. No matter what else is happening. Be a peacemaker.

That approach didn't work with her ex-husband, a low life, wife beating, verbal abusing, sloth of a human being. But his was fortunately a brief chapter in her life, short, painful, that ended with quickness and finality with a judge's gavel. No kids, no money, she got the house and mortgage. Just one and done. Cyrus entered her life a year later and she never felt fear again. She also resumed her role as peacemaker figuring that in life as in sports the outcome of one game does not define the whole season. The bad game was over. Time for a good one.

Cyrus is a practical realist. If danger approaches, as much as you can, meet it head on. If you're threatened, find some way to thwart or remove the threat. Last option? Run like hell!

From a young boy Cyrus had endured the stern instruction of his father to be a man. Stand up and fight when you have to. And, with a name like Cyrus, you have to fight more than you want to. But, when the odds are stacked against you, his dad told him, live to fight another day. Work hard to try to stay ahead of the game. Give it everything, defend the people around you that are unable to defend themselves for that is the good of humanity, and find occasional relief in a withdrawal or two from the alcohol bank. Be a man. By implication that means that you face head on the issues that you are dealt. Your role is largely reactive. No man in the family had ever, as far as anyone knew, initiated a great endeavor, whether entrepreneurial or expeditionary. Yet most male family members could be categorized as stand-up men, the kind of solid folk that make them part of the core fabric of their communities. Theirs is a role in the

lower middle of the pack, but that's where most people are. Being a stand-up guy in that group means that people consider you a solid part of the neighborhood or town.

Cyrus is quick to share his plain beliefs when the occasion calls for it. These are lessons for his life and times, and they have been shaped over decades into hard realities.

Mack is learning that working hard toward building something gives his life meaning, but he can't quite bring himself to assign that as his purpose in life. His thoughts are more exploratory, more questions than answers, more indecision than definition, more resignation than revelation. Why am I here? Is this all there is and if so, is all there is enough? What do I want, or stand for, or truly need? Why are people around me focused on their life and I'm still trying to discover mine?

He has answers for each question, but the strongest feeling is that he isn't sure he trusts his answers. He has steady values of honor and dignity and caring and trustworthiness. His moral compass has never been in question in his mind. The universe and much of the planet seem quite okay, but it is Mack that he is unsure of. He likes to question Cyrus and Fern on their opinions and experience, as it gives him an opportunity to consider if he agrees with their opinions, and that brings him a better definition of himself. Their experience also gives him the opportunity to learn important lessons and truths outside of the school of hard knocks, in which class, frankly and for some reason, he has been held back year after year. Experience may be the best teacher but learning from other people's experience has the lowest tuition. There is less pain for the gain. But why? That is always the nagging question. Why do some people survive tragedy and others succumb to it? Why do evil or greedy people live long and prosperous lives when good, kind and generous ones die young?

Cyrus breaks his thinking with, "Mack, why do you think we're here? I mean, it don't seem like a coincidence that the three of us were thrown together. What do you make of it?"

"Now that's a good question. I guess there might be that chance that there is a big plan somewhere and we're all in it, or that someone is guiding each of us, like some big checkers game that we can't see. Or, maybe that we're a whole and complete creature that can determine its own fate and we do the things to make our fate either a good one or the opposite. I kind of think the answer is somewhere in between. I've been looking for the four-leaf clover, like the Merle Haggard song, but I just can't see where it is."

"Well, what about the Bible, or those zen books or some of those other self-help crap books. Don't people say they're like road maps. You think any of those are important to pay attention to?"

To which Fern says, "Cyrus, why are you asking questions like this?"

"Well, I was just trying to find out what he thought. That's all."

Mack answers the question with, “Of the stuff you mentioned I’d say the Bible comes about as close to what I think we should try to learn from. Tell you the truth, the only thing I know about it is what my mom told me when I was 10. She said that it was a book from a superior being who made us all, and that it was full of hope and promise.”

“I guess I heard some about that over the years, too. I just never was much of a reader. So, you’ve lived in a city. What is it about a city that makes people so damned mad? Do you hear about some of that crap that is happening in cities? Kids doing bad things, adults acting like monkeys with each other? What do you think?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s kind of tough to tell. The city has all different kinds of people. Bad guys might be a small percentage but because of the size of the city, there are more of them. And it seems like they hang out in the same general areas. The average person 100 years ago probably never met anyone really bad in their lifetime. In the city, we used to see bad people all the time. I mean ‘bad’ people! And that does two things to you, it puts a face on mean and ugly and bad, but it also deadens my reaction to it. It just becomes normal because it happens so often.”

Fern interjects, “I used to see angry people all the time. They try to run you over because they’re late for work. They sneak in front of you in the checkout line at the grocery store. They park over the line in the parking lot so they can take two spaces. They yell and flip you off if you’re holding them up in any way and then they practically hit you when they pass. Sometimes it’s scary.”

“The world seems pretty tightly wound,” adds Mack. “I found the city was always that way. Here in the country it’s a slower pace of life and there are fewer people around you. You can’t blame other people here for what doesn’t go right, unlike in the city. I remember thinking that when someone drives like a maniac that they just have too much stress and too little ability to process it. I get it. I wandered for much of my life, and in fact, that was what I was doing when I got here. I’ve tried to make sense of things, but I’ve discovered with the help of you two that some things don’t need to be figured out. You just accept them and move on.

“Fighting losing battles is stupid. I tried to die on a lot of hills that I never should have climbed in the first place. I’m as stubborn and as persistent as the next person. But you have to know when to say ‘when.’ It seems like a big percentage of people living in cities are just rats on a spinning cage wheel. They’re busy jamming so much into their time that they don’t enjoy what little amounts of their real life squirts out in between the other stuff. And they’re frustrated. Hell, I know I was and I’m a pretty laid-back person.”

To which Cyrus asks, “You’re laid back? You’re maybe not one of those intense guys, but you sure as hell aren’t sitting back in a rocking chair sunning on the porch. I gotta tell you, Mack, you’re a hell of a good worker. You do a good job and you don’t quit until it’s done and done right. I respect that.”

It felt good to get praise. Mack hadn't heard praise from a boss in a lot of years but Cyrus is always complimenting him. Guess that means he must be doing a good job.

Mack sometimes finds himself drifting off into thoughts as they talk about life and everything else.

Mack returns to the bunkhouse after these evenings, thinking through earlier conversations and working on his own sense of truth and being. On the rare times that the post-supper dialogues turn to politics he is decidedly quiet, either being unsure of what he thinks on the issue or preferring not to stir the pot by sharing what might be a contrary position. Of some things, however, he is certain. Life has taught its lessons and he is the product of both.

The residue from the worst lessons continues to affect him, but as with most wounds, the healing of time has not only covered the greatest pains but given him time to reflect. With time comes perspective and also clarity. In many ways, the evenings help shape his own foundation, giving definition to beliefs long held but not totally understood. He suspects that his rootless past is now fading and he is putting new roots down in this place where he never expected to be and which is now his anchor in life. This thought is both comforting and discomfiting. It is both a foundation to build on and a weight that holds him back. But from what? When his thoughts get jumbled and uncomfortable Fern's words of wisdom come into his head. Sometimes you just have to let things be.

Chapter 23. Spring Again

After a good April of selling calves, one Saturday afternoon Fern tells Cyrus that they're showing a good profit and it looks like they can afford to pay Mack a higher wage and also bring on another hand.

"Are you sure, Fern?" Cyrus responds. "Shouldn't we get at least a couple of good years under our belt before we start handin' money around?"

"Hey, we have an edge. We need to act while times are good so we can lay up enough for when times aren't so good. That's what we shoulda done before beef prices fell and the bank almost owned our souls. We didn't know what we didn't know. Maybe it's time to use some of the lessons we learned."

"I suppose you're right. As usual."

"Could you say that a little louder, honeybunch. I don't get many sweet nothings from you."

"Wanna put some music on tonight, swig some of that tequila that we like but never drink, and do some dancin'?"

"I'm gonna take you up on that, on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you promise to take me out on a proper date to some place that serves tequila and has dance music and we can have a nice time out on a real dance floor."

"Fern, you always drive a hard bargain. You're askin' a lot of this old cowboy. My last dance in public was when that rattler was buzzing 2 feet from me. Mack said he thought I was either doing an Irish jig or having a heart attack. But, I promise I'll take you. That'll be our third date in how many years?," he asks with a sly grin.

"Don't push it, buster. Remember, I'm the cook and I handle the money," she responds with a smile and then walks away.

Later, at the evening meal, conversations are all about the work that's going on and the work that's ahead. Mack is sharing more ideas and then thinking out how they'll all work toward a bigger plan.

After Mack has gone back to the bunkhouse Fern and Cyrus settle on the raise for Mack and decide to defer hiring the second hand until next year. The two of them rarely argue, never raise their voices at each other. They work things through and come up with answers that both

of them can live with. In this case, they settle on a $200 month raise to signify Mack's new status as a leader at the ranch.

Afterward, Cyrus walks over to give the news to their hand.

Banging loudly on the door to the bunkhouse, Cyrus yells through the door, "Hey, no sleeping on the job in there. We got work to do."

In a minute Mack is standing in the open doorway, wiping his face with a towel, looking at Cyrus who is staring from the porch with a big grin on his face.

"Hey Mack, I brought over a couple of beers to celebrate. You gonna' let me in?"

Mack stares at him for just a second, throws the towel toward a chair, and then waves him in the bunkhouse.

"What are we celebrating?" asks Mack as he pops off the bottle tops of the two longneck brews on the edge of a wood counter, handing one to Cyrus.

"I thought you'd never ask. Fern and I been talking and we figured as how you done a lot of work and you don't sleep all day and you haven't stole anything from us… that we'd give you a $150 month raise."

"No kidding. And I thought you liked me." Mack's turn to grin.

"Hell, I was going to lay a wet one on you, but now you made me change my mind."

"Cyrus, I sure appreciate what you and Fern just did for me. It says that you believe what we're doing here is working, and that means what we're doing here is worthwhile, that it's making a difference. So, thank you and please thank Fern, too. I'm grateful."

"I'll do it, Mack."

Cyrus finishes his beer, stands up, belches, and starts walking to the door.

"Now don't stay up all night thinking about how to blow that windfall that we're gonna' give ya."

"Yeah, yeah, good night to you, too."

Chapter 24. Another Summer

Warm weather comes earlier than usual. After the good early spring for tilling and planting, there are several weeks of very pleasant sunny days in May followed by several short rains spread out over several weeks. The rains are perfect, enough to soak into the ground, but not frequent enough or heavy enough to overburden the land's ability to absorb it. The ranch has been busy for several months branding and castrating calves, then selling one-third and raising the other two-thirds.

In June and July, temperatures are uncharacteristically moderate, unlike previous years when the mercury would climb to the 90s and 100s for weeks on end. This year, it's like the climate is saying, "Hey, you had to put up with a lot of crummy years, so here's a good one for ya."

The Lost and Found takes advantage of it. Each person tends to their area of interest and responsibility which turns evening mealtime into almost a business meeting as the three report in - here's what happened today and here's what it does towards reaching our goals, positive or negative.

This has been one of Mack's main contributions, keeping the three focused on trying to reach a goal. He uses conversation to reemphasize points he's made earlier, repeating himself for the sake of being understood. And he knows, whenever Fern or Cyrus repeats what he's been saying, that they get it.

Mack didn't get his approach through higher education. It was really just observation. Try things. Note what works and what doesn't work. Do more of what works and less of what doesn't. It isn't astrophysics. It's just a higher level of communication and partnership. Talk it through until something emerges as obvious to all three. Often as not, the vision for what the ranch can become is from Fern and Mack. The ideas on raising and selling cattle come from Cyrus. The business side of things, the financial fabric of the ranch, are Fern's contribution. The three are learning how to trust the strengths of each other and pitch in to cover weaknesses.

As for evening meals, the food keeps getting better. There is plenty of home-raised organic meat and fruit and vegetables, some of it canned, some frozen, but much of it fresh this time of year. The chicken never tasted so good as when it is served roasted while stuffed with rosemary dressing, along with potatoes basted with olive oil and sprinkled with dill and dried cheese crumbles. Split open, the potato cavities are filled with butter, chives, bacon crumbles, and cheese. On Fridays the meal is served with beer. Saturday night, it's wine. Weeknights the supper beverage is water, coffee, milk or horchata, the last introduced to them by their newest ranch member Alejandra who in one fell swoop has won everyone's heart with the delicious cinnamon and sugar rice beverage.

Alejandra is the daughter of Joaquin, the assistant manager of the co-op in Grainger, who always greets Cyrus with a "hey, neighbor" yell and an infectious smile. Joaquin confided in Cyrus one day that his daughter has finished high school, wants to be a cook or a baker, but

doesn't know where to start. Cyrus said, "Well, can she cook?" to which Joaquin answered, "Of course she can. How do you think I look so handsome? She's been doing most of the cooking for the last four years. She doesn't want to go to college. She just needs to figure life out."

Cyrus mentions the conversation to Fern that afternoon. Fern, not one to miss an opportunity said, "Well, I'd like to talk to her. I just might have a place for her." After a meeting and a quick conversation between Cyrus and Fern, Alejandra is added to the ranch staff part-time.

Alejandra cooks, cleans the kitchen, helps plan meals, collects the fresh vegetables from the garden and does the shopping. She has a sharp eye for the best ingredients and a deft hand in the kitchen. The meals that she plans and prepares are hands-down the most memorable. Conversations after one of Alejandra's special dinners are almost always accompanied with satisfied smiles. Having Alejandra on staff allows Fern to keep a closer eye on the money situation and start to think about expansion.

Dinner conversations are sprinkled with laughter. The levity is indicative of more than a sense of relief at the end of the bad times, but also an unconscious act of soaking up the feelings during the good times to help offset the bad times that might come.

As of the middle of August the Lost and Found is recording the best harvest ever. Hay yields are high. Prices are strong and holding. Four colts fetch a good price. The dairy cow they bought the previous month is producing fresh milk, the orchard is finally producing fruit, and the vineyard is providing seedless grapes. Fern talks to the manager of the grocery store in Grainger and he agrees to buy the fresh fruit and grapes as part of the commitment to local producers. Fern's garden, thanks to Mack's labors, brings in enough vegetables to eat and can, which reduces the food bill. With money from sales to the Grainger IGA Market as a capper, it is a good year.

Work on the Lost and Found is never ending. Every day offers new challenges, opportunities, hope, fears and interest. And sometimes boredom. Tedium is what gets to Mack, doing the same thing over and over, often without thinking, passing time by doing things not effectively, not innovatively, just doing things.

He sometimes rides Curly up a hillside, remembering a few years back when he rode these hills with Cyrus for the first time. That ride and later rides have been in all kinds of weather, usually at the insistence of Cyrus that they inspect this or that. One thing – riding to clear your thoughts does keep things moving. Good thinking ensures there isn't a lot of time to sit twiddling your thumbs.

Curly is a strong horse, full of energy, muscular, and toned with age. He can trot all day, climb hillsides, work his way down the other side, and do it in all kinds of weather. Mack pays close attention to his horse, checking that his shoes are not worn, his feed is balanced, he has plenty of water, and he's wiped down and blanketed for the evening after a day's work.

On the ranch, there are always animals to care for, land to work, vegetation to maintain, and structures and infrastructure to keep up. Most tasks are enjoyable, some are even kinda fun, but there are those chores that he wishes he could give to someone else. If there were someone else.

That happens sooner than anyone thinks.

Chapter 25. The Kid Again…

On a Thursday morning in October Cyrus and Mack drive to the feed store in Grainger to load up feed for the hogs and chickens, two additions that Mack implemented in his first year at the Lost and Found, both of which are adding to the ranch's food supply.

As they drive down the main highway, the men talking over the truck noise, Cyrus tells Mack about the agreement between him and Fern that spring to hire a new hand to work for Mack. Mack isn't totally surprised. The work has been too much for both of them at times and they hired temporary labor two straight months to get through the harvest this year. If they hired one more hand they could get things better set up for next year.

Mack asks Cyrus about the timing, and Cyrus says that the decision is to hire the new hand next year. The two men kick ideas back and forth and end the discussion as they approach town.

Grainger is the county seat and about as western as you're going to find. There are a few businesses as you pull into town, but the two commercial blocks are where the charm of the 1920s and 1930s is locked into architecture. The town enjoyed a brief boom period as farmers regained some financial footing after the war. Building started. Respectable businesses were birthed and grew. One by one the two sides of Main Street filled out with buildings, some with faux brick fronts, others with real brick, all stemming from the Western Regional Farmers Bank, the seed from which the entire downtown sprouted.

Coming from the Lost and Found, you first pass a Shell station on the right with a tire business attached. Next is the original one-room wooden house diner right on the street, no parking lot, just places to park in front and along one other street. A couple of houses with front yards that were more dirt than grass, a wire loop fence, a white faded wood fence and then the bank. The two blocks after that have retail and commercial buildings, the Western Wear store where Mack bought work clothes, an insurance office, a bail bondsman, small print shop, JC Penney store, Red Wing shoe store and the bar with jukebox and pool table.

Along with a second bar on the other side of the street is a general merchandise store, a real estate office, a small hotel, and a furniture store. In the next block, the courthouse stands proud and lonely surrounded by a small grass park and next to a church with a cemetery within its fenced grounds. In the next block is a small library and at the corner, the IGA grocery store. Directly across the side street from the IGA store is a large truck stop with truck islands and four bays of fuel pumps. For the remainder of that block and for blocks on either side of downtown are houses fronting the road, residential streets with expansive, old growth trees, big yards, bigger houses, the elementary, middle and high school with attached playground and ballfield.

