

S . L . M I L L E R

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## Keeping Watch

**K**eeping watch. It always sounded so interesting in old stories. Like swords, like valor and armor. Not just sitting out in the cab of the old pickup truck on a dark March night so cold that Katie could scarce believe anything would be fool enough to venture out. Even if it was lambing season, though she knew that the smell of blood on newborn lambs would be almost a signed and sealed invitation to anything with a mouthful of teeth and a belly empty of food.

So. She and Daddy kept watch with no armor, with no swords. With only night noise and thoughts for company, because of course, as Daddy always said, “If your mouth is hangin’ open, your eyes and ears’re closed.”

Daddy was in the driver’s seat with his gun sitting across his knees, the metal thermos of hot tea between them. Katie had a little rifle poking through the open passenger side window. Though she could not see the black of the barrel, she could feel the smooth oiled wood of its stock, she could feel the carving in the handle, RH. She traced the initials. Robert Hirte.

“Drink up some of this here tea, Katie. It’ll keep you awake.” Daddy’s voice was heavy. It had been a long night already, and was not but halfway done. The brisk spring air chilled her awake. Anything to keep from thinking of warm beds going empty.

“Yessir.” She unscrewed the lid, careful not to spill it. The truck’s seats were old, but Daddy took care of what he had, no matter how old it was, no matter if it were the rifles he had carefully cleaned and oiled or his truck’s threadbare seats.

Katie poured the tea into the plastic cup that attached to the lid. The tea was strong, grainy with sugar, and still warm, but only just. She had burnt her tongue earlier in the night when the tea was just-brewed and still scalding, and the pain of the burn was still fresh. More even than that tea, that raw edge of the burn helped to keep her awake. She poured a cup for Daddy and held it out to him. He took it from her carefully, only turning his eyes to the cup when she again raised her eyes to the herd.

Forty sheep bunched in a small defensive clump in the corner of the low pasture, back where the fence met up with the McDermitt place. Daddy had the lights off, but Katie's eyes had adjusted as the light of day had gone from the sky, leaving only a slice of moon against the stars. It wasn't snowing, and that was blessing enough. It had been too much to hope that them fool ewes would finish up birthing before dark. Now that the winter was mostly over, and the snows were fading, they needed to pasture the animals, not to feed them more hay, which cost nearly twice what it did before the dry spell last winter.

It was Katie's first watch at the spring lambing. Sure, she had been target shooting enough with Daddy, and her brother Robert too, before he had gone. She knew how to handle Robert's little .22 well enough, all a kid should be given just yet, Daddy had said. Momma hadn't quite pitched a fit about Katie going this year, though something in her voice had told Katie to get her extra coat and her hat, and, *yes, young lady, you do have to bring gloves*; something flinty and cautionary visible in her blue eyes as she had handed them the tea. The words—she's only twelve—seemed behind every move, every reminder.

But of course, Robert wouldn't be here to watch this year, and Daddy needed all the help he could get.

There wasn't much work now. Hadn't been for quite some time. The ranch didn't make enough to cover costs most years—even she, the baby of the family, had known that. Momma and Daddy both worked most of the time for other people, and worked the ranch every other spare minute. Most people outside of town worked like that—the McDermitts, the Clancys, everybody up and down the road all the ten miles to the town limits of Meeker. Of course they didn't raise livestock in town. But out here, well, it was what everybody did. Looking tired like Daddy did now—and Katie knew there were purple smudges under his eyes even though she couldn't see them—well, that was a matter of course.

Now Katie was big enough to shoulder some more of the load. Oh sure, she had done chores since she could walk—weeding, watering, cleaning, that sort of thing. But watch was something that you did when you were nearly grown. Robert

had started when he was twelve, too. It was something you did when you could be trusted not to shoot a sheep, instead of hitting whatever had crept out of the forest at the river's edge to see what pickings could be got off the ranchers. It was something you did when you could be trusted not to fall asleep when you were the only eyes, to take a fair turn at watch. It was spring break now, but if the lambing lasted long enough, Katie knew that Daddy would ask an agricultural leave for her from school next week, like any other of the country kids.

He needed her now. Momma needed her now—it wasn't like she could sit up watch with a day job waiting tables and nights minding...well, minding her brother through his bad times.

And, well, the sheep needed her.

