

Glen Chamberlain

# ALL I WANT IS WHAT YOU'VE GOT

an excerpt from her new collection

photo by Barbara Michelman

## Her Funny Valentine

Cash Gunn was born in Pocket, Montana, at the tail end of the Depression, and he never got out of it. It wasn't that he didn't try: when he was 18, he was going to go to college, but the Korean War came along. When he survived, all he wanted was something familiar, so he returned to Pocket and married Agnes.

He'd grown up with her and never would have considered marrying her before he went off to war, as he knew her so well it would have been like hooking up with his sister. But after 18 months of fighting slant-eyed men and, when he had the chance, of sleeping with their slant-eyed women, none of whom he could understand, the thought of curling up next to Agnes with her big round blue eyes and her straightforward talk sounded mighty appealing.

Once he had Agnes, he had to figure out how to make a living for the two of them. First he tried rodeo. He'd grown up working with horses, gentling them in a way so they liked rather than feared humans, and he figured maybe he could take everything he learned to the rough stock in the rodeo. He imagined himself like Casey Tibbs, on the cover of *Life* magazine: "Cash Gunn, Bronc Rider." For a year he did that, and he was damn good, riding those arm jerkers, staying on when they'd ball out of the chute on their hind legs and then commence to buck and sunfish. Sometimes he'd float, just to get the crowds excited, letting it look like he was going to be bucked off at every jump but still raking his spurs on the shoulders to get the points, and then at the end of the eight seconds, when the pickup men were next to him, they'd have to wait while he fanned his hat. The crowds thought he was saluting them, and they'd cheer like hell, but the judges and the stock contractors understood what he was telling them: this horse was too easy. By summer, he had a growing purse, and he would send most of it home to Agnes who was pregnant with Chance, keeping just a little money out for food and transportation, and a little more for the gambling that went on behind the chutes while the cowboys waited their rides.

He liked rodeo because it provided the best of both worlds to him. He had the freedom that came with being on the road, but when he headed home, Agnes was there waiting all doe-eyed for him, and there was a baby on the way, a little critter who would be born all innocent and erase what he'd seen in Korea.

What he learned on July 23 of 1954 was that he'd grown cocky. Perhaps because he'd survived Korea, he thought he was invincible. In such a way, he was still green to the world. It was a rank horse at the Cheyenne Frontier Days that broke him. It came out of the chutes doing nothing but frog walking, and Cash was thinking how he'd be offered a re-ride when the horse started to spin. Cash got into the well and couldn't regain his balance and dumped off the side, pulling that bronc down on top of him. When Agnes was in St. James Hospital in Butte giving birth to Chance, he came to visit in a wheelchair, nursing a broken hip and kneecap, his rodeo career ended.

After that, he still rode, but it was just for pleasure. He felt his best on a horse because his right leg always hurt him when he walked, and because of the way it healed, it bowed so far out that it was shorter than his left. He always thought that if he didn't give walking some thought, he'd go in circles like the grasshoppers he'd pull one leg off of when he was a kid. But on a horse, on a horse the new angles of his leg felt comfortable, and the motion of the horse soothed his achy joints, and he would regain the confidence he'd lost.

ALL I  
WANT IS  
WHAT  
YOU'VE  
GOT (stories)

GLEN CHAMBERLAIN

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Confidence didn't put food on the table, though, and didn't afford him the money to buy horses and train them. So he'd learned how to operate big machinery—diggers and graders and excavators. Like his horses, his machines were well trained. Because of a naturally good eye that had been honed in Korea, and because of the hands he'd gentled to train horses, if asked to, he could pick a pebble up in the jaws of an excavator. Following the heavy construction jobs was not that different from following the rodeo circuit. The winters took him to Arizona and Utah and Texas and California, and the summers to Idaho and Wyoming and Washington and Montana, and he would send money to Agnes and be home on and off through the summers, when he would get her pregnant, and the children and the years came and went and came and went, and life patterned itself as uniformly as a hummingbird's wing, and, unacknowledged by them all, beat just as quickly. One day, just like that, Agnes was dead of uterine cancer, and he was an old man.