In its hay day Grainger weighed in at just under 1500 folks, but over the years the population dwindled down to roughly 900. Like much of rural America, most of Grainger's young people move away after finishing school leaving a small percentage that will probably live out their days never going much farther than 100 miles away from home.

Driving through Grainger is familiar. The feed store is on the other side of town, next to a Sinclair gas station and a restaurant everyone calls “The Chicken.” The real name of the place is Manny’s Family Restaurant, but it has a giant chicken in the window. It’s a home cooking place and the specialty of the house is, as befits the local moniker, the clucker, the bwok bwok bwok, the feathered fowl.

Cyrus can smell the chicken frying from The Chicken as he steers the pickup off the road into the parking lot of Grainger Feed & Farm Supply.

It’s a quiet day, being a weekday, and it’s fall when most farmers and ranchers are busy with harvest and clean up. Next month will be busier, when everyone needs last minute supplies before the cold weather sets in. Today, there is only one other pickup in the parking lot.

Inside, Mack is surprised to see the gangly kid that greeted him at the gas station when he first rode into the area two years ago. The kid looks older and has added some weight but it’s definitely him. He’s talking to the store clerk when Mack walks up.

“Hey, kid. Bet you don’t remember me, do you?” Mack says.

“Nope.“

Mack explains that they met several years ago at the Mobil station where the kid worked, “You told me where there was a café 30 miles down the road, and I didn’t get much farther than that.”

“You got a good memory,” from the kid who now looks to be in his early 20s and who turns back from Mack to continue talking to the clerk. “I been looking but can’t find much work. I can do most anything. I’m good with numbers and I been lifting weights since I was 17. I can carry a bunch. I’m also pretty fair at fixing and building things.”

Mack and Cyrus load up the feed bags, with Mack thinking about what the kid told the clerk. “Cyrus, I think that kid might make a good extra hand,” he says.

“Didn’t look like much to me. Why do you think he’d work out?”

“I dunno. Something about him. Looks like he’s looking for something but he’s lost and can’t find his way anywhere else.”

“Well, we’re having such a good year that now might be a good time. Go back in and see if he wants a job. But if he does, you’ll have to teach him how to do ranchin’. If he doesn’t pan out, he’ll be gone.”

Mack thinks about how he will approach it, and then turns and walks back across the wood plank porch, into the feed store, straight up to the kid who is now looking at a corkboard on the wall, all kinds of pictures and notices tacked to it.

“D’you say you were looking for work?” offers Mack.

“Yeah, there ain’t much around here.”

“What kind of work won’t you do?”

“I’ve been working for as long as I can remember, but I can’t ever remember not liking any of it. It gives you a feeling, kind of a reason for being here.”

“How about you come try out at the ranch? Can’t pay much, but the job comes with room and board and the company is okay. It’s hard work, but it’s honest work. Do you think you’re up to it?”

“I guess I could give it a try. Ain’t nothing else out here and I’m sure not a city type.”

“Don’t blame you. I’m not neither. You got a vehicle?”

“Nope, been bumming a room a few blocks away but they kicked me out this morning. Don’t have a car.”

“Jump in the truck. You can start today. What’s your name, kid?”

“Andy. My real name’s Andrei, but people are a little gun shy of foreign names around here so I just go by Andy.”

Walking up to the truck and opening the passenger door, Mack points the kid to the back door of the crew cab.

“Cyrus, this here’s Andy. He thinks he can be a ranch hand. Should we give him a try?”

“Oh hell, why not. We’re kind of the home for wandering strays, aren’t we?”

“Kid, where’s your stuff?” asks Mack. “We can stop by and pick it up.”

The kid looks straight ahead and with a blank look says, “I didn’t have much, but when they throwed me out of the room this morning they took what little I had and said it was for back rent. I’m all I got right now.”

“We’ll get you restocked. I got an old toothbrush and it doesn’t look like you have to shave much yet.”

And with that, the diesel engine smokes to life and the three men head back to the ranch. As they near the turn, the ranch sign is visible through the windshield. Mack points to it, turns to the kid and says, “Welcome to the Lost and Found.”

It’s one of those days that comes around once or twice a year. It’s been dry for a week, though it’s been a wet year. The hills, valleys and fields have greened up from two fall rains but dust now trails behind the pickup on the dirt road to the ranch house. Pulling up to the barn, Mack and the kid unload the feed bags into stalls and walk to the ranch house where Fern is already standing on the porch.

“Fern, meet our new ranch hand, Andy.”

“Cyrus told me you guys had pushed up the plan and hired another hand. Glad to know you, Andy. If you can put up with these two goats I guess you’re welcome to be here.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“We’re going to have dinner as soon as I get back inside. We’ll set an extra plate down for you. You hungry?”

“I could eat some.”

“When did you eat last.”

“Yesterday some time.”

“You’re in the right place, boy. We’re gonna fatten you up so you look like a man.”

Dinner is beyond good. Fern brings out fried chicken, mashed potatoes, chicken gravy, corn bread and string beans with ham. Alejandra has baked fresh sweet bread and made her special mashed potatoes with cilantro and avocado. The iced tea pitcher travels around the table. It’s a mid-day feast, worth savoring every bite, but also fit for people that work with their hands and need to be strong.

The clinking of silverware on plates drowns out any other noise as the hungry men reload. Plates of food circulate, spending much of their time where Andy can add scoop after scoop on his plate. Afterward, the table mates let the food settle as they ease into more serious, getting-acquainted talk.

Fern asks, “So, Andy. Where do you come from?”

“I grew up about 40 miles south of here, by Big Wash Creek. My pa had a farm there until he got hurt. Lost it. Died a year later. After that I worked around.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Don’t mean to pry, but how about your mom?”

“She passed when I was five, right after we moved to the farm. Pa and her came from the old country, worked in the city for a few years to save money and then bought the place. They didn’t speak English much. She got the flu and we didn’t have no money. We couldn’t go to no doctor and we tried to make it okay at home. She made it six days and then one morning she didn’t wake up. I wasn’t even school age. Only thing I knew is I didn’t know how we were gonna eat. Pa never cooked a thing in his life, at least not on purpose. Somehow we made it through until I was about 14. Then pa was out working in the field on a hot day. We was both doing everything we could to keep the farm. He was like a crazy man he was so sure we could do ‘er if we kept at it. Anyways, I walked from the field to the barn and back, bringing back some water, and I come on him in the field, sitting on his side, sweat pourin’ down his face. His eyes weren’t blinkin’ and when I grabbed his hand it felt like an old wet rag. I tried to get him up on his feet but I couldn’t lift him and he didn’t seem like he could move. I splashed water on his face and poured the rest over his head. He blinked and looked at me and I said, ‘C’mon, pa. Let’s be getting home.’ He kinda got up to his feet, looked at me like he didn’t see me and just fell over. He was dead.”

“Sounds like you’re still trying to make your way in the world, son,” from Mack.

“I guess I am. After pa died, I tried to figure out what to do next. The bank come and took the farm. I snuck out when they were coming up to the door and I never went back. There wasn’t anything to go back for. The farm was gonna be someone else’s soon. I slept out in the barn for a while, figuring I could get out of there when the place was sold and I’d best be ready to go. I was ready when they come.

“I wasn’t that good at school and decided I might not be cut out to be president, so I found work where I could, like the gas station. It hasn’t been easy but it’s okay. I was 14 then and I’m still here. I got by.”

Andy’s attempt at humor with the president comment brings smiles from the other four, Alejandra now a regular at the dinner table after helping prepare the meal.

Andy continues, “I been close to giving up. Just couldn’t seem to get my life together. But, I’m not gonna’ lie to you, maybe my luck is turning. Good dinner, nice folks to be around, Mack says it’s honest work. A man like me can’t ask for any better than that, I guess.”

“Well,” says Cyrus, “you can expect to be treated fair around here. Fern and I own the place but Mack will be your boss. He’ll give you a fair shake.”

Alejandra added, “They’re good people, Andy. These people care about what they’re doing and the people they’re doing it with.”

Andy mutters, “Thank you,” embarrassed by the attention. It is something he is not accustomed to because he has rarely been a recipient of it. In his young life, it has always been about other people. Be careful, because if you mess up your mama dies. And carry your weight or your pa will die trying to carry it for you. From how Andy describes it, neither parent seemed to actually want him, they just accepted him, which in a young boy’s heart is equal to rejection. Now a man, he feels awkward but in the same thought quietly hopeful about this new situation. He smiles quietly as he wonders if this good stretch of life will continue.

The men finish their iced tea, rise from the table and head outside.

“Follow me, Andy. I’ll show you where you bunk,” says Mack as they walk toward the bunkhouse. “What’d you bring with you?”

“I’m wearing it,“ replies Andy.

Mack gives Andy the quick tour of the small bunkhouse. The cracks in the wall were fixed last year, the stove has a load of firewood next to it. Mack now sleeps on the queen bed in the back room, with a rough wooden door. Mack points to one of the three bunks in the larger front room. “That’ll be yours. You can put anything you want on the counter in the bathroom but there isn’t much room so don’t be adding perfume or smelly hair spray or nail clippers.”

Mack’s humor is lost on the kid who is looking at the first place in six years that is just for him to sleep in. He’s used to couches and mats and sometimes a sofa bed, most of which have to be returned to their original purpose and owner each morning.

“We got to get you fixed up with some stuff, Andy. I got an old toothbrush, some shaving cream and an old razor I don’t use anymore. You can use those until we get back to town and you can get some new stuff. How do you comb your hair?”

To demonstrate, Andy takes his fingers and runs it through his hair.

“Well, I guess that’ll be easy for you, kid, but it don’t make you look presentable. I’ll help you get set up. Now, let’s go handle some ranchin’.”

The two men go to the barn and grab feedbags, carrying the chicken feed to the coop and to the feed tray on one side of the hog pen.

“Can you handle a hammer, kid?” asks Mack.

“Yeah. I had to fix up the farmhouse when I was a kid because my pa was too busy trying to make a go of it. If I didn’t fix it the whole place would have falled down around us.”

“Good, grab that toolbox and let’s see what you can do.”

The chicken coop is serviceable, but not the best. Chickens, affectionately called “the ladies” by Fern, don’t have individual roosting stalls. The coop is just one low wooden shed with straw on the floor. Mack’s idea is to build individual stalls onto each side of the box, with a hinged roof over them that will allow you to reach down and pull the eggs out and then drop the cover back down for protection against weather.

The ladies are of every type, color and description. Fern has a special fondness for her “girls” and loves to pick up new chicks every spring at the feed store. Trouble is, the feed store gets all different kinds of chicks and that makes for a chicken menagerie at the ranch. Like the hens, the eggs are all different. Brown eggs, red eggs, light blue-white eggs, white eggs. They all cook up the same and they all taste good, but they make egg collecting like gathering eggs in an Easter basket.

Mack, “Got a bunch of plywood in the barn. Saw’s in the tool crib in the barn. You’ll find nails there, too. Can you run a circular saw?”

Andy, “Yeah, we had one. It was an antique and shocked me every time I used it. Hated the damn thing.”

“Good. A healthy respect for tools is the key to a long life. I keep our tools up and if you treat ‘em right you won’t get hurt. But if you put any tool back dirty or wet or without a light spray of oil on it you’ll have me to answer to.”

This was a new philosophy for Andy. Taking care of tools meant they would take care of you. That sounded right, but it is a new idea. He used to think that his family didn’t take care of things on the farm because they couldn’t afford to. Mack was teaching him that you couldn’t afford not to, because surviving country life requires a dependence on tools. The extra time needed to clean, wipe, oil and service your tools pays off. It is a new economy to him, but it makes sense.

“After you finish with the coop, feed the hogs. That should do it for the day, but I have a full list for you to tackle starting tomorrow. I want you to fix up the rails on the corral. Some are busted up and others just need to be replaced because they’re going away. Then work on the hog pen and make sure their pen and fencing are tight and solid. Hogs can burrow under fences, so you have to sink the posts deep and bury the fence. Then you stack logs on the outside of the fence and staple the fence to the logs. They can’t get under the fence and if they do, they can’t lift the logs.

“Take your time, do a good job that doesn’t have to be done over, and see me when you have questions. I don’t expect you to know how to do everything, so if you’re not sure, I’ll show you how.”

The afternoon passes and suppertime brings conversations about the work. Andy seems to be doing okay, hogs have been fed and the chicken coop addition is finished and passed inspection by Cyrus and Mack, their approval a simple nod.

Two days later at supper, Andy reports to Mack that he has finished fixing the corral rails and modifying the hog pen, and he's ready for more work.

Mack replies, "Son, you're doing good. You keep it up you just might carve out a place for yourself here. This is a working ranch, which means the only thing that keeps it a ranch is us working. I have some more construction projects for you, seeing as you know your way around a hammer and tools."

Fern looks at Cyrus to see his reaction to Mack calling the shots, but Cyrus just smiles and looks away.

There are plenty of construction projects, it turns out. The horse stalls in the barn, and the porch on the ranch house are next, followed by building a new cattle chute for loading cattle on trucks for transport to the feedlot.

Andy sets to work. The horse stalls are pretty easy. There aren't enough stalls for the horses they now have. Those that are there are in disrepair and either have to be totally tore out and replaced or get major rebuilding. Andy checks out the available wall space in the barn. Horses work best when they have a window and at the other end of their stall, a three-quarter wall gate. They can be led into and out of their stall through the gate, but they also have a window on the opposite end that can be opened in nice weather. Walls between stalls are about 6 feet high, tall enough that the horses can't easily pick on each other over them, but short enough that they don't feel totally closed in.

Andy first draws up a diagram, trying to keep everything to scale. Then he figures out how much space is optimum for each horse. Then he draws a floor layout with walls and dimensions. Lastly, he uses a tape measure and some bricks in the barn to lay out the walls so he can see how it will feel with real horses inside. He measures how the new stalls will compare to current ones and then begins to modify his diagram, ending with a final drawing that he can follow in the reconstruction. The horses are moved to an outside corral during construction and Andy begins the demolition part. His muscles are well toned and he likes the exertion of swinging a sledge and wielding a crowbar. At the end of the first day of construction the wood framing for the original stalls is laying like fresh lumber in stacks on the floor of the barn. The construction takes barely a week and results in a sturdy internal layout that is both functional and strong. Andy has passed another test.

The ranch house porch is simply old and in need of repair. Andy quickly assesses that replacement is totally unnecessary. Few sections are showing signs of problems, sagging or dry rot. That offending lumber is easily removed and replaced with fresh wood. When all is done,

Andy puts a stain on the porch that will help the wood withstand the weather during the impending winter season. In two days, he's done with this project.

Building a cattle chute from scratch would have been challenging for Andy, but there was an old, weathered chute on one part of the property that he is able to use as his template. He takes measurements from it, notes the size of bolts and also writes down certain construction designs or techniques that enhance the structure. By necessity the chute has to support at least four adult steers at one time. That's almost five tons of moving, shaking livestock going up a wood ramp, crashing into side rails as they go.

Andy has built corrals and sheds, but nothing that has to withstand the kind of vertical or lateral stress this chute will experience. The old chute was designed for the same usage and his measurements and notes make the final chute a strong transition ramp for cattle. One day to figure it through, one day to get materials and two days to construct the chute. Within one week the completed project is met with the approving nods of Mack and Cyrus.

With those projects accomplished, the days are getting shorter and colder. Mack and Cyrus have done the other fall work and winter work will soon need to be done.

Chapter 26. Success Pays Off

Winter comes and goes, with Andy continuing to prove his worth, Mack decides that with the warming days of spring it's time for a little expansion of his own capabilities. He has wanted to add on to the fruit orchard and vineyard since both are now producing cash crops. He also wants to turn one of the fallow fields into soybeans, a crop that a several local farmers have been going to and that is being transported out of the country as export. As a bonus, the soybeans also add a good source of protein and fiber to the diet of ranch cattle.

Mack plans to plant another field in more sweet corn – hogs and cattle both can eat that, plus it's a great cash crop. Mack and Fern are always talking together about how to balance the risk and rewards by having multiple uses, internal and external, for every crop. These are conversations that Cyrus doesn't join in on, not that he's intentionally excluded. Cyrus has one love, and it's not Fern. Cyrus loves being a cowboy, raising cattle and other livestock, riding horses, and chewing tobacco.

Another field will be planted in grass and corn for silage, again to help feed the animals. Mack reasons that if they can raise enough extra feed each year to winter over the animals then that's less feed they have to buy. A penny saved is a penny earned, as his mom used to tell him. Silage is easy and the main plants, grass and corn, are good ones for crop rotation.

Mack also wants to try converting the orchard apples into additional products like apple cider and apple pies. Fern has been saying at supper that the Grainger IGA is interested in other products that the ranch might have. Mack calculates the quantity of apples currently being harvested and the excess available for cider and pies. By his counting, there should be enough apples not being sold to the market that a cider press can be justified. There will also be enough left over to make a limited quantity of apple pies, to test the market. Fern's estimated sales of cider and pies justifies the effort to expand the orchard a bit and also encourages strict quality control over the fruit, something Mack is already pretty picky about.

To do these three projects will take all three men, although Cyrus has been slowly pulling away from the work side of things, leaving the main work to Mack and Andy.

After sitting down with Fern and Cyrus over the finances, Fern agrees that they can put a little investment into more trees and grape vines, as well as soybean and seed corn. Mack explains that from his research and talking to other farmers nearby they'll need additional money for fertilizer and pest mitigation.

"I don't want any pesticides on those crops, Mack," Fern reminds him. "Those poisons aren't fit for us to eat and we aren't going to sell food with them on it." Mack has heard this before and, as before, her statement is final on the subject. Cyrus looks at Mack and shrugs. Case closed.

That puts Mack back to work finding out how to raise the additional crops organically without losing everything to pests. Mack spends time with the extension agent and at the Feed and

Farm Supply, from which he makes a list and budget, runs it by Fern and the now nonchalant Cyrus, and, gaining their approval, he gets to work.