Daddy had just shut his eyes, like his eyelids were too heavy to keep open even a minute more. Katie knew he'd needed to, even if it was his turn to stay awake. It was Sunday night, and he worked his factory job during the week, but he had been helping at the Clancy place in exchange for the Clancys keeping an eye on the flock during the weekdays. She could see the tiredness running him ragged, from the purple blossoms under his eyes, from the stiff set of his shoulders beneath the chambray work shirt. She'd known he would be tired like this, even while she had been at church with Momma that very morning.

She should have been listening to the sermon, of course she knew that. Somewhere in the background she had heard the tall severe man behind the tall severe pulpit speaking carefully into the microphone. Words of comfort and all that. What had always been, just like it would always be. Forever and ever, amen. Though coming from his mouth they sounded more...well, more *ominous* perhaps was the word for it. She had doodled a star in pencil on her order of services, typed up in letters all business and without so much as a single picture. The thick paper was always good for drawing though, so long as she didn't draw anything sufficiently unchurchy as to raise the ire of Momma sitting all straight-backed and soapy-clean in the wooden pew beside her. Katie traced the star again. It wasn't one of her best, the legs on the bottom were a little askew, but that gave it character, like Father Desmond at school was always talking about. Character was always more important than perfect figures. Perfect figures were like gingerbread men, like the pickets on a fence. Healthy enough, but boring if that's all a body has to look at.

Katie had used a finger to trace the carved pattern in the armrest of the pew, the long scrolling curves in the varnished honey-colored wood, deepest in the middle, rolling up to nearly nothing at the ends. They were just, just...*elegant* was the right

word a person should use. *Elegant*. Yes. It fit how the woodcarving felt under her fingers, long and right and somehow proper for the pew. But just the same, the word fit Father Desmond, her reading teacher at school, and he hadn't a thing to do with the pew. He was tall and thin with kind eyes and the hands of someone who didn't work with much but papers and chalk, the kind of a messy sort of man who could never keep his books in order. Not like her daddy, or her brother, or any man or boy she ever knew from town. But when he talked, there was something pure in his voice. Something about his talking about characters in the stories he set for them to learn, something that got so fired up and yet so calm at the same time, something that made her understand that there wasn't any other word for him either. Just *elegant*.

The girls at school would just say that she had a thing for him, blasphemy though that was to think it of a *priest*. Momma might even tease if she knew, and say she was sweet on him (in that old-talking, all-too-country way that townies would make fun of), but that wasn't exactly right. Father Desmond was handsome enough, but he was a grown man, and it was just foolishness for a girl to be setting her eyes on any *priest*, for heaven's sake, much less a grown man. No, that wasn't it. Maybe there was something about things and people that were *elegant* that just felt right, something about them that didn't only just line up smooth and plumb at the edges—like their soul and their mind and their body all matched up exact—but somehow did more than that. She didn't know, but it seemed something to set on for a time and ponder.

Though Father Desmond didn't know a thing about ranching, neither. Right before break, they had started in on something called "pastoral poetry," properly religious and properly agricultural, he seemed to think, for the girls of the Holy Trinity Catholic School. Sure, it was pretty how they said stuff about the meadows and all, but the shepherds were just about the stupidest thing that Katie had ever heard. She didn't like to say so, and wouldn't have for anything—Father Desmond being such an educated man and all. The poetry was supposed to be about *ancient* times, he'd said, when shepherds lived out on the hillside with their sheep all night, rather than having a proper sheep ranch like the folks around Meeker. But the shepherds (who all seemed to be boys) just sat around and wrote poems about pretty girls and nice flowers and sitting in the grass all day.

Katie had known shepherds. Lots of them. She had stood shepherd herself over summer breaks. Shepherds might have enough time to walk around a bit, and she had often spent time with the wind and sun on her face and the hot sweet smell of drying grass all around. But those cursed sheep were always getting themselves

in some fix or another, especially when the weather was fine and their fleeces were shorn and they were feeling good—crawling into places they couldn't get out of, wandering away from the herd and then panicking. The sheep in them pastoral poems always seemed to be somewhere else, like the shepherds had them on a leash or could stick them in a pocket or something and didn't have to spend their days fretting about where the thick-skulled things had gotten off to now. If she hadn't thought so highly of Father Desmond, Katie would have said so. Though that probably would have meant something else for confession, disrespecting an elder and all. Just thinking it was bad enough.

Just then, the organ had started up, and Momma had got to her feet. Katie had to help hold the hymnal today—on most any other Sunday, Daddy could have been here and done it, and Katie could have held her own hymnal and just mouthed the words. She didn't much like singing.