Chance and Baylee and Dallas and Kaycee had kids of their own, so that on any given day, when he was horseback—for he still rode and the motion still eased him—he could look at those kids and imagine being any one of them, and, depending on the grandkid's age, he was a twenty-five year old, or a thirty-year old, or a forty-year old, and life still spread out before him like a bright checkered cloth on a picnic table. And then he was off his horse, on the ground again, the ground that never lets you forget anything—all he had to do was go to the graveyard to know that—and his leg ached, along with his back which he'd broken when he got tossed out the cab of a backhoe on a steep hill, and a grandkid would pull the saddle for him and he would curry his horse and put it away and just stand and admire it, then hobble to his truck with the license plate that had a wheelchair on it, reminding him that on top of being old, he was crippled.

On a day in June, in the midst of a monsoon spring, Cash took a break from his dish television with the three hundred channels, most of which he ignored except those carrying rodeo. He drove the truck with the crippled license plate up Falls Creek, as flooding was predicted, and his yard backed up to its banks. He had travelled the road about a mile when he saw a lady he didn't recognize running down it. That he didn't recognize her was no surprise. A decade before, some newcomers—lesbians, the town whispered, but Cash didn't care; people, even Koreans, he'd come to understand, were just people, trying to get by in a world of half truths—had started an artists' refuge, and people from all over the world came to have their art fed by the landscape that he'd never figured out how to eat and digest. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate its beauty; it's just that he'd spent his whole life trying to balance living in Pocket against making a living in Pocket. No matter which side won, the scale always tipped toward poverty.

That the woman was running didn't surprise him, either. In some way foreign to him, these people fed by the landscape were energized, and they ran or rode bikes along the dirt roads that spoked out of Pocket and into the drainages of the mountains surrounding the town. Just the other day when he was riding Lark, both the gelding and Cash had been spooked by a couple of the colonists whizzing down a forest service trail, the bike's tires thick as those on a motorcycle.

What surprised Cash about the woman was that she looked older than most of the artists who came to stay. He couldn't say why, as she was running in her long underwear—tights, his grandkids called them—and her top was tight, too, showing breasts that seemed firm, and high up, like a young woman's. But there was a stiffness to her run, a resistance in her gait like he'd seen in older horses, that belied youth. She ran a little like his body felt. As she drew closer, he saw that she had long tangly gray hair that streamed out behind her, and when she was almost even with him, that her skin was weathered. She waved, and it reminded him of himself, when he used to fan his hat, as if she was telling him that this mountain road was too easy for her, and then she flashed a smile like a meteor at him. And that was it. She was by the truck, probably running faster than he was driving. If he hadn't been so stiff, he would have craned his neck around to watch her. Instead, he drove even slower and watched her retreating butt in his side mirror.

Something about her made Cash happy, and that evening, as he peeled and quartered and chopped his potatoes and put them on to boil and shaped his hamburger into a patty and whacked his head lettuce on the counter to core it and then cut a quarter off and doused it in ranch dressing and popped the top of his beer can and sat down to watch bull riding on ESPN, he whistled.

Two days later, he saw her again, up Ubet Creek. She wasn't running, and she was dressed in normal clothes. He slowed and headed the truck right toward her.

She stopped, looking startled and vulnerable, like a deer that's found itself in the headlights of an oncoming car. If her hair had been pulled back so he could see her ears, and if her ears were like a deer's, Cash bet they would have been alert and slanted back, scared. It made him feel more powerful than he'd felt in quite a while, that he—or his truck, despite the crippled tags—could scare someone. But it also made him feel sorry, so when he pulled up beside her he had already put the passenger window down. "You up looking at the water?"

The woman looked confused for a moment then caught on—everyone was watching for flooding. "No. No. I was looking at the cemetery."

"Nicest people in town live there," Cash told her.

But for a slight smile, the woman did not respond.

He thought of breaking the ice by introducing himself as Kidd Quartermoon, named after his ancestor whose colorful tombstone no doubt caught her eye. Or he could say he was a Connick whose three stones told the story of the family: migrating from a coal mine in Wales to a gold mine in Pocket, where the brothers still could not make a living but died trying. Each stone's endnote read, "Died In Mine, 1902." Or perhaps her heart had broken when she saw the obelisk off by itself; on each of its four sides was chiseled "Baby," along with a particular day in a particular month in a particular year. The years were sequential. Cash could say he was related to the baby that got away, the only one that outran death and hid in the branch of a tree as death sniffed the ground below, looking to gobble him up, too. Oh, he could make up something dramatic, but instead, he asked, "You see Agnes Gunn up there, 1935-2006?"

She shook her head.

"That's my wife."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's what happens to us all."