Mack and Andy take the ranch pickup into Grainger to order the supplies at the feed store and to talk more about how they can fertilize and apply organic pest deterrents, when necessary.

Three weeks later, their order of trees, vines and seed arrive in Grainger and the men drive in to get them. Mack has a surge of energy, enthused about the new improvements that Fern and Cyrus are allowing him to make to the ranch. He feels a quiet satisfaction that his ideas and work are paying off.

The next two weeks are busy, working the fields with the tractor and implements, expanding the orchard and vineyard, planting, tending, fertilizing, pruning, growing.

Andy is proving a willing worker after almost seven months at the Lost and Found, growing stronger and more confident in himself, becoming a dependable and essential hand. Mack sometimes spots Andy doing pushups and other calisthenics, bringing back memories of his own stint in the Army. Even better, Andy is gaining weight along with muscles. It's like Andy has found his home.

Fern spends most days with the "ladies" and the garden, housework and working on meal plans and the three daily meals she and Alejandra prepare for the five people. While capable of doing practically anything on the ranch, Fern chooses to do exactly what she's doing. "We don't need another person out there breaking horses and castrating calves," she reasons.

Chapter 27. Ranch Expansion

A year has passed since Andy joined the ranch family. The seasons revert to their typical erratic behavior, after giving them a blessed one-year break. Winter is heavy with deep drifts and impassable roads for days and sometimes weeks in a row. A large cold front brings two ice storms within three weeks' time. It's brutal on the ranch hands because animals need feed, water and shelter no matter the weather.

The men are busy getting hay and oats from storage and hauling it out to the cattle. During the summer and fall Andy designed and built several three-sided sturdy wood structures as shelters in the open field, with four deep sunk logs as the base frame. During extreme low temperatures the cattle naturally gather in the shelters where they are protected from the wind. Their combined body heat can actually make tolerable a day where the high temp of the day hovers in the single digits. Water has to be trucked to each shelter and poured into basins, which have to be cleared of ice first. Tending to all the sheep, cattle, hogs and horses makes the days long and tiring, but the work also generates hearty appetites and lively conversation in the warm kitchen of the ranch house.

Over the last year Andy was at first quiet, and then more and more began to inject lively comments into conversations. Mack and Cyrus occasionally brag on Andy, giving him a feeling of self-worth, and also reaffirming that he has carved out a place on the ranch. Alejandra and Andy occasionally get into arguments that end up with both agreeing on an intermediate position. It's almost comical to see the two come at an issue from polar opposites and then gradually work their way toward a middle ground, where they final put a boundary around what they agree on. Mack has never seen this kind of negotiation and successful agreement. Fern and Cyrus just accept it.

Alejandra and Fern have a great understanding. Fern has the last decision, and Alejandra's ideas and thoughts are not just welcomed, they're expected. Fern is great to work for. She is caring, but also fairly straight-laced. She has a way of doing things, of counting and accounting, that Alejandra has never seen before. It's different, but it makes sense. For the young Alejandra, the best part of the Lost and Found Ranch is the freedom to try new things. She has lots of ideas, and her own family heritage is rich with great cooks and bakers. Alejandra wants to introduce these ideas into the ranch, and Fern gives her wide latitude. The results are a mouth-watering blend of cultures and tastes that make every meal a don't-miss event. Alejandra loves her job and her talents are especially evident in the delicious baked goods that result from her passion.

Chapter 28. The Flood

Another winter over, when March finally brings a thaw and snow melt, it is accompanied by heavy spring rains. The worst of the storms brings torrents that sweep across the area as if a massive sprinkler is spraying water across the land in the middle of a downpour. The saturated ground finally forces the water above ground, spawning streams where there were none, swelling creeks and rivers to flood stage, immersing large sections of the valley. The Lost and Found has it some better because of the gentle slope on which it sits.

The greatest weather issue at the ranch is erosion from new streams of drainage that coalesce into fast moving creeks crossing the land. When several neighboring farms and ranches face flooding, everyone at the ranch gravitates toward whichever place is in distress, filling sandbags, herding animals, stacking hay and other perishables on the highest ground, sometimes onto the adjoining property of another neighbor. These challenges require fast reactions, everyone moving quickly to protect house, belongings and property from destruction. The sandbag lines are ambitious and impervious to weather or moisture. One bag after another form a barrier around something deemed essential by the landowner.

After the first threatened farm has been defended, the ranch crew comes up with a system that uses the strengths of each person. Mack assesses the situation and comes up with the plan. Cyrus is the great encourager and lightens every moment with a wise crack or a joke. Fern and Alejandra prepare and deliver meals, and also work the sandbag lines, filling, tying, carrying, placing each bag. Andy is the strongest of the bunch, tirelessly carrying two large sandbags at a time from start to end of the line as well as supervising any necessary construction effort.

On neighboring properties Cyrus, Fern, Mack, Alejandra and Andy work almost as one, having worked out communications and leadership on the Lost and Found. Helping neighbors is a more urgent effort and it has a unifying effect. As rains subside and surface waters return to normal channels, each of the ranch crew has gained a new-found admiration and sense of confidence in the others. It is trust, built in the heat of battle. The loose collection of individuals, brought together by chance or circumstance, has become a team.

After evaporation and drainage finally dry up the fields, the ranch tractor makes short work of the eroded areas of land, chasing contours, dragging land over rivulets to flatten them, letting the soggy ground compact, and then preparing the soil for seed. Planting is easier this year thanks to the used tractor that Cyrus buys at a farm auction.

Chapter 29. The Auction

Mack and Cyrus had heard about the auction, as did all the other ranchers and farmers in the valley. The Lexter family had suffered through the death of the patriarch, but no one had the leadership skills to take them out of the loss, so they decided that the best answer was to sell. Actually, the Lexter boys got jobs in Boise and moved, taking mom with them, putting the property in the hands of the auctioneers.

The day of the auction a slow-moving line of cars and pickups pull into the Lexter farmyard and men and women get out and walk to the barn. A man directs people to gather near a pallet that has a loudspeaker and a stand with microphone. A woman hands each bidder a small round card on a stick, the card displaying the bidder's number. Many of the buyers have been walking the property, looking at fences and structures, reading the inventory of equipment and then checking out each item, getting ready for the bidding.

A short, balding man wearing a straw cowboy hat climbs up on the pallet, adjusts the microphone, and starts talking.

"This here's an auction and it's gonna' go like this. You all had time to look over the items already. That time's up. Right now we're gonna take each item on the inventory and you're gonna have a chance to buy it. if you're lucky, you outbid the next person and you get the item. If you're not lucky, or not on your toes, the next person is gonna get what you want. It's all up to you if you win or you don't."

After this brief instruction, he pauses for a moment, looking across the small crowd, sizing them up. They're a poor mixture. A few people that he knows have some money and the rest are a bunch of bargain hunters hoping to pick up something valuable for cheap.

"I'll announce each item one at a time by number. I'll give you a damn quick description and then I'll start the bidding off. When I say so, after no one has offered a higher bid, the last bid gets the item. We don't take no credit. You gotta have cash on the barrel. Today's Tuesday, so the bank's open. You'll have two hours after the end of the auction to pay for your winning bids. If you don't come back to pay, we sue you for breach of contract and we'll be handling your auction next. Got it?" he finishes to the silent nods of the gathered crowd.

Most are interested in the land, but it's bottom land and subject to flooding, which means that Cyrus, Fern and Mack are unified about not bidding on it. The Lost and Found needs another tractor and the Lexton estate has a four-year old Deere that looks to be in good shape. It's been claimed by the bank, but they have put it up for auction and will get the proceeds from the winning bid in payment for an outstanding loan against it.

Bidding starts and the land and buildings are gone in the first hour. Animals are next and another hour is taken in auctioning off each animal. When the tractor comes up, the auctioneer describes the tractor and its capabilities. With a "who's gonna buy this fine tractor here, who's

gonna get it," the bidding starts at $500. Iz Farnworth raises his number. "I got a fine tractor here, with three farm implements. Would you give me $500, who's gonna give me $500, I'm bid it at $500, who's gonna give me $650, say who's gonna give me $650. Now $650, $650 now. Got $800? Who's got $800. Now $800, do you wanna give $1,000. I'm bid it at $1,000." And so it goes, Iz and two other bidders fighting over the tractor. Mack wants to bid but Cyrus puts his hand on Mack's arm signaling to hold off. The last bidder quits when Iz bids $2,500. The auctioneer continues his chant working the crowd for more but no more bids are forthcoming. Just as the auctioneer is going to award the winning bid to Iz, Cyrus raises his number and says, "$3,500," looking straight at the auctioneer. Iz throws his number on the ground and walks away in disgust, having bid all he could to shake the other bidders. After a brief auction chant the auctioneer says, "Sold, to number 37." Cyrus takes his number to the cashier, hands her 35 $100 bills and takes the bill of sale. After checking to make sure it has enough fuel, Mack starts up the tractor and drives it to the ranch. They'll come back for the implements, towing the hay wagon behind the pickup.

With two tractors, working the fields is quicker and easier, making more time to get spent on other tasks.

Chapter 30. Stick

On a Tuesday in August the western sky is darkened with towering, mean-looking clouds, sheets of rain dragging behind them like a bridal train. Trees begin to whisper and then whistle and then shriek as wind velocity increases by the hour. An hour before dark, all hell breaks loose. Lightning, thunder, massive wind gusts, and torrential rain make intermittent claim on the Lost and Found. All night the wind swirls and blows, shrieking past windows and doors, rain pelting the windows, and hail occasionally dotting the ranch yard. Sleep isn't easy on nights like these, but tired, hard-working ranch hands can go out like a light through an atomic blast.

The next morning, Mack and Andy wake up at the usual time, checking outside to see what nature is doing. Cyrus is at the doctor, having something or other checked. The wind died down during the night, the system moving through like a giant sky-borne jelly fish, dragging rain tendrils as it floated across the landscape. The sky is overcast but the precipitation looks to have ended. It'll be a good day, a little cooler; pleasant weather to work in.

One thing about the Lost and Found, the food is good. Alejandra has made up her breakfast specialty, chilaquiles and migas with homemade salsa and hot sauce, tortillas and some sweet cinnamon raisin bread with honey cinnamon drizzle across it. Fern always brews the best coffee and plenty of it. No one knows why her coffee is better than anyone else's but it just is. Mack likes fruit with breakfast and with the orchard producing a nice crop Fern adds fresh fruit compote to the table, with a jug of cream alongside it. All in all, Lost and Found breakfasts are a good start to the day.

The men leave the ranch house kitchen calling out "thanks" and "see you for lunch" as they go out the door.

First thing this morning, from Mack's direction, is to check the fence lines.

Along the eastern border a large limb from an old leafless tree has broken off in last night's maelstrom, landing on the fence and taking out two fenceposts in the process. The limb is at least eight inches in diameter. As it fell the end broke off and then spiked into the sodden ground a good foot deep, but the brunt of the aftermath was taken by the damaged fence. It takes Mack and Andy almost an hour to cut the limb into pieces and lift it off of the fence. Replacing the fenceposts will take at least another two hours, but before that can happen the men have to track down and bring back several steers that have simply walked over the downed fence and taken a stroll into the neighboring property.

"Stick" Fingerson is an okay neighbor most of the time, unless he has crawled into the bottle, had a beef with his wife, or just woke up cranky. Anything or anyone walking on to Stick's land is always taking a gamble, but this day must have covered all of the preliminaries.

No more than 100 feet onto the neighboring land, Andy lets out a yell and begins to run. The steers, in their anxious attempt to find shelter from the thunder and lightning last night, have

run roughshod through Tina Fingerson's garden and right there among the remaining dead brown stalks of corn lay one of them, clearly dead from a gunshot wound to the head, a pool of dark liquid congealing alongside. The other cattle are nowhere to be seen, Andy soon finding them and herding them back over the fence line.

Blood is all over the ground, and rigor mortis is already making the animal's legs stick straight out like the steer had just been standing and then tipped over onto its side. It's going to be a job to put a chain around it and use a tractor to drag it back to its own land.

Andy is mad as hell. Once the dead steer is back at the Lost and Found, he and Mack replace the fenceposts and tighten the wire. Andy rides back to the ranch house and immediately tells Fern what happened. If Mack had been back from the fence line that he and Andy were checking, what happened next would not have occurred.

Fern straps a holster with a revolver to her waist, tells Andy to get in the truck, and the two of them drive over to the Fingerson farm. Truth be told, the Lost and Found and Stick had never been very friendly. Cyrus and Stick kept somewhat to themselves, and both were known to have a bit of a hot streak. With Cyrus in town, the weight fell on Fern to fix the problem.

The drive is short and after last night's rain the ground is still wet. At the speed that Andy is driving, big clods of mud are flying off the truck's off-road tires as they accelerate and then finally brake suddenly, sliding to a stop in the Fingerson's front yard.

Fern jumps out one side with Andy coming out the other door. They look at each other and then practically run up to the farmhouse door which is slowly opened by Tina Fingerson. "Yeah?," she asks, looking at the two neighbors.

"Where the hell is that old son-of-a-bitch you got stuck with, Tina?" from Fern.

"He ain't here and he probably don't want to see you neither after your steer tore up my garden."

"Fer God's sake, Tina. That garden was never much. But my good steer is dead and I'm about ready to take my pistol here to some of your chickens in return, dammit!"

"Well, you do what you think you gotta do, but Stick may have a thing to say about whatever you done when he gets back."

"Why'd he have to shoot an animal?" asked Andy. "That steer was just running scared from the lightning."

"I guess Stick saw him in the garden in the flashes of light, and he just pointed his rifle and shot. Maybe he was just trying to scare it and got off a lucky shot, I don't know. Might not have even knowed it wasn't a bull elk."

From Fern, “We’re going back home, Tina. You tell your old SOB that he better come over to my ranch and explain a few things when he gets home. I got a few things on my mind that I want to settle.”

Fern and Andy walk off the porch and back to the truck. The motor fires up and Andy makes sure to spin ruts in the soft wet dirt on their way back to the road.

Back at the Lost and Found, Mack has returned to the house, dirty and wet. He’s in the bunkhouse cleaning up when Andy enters and tells him what has happened. Mack walks outside and takes a look at the dead animal and then immediately goes to talk to Fern, finding her standing on the porch, looking like a mad hen.

“Fern, what’s this about you going to Stick’s place?”

“I’m too mad to talk, Mack. Talk to Cyrus.”

Cyrus jumps in, “That old bastard drilled one of our steers with his 30-06! Can’t help that the fence got tore down by a tree limb. Can’t help that the cattle were running to find shelter and escape the storm. But Stick damn sure could have just gone out and shooed our steer out of the garden instead of sitting in his chair in his upstairs bedroom and drawing a bead on it. I’m gonna trash him like an old garbage can when he shows up.”

“Well, I guess you can do that. It’s your steer. But, it was on his land and he didn’t cause either the storm or the fence line to get busted down. If it had happened to you, you’d have probably shot the steer and tried to pick off a few more as they ran away.”

“Oh bull! I never did anything like that in my life.”

“How about that time we were in the store and the guy backed into the truck? Barely dented the bumper but you’d a thought he hit you hard. You were out of the truck quicker’n me and yelling at him through his car window. If I hadn’t been with you and pulled you back, I would have had to bail you out of the hoosegow. You remember, don’t you!”

“I guess I was pretty fired up over that,” Cyrus said, shifting his feet uncomfortably.

“Yep, and you saw how that worked out. The guy gave you $100 to not report it to insurance and you were $100 richer. That bumper never even needed a drop of paint.”

“Aw crap. I suppose you’re right but I’d sure like to dust off a baseball bat on Stick’s head, dammit!”

“Well, how about we talk to him and figure out a fair compensation. Maybe he butchers the steer and pays you for the meat. Would that square it up?”

Cyrus gives in, grumbling all the way. The next day Stick shows up at the ranch, Cyrus has an uncharacteristically calm attitude, and the two men agree that Stick just bought himself some beef. Part of the payment comes in trade from Tina's prized pumpkins, plus $500. Stick pays Cyrus a less-than-market-rate for the slaughtered beef, but the men figure it doesn't pay to have neighbors mad at each other. It is a fair deal.

Chapter 31. Transitions

Fall comes on with uncharacteristically hot dusty winds, desiccating the land and all vegetation. The ranch hands work hard to get water where it is needed. Three adjoining fields are irrigated by deep wells which are pumped with gasoline engines. Up hillside are more fields that get ground water, one from a surface stream and the other from underground water. Roads don't get watered, and the road from the main road to the ranch house is one constant dust generator, swirling gritty, choking dust in the air where dust devils and winds can spread it around. Mack and Andy wear kerchiefs over their noses on several of the worst days.

Cyrus is becoming noticeably slower at everything. His conversations, usually filled with pithy comments and wry observations, have dulled to the point of almost non-participation. Physically, Cyrus is looking older and slower. He even walks slowly, sometimes looking like he's leaning to one side. It's becoming a topic of conversation among the two hands.

On a hot, still night around midnight toward the middle of October, Mack wakes to the sound of a woman's screams coming from the ranch house. He pulls on his clothes and runs to the house where Fern is standing on the porch screaming and yelling.

"It's Cyrus. Something's wrong with him," she cries, pointing into the house.

By this time, Andy is also dressed and running to the house. Mack rushes into the house and into the bedroom where Cyrus is laying on the bed with his eyes open in a blank stare, his face drawn, one arm flailing around.

"Cyrus, are you okay? What's the matter?"

The cowboy looks like a corpse, pale as a ghost, eyes wide open not blinking, left arm beating the covers like a pump handle gone wild.

"Did you call the doctor?" asks Mack.