Daddy knew of course that the Lord frowned on work on Sundays, but He frowned harder on them that don't help themselves, as any starving soul could tell. As it was, Daddy had been up laying in a new root cellar for the Clancy family, who sat in the next pew but one, so the floor might settle by the time the canning was done, and not fall to bits like the old cellar had, which caved and nearly killed Mrs. Clancy, but didn't. It did bury her preserves, though, and that was a pity. Everybody said so.

Robert used to hold the hymnal too. He was tall enough that it was easier, nearly as tall as Daddy, standing proud enough in his dress uniform.

But it wasn't any good thinking about it now.

So Katie had to sing out, standing so close to Momma. For fear of the look. Katie was sure what adjective to call Momma's look—she had tried on *terrible* and *accusatory*, but neither word really seemed to cut it. There was something in Momma's look that knew what you were trying to get away with, and knew about how long you'd been doing it, and knew just about how many chores you'd need to do to get out of your head that doing it ever had been a good idea. There was a trick to it—she was certain.

Of course, Katie knew that all mommas had such a look, but Katie's Momma somehow knew how to make the look something more than just fearful. It was almost certain if you could watch a body long enough, particularly a body really good at a thing, you might figure out the trick of it. Just like Katie had learned how to walk a sheep fence by watching Jimmy McDaniel, who was the best fence walker in the county. If she could figure such a look out, Katie was pretty sure that she could understand anything.

Until she learned it however, Momma was the reigning champion of the look. And so, Katie had held that hymnal and sung out.

In the pickup cab, Katie's eyes had long ago adjusted to the dark, not really blackness, but more a smudgy gray in the half-moon's light. Dark enough that a flashlight would make her all but blind now. She could just make out, on Daddy's wristwatch that it was nearly midnight. He was still dozing a bit, and that was fine. The Clancy cellar had taken him most of today, and would probably take him some of tomorrow as well, after his shift at the factory had let up. She could wake him up in a bit, and do her own dozing when the tiredness came upon her. It wasn't quite as good as sleep, but it was something like rest.

Besides, the sheep weren't milling about at all, they seemed to be dozing themselves. Sheep mostly seemed to know when something wrong was near, both the sheep and the sheep dogs, now asleep back at the house. Katie would have liked to have them with her, their warm furry bodies would have been a comfort on a night like this. Of course, if something did come, the dogs would go after it, try to bring it down. They would try to defend against it, even if there wasn't a prayer of surviving it, trying to save the sheep, trying to keep their owners from harm. Even though a shot or two from the truck cab—even missed shots—would probably be enough to drive off most anything out there.

This sort of thing was more about making noise than actually doing anything harm. Coyotes, known as the most *notorious* lamb-thieves in the county, would be frightened off by noise. *Notorious* was a good word for them. It was like criminals carrying guns and heisting banks, like movies that Momma and Daddy didn't want her to see just yet. Of course on a lambing night, those *notorious* creatures would make trouble.

Momma and Daddy could not afford to replace such good herding dogs. So they had to be left back at the house until morning.

They had been Robert's dogs. Not a gift or anything, but those three shepherds had all just—well—taken to him. They knew they were his from the moment they had landed at the farm—a trade in puppies from the McDermitts for help with their hay—and they had slept in his room. They fit with Robert. Had always come to him when he called, even before he called. Wrestle around with him and pile on him in a big heap of tails and extra limbs, all dog-grin and boy-grin. They just all fit together perfect, as much as a gangly heap of creatures could.

Or they *had*. Before Robert came back. Now the dogs only laid in front of the door to his room when they weren't out herding, laid like they were at watch.

Robert had long since gone off to fight. Lots of the kids from town had gone off to do it, had gone on to the war overseas. In Daddy's time, it had been Vietnam. In Granddaddy's time, it had been Korea. Now it was Iraq or Iran or Kuwait. An army-job made money, and little enough money was to be had in a town this size. Most kids from their school didn't have a prayer of a scholarship.

Robert hadn't send many letters back, but Meeker was the kind of place you spent your days trying to get away from, and being thankful when you got out. It wasn't the kind of place that kept its kids, and not just because there wasn't a thing to do on a Saturday night. Maybe it was because the mill had closed and turned away workers who had been there all their lives. Maybe it was because the bleak weather and flat scenery never attracted skiers in the winter or tourists in the summer like the places further up in the mountains. Katie knew that the town was the kind of place that you left, the kind of place that you maybe sent cards to once a year, where the home folks were and stayed and you visited them only sometimes, even home folks that were pretty good to you. But you had to have a place to go when you left, something waiting for you, a job to go to. If you just left without a place to go to, you had to come back. The kids who left without a place always came back. Just like Sam Clancy, the Clancy's oldest son, who sat on the couch and smoked more bummed cigarettes every year, and complained about how the big city had taken every good thing he might have had. No, you didn't leave without a plan, without a place.