She had a striped boat-necked top on that accentuated both her thinness and her broad shoulders. Where the tops of her shoulders were exposed, she had freckles, like a kid would. Her hair was thick and defiant in its unruliness and its grayness, and Cash thought about all the women around Pocket, how they wore their short permed hair in either purple or pink shades, thinking the style made them look younger. Agnes had worn her hair that way the last twenty-five years of her life. Hell, even when she went bald from the chemo, she had a wig made that looked exactly the same. She'd asked him if it looked fake, and he answered no, and though she seemed pleased, it wasn't a compliment.

"I'm going to look at the water. Want to ride along?"

The woman glanced up and down the road, as if she was looking for witnesses. She should see there was nothing to be afraid of; he had the goddamned tags with the wheelchair on them and he looked like Jack Crabbe at the end of *Little Big Man*. He looked 110-years-old. He smiled. "Well?"

"Sure."

She opened the door as he cleaned the seat, throwing his spurs on the floor, sticking his camera in his shirt pocket, hanging his straw hat on the rifle rack in the back window, pushing the gun in its holster down farther between the seat and the console so only its handle showed, hoping she didn't see it. Her legs slid in, sheathed in jeans that fit her as tightly as his granddaughters' did them, and he made a hollow whistling sound that she would probably take as the unhealthy breathing of an old man.

"What's the gun for?" she asked, pulling the door shut.

Cash cursed his awkward tucking which probably made him look threatening. After all, she no doubt read papers and saw articles about crippled old men who still had enough strength in their fingers to pull triggers. Hell, he'd thought a few times about putting Agnes out of her misery. He'd done it for every other being he'd ever loved; why not for her?

"Gophers." He changed the subject. "You a refugee?"

“Yes.”

“You a painter?”

“No. A writer.”

She stuck out her hand, and Cash saw that her fingers were long and thoughtful.

“I’m Marin.”

He liked her voice. It was a little high-pitched. Given her stature, for she was a tall drink of water, he thought it would be a voice deep and full of authority, but, instead, there was a youthful, open quality to it, as if life hadn’t tired her out yet. “Cash. I’m Cash.”

“What a wonderful name,” she said. “Tell me your story. So as they drove along, he did; he talked about the time he was miles from home and his horse piled him and he walked to Bert Russell’s place and got some Mexican laces to fix the stirrup and when Ray Carson was drunk and called him up and told him the steer Cash had bought to fatten and butcher had busted through his fence and Ray told the steer he had till two o’clock to get out, and if he didn’t, he’d pay for it and when the steer hadn’t left by two Ray shot it in the head, and the time Agnes scolded him like he was a goddamned dog, so he hopped on one of his horses and headed for the mountains, and with each mile he felt more like a man but the problem was he hadn’t brought any grub or gun or coat or bedroll, so by the third day he was so hungry and cold that he came home with his tail between his legs, just like the dog he’d been when he left.

When he hoped she would, she laughed, and he liked how she put her hand to her throat and tipped her head back. She had a bit of the turkey wattle to her neck, but tipped back like that it disappeared, and she looked just like a girl and he felt just like a boy.

At a few places, Ubet had jumped the bank, and at one of its bridges, a log had jammed and snagged branches as they washed down so that the water backed up and now licked the bridge. “Get a picture of that, will you?” Cash asked and handed her the camera. He marveled at the ease with which she lit from the truck, and he watched with pleasure how when she bent all her joints still seemed well greased, and when her shirt pulled out he could see a swatch of bare skin between that and her pants top. He doubted if Marin had any kids. If she did, she should look like Agnes had by forty—so stretched and pulled around the belly that she took to wearing pants with elastic waistbands and shirts that hung over the top. He thought of asking her if she had kids or if she was married, but he didn’t because he didn’t want to know.

They drove down Ubet and up Falls and down Falls and then up the Pocket Valley to see what the river was doing. Three hours later, when they returned to town, people were out sandbagging, and Cash drove slow with his window down, stopping and chatting with everyone whose attention he could get about the rising water. They talked with him while they looked at her, and Cash felt good. “That’ll set them to gossiping,” he told Marin when he stopped the truck in front of the Refuge. “I don’t know if you mind, but I sure don’t.”

“Not at all,” she laughed as she got out. “Thanks for the grand tour. I was just expecting a ride up Ubet.”

“You bet,” he said, putting his hand to his hat and tipping it.