"Yes, and he said to get an ambulance out here right away. I called and they'll be here in 30 minutes," Fern replies.

"Did the doctor say what he thinks is wrong?"

"He said he thinks he had a stroke. I told the doctor that Cyrus had been slowing down, slurring his speech and walking gimpy lately and he said that he's probably had some smaller strokes leading up to this."

Finally, the ambulance arrives at the Lost and Found, attendants moving quickly to stabilize Cyrus for transport to the nearest hospital, almost three hours away.

As the big vehicle leaves, lights flashing, the siren wailing as it reaches the main road, Fern reaches over and wraps her arms around Mack's chest, holding tight as she cries.

"I knew there was something wrong. I kept telling him to go see the doctor, and he did go once, but he's just so doggone stubborn. I swear, he cares more for those cattle than he does himself. I'm scared, Mack."

"I've got you, Fern," Mack replies as he reaches around and returns her hug, holding her tightly and stroking her hair with one free hand, Andy just standing on the porch unsure of what to do, as Mack says, "We're leaving it in the hands of God, Fern. Cyrus is in good hands. Let's go to the hospital and keep him company."

The three get in the ranch pickup and make the several hour trek to the regional hospital, which, with Mack driving, is in record speed. It's a one-story building with 60's-era construction. The exterior walls of the building have windows above, and green plastic panels below. It looks like a cross between a 1960s school and an emergency shelter.

Parking isn't a problem. There aren't that many people living in the region, and most of them work hard, breathe fresh air and don't get sick that often.

They walk into a brightly lit, antiseptic smelling emergency room and ask where they can find Cyrus. The receptionist motions to them to have a seat in the waiting room and shortly a young man in blue scrubs comes out to talk with them.

"I'm sorry, there was nothing we could do. He was unconscious and in bad shape when he got here. We tried to resuscitate him but he was already gone," adding, "Do you need to call somebody?"

Fern drops to the floor with Andy kneeling down to hold her while Mack says to the doctor, "No, we're all he had. We'll need some time to figure things out. Is that okay?"

"Of course, take your time. We can keep him for up to one week, but you'll want to make arrangements between now and then. Do you need any suggestions?"

"Well, that wouldn't hurt, I suppose. Never been in this situation before. What do we do?"

"You'll need to decide what to do with the body. Some people opt for cremation. It's less expensive and you can decide how to honor him in a lot of ways from there, including burial or placing the urn in a creche in the mausoleum. Both of these options allow you to put a permanent marker on the spot. Or, you can call a funeral home and have the body embalmed and prepared for a funeral. The funeral home can arrange for a burial plot in the local cemetery. That's a more expensive route but some people prefer it as it seems a more traditional approach."

“Thank you. We’ll have to talk about it when it’s not so raw.”

“I understand. Take your time but do contact the hospital within the next several days with what you have decided.”

“Okay. Can we go pay our respects?”

“Certainly. Follow me,” and he leads Mack, Andy and the barely walking Fern into a curtained area of the emergency room where Cyrus lies on white sheets. Fern talks softly to Cyrus for a few moments, squeezes his cold hand, and turns. Mack grabs the lifeless hand and shakes it gently, thanking Cyrus for believing in him and bringing him to the Lost and Found. Andy just stands quietly, looking at the body, and then turns and walks away, silently wiping his eyes.

The drive back to the Lost and Found is hushed, each person lost in their own thoughts and emotions. No one wants to put into words what they are thinking, not trusting themselves to say it right. Andy remembers the loss of his parents, most notably his pa because his was the most recent passing. Mack remembers losing buddies serving in one of those mindless, nameless, never-ending wars. Fern has had many losses in her life, beginning with both parents dying in a fiery car accident when she was in her 20’s. This loss will hurt bad, but today she’s just numb, frozen in time, not wanting to think about it. At all. Ever. Again.

The ER doctor has sent home some pills with Fern to help her sleep. When the three arrive back at the Lost and Found, Fern takes the pills and goes straight to her room, avoiding the room that hours before was Cyrus’ bedroom.

The next two days are a blur. Mack attends to Fern, Fern is trying to keep busy doing mindless busywork, and Andy stays out of the way, working on a long and growing list of projects.

Mack and Fern have “the talk.”

“Fern, what do you want to do with Cyrus’s body? Do you want a funeral and burial, or what?” Mack stumbles over the words.

“Oh, Mack. When Cyrus and I found this place, we were sure not certain about much, but we were game to give it a go. We didn’t know if it was ever going to be a real home, but that’s what it became. I’ll tell you, I want to have Cyrus cremated and then we’ll bring the ashes back here, to our home, and we’ll bury them right here on the Lost and Found. Can we do that?” she asks, looking into his eyes for both answer and assurance.

“We’ll do it, Fern. That’s surely the right thing to do.”

One week later, on a beautiful October morning, four people gather behind the house in front of a shallow hole, on a small rise before the main hills, with a vista overlooking the ranch and surrounding valley. Fern holds the urn as Mack and Andy each dig a shovel full of deep brown

dirt from the ground. Alejandra holds a photo of Cyrus in his prime - cowboy hat, big mustache, and all.

Fern takes one step toward a freshly dug hole and says, “Cyrus, you’re home. It’s where you wanted to be and now you’ll be here forever. You and I came here lost and looking for something, and this place found us. You can rest in peace. Your work is done.”

Not wanting to break the moment, Mack doesn’t touch the urn but simply turns toward it and says, “That day you found me at the Subway was the day my life actually started. I am not the man I was. I am the man that you and Fern and this place made of me. You will always be a part of this ranch and all of us. Thank you, Cyrus.” And he steps back.

Andy clears his throat. “I didn’t know ya long but I feel like I knew you well. You cared about this land and you showed us how to live honest and clean. I’m indebted to you, Cyrus. May th’ angels watch over you kindly.”

Alejandra braves a thin smile and says quietly, “Vaya con Dios, Señor.”

And that is that. Fern steps forward, places the urn in the hole, and then reaches down and tosses a handful of dirt on top of it, each person doing the same. Then Mack fills the rest of the hole with dirt and places a little patch of grass and a clean, white cross that Andy has made, on top. On the cross are these words, “Cyrus Hayford, 1940 – 2004. RIP.”

The four survivors walk slowly back to the house, sit down for some iced tea, and share stories about Cyrus for a few hours. Fern tells the others about his life, how they met when she was young but then they went different ways, how he got married later but it wasn’t a good marriage and he left that union a broken man. How Cyrus got into the bottle pretty good after the divorce and ended up giving up booze in jail after a barroom fight. As luck would have it the following week his employer sold the Wyoming ranch where he worked to a large corporation and Cyrus got a nice severance check which he used to go back to the town where he first worked for Fern’s father, hoping to find Fern. He and Fern met at the diner where she waitressed, across the street from the bus station. He was kind and steady, she was lonely, divorced and tired of being beaten up, and they became friends. Fern shared about the time they happened upon this ranch. It was a gamble and a small dream, which both of them needed badly.

“You mean you and Cyrus weren’t married?” Andy blurted without thinking.

“No, we thought about it and then decided we didn’t want to mess up a good friendship with another shitty marriage. As it worked out, we gave each other all that either of us needed at the time. Just no ring to pay for and no legal agreement to tie us down.”

“What about the ranch?” again Andy, again with an impulsive question.

“Well, it’s mine. Cyrus had no credit and I did. We put our money together for the down payment and I always thought we would put the ranch in both of our names if we got married, but we never did so we never did.”

“Well, that makes things easier, I guess. When my pa died it was a scramble for whatever was left at the farm and everyone but me got something.” And then, in a moment of rare introspection Andy quietly added, “I did get my pa’s name, so I guess I got something, too.”

Chapter 32. Fern's Thoughts

It was so sudden, it just caught me by surprise. I guess I should have seen the signs. He was slowing down and pulling back from a lot of the work that he always liked to do. I thought maybe it was because Mack had taken over running the ranch part and he just decided to take it easy.

Cyrus and I go way back, back to when I was a young girl starting to be fascinated with boys and he was a tall, rugged cowboy with a great smile and a downhome style. I thought we would end up together, but then he went and took that job in Wyoming and we didn't keep in touch. I was sad for quite a while but my mother told me about how many fish there are in the sea and gradually my dreams of him and my sadness faded away. I had a few boyfriends in school, but none of them could measure up to my cowboy even though they thought they were rough and tough.

This ranch was his dream. I just happened to be in the picture, but it became my dream, too. We had some tough years and more than a few times I thought we wouldn't make it. But we always just drew in our breath, worked long and hard, and somehow made it through.

When we were finally able to hire a few people to help out I thought things were going to be the way we both dreamed. I guess they were. This old Lost and Found was coming together the way we hoped it might, and the way Cyrus always imagined it would. These last years have been the best of my life and I didn't see this coming. Why couldn't we have had another five or ten years? Why couldn't we have grown old with this dream?

I'm trying to get myself together now, but it's hard. Even though we never got married he came along when I was getting my life back together and he made it easy. He was just so easy going. We fit together like a hand in a glove. And I'm sad. I feel broken and defeated. I'm just sad to my bones. I guess I'll get through this somehow, but I doubt I'll ever find another cowboy to take his place.

Funny how it seems that the end of one thing sometimes brings the beginning to something else.

The Lost and Found may have been our dream, but now it's a family of unrelated people that seem to belong together, tied by a common experience – we were all lost and this place just found us and knitted us together.

Cyrus had this dream, but we never saw it amounting to this. Rest in peace, Cyrus. You may have died but your dream never will.

Chapter 33. Life Goes On

After the death of Cyrus Hayford, the Lost and Found Ranch struggles to find its footing without him. He was the Cowboy, the tough, tall, head of the ranch. A bit gruff and rough around the edges, but a straight shooter, honest, and respectful of others. His legacy is this ranch. It was his dream, and his life partner Fern and ranch hands and employees Mack, Andy and Alejandra are committed to keeping it going in his memory.

It is their destination, too. They are, like he was, striving to make a life where they were found. The cowboy may be dead, but his progeny live on. The place he found, the place that actually found him, has a life of its own.

The weather for the rest of the fall and the winter after the passing of Cyrus is mild. It's as if his spirit is watching over the place and subtly commanding the elements to be kind in reverence.

Spring brings rains, but no torrents, and with no snow on the lowlands there is no danger of flooding. There is only the annual waiting for the fields to dry a bit for tilling and drilling.

After supper each night for several weeks Fern and Mack have long talks about the ranch and its future. At the same time the three ranch employees are also dealing with the loss of one of the founders, and with uncertainty about their future. Will the ranch survive, will they need to leave and find a new future, what can they possibly do to keep the ranch alive?

"Mack, I don't know if I can do this," muses Fern one evening at the dining room table after everyone else has left. "It was his dream and I'm scared. I caught the dream, it became mine, too, but I have to tell you that I'm not sure I have what it takes. Cyrus and I were partners, he was my steady man, my cowboy, the only one I could lean on. I just don't know."

Mack answers, "Fern, I feel the same way. Cyrus found me in that gas station sandwich joint when I was passing through with no place to go and no idea of what to do. He brought me home like a stray dog and gave me a purpose. He trusted me and I believed in him.

"But I'm as sure as I'm sitting here that I can see what to do from here. You're one of the smartest people I've ever met. You have a handle on things, and you watch everything like a hawk on a telephone pole. We may not know the road straight ahead, but we know where we want this to go. It's just a matter of us being faithful to moving forward, with courage to play the cards we've been dealt. I was never a good card player, but I can see that we have a good thing going and from where I'm sitting, I have faith we can make a good future happen. I believe in you, so I need you to believe in me and the other people on the Lost and Found. We have a stake in this and we're strong. I believe in us. Just hang in there. We can make this happen."

"I'm tired, Mack. Tired of crying, tired of not sleeping, tired of feeling lost. I'm not sure I can do it."

“Well, Cyrus told us that he believed in us and so we trusted his judgement even with our doubts. He left this ranch in a good spot. We have a great foundation to build on. We all need you to just hang in there and let’s see what we can do.”

“I’ll try, Mack. I’ll honestly try.”

“That’s good enough for me. Let’s talk to the others after supper tomorrow and map out a plan.”

And with that, Mack gets up, walks to the bunkhouse and sleeps fitfully through the night, waking up after dreaming about how the ranch could proceed. The pieces are there. The ranch has been profitable. The land has given them bounty, and they’ve found ways to market it for profit. Now they just need to figure out the next steps.

The following night the four are sitting after the supper meal as Mack starts the conversation.

“It looks like we’ll have another good crop this year, barring some bad weather or other problem we don’t see coming. How can we take this to the next level and make progress on the dream Cyrus had for the Lost and Found to be a growing, thriving operation?”

Andy is first to comment, “We did some good things and that shows that we’re all pretty danged good at stuff. I think it’ll take all of us, but with the strength and abilities we have, I believe we can grow this thing. It does look we’re going to have a good crop, as you said Mack. The IGA in Grainger is taking all they can, but that’s only about a quarter of the harvest we should get this year. We got to find another place we can make money on the rest of the crop we don’t use for our own food.”

Fern enters the conversation, “I’ve always had an idea of having a roadside stand to sell produce, fruit and maybe some other stuff. Maybe that’s one way to go.”

Alejandra adds her thoughts, “I like that idea, Fern. I could help and maybe we could even sell some of my pastries and other stuff once it gets going.”

After another hour or so of talking, Andy is tasked with designing, budgeting and building a roadside stand down where the ranch property fronts the road. The road is a well-traveled stretch between the big cities to the west and the countryside and growing, small towns to the east.

Andy designs a long wooden structure with a broadside facing the road. It can be set off the road about 40 feet with a graded parking area that can probably hold 7 cars at a time.

The structure itself can be opened for business using ropes through pulleys to raise a hinged exterior plywood covering over a large opening on the front side of the stand. It’s easy to raise

the cover, latch it on the sides during open times, and just as easy to drop it back down and latch it when closed. It’s a simple design that works well.

The stand will be small but efficient in space with plenty of room on the shelf in the opening to display boxes of produce and other goods. Fern can sit on a stool or stand on rubber mats when facing customers ordering from the street side of the opening.

At the end of the day, the remaining produce will be moved to the pickup for transporting back to the ranch house, and the plywood wall lowered, latched and locked on the inside. The door on one end will be locked with a deadbolt to finish securing the stand.

It’s a pretty simple process, that can be easily handled by one person, which initially will only be Fern.

Andy presents his bill of materials and construction costs to Fern and Mack for approval. He estimates that everything can be done in one month from start. Fern calculates a payback of 10 months, using very conservative estimates of sales.

She and Mack have a meeting after the next dinner.

Fern shares her thoughts, "I'm not a gamblin' woman, Mack, you know that. But, this looks like a pretty safe bet. I figured sales would be slow for the first five months and then pick up in the next five. We've got some reserved cash to pay materials costs and you and Andy can do the work without stealing too much from your regular ranch work. I think we give it a go. From what Andy says, we should have the stand ready for business in time for summer crops."

"Well, Fern," says Mack. "I've seen how you think and manage and I surely trust your judgment. Let's go for it."

The next day Andy is given the word, gets the hands organized and goes into town to get materials. Construction starts the next week and just as Andy projected, the stand is ready to open four weeks later.

To promote the new stand, Mack and Andy paint signs and place them along the road for a half mile on the end of the ranch property in either direction. The signs simply say,

Fern’s Organic Fruits and Veggies
1/2 mile
Grown with love!
Open Saturdays 10-3

Fern does a trial run with the new stand to see how she likes it. She’s shaky with emotion, but she stocks the stand with fresh summer vegetables, preserves from her own garden, and local honey from the hives Mack and Andy recently brought in to help pollinate the fruit and berries.

The stand opens initially only on Saturdays from 10 am until 3 pm. The first Saturday, only one car stops. It's a neighbor farmer who walks up to the window, looks at the offerings, and buys some honey and berries. It's a slow start but Mack and Fern have each said to the ranch hands that this is just an experiment. Their main business is still cattle and crops. During the week, the ranch operates as normal. Mack and Andy are busy doing field work, planting, weeding, pruning, herding, and feeding. Fern is tending to the gardens along with Alejandra.

Two more Saturdays and the stand has sold a grand total of $112 worth of goods. But there are lots of looky-loos each day that drive slowly by, looking out their windows at the stand.

Fern and Mack discuss options after dinner one night and the question they tackle is "Should we fish or cut bait on the roadside stand?"

Mack is undecided and they bring it up at dinner the next night for the rest of the crew to discuss. Fern is now confident that it will work. It was her idea in the first place, and she confides that she just needed a break after the death of Cyrus. Andy believes in the idea and comes up with the idea that they plant more A-signs along the road between the initial signs and the stand. Alejandra also thinks that the additional exposure is necessary to build interest for cars traveling the road.

The next day, Andy cuts wood for the signs, and he and Mack and Alejandra get busy painting them. The next Saturday they place three signs in each direction between the stand and the first signs. The new signs are spread out evenly and say, "Saturday 10-3," "Fresh today" and "Stop and look – free cider tasting."

Andy's sign strategy works and each succeeding Saturday more cars stio. Sales grow and the stand is now bringing in a small but reasonable business each week.

After three months of Saturdays, it's clear that the locals have embraced Fern's. The roadside stand now serves an average of 20 customers each Saturday and the extra cash is proving helpful. Fern gives over much of the cooking chores to Alejandra so she can spend time on the roadside stand. The modest success spurs Fern and Mack to imagine how they can expand that side of the ranch's efforts.

From the stand's start with summer fruit, it's fall now, and soon enough it is again time for harvesting apples, pumpkins, squash and root crops.

Mack and Andy get busy preparing equipment and processes and thanks to mild weather over the summer the fall harvest is bountiful.