For lots of kids, it was the army. It had been for Robert, too. He had gone to basic training, had gotten his private's rank, and quietly and steadily done them all proud stateside at the base out east on the Front Range. Before he was deployed, he had thought he might be groomed for a sergeant's stripes in a few years. He had once told Katie, when he was home on leave, "I'm gonna retire from the army, go work for the post office, have a cushy retirement. I'll send for you when I get out. Couldn't leave my kid-sister to rot out in the sticks," he had assured her. Katie could count, though, and she was fairly sure that she would be more than 20 years old before her brother could retire from the military. She hadn't said anything, though. She had only smiled a little at Robert, his eyes bright and staring off into a future she couldn't see.

Better then than now. Better him looking at a dream she couldn't see but wanted to, than seeing and living in a nightmare he couldn't outrun.

She jumped in her seat when Daddy nudged her. "Katie, you rest a spell now."  
"Yes, sir."

She closed her eyes, but didn't sleep.

Robert had been deployed with his troop, gone a whole month, and then was captured. Momma had gotten the letter when he was listed as a prisoner-of-war. When the letter came, her lips had thinned to such a sharp little line, and her eyes looked like they were drowning. She pulled herself together enough to read the official words aloud. Katie remembered a few of the words—*regret to inform...in the line of duty...missing in action*—words that sounded like a speech, like they weren't talking about a person she knew.

Daddy hadn't really spoken for a week, just threw himself into his work, day after long day.

When Daddy finally did say something, his voice creaked and grated, as though it had become rusty from disuse. He had said, "Used to be, back in my day, the girls would be all a-flutter over a uniform. Silly as sheep even then, but now... Now their daughters're just waiting to get their very own. 'Less you get a scholarship, 'less you find a way out of here by your own sails, Katie, there ain't nothin' for it." Daddy had turned his eyes to look past her, those eyes usually such a placid gray, suddenly cold and hard like an iron fence on a February morning. Her backbone had come up rigid, and she had felt like she should have cleaned off the sheep-doo on her boots, have combed her hair out of its usual tangled and ragged mess, paid more attention somehow. And a little voice—a mean little voice—wondered why he would never talk right, even with all those big thoughts of his. Why he always had to talk like he was fresh off the Okie wagon, as the girls at school would say. And she would be ashamed of that cruel voice, even as she could not silence it, even as she could not stop listening to it. Daddy had gone on, "Girls are tough enough, help 'em, to bring babies into it and all. It ain't that. But Lord knows, if I could have stopped your brother, Katie... But, ain't nothin' for it. Nothin' at all."

Daddy had looked away—he always looked away then. Always started fiddling with whatever was in his hands, baling wire, pliers, a hammer. And his eyes had released her at last, had moved to whatever his hands had found to occupy themselves. "Well. Go on, then. Go get after them chores." And the speech would be over. And Katie could get on.

The speech came more often these days. Often enough before Robert had left for the war, but more often in the six months or so since Robert, or what was left of him, had come back, it seemed.

Katie didn't go into her brother's room these days, didn't kneel aside the dogs in their vigil at his door, didn't try to see where Robert lay day after day on the faded

coverlet of the bed he had slept on since he was a child. Didn't try to see into his endless stare, off into some other place she couldn't see. Didn't want to see.

Nothing for it, of course.

It wasn't quite right to say that Robert was as good as dead. But nothing would bring her brother back from that dream he had gone to, nothing would make him a whole person again.

She was sure of it.

She had tried, of course. He was her brother, had been her brother, after all.

It had been a dark summer day, heavy with clouds and a scorching heat that seemed to come up from the ground itself, when they had brought him home—those army men in their dark-painted ambulance, a camouflage blotch from another world. Robert's face was all slack jaw and wandering eye. When she and Momma and Daddy had come to greet him, it was as though a stand of trees had just crossed his view, instead of his family. Momma had tried to touch his arm, to welcome him home, but he flinched away from her with a whimper so quiet it was nearly under his breath. He would not speak at all. They had gotten him inside the house, inside his bed where he curled up, and the dogs had crawled to his door like his own personal guards.