Two days later, he was at the Silver Bullet Bar, about to roll dice with Tammy to see if he could get his beer for free when Marin came in with a man.

“Hey, Cash,” she said, and her voice sounded glad to see him. “This is Sean. Sean’s a writer at the Refuge, as well—from Maryland. Cash shook the man’s spongy hand. He was pockmarked and balding and heavy, and he talked a little too eagerly to Cash, like he wanted to fit in, but at the same time there was something patronizing about him. Marin had taken a stool and sat smiling at the conversation that meant nothing to either man. When Cash lost his roll to her, Tammy wandered over to take their orders, so Cash had nothing to do but sit and watch and listen. The man—Cash had already forgotten his name—asked Marin something about post modernism and she said she’d always wanted to teach a post modernist class, where the students never wrote anything but just imagined papers, and since that which didn’t exist was always better than that which did, she would give them all A’s and they would give her excellent evaluations. Cash didn’t know what she was talking about, but the man laughed. Then she ordered a gin martini on the rocks with olives.

Cash had never had a martini. Through the years, when he wanted to get drunk, he’d buy a bottle of whiskey and drink it neat out in the barn with the horses. That’s when he fought with Agnes the most. Otherwise, he’d drink beer wherever he wanted, and that’s when he fought with Agnes the second-most. Twenty minutes later, the man left, and Marin, who looked relieved, took his vacated stool next to Cash. She sipped her drink and he asked her about her running. She told him how it allowed her to get farther into the mountains and explore.

He suggested she should ride a horse because then she wouldn’t have to watch the ground and she could actually see the treetops and the wildlife and the sky and the wind and the birds. He invited her to go riding, but she declined, saying she was scared of horses, that she wouldn’t enjoy it a bit, and, besides, along with the yoga and exercises she did in the morning, running helped keep her in shape.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” he said, “how old are you?”

“Sixty,” she answered, sipping the last of her martini and eating her olives. Cash was pleased. He thought she was at most fifty and that the spread between him and her was too much. But seventeen years? He could imagine it. He offered to buy her a second drink.

She checked her watch. “Uh oh,” she answered. “It’s quarter to six. I want to get a little more work done before I fix my meal. I try to stay on a schedule, eating about seven then going out for a walk afterward to clear my head so I’ll sleep well. I’ll take a rain check, though.”

“Well, if you’re not having anymore, then I’m not,” he answered and walked out with her. It was raining a little. “Can I give you a ride home?”

Marin laughed. I’m only a block from the Refuge. I think I can make it.”

“But water’ll melt you,” he flirted. “You’re all sugar.”

“Oh, there’s quite a bit of vinegar, as well.”

“Well, then, you can’t catch on fire, neither.”

She wished him good night and stuck out her hand.

“You’re a good person,” he told her, holding it in his and covering it with the other, which looked to him like an old bear’s clumsy paw.

“Why, thank you.” She said it seriously. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s told me in a long time.”

He stood on the sidewalk, watching her stride down it in her tight jeans, till she turned at the Refuge and disappeared. He thought of home, of the silence and the television rodeo that could usually overwhelm it, and he thought of another beer, and he returned to the bar.

For the next three days, Cash drove up and down Falls and Ubet creeks, and when he didn’t see her, he drove up the valley along the river, but there was no sign of her. For the next three nights, he went to the Silver Bullet, arriving at a little after five because that’s when she came in the one time and drinking more beer than he should as he waited till 7:30, when he figured she’d be done with her dinner. Then he’d drive up and down Falls and Ubet again because she said that’s about when she went for walks. When on the third night he had again failed to spot her, he pulled into his driveway at eight. He got out of his truck and just stood, wobbling a little and staring at his house. He’d drunk four beers at the bar. As he was finishing his third, losing every roll of the dice and paying for them all, he thought how if Agnes were alive, she’d berate him, and he wished there was someone at home who loved him enough to get mad at him. So he ordered a fourth beer and a hamburger from the café to go with it. Now here he stood, wondering what to do. The four beers had depressed him, and because he’d already eaten, he didn’t have to cook, so he couldn’t distract himself with the business of feeding himself. With summer solstice approaching, it wouldn’t be dark until ten, and he couldn’t sleep when it was light out, so

what was he supposed to do? How could rodeo could a man onto? Until Marin had come, he thought a lot.