During and after eacg harvest, Fern's Organic Fruits and Veggies shelves are filled with fresh peaches, apricots, apples, plums, berries, tomatoes, and sweet corn. The stand is now open

from 10 am until four on Saturday and Sunday, and from two until five each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon during the week.

Signs along the road now herald the new, freshly picked fruit, berries and produce with a small sticker pasted-on - “Fresh picked.”

During the stand's off-days Fern and Alejandra try making a few candles from beeswax, experimenting with forming them into small farmhouses and barns and windmills. They don't sell real well initially, but they add to the stand's farm decor and customers smile when they see them.

During “Fern’s” open hours in fruit and veggie season Fern rarely has any time to herself, thanks to the intermittent cars and customers stopping by for her best goods. Fern hires Jana, a local teenage girl, as a part-time helper around the house and to work with Alejandra to bake loaves of Sourdough bread, made from a sourdough starter that passed down from Fern’s mom. The smell of sourdough fills the ranch house kitchen, and loaves of “Fern’s Old Fashioned Sourdough Bread” soon grace the stand’s display shelf.

Alejandra convinces Fern that they should also make and sell conchas, a sweet bread that her mother made for special occasions. Within a short time, word-of-mouth in the surrounding area helps conchas become a popular item.

The small roadside stand is growing in profitability. It’s no surprise that the main expense is labor but since that's already factored into running the Lost and Found any money from the stand is close to pure profit.

That extra money is helpful because Fern has not had her own vehicle. She and Mack drive into the county seat to buy a car, which will be the first she has driven in twenty years. The truck was not hers; it was Cyrus’s truck and it now becomes the ranch truck. "Don't need nothing fancy, just a car that runs," says Fern. The car they buy is an older Chevy with comfortable seats, a radio that works, and air conditioning.

Following the fall, the stand has shorter hours during winter time, except approaching the Christmas holiday season when Fern, Alejandra and Jana create farm-style holiday crafts. Andy decorates the stand with Christmas lights and decorations, attracting more customers for cider, breads, and fruit. The impulse buys of holiday crafts increases the average sale, helping the season stay profitable.

At the end of the year, Fern tells the ranch team that this is the Lost and Found's best year ever. Even though ranching always has its ups and downs she shares her hope that positive things will continue.

In spring, six months after the stand opens, the five people have a celebration dinner prepared by Alejandra and Jana. Fern is tired from the additional work she has taken on with the stand,

but there's an air of relief that things are looking good, and the ranch seems like it may survive after the death of Cyrus.

After the meal, and a round of beers, Alejandra and Andy leave the ranch house and Fern and Mack continue to talk while Jana cleans up.

"I think we have staked out something here, Fern," says Mack. "You have a hell of a mind for business and I'm darned glad we hung in there."

"Thanks Mack, I couldn't have done this without your hard work. You're a good leader. I was scared when we opened that stand, but you kept encouraging me and heck, I guess I was just trying to not let you down. Jana graduated high school last year and last week she told me she doesn't want to go on to school for another year or two. We could put her on full-time next month, which would take a little more work off me as we get the stand set up for the spring season. With finances the way they are we could probably add another hand to help carry the load this next month. What do you think?"

"I guess you're right. Let's sleep on it and see how things work out for a bit here, okay?"

"That's been our way so far. Guess we should stick with what's been working so far."

Over the next week, Mack and Fern continue to have short conversations about their observations and forecasts for the ranch.

Chapter 34. The Drifter

Fern owns the ranch, but Mack runs it. With a good last year, the ranch finally begins to reflect its modest prosperity on the outside. The house gets a new coat of paint with a nice trim and a beautiful Lost and Found graphic logo painted on the barn. The short dirt road to the house is paved with concrete, along with a circular parking area on the side of the house. Fences are mended, fields are tended, and the ranch seems ready for whatever God has in store for them next.

At 5:30 on a Tuesday morning a drifter gets his car stuck in a ditch on the road and walks up to the ranch house to get help, while the ranch crew is in the middle of breakfast.

Andy drives a tractor down and pulls the car out of the ditch, but the vehicle won't start so he tows it up to the barn so Mack can take a look at it.

Andy talks to the Drifter as Mack walks up. "Yeah, the ranch is called Lost and Found because everyone who came here was looking for something that they didn't know they needed," Andy is saying, "and didn't know that they would ever find. None of us ever found this ranch; it found us."

"The car died," the Drifter explains, "and I pulled over to get it off of the road. I didn't see that ditch coming. I'm not lost, and I'm not sure I want to be found neither. The tway things are going, I might as soon live in a ditch."

"I guess I was there, too," remarks Andy. "Hell, that goes for the rest of us, too. None of us much knew we were lost until we found ourselves here. You may not know what you're lookin' for, but I'll tell you what, from what I can see you're lookin' for something."

Mack interrupts Andy to ask the drifter what's wrong with the car, and he soon has the hood up.

The battery is good, plenty of starting voltage. Fuel in the tank. Plugs look okay.

The car is a beater, but there doesn't seem to be a good reason it won't start. Mack's assessment is it's more likely it just gave up.

"I think the problem is it's just plain worn out," says Mack. "The garage in Grainger can probably find the problem, but it'll cost you $100 for the diagnostic and from what I can see there is probably at least another $500 worth of work needed, if not another engine," looking at the poorly maintained, grease, oil, and corrosion-filled engine compartment.

"Well crap!" the Drifter blurts. "I could just buy a horse and hitch it to the car. It might make a better buggy than an automobile."

Mack laughs. “Well, that’s an option. $1000 for a horse, harness is extra.”

“Okay, dammit. Know any place where a guy can bed down? I don’t have any money, but I’d be willing to do a little work in return.”

“We got a bunkhouse you can stay in. You’ll have to put up with Andy’s snoring,” as Andy laughs at Mack’s wisecrack. “And watch out that he doesn’t come over and crawl in bed with you during the night. But if you can put up with that, I’ve got some hogs to slop and you can whitewash the fence to cover your bed and food. We’ll be sitting down for supper in an hour and you’re welcome to join us.”

“Okay, but I’m not real sociable, so Andy better keep his distance at night.”

Andy just laughs and says, “Don’t worry. You’ll be alright.”

During supper, Fern introduces the Drifter to Alejandra who then tries to drag some personal information out of him. “What’d you say your name is?” she asks.

“Didn’t say,” comes the cryptic response.

“Well, you should have. We aren’t strangers here and we don’t invite any in, either.” Alejandra says and then quickly smiles.

“Name’s Kazimierz,” he says. “Now don’t that float your boat?”

“What do your friends call you?” she presses.

“Don’t have any, but if I did, I could settle for Kaz.”

Fern joins the conversation, “That does it then, Kaz. Glad to meet you.”

The following morning, Kaz is up early and joins the others at breakfast. Mack lays out the details of the work to be done in return for his stay and food.

After breakfast he follows Mack who shows him how to slop the hogs and the fence to whitewash. It’s a long stretch of fence on both sides of the road from the main road to the main house. Kaz will have to scythe the tall weeds around the fence, gather the cuttings, mix the whitewash and paint the fence.

He’s done with both jobs by noon and finds Mack working on the barn.

“Okay, I done it. You better take a look and make sure I done it right.”

The men walk out as Mack sees the hogs are good, and the fence line is also.

“That looks good, Kaz. If you’ve a mind to it, I could use an extra hand in fixing up some of the barn walls that aren’t in good shape. You could help me with that if you want to stick around for lunch.”

“Well, seeing as how I don’t have anything better to do, I can help out.”

Lunch in the ranch house kitchen is ample and good. Fern always says, “Working folks need fuel to work hard, and hard work is what we do here.” Lunch of fried chicken, potatoes and gravy, fresh biscuits and green beans is washed down with iced tea.

After lunch Mack and Kaz spend the afternoon repairing loose and broken boards, sealing cracks in walls, and reinforcing the horse stalls.

During the work, Mack and Kaz talk like men do when they’re working. Kaz doesn’t share much about himself, but Mack tells his own story about how he came here and what the last couple of years have been like. A funny look flashes across the new man’s face as Mack relates the story of Cyrus and his last day on the earth. They finish up the work about four in the afternoon.

“Well, Kaz,” says Mack. “Where are you headed now? Your car won’t run but you can leave it here until you can manage to get it towed away. You been thinking about that?”

“Man, I don’t know. I’ve been trying to avoid thinking about that all day. I guess I’ll just hitchhike and see where the road leads me.”

“You did good work today. If you don’t have any place to go and no time to get there, you could stay another night. A good meal and a good night’s sleep could put you in a good frame of mind to hit the road tomorrow.”

“I haven’t had a better offer today, so if it’s all the same to you I'll take you up on that,” came the reply.

“Okay then, wash up and we’ll call you and Andy when supper is ready.”

After supper Mack takes Kaz to the bunkhouse and shows him his bunk, where to wash up, and how to stoke the wood stove. Andy offers to loan Kaz an old toothbrush and shaving gear, passing along the same courtesy extended to him years before. “Soap’s next to the wash basin and the tub. Tomorrow morning starts at 5. If you’re up, you eat. If you ain’t, you work hungry. You get to decide.”

Mack sees Fern sitting on the ranch house porch and walks over to talk to her while Kaz goes in the bunkhouse.

“Hey Fern, that drifter did a pretty good job today. He worked hard, wasn’t lazy, didn’t even take a break. He said he’d stay another night, but maybe I can put him to work again tomorrow pruning in the orchard and I could use someone to weed in the vineyard. Whaddaya think?”

“I dunno, Mack. I guess that would be alright if you think he’s not gonna rob us or steal stuff.”

“I don’t see anything about him that would suggest that. I think he’s just another lost soul that wandered across our path.”

“Okay, well, if food and a bed is all we pay him then there doesn’t seem to be much risk. That is, if you feel we’re not taking a big chance.”

That’s the end of that.

Supper conversation is polite with no one prodding Kaz for more information. He’s quiet, eats fast and then excuses himself to go to the bunkhouse and get ready for bed. When Andy and Mack enter the bunkhouse, Kaz is already asleep and snoring like a chainsaw.

The next day plays out like the previous one. Mack gives Kaz direction on what to do, shows him the implements and leaves him alone. At lunch, Kaz says that he’s done with the work and after lunch Mack’s inspection reveals that Kaz has done a good job. The two men agree when Mack says that Kaz is welcome to stay another night.

“I don’t have nowhere else to go and I like you folks. You work hard, eat good, and don’t get in my business. That’s good by me.”

Andy catches Mack in the ranch yard and says that he’s impressed with Kaz and his work ethic. “That man can put in a good day’s work as good as any man, and he seems to just stay at it until it’s done. It’s done good, too.”

“Yeah, I noticed that, too,” says Mack. “Did you see anything about him that gave you any concern?”

“Naah, he keeps to himself and if he has any dark secrets you can’t tell by how he acts. I don’t see any bad habits in him yet.”

After a week of daily extensions of Kaz’s stay, and good hard work from him, the conversation at dinner one night changes as Fern asks him a question.

“Did Mack tell you that we’re looking for another hand?”

“No, but I heard that President Truman always wanted to have accountants with only one hand so they could never tell him, ‘But, on the other hand.’” He laughs at his own joke, as do the other three. “How many hands do you have now?”

Mack replies quickly, “I only have two, but both are usually busy feeding my face. One more would be a good thing to have,” adding his own poor attempt at humor. “We’re a working ranch, just a bunch of misfits that somehow formed a family. If you’re interested, we could try you out for a month. Work’s hard, honest, and good. Pay isn’t great, but you get room and board on a peaceful place on earth where you can feel grounded and where you can know that you can do some good. You’d be working alongside Andy, and I’m the guy that you both answer to.”

Kaz has a funny look on his face, not smiling. “That sounds okay, but I gotta tell you, I’m kind of a loner and a horse’s ass.”

“We have six more horse’s asses in the barn. You can sleep there if you like, but Andy and me, the other two horse’s asses, sleep in the bunkhouse where you’ve been staying and it doesn’t smell so much.”

“I could give it a try, I guess. Car won’t run, almost out of money, haven’t found anything in life for me to do yet, no place to go. This looks better than that.”

That settles it; the Lost and Found has snagged another lost soul.

Kaz fits in. He is up the next morning at 5, eats a good breakfast, Andy shows him how to run the tractor and add implements, Mack gets him started on some of the new projects he’s been wanting to get into but hasn’t had time.

The day comes and goes like every other day for the last week.

That evening at supper, Fern asks, “What do you think, Kaz? Think you can cut it around here?”

“Well, Fern, pay’s shitty, work’s hard, you people are all crazy, and this land is trying to take back what people took from it. This is the one place on earth where I might fit in.”

Andy interrupts, “You picked up running the tractor pretty well. You ever drive a tractor before?”

“My old man was a farmer back in Poland. We come here with nothin’ and when my folks give up and moved back to the old country I stayed with what we come here with - nothin. Sure, I drove some farm equipment back home and I woulda done it here if we could have made a go of it.”

“What kind of work did you do after your ma and pa left?”

“I tried a bunch of jobs, but they always canned me because I told it like I seen it. Most bosses don’t like to hear the truth, and I don’t like telling lies to please ‘em. I worked at lots of labor

work, and in between I was standing around outside hardware stores and lumber yards to see if anyone needed someone to dig this or build that or fix something. I lived in that old car for three years and it was okay. My best friend, right there," as he points out the window toward the lifeless, 25-year-old beater car in the shed.

"Well, you got some friends here and we don't break down like cars do," Andy responds.

Mack jumps in, "Yeah? Well Andy, you sure sound like something ain't working great when you sleep. I never heard a man snore like you. Sounds like you got a ton of gravel rattling around in a can."

"Don't give me that. You hold your own in the snoring game. I'm just trying to compete," retorts Andy.

Mack answers, "Both of you guys would probably keep me awake all night if I didn't have a door to separate me from you. I'm tempted to pull a couple of zucchinis out of the garden and stuff them in whatever exit the snoring is coming from!"

Fern breaks the supper up with, "Okay, boys. Time to call it a night. Alejandra and Jana and I have cleanup to do and you all have to get up early to build the dream here."

Kaz is a good worker but he hasn't staked out his place in the Lost and Found except to prove willing to tackle just about any job. He's good on the farm part of the ranch but doesn't know livestock. That being a missing ingredient at the ranch, Andy patiently shows him how to tend to the small herd of sheep that have been added to the ranch, and how to mind the cattle and milk cow, and care for the horses.

Over the next several months, Kaz discovers that he has a natural affinity toward animals. They almost sense what he is wanting from them, and he can almost hear them replying to him as he goads them to do something. Ultimately, he prefers working with the animals over working on the farm, but he does whatever is necessary. He's becoming a member of the Lost and Found family.

His knack with animals comes out more and more every day. They respond to him when he comes near. He always has a salt lick to offer the cattle. The horses neigh with welcoming tones because he often brings whole fresh carrots out of the garden as a treat. The sheep and hogs are simply okay that he feeds them and talks to them and takes care of them. Actually, the hogs couldn't care less, but he treats them well anyway and that's good enough.

In a thoughtful moment, Kaz realizes that in the evenings, after supper, he usually finds himself in the horse paddock or the hog pen or walking among the cattle or sheep.

When Fern suggests they get two more milk cows, Kaz quickly offers that he will be happy to care for and milk all three. That settles it. Mack and Fern agree and Kaz buys the cows at auction with Mack's help.

Over the next month, the three men construct a small dairy barn with milking and feeding stalls, from plans Andy draws up,. Kaz is in the middle of everything. The cows need a certain diet, they have to be cared for daily with udder balm and other additives and supplements to make their lives better and keep them healthy. The milking stations are a collaboration between Andy and Kaz, checking options, making assessments, and then making buying decisions with Fern's approval. Mack has gently pushed them into this corner, assigning them to work together and figure it out together. The dairy barn is just the first of many collaborations they will have.

The dairy portion of the Lost and Found is busy every day. Kaz milks all three cows twice a day taking the milk to Fern and Jana who trade off refrigerating and separating the whole milk, retaining the butterfat at the top and the cream just below it, as separate products. The milk is bottled as a third product and sold in clear bottles in a glass-doored, refrigerated cooler that Mack bought at the auction of a small convenience store about 60 miles away. The cooler had probably at one time proudly held Nehi and Nesbitt soda on a front side wall of the store or near the cash register, but it was recently "put out to pasture" when the convenience store closed. Transported to the Lost and Found and plugged in at the roadside stand, it comes to life with bright lights inside illuminating its contents.

The cream is bottled in smaller bottles for the cooler. Fern takes 1/3 of the cream and mixes it with vanilla and whole milk to make Fern's Sweet Cream. Locals are soon saying that Fern's Sweet Cream and a shot of Jameson's Irish Whiskey in coffee makes the absolute best Irish Coffee. But then, none of them have ever been to Ireland, so you have to take that into account.

Kaz is now the resident animal whisperer. In the beginning he spent a lot of time with each one, getting to know the species and each individual animal. He's quick to realize that, within a species, each has its own personality, its own being. "Most people think one animal is the same as another," he shares with Mack, "and it'd probably scare the shit outta 'em if they knew that they were all like people, but different."

When one of the livestock is in distress or having problems, Kaz goes to them, calms them down, speaks quietly to them, and doctors them. When Mack has to call the vet to take care of more serious problems, Kaz is right there rubbing the animal's nose, scratching behind its ears, offering a treat to relax it, talking softly as it is examined and treated.

The animals begin to respond like wind in the trees - softly, slowly, and then growing. The first two in each species seem to break the ice. When Kaz has won two over, the rest of the herd follow. Over time, he sees that it isn't just any two, but the right two, the influencers of the flock or herd that turn the rest.

When Kaz approaches the sheep pen they slowly start moving toward him. When the cattle are restless in a storm, Kaz stands out in the wind and rain and talks to them loudly until they settle down.