The army men didn't have much to say about what had happened. Ongoing treatment was being researched—the best possible care had been given. Recovery within a few weeks was possible, but the patient had not responded as hoped. No reason to believe that he might not respond more functionally within the home-environment. All apology and duty and medals and the like. No word of which was enough to make up for what had been lost, no matter how shiny or dutiful they sounded.

None of them spoke at dinner.

It seemed to Katie that he had run away in his own mind. She had thought that maybe she could still talk to him, thought about it instead of sleeping, thought about as she stared at the clock hands edging sleepily and so slowly toward 5:00, thought how it might be to hear him say, well, anything at all. He was still her brother, still her Robert, still the boy who was going to retire and take her away from this, just like the captain of the guard or a prince in a fairy story.

Daddy had gone to bed after all all-night swing shift, Momma was still sleeping on the sofa, close to Robert's door, so she could hear if he called out in the night, if he needed anything at all. Momma had been gently snoring as Katie stepped over the dogs. They made no noise as she passed, pricking their ears as she turned the handle on the door and stepped through. The air in the room was still, smelling too

clean from the furniture polish and glass cleaner they all had used only last week when his homecoming letter came, instead of the smells of shoe-leather and saddle soap like it had before.

She had whispered to him through the half-light seeping gray through heavy blankets that passed for curtains, “Robert?” She had wondered if his army buddies had called him something else. Maybe he wouldn’t recognize it anymore. She had moved toward the shape on the bed, still curled up. “Robert?”

The shape had stirred, had made a noise on the bed, a whispery shivery sound without voice behind it, only the breath stirring. She had thought maybe he was sleeping, stirring in a dream perhaps. But the light had come from the window, had glinted off open eyes, and the white of the bandages at his arm, his throat. The pupils had been dilated in the darkness, turning gray eyes into black pools against the flashing whites. The glance whipped frantically across the ceiling, scanning over the textures and contours of it, seeking out...something.

“Robert?”

A dull, dead voice drifted up through the darkness of his bed, so low and strange that it startled her, rose the gooseflesh on her arms. “It’s no good, you know. They’ll hear you, and then, they’ll come to get you too.” Cold. So cold, that voice had sounded. The eyes darted again and again across the ceiling. She hadn’t been sure they even blinked. But the voice was so sure.

“Robert?” she had whispered.

“Don’t be stupid. They don’t care. That’s what they’re here for.”

For a minute, she hadn’t been sure. She had held her breath, listening, watching the terrified eyes that weren’t any part of the Robert she had ever known.

“Shut up, shut up!” the voice barked. Without another word, without the eyes so much as glancing at her, the voice rose in a siren howl longer and longer, without seeming to stop for breath.

Katie had heard feet—the feet of her parents coming—running, and she had slid down against the wall. Momma and Daddy hadn’t yelled. She had wanted them to, wanted some sort of noise, something at all besides that voiceless gray light and the sound of running feet.

Daddy had just scooped her up and put her in the hall with the whining, uneasy dogs.

She had heard him just before the door shut behind her, before he went silent, and it had been Robert, and he had said just her name. Just once. Just, “Katie.”

Katie hadn’t tried to go into the room again. That had been at the beginning. She didn’t want to be alone with those eyes or that voice. She never saw him come

out of the room. Momma went in, brought him his medicine and such. Katie saw Momma's face, Momma's eyes when she came out of that room and knew that there had been no change, that those words *responding in a home-environment* were just as hollow as the terror in her changed brother's eyes.

It did no good to think about Robert or what had taken him away. Her brother and his silly lopsided grin, the loping way he had of running through the high pasture. How she had sometimes seen him and his friends wrestling like puppies tumbling through a great loose pile of sweet dusty hay, playing until Daddy would yell at them—though he had a laugh in his voice—to knock it off, and start getting the hay piled already. Robert snapping off a perfect salute in his dress blues, home on leave, getting into his dirty clothes and boots to help. Robert's commendations. Robert's medals.

Robert laid up in bed with no more sense than...than those sheep out there, he was as good as dead, no matter what her folks said, and that was all there was to it. You went to war, you came back wounded. That was what happened. You took your check like the next person—the next grunt, as Robert himself once might have said—and you said thank you. No matter what it cost.

And then, Daddy was shaking her shoulder, and she was blowing her nose to hide her wet cheeks, and it was her turn again.