He scratched his chin for a minute and then turned and climbed back in his truck, heading up the valley toward Kaycee's, where he kept his four horses in with hers. As he pulled up the lane, he looked for their cars. Kaycee and Chet were at least gone. He watched to see if the front door sprang open and any of their kids came out. There was no activity. It meant there was no one to carry the saddle to Lark and lift it up. That he could get on or off his favorite horse was not an issue. Tyrell, who had inherited his grandfather's understanding of horses, had for Cash's birthday present taught Lark to fold onto his knees and wait as Cash slowly lifted his bad leg over the saddle. When he was settled in the seat, all Cash had to do is say "up" and Lark would unfold. Cash would slip his boots into the stirrups, and off they would go. Then when he was done riding, he'd say "down" and Lark would fold onto the ground and wait for Cash to dismount. Many old people lost their independence and their dignity when their cars were taken away from them, and Cash was grateful that he could still drive. But he was more grateful that he could still ride. It was just lifting that damn saddle that wrecked his freedom.

He walked through the barn and into the corral whose gate was open. All eight horses were still out in the pasture, eating just a little more before darkness fell on them and of their own accord they wandered into the corral and the protection from the night. When it came to their needs and their fears, they really weren't that different from humans. Cash whistled, and eight heads came up at the same time, as if they were all attached to one organism. When they saw him, the little herd began to shamble toward him, their heads relaxed and low. It was not out of devotion to him, Cash knew, that they came, but of promise. He always had sugar cubes in his pockets, and better mannered than most people, the horses would crowd around him but wait their turns as he shifted from animal to animal, two cubes resting flat in his hand. The velvet lips with the stiff whiskers rippled over his palm, searching by touch, and then they curled around the two cubes and gently lifted them. He always made Lark wait till the last, and for him there would be three cubes.

As the gelding crunched them, Cash would rub his ears. "Look," Cash said to Lark. "I got one extra cube. You get four tonight." The horse moaned in pleasure as Cash rubbed the inside of his ears with his knuckles and dropped his heavy head against Cash's chest; Lark smelled of everything that through all his long life had calmed Cash: grass and dust and sweat. The simple push of the horse's head against his chest made him realize how lonely his heart had grown.

Once the night was dark and Cash could go to bed, he didn't sleep. A practical man—his life had forced him to be—he was hatching a plan.

By seven in the morning, he had eaten and was in his shed, stiffly digging around for two scraps of two-by-four, neither more than a foot in length. When he found them, he set them aside and turned to the rows of mason jars that held horseshoe and roofing and ten penny nails, hinges and pins and carriage bolts and nuts and screws and fencing staples. Any old piece of metal that might get a second life had over the past fifty years been thrown into one of these.

He was determined, though, and he approached the first, sticking in two swollen fingers that wiggled and shifted the rusty contents like worms blindly shifting dirt. He moved from jar to jar and finally finding one that looked promising, he took it and dumped the contents onto the workbench and pushed them around until a big screw eye floated to the top like a phrase on the kids' old Super Eight Ball. "You can rely on it," Cash remembered one saying, and he smiled because he was feeling pretty damn self-reliant. At eight he was sitting in his truck in front of Lockwood-Ace Hardware, waiting for Howard Toole to unlock the doors. "You're late," he told Howard when he finally got in at ten minutes past the hour, and knowing just what he wanted, Cash went to the aisles he'd perused for more than seventy years. When he left, he had eighty feet of inch-thick nylon rope, two straight gate carabiners, two pulleys, and a boat hook.

By nine Tyrell had finally eaten his breakfast and was in the barn with his grandfather. The extension ladder was stretched almost as far as it would go, and it leaned against the center beam of the barn. Ty's head was even with the beam, and he was screwing the second board with one of the pulleys straight into the beam. The other, also with a pulley, was already in place. In between, the nylon rope dangled from the big screw eye. While Ty worked high, Cash worked low, screwing the boat hook into one of the beam posts. He'd also cut off three feet of the rope and to either end used a double half hitch to secure the carabiners. Now he stood with his head turned up as far as his stiff spine would let him, as Tyrell ran the rope through the pulleys.

When Tyrell climbed down, Cash bade the boy to go get his saddle. Once he'd knotted the latigo strings together on either side of the back housing, Cash opened the gates of the carabiners and dropped the loops of latigo strings in. To the middle of the rope that the carabiners were attached to, he knotted an end of the rope that ran through one of the pulleys. He tied the end of the other pulley rope to the saddle horn. The remaining ends ran through the screw eye and dangled in front of him. After knotting those together, Cash pulled, and the saddle swung off the floor of the barn like some magician had just levitated it. When it was floating at about eight feet, Cash looped the two ropes around the boat hook and then went and got Lark out of the corral. Once he had him positioned, Cash neatly placed the saddle blanket and then carefully lowered the saddle onto the gelding's back. The door to the world, which had been closing, again opened a little. He looked at his grandson, a smile of gratitude on his face. "Thanks, Ty."