He even has a special affinity with the ranch chickens, helping the ladies and rooster when they're molting by adding protein to their diet and giving them plenty of space.

The pigs, well, the pigs are the pigs and any attempt to change them is immediately met with obnoxious resistance, but Kaz eventually has them eating food from his hand and rubbing up against his legs. Of course, pigs being pigs, take a pig close to its mealtime and it will eat your hand right off your arm, given half the chance. But Kaz has the touch. Every living thing on the ranch, except for insects and plants, feels like it has a good friend in him.

Kaz has settled in on the bottom bunk of the bunkbed, talking Andy into making a shelf off of the wall beside his bed so he can keep a few items there, one of which is a small photo of his mother.

The three bunkhouse mates – Mack, Andy and newcomer Kaz – are getting to know each other over time. Nights after dinner at the ranch house, the three sit on the small bunkhouse porch and talk.

Mack smokes. It's a habit that he thought he had kicked, but working at the Lost and Found gave him such a rush that he picked up a pack of cigs to celebrate and he just kept buying more. He's thinking about changing to cigars, but he's not in any rush.

Andy and Kaz are glad that Mack has his own little room, because Mack can open his window and let the smoke out. The men have an easy-going friendship, partly because they don't have any overlap in their skills. Mack has turned into a good vision and management guy. Andy is a good structural builder, and Kaz is great with livestock and wildlife. Mack and Andy had to learn to accept Kaz, and Kaz had to be satisfied with letting relationships with the others develop in their own time.

Kaz is Kaz. He's a guy that isn't all that sure of himself but who could probably bluff himself into a high stakes poker game. On the flip side he's lost money at a few poker games. Walked out with nothing. Flat. Flattened. But he has found his calling in the animals on the ranch and that gives him a purpose and also instant feedback. He's starting to feel like he may have found his place in the world.

Being the third guy in the bunkhouse gives Kaz the low hand. His hard work is winning the trust and camaraderie of the two guys that he will someday call his friends.

Chapter 35. Kaz's reflection

I dunno what this place started out as, but these people are messed up.

I had enough trouble making the transition from Poland to here when I was a teenager. I could speak English because it was my favorite class in school in Poland, and I listened to a lot of American music and watched American tv. I couldn't understand all of the words but I got the general idea in every conversation.

Then, when my dad told us that he found work in America and we were moving here I was at first excited, but then just resigned to it. At the end I just thought, "Come on, they're the only parents I have and I'm the only kid. If they're going, I'm going. I don't have any better ideas and they've been good to me so far."

Sure, I was leaving my friends and also our extended family to move halfway around the globe. But when we got off that boat in New York I was so full of energy, I couldn't hardly contain it. Part of it was I just glad to get off the boat!

The entire trip over the Atlantic I had been depressed. I was leaving home, friends, church, regular life, all I had known. And, we were going to a strange country where they didn't speak Polish. I could speak pretty good English to other Polish English speakers but they weren't easy to find and the ones I sailed over with were all going to the east coast, looking to get work on the docks or inland to work in the coal mines.

It didn't matter. I had my diploma from high school and I was ready to use my muscles for work while my brain was still growing. I didn't have any friends on the trip, and I didn't have any when we got here.

My dad was a pretty good farmer in Poland. I'd least I thought he was because he worked hard. He always thought he was going to make it big. He said he had a sense for it. But, life taught him a harsh lesson after that first winter. He worked at it, but it was like he was confused. Like he didn't really know much about this kind of farming and if he couldn't figure it out, he damned sure wasn't going to let someone that did chase his dream.

I liked it here. The winters ain't as cold as Poland. There you had to stay in the house at night and keep the fire or coal stoked to get more heat. If you go outside there you make it quick. But here, if you get snow it ain't much and it don't last long. Winters here don't shut everything down like they did sometimes back home. And the ice don't last long either.

I was really wandering when I come here. They called me "the drifter." I never heard them say that, but Andy told me that. I didn't care. I was drifting, trying to find a place that I wanted to stay at, some place where I could make a difference. It was the hope I had when we come here from Poland. I got taken away from everything I knew and I grew up with. My grandparents and

cousins aren't here and they were my family life. So, I got to find a way, something I can do that helps me stick.

When ma and pa went back I could have gone with them. I thought about it long and hard. But I liked the land here and the people. Hell, I figured I could handle that part. Just do what you can do and let the chips fall. If people like you, they like you. If they don't, don't give it a second thought. Just keep going.

The hard part was figuring out what I wanted to do. I was a growed man when ma and pa left for Poland and after a while when I didn't never hear from them, I just figured I was on my own and I better make my way in this life. I didn't expect it was going to be this hard.

I guess if pa had put us in a city I could have seen more choices about what I wanted to do. But he was a farmer and farming is what he knew so farming is what we done. I helped him on the farm until we all knew that we weren't gonna make it. He and ma talked about it for weeks; I heard them arguing almost every night. Finally, they decided to tell me and to ask me what I wanted to do. I wasn't surprised but I also wasn't ready. I didn't have enough information about what all you could do in this country to make any decision on what I should do. So, I decided to stay.

The day they left was a hard day. The farm had been sold, and they were using the money to go back to Poland and get a stake of land there. It was a new start for them, and to some people that might seem strange to try to start over, but pa was only 38 and ma was 35. They had lots of land left to plough in this life. I was able to stay on the farm for two months after they left, part of the bargain for the property, but I had to live in the barn. Ma gave me a few bucks when they left, and I started looking for work right away. Heck, I was 20. That's a working man's age.

I walked around to all the neighboring farms to see who might need some help. I got a few jobs, a week or two here, a month there, but nothing that looked like it could last for long. I was able to save up enough to buy a car whichm after the 60 days of living on the old property was up, became my room and car. If I got a farm job, it usually paid some and included free meals. That made it work. I got a couple of building jobs, helping with barn and shed construction and one time even doing some work on a house. I got paid every week and that had to stretch for food and maybe a little gas. Most jobs I got let me park my car on the property, and they knowed I was living in it. I guess labor is labor.

I was able to do okay, have food and a dry place to sleep every night for a little over a year. After two jobs in a row ended too soon, I just decided to get in my car and take it as far as the gas would get us. We set out and after two days I swerved to dodge a cow in the road, bit the ditch, and the danged car wouldn't start. That was when I started looking around.

From where my car was in the ditch I could see a ranch spread. The sign over the dirt leading ot the house said "Lost and Found Ranch." I sure didn't get that name until after I was there one year. Then I got it.

I never got much of a start in life being stuck in a foreign country and all. I tried to make it, but something was off. I couldn't figure out if I was wrong for this country, or I was stuck in the back woods, or if life was just dealing me from a bad deck (yeah, I knew some cards). The ranch name finally hit me one day. I got myself lost and two years later I was in a place that I liked, where I fit in, where people gave me some responsibility and I got a sense of pride in what I was doing.

Chapter 36. The two-letter guy

About a year after Kaz arrived, LT joins the ranch family. LT is a large man with giant hands. His dark skin has a golden color that looks a bit like coffee blended with rich cream. He has a laugh and a smile that can make the sun shine on a rainy day.

No one knows what LT stands for and LT won't say, but occasionally he shares some of his story. He finished high school in Yakima, joined the Army the day after graduation, served in Iraq during Desert Storm and later in Afghanistan, saw some of his buddies die or get messed up by IED's and friendlies, and after he got out of the military he went four years with undiagnosed PTSD. His life has been as crazy as he was, filled with a string of broken relationships, including his immediate family and a succession of girlfriends.

During the worst of his condition LT was prone to unexpected and unprovoked violence, which with his size means that he did serious damage. He had his share of barroom fights, most of which he won. After one or two arrests for assault or damaging property, with the ensuing fines and restitution, a cop picked him up, drunk and alone on the street at 3:30 one morning. LT started crying and the cop hearing about his service history checked him into a VA hospital. According to LT, it was the best thing anyone had ever done for him. He spent the next eight months trying to get his life back together, with help from the VA and a chaplain that took an interest in him.

Two weeks before he showed up at the Lost and Found, it had been a bad week in LT's life.

He had a job at a meat packing plant. He smelled bad after work, but he had a steady paycheck, a place to stay, a room with a bathroom, an outside kitchen downstairs and a couple of friends that he hung out with in a bar downtown.

Life is fragile at this point in life. One thing can sway you one way and another can swing you back. You don't always know the cause or what will be the effect. Those thoughts are way too heavy, and LT gets a headache thinking that much. It's more like you know the experience and you either like it or you don't, he thinks. It's either good for you or it isn't.

LT rode with Hitch to the packing plant, his usual carpooling buddy. He split the gas with Hitch and it worked out fine, much cheaper than buying and maintaining a car and paying for gas.

One Tuesday the wall above the timeclock had a notice saying, "The following people…" and it listed LT's name on it along with 14 others. All of them are to report to the plant manager's office before the start of the shift. LT and several others walk along the cyclone fence to the plant manager's office, a trailer with two stairs and doors, one on either end.

The plant manager waits until all 15 are in the room and then announces that "the plant is going through a management shakeup and you are all laid off at this time. Do not report to

work. Do not clock in because it won't count. Go home and we will let you know when you'll be coming back to work."

Two weeks later LT woke up with a hangover, rent due on his room, no food, and an ugly taste in his mouth. He got in the car he had just bought the week before he was laid off, old and ready to go to the car ranch in the sky, and he headed out. First north, then east. The car died on the first day. He parked it off the road a ways and just sat for an hour.

He wasn't looking for the Lost and Found, but it was about to find him.

Mack spotted him walking along the country road late in the afternoon near the ranch. He stopped the pickup and opened the window, "Hey buddy, need a ride?"

"No, but I could sure use a life," LT's answered, with no break in his stride.

Curious, Mack follows slowly in the pickup, window open. "Where you headed?"

"Don't know yet, but I'll know when I get there."

"Jump in. You can come sleep at our ranch. You might have to do a little work tomorrow to pay for the night and for breakfast, but it looks like work never hurt you."

LT stopped, shrugged his shoulders, climbed into the pickup, and they drove to the Lost and Found.

LT is given the last bunk in the bunkhouse main room. It's cozy, but they're all men and they aren't the kind to sit around and talk, so mostly they stay outside on the porch until it's time to sleep and then they go inside and go to bed. By unspoken rule, the order of using the bathroom is on the seniority system. The guy that's been at the ranch longest goes first, followed by the next guy and so on to the newest guy on the ranch – the visitor LT.

The next day after breakfast, Andy has LT help fix up a couple of sheds and he works very hard. He's strong and he's also fast. Andy talks to Mack and before supper Mack stops LT outside the ranch house. LT figures that this will be quick and the news will be bad.

Mack starts talking, "You know, you're a little green around the edges but Andy says you work hard and you're pretty smart. This ranch has been growing and we have more work than the rest of us can do. I'm gonna take a risk and give you a chance to be part of this, but I'll tell you, you'll have to work hard and make your own way here. We'll give you a place to sleep, food to eat, and a few hundred bucks a month. If that sounds okay to you, let's give it a month trial and see how it works out."

LT smiles to himself and replies, "Okay, let's give it a go."

It’s hard breaking into a new living situation, new climate and region, new lifestyle, new kind of work, new opportunities, new promises.

LT has heard his share of promises. After the first broken promise he just didn’t pay that close attention to promises any more. He figures that promises are more like “maybes.” Maybe I’ll do this if you do that. Maybe I’ll pay you this amount for that. Maybe. Or maybe not.

The maybes were usually bullshit and it was embarrassing when he got suckered into another one. It isn’t that he’s slow. It is more that he is hopeful.

He had a loving mother who died when he was young. His dad was a gambler and a drinker. Between those two bad habits his dad didn’t ever have much money or much kindness. When he was drinking, he beat LT. When he was sober, he cried and asked for forgiveness. It was a cycle that didn’t make any sense, and at age 10 after a beating, LT’s mama left his daddy and took to the streets with LT in tow. The unknown looked somewhat better than where she was.

She worked hard and managed to provide a roof and food until she got sick and died. After that he became hardened by too many lies and smiles that meant nothing. His dad used to call that “showin’ yo' teeth and hidin’ yo' fangs.”

A year after his mama died an elderly neighbor spotted him on the street and let him move into a spare bedroom, where he lived and helped out around the house. The old man insisted that LT go to school, and became like a surrogate grandfather to him. He was the only person that showed up for LT's high school graduation.

Right after graduation, as though his job was done, the old man moved into a rest home and that was the end of that.

Even after the tough start, LT could still be had by a pretty face and a handout, or a buddy shake and a promise. After each, he swore that no one would be able to take advantage of him again.

But maybe this time will be different, he thinks. He tells Mack he’ll give it a try.

The Lost and Found is a surprise. For the first time he is considered an equal by people that have more than him. He gets asked for his opinion and when he gives it, people listen. And more often than not they try his ideas on how to solve a problem. Sure, the pay isn’t great. But he’s listened to, he gets a say in things, and he gets credit for having good ideas.

As time goes on LT just never leaves. This was just going to be another temporary stopover, but the Lost and Found Ranch has picked up another stray.

The three hands, Andy, Kaz and LT work pretty well together. LT is a private person, but he works hard, has a big, hearty laugh, a little kid’s smile at times, and is generally an all-around

pleasant person to be around. He's the kind of guy that makes close quarters not quite so unpleasant, and he has a unique way of calming tense situations. The three men become friends.

Chapter 37. Fitting In

Sometimes when they are working in the fields, LT starts singing.

“What song is that,” Kaz occasionally asks.

“Something we used to sing in church when I was a kid,” LT answers before swinging into the next chorus. “It makes me feel peaceful.”

Kaz likes it when LT takes his deep baritone into a song that Kaz has never heard before. LT has a very pleasing voice and the music he tends to sing makes everyone stop what they’re doing to listen, the sound alone being both soothing and smooth. The melodies are gentle on the ears and the mind, the lyrics often edging out of sorrow and into hope.

All four hands are working on a stretch of fence line that has fallen. The day is hot, the work is heavy, and the men are tired. They have to move cattle and wrangle hogs in the morning, and with the sun at full noon each man is trying not to think about how he feels but just concentrating on the work and slugging it out.

Andy has longish hair, and sweat is pouring from his head down one strand of hair which swings in his eyes as he moves his head. Kaz is holding a fencepost vertical while Andy hits it with the sledge. Just as Andy is getting ready to hit the top of the post the wet hair hits his eyes and, momentarily distracted, he misses the fencepost with the sledge and the head of the sledge strikes the ground right beside Kaz’s right foot.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing? You could have hit my foot, and I can’t afford to be laid up, you stupid idiot!”

“Who are you calling stupid, jerk? I missed you didn’t I?”

“Well, you’ve been missing all day. You screwed up with that one hog that wouldn’t move. You can’t treat hogs bad because they’ll sure as hell treat you back if they want to.”

“Look, don’t tell me what to do. And I’m not your little kid to boss around. Get outta' my face!” With that Andy pushes Kaz hard.

“Look punk, I’ll teach you how to push,” from Kaz and he takes a swing at Andy who dodges just as Kaz’s fist flies by his cheek.

“Hey guys,” yells, LT, “did you hear the one about the chicken and the duck?”

Both men are dumbfounded by LT’s interjection. Andy and Kaz stop their argument and turn to stare at LT. “What?” blurts Kaz incredulously.

“Yeah,” Andy adds, “what are you talking about?” and he starts to laugh.

Almost immediately he’s joined in laughter by Kaz. Both men are soon bent over, hands on knees, laughing hard, partly from the heat and being tired, partly from relief of the tension, and partly because WHAT KIND OF QUESTION WAS THAT???

After several minutes of side-splitting laughter, Andy and Kaz slowly stop and look at each other, a guy that each wanted to pummel a few minutes ago but now is a friend he gets to work with. Andy says, “Hey, man. I’m sorry. I’m just hot and the damn hair is bugging me; can’t keep it out of my eyes. I didn’t mean it.”

Kaz smiles and offers, “I’m sorry too, buddy. Got a little hot under the collar and did what I always used to do. Fire first, aim later.”

Then Andy says to LT, “What was that about a chicken and a duck?”

LT answers, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, man” and walks back to his horse to get a drink of water.

It’s good when ranch hands find ways to appreciate each other outside of ranching. It’s important. There is trust and reliance that a person has to put in one another when you’re dealing with 2400-pound steers, 900-pound horses, a flock of 70-pound sheep, a couple dozen full-grown hogs, and five other humans on a ranch.

Every person on a ranch brings something different, and like every person, LT brings something that, when added to the whole ranch family, contributes to what the family needs to become. Bigger. More capable. More well-rounded. More successful. With new perspectives.

LT is a natural. Not just in disposition, but in temperament and skills. He is a whiz at mechanical things, a trait he says his daddy “brung” him. Whether it’s a hasp, a hinge or a harrow, LT knows it or can figure it out, can maintain it, and can fix it if it breaks.

Unlike his daddy, LT has no interest in either gambling or drinking. He clings to the very early memories of his mama walking with him to Sunday School, dressed up and making sure he was wearing his best clothes. After church they would walk back through a park and sometimes there would be an ice cream cart there, with a dozen kids jumping up and down trying to buy a cold treat. Mama would reach in her purse and pull out a quarter for him to get his favorite ice cream, Drumsticks. Then they would sit together on the bench in the park, looking at the birds and kids and families with blankets and picnic food while he ate his ice cream. The best part was the bottom of the cone, where the chocolate inside was waiting to give him that perfect, sweet ending to a great treat.

He liked church music and sometimes caught himself humming some of the songs that the choir director led the choir to sing. He was sure he would get to sing in the choir when he grew up.

But then mama died.

LT doesn't think about those times much. They remind him of the loneliness of life "after mama," and of the ache for just one more Sunday with her. It is this sadness that, like that of many of the other ranch team, continues to linger in his mind.