Cash went to Kaycee's every night to ride Lark. As he expected, the first night everyone came down to the barn to watch him saddle the horse with his pulley system. By the second night, only a few of the kids came. The third night he was down to one, and by the fourth, he was alone. And that was what he wanted.

The fifth night was almost the full moon, and at nine, he was out the gate with Lark, headed toward Pocket. It would take him a little over a half an hour to get there, just as the sky started to think it was tired and should wink out for the night. He didn't know which apartment Marin was in, but she, along with every other refugee, would be turning her lights on. Cash figured it would still be too light to close her curtains, though, so he could spot her through a window to figure out which apartment was hers.

He rode Lark down the alley where the back of the compound was, and though he was nervous, the steady clop of the gelding's iron shoes on the gravel and the slight hiss as the stone shifted under the horse's weight was so familiar that it calmed him. When he got to the back of the Refuge, he found a fence post he could tie Lark to. "Down," he said, and Lark folded to the ground for him, and he dismounted. "Up," he said, and Lark stood, and he hitched him to the post. "You're a good boy, Lark," Cash told him, and he put three cubes of sugar in his palm. As the horse snuffled them, Cash rubbed between the gelding's eyes with his thumb. The horse sighed contentedly as Cash assayed the center court of the colony.

Earlier, he'd gone through his closet and picked out one of his better cowboy shirts, one that hadn't yet pulled apart at any of the seams. Then he'd washed it, along with a load of undershirts, and thrown in one of those fabric softener sheets Agnes used to use. It assured him that he wouldn't smell like an old man to Marin. He'd smell like Bounce.

He entered the walkway, glancing left and right in the windows. Some lights were out; the inhabitants were gone. What if Marin was gone? His heart thumped anxiously. He didn't see her.

But when he stepped out the front gate and looked both ways, there she was, coming toward him, her head down. When she looked up and saw him, she smiled.

"Hello, Cash. Long time no see."

He didn't tell her that he'd looked for her for three days and then spent four hatching a plan to woo her. "I've been mighty busy," was all he said.

She had her tight jeans and a white shirt on, exposing a vee of her chest. In the hollow of her neck, the pulse of her beat slow and steady. He watched that and then he noticed that through the cotton of her shirt he could see pink polka dots on her brassiere, and that her breasts were small, like a young girl's. By the time Agnes was sixty, hers were covered in stretch marks and they hung like a cow's udder almost down to her navel. At night, when she removed her bra, her shoulders had dig marks in them from the straps trying to hold everything up. Oh, he loved Agnes, she'd been a good wife to him, he didn't want to be disloyal, but she'd left him, and he was so lonely. And Marin. Marin. "I want to show you something," he said, and he reentered the courtyard and walked through it with Marin right behind him.

When they got to the alley, Lark rumbled a greeting.

"Oh, my," Marin said. "A horse."

“Not just any horse. This is Lark.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“I rode him into town so I could take you for a ride. You’ll see how much nicer it is atop a horse than scooting along the earth with your nose to the ground like you’re some kind of mole.”

Marin laughed. “You’re going to lead me on him, like you would a kid on a pony?”

“Hell, no. I’m no mole.” He’d untied the reins from the fencepost. “Watch this.” He turned to Lark. “Down,” and the horse folded.

“That’s amazing!”

Pleased at her response, Cash swung his leg over, trying hard not to be awkward, and scooted as far up as he could on the seat, his crotch pressed against the horn. Then he offered his hand to Marin. “Jump on behind me.”

“Isn’t that a lot of weight for a horse?”

“Hell, you don’t weigh no more than a hummingbird,” he told her. “Lark won’t even know there’s another person onboard. Just swing your leg over and settle in behind me. Get your butt,” and he hoped he wasn’t being too personal, “tucked in front of the cantle.”

“What’s that?”

“The back of the seat.”

Giggling, Marin did as she was told, and he felt her body pressed against his, the points of her breasts against his shoulder blades. “You ready?”

“I guess.”