Between Andy the builder, and Kaz the animal whisperer, LT is the mechanical master, which is the role that Mack has played but now is, more often than not, way behind on while running the ranch.

LT picks up the slack and also inherits the DNA of the Lost and Found. It's the belief in the earth, in the seasons and reasons for them, and for the good fortune provided by an unknown and unseen super-being, a being that has an amazingly, and unwarranted, benevolent relationship with its creation.

LT becomes the guy that maintains all the equipment, the pickups, tractors, implements, and cars, as well as the pumps and irrigation line, and anything else that is mechanical.

Mack approaches LT when he's working, to find out a little about him. On one occasion he asks LT, "Where did you learn about mechanics, man?"

To which LT replies, "I worked in the motor pool in the Army. When I got out, I spent a lot of time hustling to get enough so I could buy food. There was a mechanic garage right near where I slept and every day, I walked past that big open door, the man standing watching me as I walked past. He asked me one time was I hungry and I said 'Yeah', and he said, Here kid, here's a sandwich.'

"The next day I walked past there and he's standing there again. He asked me the same question and gives me a sandwich. It was good, I'll tell you. Anyway, he was the mechanic in that garage, and he said he would teach me a few things and give me some food if I would help him in the garage. It was food, man. I ate good from him, and he had me doing all kind of stuff in the garage, but my favorite part was working on cars. I knew some from the Army, but not much because mainly I was a driver.

"That man showed me how to fix hoses and brakes and steering and motors and transmissions. I got to work on everything. I was 22. He said if I would keep helping him every day that he would give me a job when I turned 23. I didn't have nuthin' else to do so I kept at it and he put a $20 bill in my pocket every coupla days. By the time I turned 23 that man didn't work there no more and I had to go back to hustlin'. But I worked on every kind of car and truck in those two years, and I sure loved it, yes I did." And then almost to himself, "and I would have made that garage one heck of a good mechanic."

While LT is a really intuitive mechanic, if you get him and another guy together around some work, they're gonna' sing. Voices, individual, together, discordant, spoken word against melody

- it would just happen. LT usually starts it with his smooth voice, but he’s quickly followed by others that just wanna' sing along, maybe don’t know the words or the melody, but they get the beat and the gist of the music, so they keep up and even contribute. And then it’s over. Just starts and ends. Just like that.

In the Lost and Found bunkhouse LT is camped out on the top bunk. In a few months Mack has him helping Andy and Mack build on to the bunkhouse, adding a new washroom with a bigger sink and tub with a shower curtain, and another room with one bunk. Andy moves up to the new private room, leaving LT and Kaz to take the two remaining lower bunks in the main bunkhouse. It is almost like they have privacy, except not really.

Chapter 38. LT vignette

I remember when mama first started acting funny. She'd get that look on her face, kinda scrunched up. And I never thought much about it. Just something for a moment and then it went away. She would come home from work, and I'd be waiting for her because that was when we got to eat. But sometimes she would move slow and lay down and then get up and finally make something we could eat for dinner. I liked dinner times because I got to spend time with her. She was the only parent I knew and that meant something. She would tell me, "We can do all things through God who strengthens us." I believed her. She said it so many times, so I believed.

From as far back as I can remember mama was taking me to church. She would put me in Sunday School and then she would go up to the main room for the preaching. I made friends in Sunday School and I learned a bunch of stuff that I ignored later in life. Afterwards she and I would sit together.

But mama kept slowing down and laying down and finally she couldn't get up to go to work. I didn't know what to do. I was 11. But mama began to tell me things about how to survive and live in this life. From sitting to laying on the couch to being in her bed all day she gave me the keys to survival. Without those I wouldn't have made it a minute after she passed. And the keys she passed on was what we needed for us to survive. I took over the responsibilities for the food and living.

I had just turned 14 when mama finally went home to Jesus. She had been talking to Him for half a year and it seemed like He was answering her by her face. I was doing some odd jobs and we were behind on our rent. Mama's brother had been sending some money, and that kept us in our little room with kitchen and got us food. I slept on a cot on the floor and mama had the bed. It was good. I could do my studies by laying on my cot. It was comfortable and I was okay.

Mama always worked, always worked. For her, work was life. For me, work was work. When she couldn't work no more, she put all her energy into teaching me how to live. The day she passed she wasn't in no more big pain than usual. She had her moments during the last month that I could see were hard. But she was mama. She hid her pain a lot, I think. Anyway, she got up from her bed to go to the kitchen or the bathroom, I don't know which. She looked like she tripped maybe, and I watched in slow motion as she fell to the floor. I couldn't move, I couldn't understand what was happening, and I finally went over to her. She was blue. I yelled out the door and a few people came to see what the noise was about. When I told them, one lady said, "I'm a nurse" and she followed me back in our room. She knelt beside mama and held her hand. In a few minutes she said, "She's gone, son. She was gone when I first got here. She's for sure gone."

I was stunned and then the lady called for an ambulance, and they took mama away. I held her hand as they wheeled her out the door, but her hand was cold and limp. Mama was gone.

I wish I could say that I made it okay, but I was mad. I mean, hopping mad. What kind of world is it when a 14 year old kid has his mama taken away from him. It's not fair. She was my only parent and now I'm an orphan. What kind of world is that?

I started right then to find things that I could do to make money, and I did okay. I did a little hard work here, a little hustle there, I had a few bucks.

School was tough. That old man took me in and if it wasn't for him I would never have made it through school. He brought the first kindness into my life after my mama, and I'll always remember him.

The day I graduated from high school I joined the Army. Three hots and a cot… and clothes, a few bucks, even a few friends. It was alright. Some part of me still thinks I would have been better off to stay in than to get out after three years.

But, deep inside I wanted better. I felt that I got robbed when other people were doing something with their lives, working at jobs, making money, buying cars and stuff.

I got a letter my last year in the service, that the old man had passed. I got drunk that night. He was a kind man and I had hoped I would see him when I came home.

After I got out, I got unemployment for a while, and some help with surplus food, and I started to go to school. It wasn't any big thing. I took car mechanics at the local voc-tech school. I had worked in the motor pool in the Army and I knew a little about cars and a tiny bit about everything else.

It was okay, but I just didn't have the head for school. Yeah, I went everyday but I didn't feel like it was taking me anywhere, so I didn't really keep up with it. The other people in my class were serious about getting jobs in the car business, but me, I was just doing something to do something because I didn't know what I wanted.

If I thought about it much, I'll tell you I felt like I got a raw deal. Everyone else had parents and a family and a chance at a future. I was an adult orphan. My mama did her best, but she had to work her butt off all her life, and I got whatever was left. She did her best and I loved her, but I was jealous of the other kids that all seemed to have it much better. The old man that took me in and helped me get through high school died before I could see him again. It was a raw deal.

After the unemployment ran out, I started slumming. Just living on the streets trying to keep alive and hoping that some blue bird would land on my shoulder. It never did. It crapped on me a couple of times, but never landed.

Then the guy in the auto garage saw me and gave me a break. I learned a lot and the money he gave me helped me eat. I still was on the streets, but I wasn't hungry.

There was so much drugs around, man, I was having it put in my face all the time. But I remembered what mama told me about drugs, “they’ll mess you up LT. They messed up your daddy who you don’t even remember. Do you want to be like that? Or do you want to be the kind of daddy that loves his own? That stuff will not only mess you up, sooner or later it’ll kill you. Now, does that sound like the kind of stuff you want to mess with, LT? No! Uh uh! Don’t even think about it for a second, not even less than one second.”

That was all it took. I loved and trusted my mama. She loved and helped me until her last breath. No way I was gonna' mess with no drugs.

Alcohol and I had a few times, though. I just never hit the bottle that hard that often for that long that it could creep into my system and take over my self-control.

The meat packing plant came about because I had to go to the employment office to get some help. The counselor there leafed through a bunch of papers and pulled one out. “There’s a meat packing plant that’s looking for a food handler. It pays by the hour, not bad. And it’s got a few immediate openings.

It was a job. I would just be happy to have some bucks to pay for stuff.

I went to the office in this big metal warehouse kind of building and filled out the application. They hired me on the spot. I only got a year of what I would call almost normal life. I worked hard, five days a week; if I got lucky there might be an extra day I could work. It cost money to live, but I was used to living on the cheap. Food was important. Place to sleep? Important. Inside rather than outside? Mostly important. Comfortable bed? Not that important. Clean room? Not important at all. Still, I could pay rent, eat food and put gas in the car which I bought from an old guy that was retiring. He about wore it out but left a little bit. I was happy to have it, no matter what shape it was in.

When we showed up at work that Thursday and we all saw that notice on the door that led to us all being out of work, some people left there and went straight to the unemployment office. I didn’t think about it, I couldn’t think about it, I just needed to clear my head.

For the first time in so many years, I had. been starting to think about the future. My life had been about hanging on and taking the cards you're dealt and doing your best to use them well. I guess we can try to do something with the good things, or we can wallow in the not so good things. I was always happier when I was trying to do better and learning along the way.

This time I didn't see it coming. It wasn’t good and my hopes of having a better future were trashed. It had been my one best hope and it was gone.

So, I ended up putting some of my last money into gas in the car and headed out. Going nowhere in particular, but somewhere by accident. It was kinda like you were at the craps table and you doubled down. You didn’t really care if you lost or won, it was the thrill of it. The

freedom. And the knowledge that you were playing the cards you were dealt. You were trying to make the best of it. The crap might linger but the one pure moment of thrill when you went on a lark, now that was worth it.

I knew there were diamonds in life, cause I seen them. I just didn't know if I was worthy enough or smart enough to get 'em. Or if I even looked the right part.

Figure it out all you want, truth is I didn't have a clue as to which way to go or how to go about it. I was wandering. And I didn't even know I was lost but I guess I pretty much was. I didn't have an idea where to go and didn't want to remember where I had been. That kinda describes lost, doesn't it?

But then I found this ranch. Funny how Kaz and I both ended up in a ditch near this ranch. Can't get much lower than that, so anything better than that is a good deal.

Chapter 39. A New Foundling

Spring brings new energy to the Lost and Found. Rotating crops are planted, orchards have been fertilized and pruned, berry bushes are trained, the livestock are producing babies, and rains bring refreshing water to the ranch.

Except for one week of deluge that threatens to flood the east sections of the Pickering addition, it's a pretty normal winter and spring.

In late May, Jamie stumbles onto the Lost and Found. Jamie's car is loaded with her few possessions, having cleaned out her rented room in Corvallis. She's on a vision quest, driving through to wherever draws her in.

She sees signs for Fern's Organic Fruit and Vegetables along the road and since she's into organic, and is suddenly hungry for some really fresh fruit, she pulls into Fern's parking area.

Jamie is a 23-year-old tomboy that loves horses, loves ranches and is not only smart but handy. She has a mind for growing things, with a solid education, good instincts, and some professional gardening experience. She's fresh out of Oregon State with a degree in agricultural sciences. And she's looking for a future.

The roadside stand lot is crowded with cars when Jamie parks in an open spot at one end of the lot, and walks into the stand.

She is checking out the organic fruit and strikes up a conversation with an older lady wearing a Fern's shirt. Jamie asks questions about the organic methods the ranch employs. The other lady spends the next 15 minutes talking about composting, earthworms, ash, pruning, thinning, fertilizing and organic pest control. It's as if she's the owner. Which is exactly the question that Jamie asks, and to which the answer is "Yes."

"Have you done any biointensive growing with your fields?" asks Jamie.

Fern replies, "Sure, we've tried it and it works well with some crops. With some, but not many, more conventional methods seem to work better for us. But I like it."

"We just finished a study at OSU about the benefits of double dug and biointensive, or French Intensive, and we found that by tweaking a couple of things we were able to get a 30% greater yield with an organic pest defense."

"Really? I'd like to hear more about that. Are you in a hurry?"

"Not yet. I really don't know where I'm going. I'm just on the way. I've got time."

“Good. I’m taking a break in 15 minutes. Why don’t you come up to the ranch house. I’ll make us some sweet tea.”

“Sure, why not. I’ll stay for a little while and then I’m heading on east.”

Over the course of a conversation and tea Jamie is intrigued by what Fern tells her about the Lost and Found, and she shares knowledge from her graduate level investigation into French Intensive techniques.

“French double-digging provides great drainage and a perfect stratum for root development. In our research beds we trenched down 12 inches and then used tines to loosen another 6-10 inches of the soil at the base of the trench. To combine with biointensive we made the beds a little extra wide and, by putting plants closer together than normal, we created a biosphere that helps defend against pests while also increasing yields.”

“That sounds very interesting,” offers Fern, “We could probably give that method a full test. We’ve been so busy growing that we haven't had much time for learning new things.”

“I get it. Grad students managed the research, using us undergrads to do the grunt work and data gathering. We tested the premise that combining the two methods should make a bigger difference than conventional planting.

“We started with the basics and then worked with the variables. The three critical components to a vibrant grow are light, water and nutrients. Our test considered nutrients to be a constant, the same soil values were used in each test garden. The measured variables for water were primarily quantity, timing, and frequency.

"In another test area the variables were full sun, partial sun, and filtered sunlight.

"Water had the biggest impact. Sunlight tests had varying impact, but water was critical. We got a good 20% increase by regulating the water to the available light. The remaining 10% was achieved by modifying the light and leaving the water the same. By analyzing the data from all the tests, we combined the best performing variables and measured for increase in crop yields.

"It was cool. The healthier the beds the better they withstood the onslaught of pests and disease. I’m hoping to see how effective our research can be in an actual commercial operation.”

For the next 30 minutes the two women talk, sharing core beliefs and their individual talents as they get more comfortable with each other. Fern is impressed by the young woman’s strength of mind and knowledge. Finally, she asks the question that’s been on her mind for the past 10 minutes, “Look, we have a ranch here. It’s a small business but it’s growing and we’re making a name for ourselves here and in the region for doing the right thing the right way. We’re not hiring but if we were, would you ever consider working at a small operation like ours?”

To which Jamie answers, “I suppose I would. I was looking to get on with a large farming corporation. I’m just passing through but if you’re going after what you say you’re going after I think I could make a difference here. That’s only if you were hiring. Since you aren’t, I’ll be continuing on east until one of three things happen – I get the job I’m looking for, I run out of money, or they stop selling tequila.”

“Just a minute,” says Fern quickly. “I have to check on something. Can you wait a minute?”

“Sure. I’m fine here.”

Fern steps out of the room and finds Mack in the barn. She explains that she’s got a young lady right out of college with good agricultural skills and who seems like a natural born farmer. However, she’s passing through to nowhere and just stopped at the stand.

Ferm says, “I think we should hire her, Mack. She’s a perfect fit. She has exactly what we’ve been missing on the agricultural side – the produce and herb beds and the orchard. She could move us four steps up in whatever time she’s here. She’s probably passing through, but we might get a year’s worth of her time and be miles ahead. Whadayathink?”

Mack’s first words are, “You better get back there and grab her before she gets away.”

Late that afternoon, having come to quick agreement, Jamie moves into the ranch house, which was designed and built with three bedrooms. Mack and Fern have the master bedroom upstairs and Jamie has the guest bedroom downstairs at the opposite end of the house. It’s a plan that works.

For the first few months everything is fine. Jamie has quickly assumed responsibility over all the gardens and orchards. She also has an interest in cider and hopes to learn the ranch’s processes. She’s heard some interesting ideas about cider production at the university but has never tried any of them.

Jamie is tough. Not strong, but tough. She got dumped off a horse her first week at the Lost and Found. It was right in front of the ranch house as she was coming up for the Friday night barbecue. Landed right on her right hip. Bam! Hurt like hell, but she got up, slapped her jeans to dust off the dirt, checked the tack on her horse and then remounted effortlessly.

After that, she never walked with a limp, except when she was out of eyesight of any other ranch staff, and then she would wince and draw in her breath at the pain. “Can’t show anyone that this bothers me,” she thinks. “It only bothers me when I’m alone. When I’m with other people I’m someone else. But when I’m alone, there isn’t anybody here but me, and I can feel the pain.” The hip on the resilient young woman is back to normal in three weeks.

Jamie also has a feminine side and that part becomes more noticeable to Fern and the men.

As the summer weather gets hotter, Jamie wears more loose-fitting clothes, some of it a bit revealing. When weather is really hot, Jamie wears shorts and a tight tanktop. She has the best work boots and when the whole ranch crew is working the hay, she wears jeans to protect her legs. Both of which, legs that is, are “A-number-one” according to any male within a mile of her when she’s wearing shorts.

One Sunday afternoon Fern comes in from a short drive to a neighbor farm and as she’s parking the car she sees Jamie laying on a lounge on the deck, with Mack rubbing sunblock on her back.

The walk from the car to the deck is excruciating. Fern feels her heart beating rapidly in her chest and she loses track of time and space for just a moment as she walks to the deck.

“Hey, baby. How was the Vinatue place?” calls Mack casually, still rubbing Jamie’s back. Jamie is laying face down, with her tank top off lying next to her on the lounge. She’s covered but obviously topless.

“Oh, it was good. We’ll talk about it later. What are you two up to?”

“Jamie’s dying for a suntan. I told her, she doesn’t watch it she’ll be dying *of* a suntan. But at least I talked her into some sunblock. We can’t have these kids running around unprotected.”

“Good for you. For a minute I actually thought that maybe you were enjoying that,” Fern says with a smirk.

Mack answers without looking up, “Okay, you caught me. I was imagining how my life might have turned out if I had gone to chiropractic school.”

And then he adds, “Did I ever tell you that my parents wanted me to grow up to be a butcher so they could tell all their friends that their son was Mack the Knife?”