Her voice trembled with fear or excitement or cold, he didn’t know, but whatever it was, it made Cash’s heart sing. “Up,” he said, and Lark rose.

Marin gasped “Oh, oh!” as he reined Lark around and they left the alley the same way they’d come in.

When they got to the edge of town, the moon was just coming up over the summit, and low on the horizon like that, it was bloodshot and puffy.

“I’d say the moon’s been out drinking all day,” Cash said. But as it rose, it sobered up and did its work, lighting the way through the sagebrush, for Cash had left the road.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Marin asked.

“Sure do,” he answered.

He had Lark carry them along the river that in the moonlight looked as viscous as mercury and rolled as slowly by. As they ambled along, bats darted overhead like all the things Cash wanted to tell Marin, and the birds, disturbed from their sleep by the passage of the horse and the man’s voice, tweeted and peeped and chirruped and chirred.

Finally Marin interrupted Cash. “I think I’m going to split in two if we go much farther. And my feet are asleep.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” While he talked on and on, Cash had forgotten that Marin’s legs had been dangling while his were supported by the stirrups. He turned Lark around, and they kept pace with the current of the river as they rode to Pocket.

When they were back in the alley behind the Refuge, “Down,” Cash ordered, and Lark again folded to the earth.

“I don’t think I can move,” Marin laughed.

As she struggled to dismount, she pressed her hand into Cash’s shoulder, and it was cold and Cash imagined all of her being goose bumped and her nipples underneath that pink polka dot bra, and he felt alive. “I can barely move,” she laughed, and he laughed, too, and he felt even more alive. When she was clear, Cash dismounted, and “Up” he said, and Lark stood.

“He is just . . . just wonderful,” Marin said, patting the gelding’s neck and running her long, beautiful fingers through his mane.

“I’ll walk you to your door,” he said. “You’re unsteady.” Plus he would get to see which apartment she was in.

“Thank you.”

He watched as she walked with spraddled legs in front of him, rubbing her tight butt with both hands and groaning.

“It’s here,” she said. And she opened the door.

She turned, and Cash hoped she would invite him in.

“This has been the highlight of my stay,” she told him. Leaning over, she gave him a kiss on his cheek. “Maybe a story will come out of this.” She stepped through the threshold. “Good night, Cash.” And she shut the door.

Though a little disappointed, Cash was all right. Hell, he was better than all right, and he stood in front of that closed door enjoying the fact that she was on the other side of it.

When he got back to Lark, he told him, “You poor old horse. All you’ve done all night is get down and up. Let’s do them both a few more times. Down.” The horse folded, Cash climbed on and once off the pavement, gave him his head for Kaycee’s. When he got there, all the lights were out.

He thought of everyone asleep while he was sneaking around like a teenager.

Once he got Lark positioned in the barn under his pulleys, he lifted the saddle and then led the gelding into the corral where the others horses were. They rumbled their greetings and went back to snoozing while by moonlight Cash brushed him. “Thanks,” he quietly told Lark.

The next day, Cash was tired; he hadn’t been up past midnight since Agnes died, so he went driving the creeks looking for Marin. Up Ubet, when he came around a bend, there she was, walking upstream. He pulled over next to her and stopped. “Not running today?”

“Oh, no.” She rubbed the inside of her jeans. “My legs are too sore.”

“Want a ride?”

“No thanks, Cash. I need to stretch everything out.”

“I’ll buy you a martini tonight. That’ll loosen up those legs.”

“It probably would, but I’m driving over to Missoula.” She smiled. “What is it called for prisoners when they get company? A conjugal visit? That’s what I’m getting. My husband’s flying in.”

Cash smiled and tipped his hat. “Well, you drive careful. That’ll be a real nice break for you.”

That night when he pulled in at Kaycee’s, as usual, no one came out. The lights were on, and he imagined them all in there together amidst an awful racket as the kids fought over video games and t.v. channels and Kaycee jockeyed dishes around. He could go in, they were used to him dropping by, but he didn’t.

Instead, he whistled for the horses, and they straggled in. He gave each of them their allotted sugar cubes and then walked through the dark barn, under the floating saddle and into the moonlight. Cash turned his head as far as he could in either direction. Rather than illuminating, the moon seemed to shroud everything. He switched his weight to his

good leg and stumbled a little as he headed to his truck, thinking how much he ached all over. He'd been doing too much. He wasn't a young man anymore. It was time to go home and go to sleep.