Fern comes up to him, grabs one of his hands, still with some lotion on them, and puts it between the buttons of her shirt, rubbing his hand on her bare tummy. Fern is an athletic type. She is always doing some stretching or isometric exercises, and she can work out with the best of them. Her tummy, even when touched between the buttons of her shirt, is tight and lean.

Mack turns to follow Fern into the Ranch house, calling to Jamie, “Don’t stay out in that sun for longer than 30 minutes. Then check to see if your skin changes color when you touch it. If it does, stop and come in. If it doesn’t change color, you can stay out a little longer. Got it?”

“Yep. Thanks, dad.”

From the open doorway, “You’re welcome, Jamie. Just don’t overdo it with the sun.”

And he turns and walks in the house.

Mostly the three are pretty simpatico, living in the same house. Mack and Fern are in the far bedroom upstairs. It's a master suite with a bathroom attached to the bedroom, redecorated by Fern after Cyrus passed.

Chapter 40. In the Heat of One Night

At 2 am one Sunday. Mack wakes up thirsty and desperately needs a glass of milk, which he hopes will help him get back to sleep. He crawls out of bed, he has always slept naked and, being careful not to wake Fern, he slips out of the door and wanders downstairs, totally forgetting that anyone shares the house with them. He walks down the stairs slowly, holding on to the handrail because of the darkness. Feeling along the wall to the right, he angles toward the kitchen, a faint light emanating from it. The kitchen is still dark but with soft filtered moonlight shining in the window.

He grabs the door to the fridge and pulls it open, the interior light casting a halo around him. He finds the milk, grabs it and, shutting the fridge door, walks toward the cupboard. His eyes are slowly adjusting to the low light and as he finds a glass and pours some milk he hears a sound nearby. It sounds like a chair lightly scraping the floor. He turns in that direction, moonlight coming from the side and illuminating his body, to hear a woman's voice say, "That's far enough partner, but stand there for a minute while I take a look at you."

Shocked and without any ability to react, Mack stands stationary. After a couple of minutes he asks, "Uh, do you mind if I…" and before he can say anything else a young blonde, Jamie, is standing before him, also totally naked. He stops in mid-sentence and stares.

Jamie, at 23 is quite simply, a looker. Tall and slender, nice figure, legs up to "here."

Now, she's standing in front of him with no clothes on. And he is also naked. The two of them, with every intimate part of their bodies totally exposed, are within two feet of each other.

Suddenly, Jamie starts a muffled laugh.

"What's so funny," asks Mack

"I'm not sure if you're excited to see me or what, but you're sure standing at attention."

"Sorry. Sorry!" says Mack trying to cover up with his hands. "I'm not used to anyone else being in the house," and he hurriedly runs for the stairs.

It is the last time that Mack walks downstairs at night without clothes on, and Jamie never mentions that night.

The next day, there isn't even an awkward moment when the crew are all together for breakfast. Neither Jamie or Mack have any interest in reliving or extending their early morning encounter.

Chapter 41. Jamie's Reaction

I wanted to find something I could get some traction on and the Lost and Found gave me that chance. They trusted me, and I trusted that I could deliver. What I really like is the way everyone is so encouraging.

The name of the ranch isn't as meaningful to me as some of the people here say it is for them. But it's kind of cool in its own way and I can get behind the whole idea that everyone needs to find yourself. I wasn't looking, but just found this place and I guess it kind of found me at the same time. When Fern offered me a position, I figured my journey might as well start here.

I do like to sunbathe and the Ranch is in the perfect climate for it. In the past I would find a secluded place so I could get an all-over tan, but there are always people around on the Ranch so I just lay face down on a lounge chair on the deck and pull off my halter top so there are no strap marks on my back.

Mack spotted me one afternoon and warned me about the dangers of damaging my skin in the sun. It was really nice of him to put SPF 30 on my back. He has really strong hands and he rubbed it in with like a little massage. I couldn't help it, I sighed from relaxation and was just about to turn over and let him do the same to my chest when Fern came up. I'm not that modest and I think women should have the same right as men to bare their chests, but I was a little embarrassed at my impulsive thoughts. My last boyfriend was a year ago and it would have been nice to have had a little male attention.

The night when I bumped into Mack in the kitchen, I was just trying to get some juice. I had been asleep and I woke up. My throat was so dry. It was, you know, kind of an impulse. I always sleep au natural and it was late. No one is ever up at that hour so there was no reason to cover up. I had walked to the kitchen and was about to go to the fridge when I spotted movement out of the corner of my eye. I sat down at a chair and watched as Mack came into the kitchen and opened the fridge door. The light from the fridge shown on his body. As he reached into the fridge I just had to say something so I blurted out, "Just hold it right there," or something like that. Not my best line, I guess.

I've known my share of men in high school and college, so I could see that Mack was physically attracted to me. He used his hands to cover himself but it was too late. His anatomy had already spoken. Too bad he was so much older than me because he has a great physique. Okay, I admit it, I thought he was good looking.

He seemed more embarrassed than I was but he kept staring at me for a few seconds. I've been naked in front of enough men to not be squeamish and scream or something juvenile like that. And I didn't attempt to cover up. If he had been 15 years younger and not been Fern's boyfriend I might have been tempted to invite him to my room for some candlelight music.

I had a few idle thoughts about that night, but that was all. It was really more funny than anything else.

Chapter 42. Bookends

It's never about the outcome or the starting point, is it? It's always about the journey.

There are many warm nights when Fern and Mack sit out on the front porch, looking straight at the bunkhouse, and sideways to the barn. Mack lights his occasional cigar. Fern usually has a folded paper fan in her hand, partly to keep the bugs away, partly to blow the smoke away, and partly to keep cool on the summer nights when the air is thick and humid.

The past year has been pretty good. Neither of them takes that for granted. They both understand that they're just one calamity or bad weather year from being on the ropes. But they haven't come this far without a sense of optimism and lots of ideas for the future.

The road coming from the northwest, traveling on through Grainger and heading south, has been designated a state historical highway, with bureaucrats asking local farmers how they can help them make this into a true organic, farm-to-table eco-region. Mack and Fern are all over this opportunity, sharing ideas, and going to the state capitol to talk to legislators. Within a year, new signs sprout on the highway for a hundred miles in either direction saying,

Organic Highway
Path to the Future

with a smaller sign below that says,

Free maps at the next tourist station

The only tourist station is ten miles from the ranch, making the ranch one of the quickest and easiest first stop in this new regional concept. The Lost and Found seems about to experience another small wave of prosperity.

Fern likes the idea from the beginning because it plays right into the direction that she has been steering the ranch toward. If anything is going to come of the new effort it will be because of the Lost and Found Ranch.

Unfortunately, the promotion doesn't go any farther than the signs. Few ranchers and farmers seize the opportunity and most just keep doing what they have been doing. The county extension agent has talked to each property owner and tried to get them to visualize a new direction, but only one or two give the idea any chance.

Chapter 43. Onward and Upward

It's the middle of the week, sitting at the breakfast table Fern turns to Mack as he puts a fork-full of food in his mouth.

"Hey, did you hear about that Nielander property to the east of ours?"

Chew, gulp, swallow. "Yeah, sure did. What about it?"

"I think we ought to check it out a bit closer. It just might make a good investment."

"What do you like about it?"

"It seems well irrigated, reasonably fertile, got good drainage and I've never noticed any parasite or insect to invade that area."

"Okay, when do you want to go see it?"

"I made arrangements for us to see it on Friday," came the rejoinder.

"Well, alright then. I guess we'll see it on Friday," he says, not at all surprised that Fern has already set up a visit.

The Nielander land is adjacent to their main section, a little on the uphill side but good land for virtually every crop suitable for this climate. It gets fairly wet in the rainy season, but it's drained by a stream that runs right down the middle, digging into a 3 foot to 4 foot "canyon" before exiting beneath the road.

Pipe has been laid from a stream diverter box to different sections of land. It's a DIY manual irrigation system but it works and it is a heck of a lot cheaper than one built by Lanyard Brothers, the irrigation company in Grainger. It makes the property marginally more valuable.

The land isn't valued any higher than if it didn't have an irrigation system, but the access to abundant water could help produce good crop yield. That belief has yet to prove itself out for the Nielanders, but it always sounded good. They kept at it until they were both convinced that they would not be able to turn the corner with the property. It wasn't a hard decision to sell. Like many of the farm families in the area, Ben and Magda Nielander are older. Their kids are grown and gone, Ben had knee surgery two years ago and is getting tired of trying to keep up a farm. Magda wants to find a small house in Grainger where they can retire and live comfortably.

A deal is struck. The new land includes a positive cashflow lease from a small producing gas well on the property. The lease is worth almost a quarter of the monthly mortgage payment, which could make it quick for the ranch team to make it a profitable producer. The team draws up

plans that should create a modest return on the land year over year, while paying down the note from Farmer's Bank for the land purchase.

One month after the purchase Fern calls a meeting with Mack.

"C'mon, Fern. You know you don't have to call a meeting. Just say what's on your mind after the hands have gone back to the bunkhouse, for gol' darned sake."

"Well, mister smarty Mack, I'd say we're at a crossroads. We're making some additional income with the new sections we've added and thanks to smart people working for us. It just seems we should tell them what we're doing and why."

"Uh, okay.

"I'll set up an all-hands-on-deck meeting. You think about it and then be there to present."

"You want me to tell them about the economics of incremental profit? How investing in new cash-positive opportunities helps a ranch keep people paid, provides money to buy more and better tools to make the work easier and harvests greater, and builds even more leverage to invest further. I'll do my best to say it well, but I honestly didn't understand it well myself until just a few years ago. And I swear on the grave of Cyrus, you were the one that taught me. So, why am I the one presenting?"

"Silly cowboy, more than half our people are men, so it makes sense that the top man of the ranch will be the one that they will listen to."

"Alright, dammit, but it feels like I'm getting roped into this, Fern."

"Get used to it, buster. Remember whose bed you're sleeping in. I didn't ride in on a truckload of turnips."

The all-hands meeting is positive. Mack explains the recent strategy of the ranch, which is to use some of their recent profits to invest in other opportunities, like adjacent sections of land, new crop mixtures, additional revenue sources that can come from the land and the products they have created.

Mack has Jamie give a short explanation of how land is being converted to produce greater yields with less fertilizer and no pesticides. The orchards, vineyards and produce fields will be expanded, she says, with new irrigation and pollinating strategies to improve watering efficiency and yields.

Fern describes future ideas for the roadside stand, the dairy operation, and distribution of the growing line of Lost and Found products. She describes the financial growth of the ranch, the

good relationship with the bank, and the strong and growing web of distributors and stores that are now buying a good share of the ranch output.

There are a few questions and two people stay around later to ask more. It is the best that Fern could hope for. The team got informed, they heard explanations for pursuing the opportunity, and some potential downsides, and everyone seems interested and supportive. The ranch has been constantly changing over the last number of years and is now ready to embark on more new directions. Given the history of expansion and profitability it will not take any time for the team to adjust.

Chapter 44. Time Flies

The ranch is flourishing in so many areas, all of them are growing, some more slowly than others. Mack continues to be the backbone of the working ranch, essentially the boss, and Fern is happy to be just an owner, visionary of the roadside stand business, and help manage from the second position. In truth, most of the good decisions are initially hers, and she takes charge of most of the day-to-day operations. She seems to enjoy the higher-level work, while Mack would be as content if he was the only ranch hand and didn't have to worry about so many people counting on him to tell them what to do.

The years roll by so quickly that neither Mack nor Fern could at any one minute tell you exactly how many years either one of them have been at the ranch.

Grainger has undergone a mini-boom in population thanks to its history and relaxed lifestyle. As the town grows, so does the market for the Lost and Found.

Every year on the weekend before Cyrus' birthday they have a sale, called the Cyrus Sale, a customer appreciation weekend. Everything in Fern's Organic roadside is discounted by 15% and each includes a small card explaining the legacy of Cyrus Hayford. Outside of new product introductions this is the only sale at the ranch.

Fern is good at financial management, paying down debt and setting the ranch up with a large credit utility at Farmers Bank. She maintains a solid debt-to-asset ratio and the ranch continues to be Sheldon's favorite customer. The Lost and Found has a clean record, managing to turn almost every loan into a money-making part of the enterprise.

Being financially healthy sets the ranch up for success through lean times, too. No period of time over thirty years in the nation's history has been without a recession. Both Mack and Fern have weathered several recessions, either together or before they met. It was a recession that almost took Cyrus and Fern's ranch down when beef prices dropped.

Weathering financial downturns has led the ranch to take a more conservative approach to their finances, boosting savings and keeping cash reserves for when an unwelcome recession cycle returns. This conservative approach provides money for even larger investments.

Andy and Alejandra are married and with two children they are both busy with their jobs and raising kids.

LT is the assistant ranch manager and does most of the work that Mack used to do. LT met a local lady at a dance in Grainger two years ago and after a whirlwind courtship they were married on the ranch.

Kaz is, well, Kaz. He knows all the animals by name except for the cattle, but of course he has his named favorites, even in the herd. All the animals sense his presence when he's nearby.

They raise their heads, turn his way, or walk to him and then just stand nearby. The cattle herd is ten times the size it was just five years ago. Milk cows now number 20 and Kaz hired and trained the dairyman and the dairy facility and process person, a 19-year-old aspiring veterinarian named Sheryl who broke it off with her boyfriend to come work at the Ranch.

The ranch is raising 40 Berkshire pigs and Andy makes sure their pen is substantial. There are 40 adult sheep and 14 lambs in the ranch flock. The chicken flock has grown exponentially, now numbering 1200 hens in three large sections of land, with a loud and obnoxious rooster in each section, all named Cyrus. The "ladies" dutifully provide 100 cartons of free range, cage-free eggs everyday which are sold at Fern's roadside stand, the Grainger IGA and another supermarket, all within a 200-mile radius. Once a week LT drives a box truck, now outfitted as a refrigerator truck, making the rounds delivering orders, resupplying the markets.

Kaz and Sheryl have taken the ranch menagerie through a scare with rabies, contracted by two lambs that were bit by a diseased bat. Several cattle contracted IBR (Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis) and had to be put down before they infected the entire herd. Chickens were constantly having problems with parasites or disease until Kaz redesigned their area to be cage-free, giving them freedom to roam a large area and eat the plants and small insects that thrive in the region.

The enlarged Cider Tasting Room is now part of Fern's new, expanded roadside stand, with the older building being used for expanded production of the variety of ciders the Ranch now sells. Apple pomace from the cider pressing process is shoveled into plastic bins outside a side door and then used to feed cattle and hogs.

The production building is also used to ferment and bottle mead, a new, wine-like drink made from the ranch's honeys. Elandeff Orchards ciders and mead are now distributed nationally, having garnered awards in several competitions. The ranch has become one of the region's top buyers of apples. Some cider is bottled under contract by a large bottler with deep distribution connections and a brewer on the east coast operates under license to supply the popular products to eastern markets.

The original Fern's Organic Fruit & Veggies at the ranch is an anchor, now offering great food and beverages for lunch daily, in addition to all of the produce, infused cheeses and other dairy products. Maria has created menus that are simply delightful and popular. On weekends, when many families visit, the picnic grounds and shelters that Andy and the construction team built provide tented picnic tables where guests who buy food at Fern's can sit outside to eat. In the summertime, the shelters have drop-down bug screens on all sides and spray misters for hot days.

Alejandra's Bakery has its own end cap in the ranch store, with freshly wrapped loaves of fragrant bread stacked four shelves high. New pastries have also been added to the bakery, including stuffed breakfast croissants, blueberry muffins and scones, cinnamon twists, banana

nut bread and in the fall, pumpkin bread. Powdered sugar-sprinkled zucchini bread has its own separate table.

Fern and Mack run the ranch like parents in a family. They often display affection for each other in front of ranch workers. It's been well-known for many years that they are more than partners. Every time they're together in public, people who don't know, guess that they are married. They often sit on the porch of the ranch house at night, talking and drinking lemonade under bug lights, oblivious of the hum of activity still going on in the enterprise that surrounds them. Much of their talk revolves around marveling at the success of the Lost and Found. Often, they talk about other ideas for the ranch, or they weigh the pros and cons of the many suggestions discussed by their "brain trust" team.

It's a dream that no one could have had.

Chapter 45. The Letter

Mack goes to the doctor so infrequently that when he finally goes three times in one month it could have drawn someone's attention even in the busy Ranch, except Mack never says where he is going so no one knows.

Late the next month, Mack rolls his bedroll on the bars of his newer Harley. He has taught the ranch hands well, LT is mostly running things anyway, and he has settled out every account.

He walks into Fern's office to tell her he is leaving.

Fern sits in stunned silence and then tries to talk him out of it. She cries. They have put in 20 years of investment together and with the wonderful success of the Lost and Found it doesn't make sense to walk away from it and their love for each other. She argues with logic but also appeals to him on emotional levels.

Mack answers that life has beginnings and ends, and all things must come to an end. He has to go when it's time to go.

He rides off, Fern crying and yelling, screaming at him as he leaves.

Three months later, Fern receives a letter from Mack.

"When you get this, I will already be gone from this life. The doctors told me that I didn't have much time left and I didn't want you to have to see me that way when it got bad. When I first came to your ranch I was lost. Cyrus and you welcomed me and gave me a home and a purpose at a low time in my life. What you did for me saved my life. I have spent the last 20 years paying you back. Along the way I found out how special you are, and I couldn't help but fall in love with you. The years since that realization have been the happiest of my life. The day the doctor gave me the news that I was done for was the day I wrapped my bedroll on the handlebars and rode off. I have loved you these 20 years and I would never hurt you. This was my way. I will love you until my last breath, and I hope for your life that you find someone that you truly deserve, one that will give you the life you always wanted."

"I did, Mack. It was you," Fern whispers to no one.

# # #

"All who are lost are not found. All who are found are not lost."

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