The light of false dawn ghosted the sky, turning the deep indigo into something more cloudlike. Katie stretched her legs against the dusty floor of the pickup's cab, pushing the soles of her hip waders into the truck's mats. She yawned. The lambs didn't seem inclined to actually come tonight—it seemed like the ewes might just give up, and wait for another day.

Daddy's great shaggy head leaned against the door. He sighed quietly in his sleep, the lines between his eyebrows smoothing a bit. She smiled a little, and reached over to pull his coat a little more around him. She sat up a little straighter. If he could really sleep now, it was nearly...what was the word? *Idyllic*.

The dogs would be up in a couple of hours, and the Clancy boys would come over, and then she could sleep truly. It wouldn't be much for them to...

Katie saw the sheep had moved off in the corner of the field, now lying by the fence post, but restive and shifting. One of the ewes had gone off by herself, bleating in that strangled sounding way that the ewes always did. Daddy still slept, and Katie let him, wiping at the sleep in her eyes. It might be time.

Katie blew warmth on her stiff fingers and squinted into the early light. There was something moving a little way off, slow, but not in the stiff-limbed way of sheep shaking off sleep. Not quite in the jerky frightened way the ewes had.

In a moment, the herd suddenly quivered to its feet, and the bleat of the solitary ewe rippled and echoed through the herd. A momentary silence. Katie strained to see, a shivering in the pit of her stomach.

The herd jerked into motion, scattering all at once.

A dark streak, two, darted after them, so fast that Katie could not identify the attackers.

Katie's breath rushed out, "Daddy?" She shook his arm. "Daddy!"

"Uhm. Katie..." he muttered.

"Somethin'. Out there."

He swiped at his eyes, and was instantly awake. "Which way?"

She pointed in the direction most of the herd had gone. He yanked at the window crank, opening it a little further, its gears protesting after hours of cold inactivity. He sighted along his scope for a second, grunted in frustration and reach for the door handle.

"Katie, you stay here."

"But, Daddy..."

He wrenched the squeaking door open, staggered onto his feet, and called over his shoulder. "Stay, Katie. Your momma would shoot me herself if somethin' happened. Stay and watch if they come back this way."

The bleats echoed up from the high pasture, the direction of the calls becoming less clear, less singular.

"But..." she started. He was too far away. What would possibly happen? And how would it be better if it just happened to Daddy?

She should do what he said. She *should* obey him.

There had been at least two things out there. The numbers weren't fair, and the sheep would be more in the way than any kind of help.

The dogs. She could get the dogs, and they could buy him some time. The house was maybe a ten-minute run away.

She wrestled the truck door open, the loud groan of it startling her. Her legs were numb, but she started to move them anyway, through the sticky white-gray mud of the pasture that pulled at her boots, that clung to her. Her limbs felt heavy, half-numb with sleep. It was just question of pulling her feet out hard enough without throwing herself off balance. Within a few paces and a very near fall, her blood had begun to pump faster, to wake up her heavy legs, her heavy arms.

She got the motion down, the regular sliding forward in the muddy ground, finding a few clumps of new grass to support herself without skidding.

Left, right. One in front of the other.

She was there faster than she expected, as though the pasture had shrunk into snatched breaths of cold March air and careful steps and anxious moments. How many moments had there been? Where had they all gone? Where was Daddy?

She skidded up the back steps, into the door, hearing the claws of the dogs scrabbling furtively, their voices yipping high and anxious. She opened the door, and the dogs streaked past her, around her, through her legs, bowling her over. She sat down with a whoosh of breath.

And they were gone. She pulled herself to her feet, turning to see where they had all gone. They had been too fast.

She was suddenly tired, more tired than she had ever been, just sitting in the truck.

Katie listened for the dogs' barking, for the sound of a gun. The faintest echo came from the high pasture, a growling, maybe a shout...

She began to run against the mud as it again grabbed at her boots. The high pasture. She could see from there, even if they had moved on. She could see where they had all gone. Her breath came harder now as she ran up the small rise.

She had not quite crested the rise of the high pasture when she heard the scream. It was unmistakably a scream, though afterward, she could never be certain how she had known so definitely. Her feet hesitated. She had never heard anything like it before, so wavering, so terrified. The primal sound of it trailed off. It could not be her father. It was not a human sound.

She ran toward it, toward the winter barn, where they stabled the sheep in bad weather. She burst through the doors, eyes scanning the wood of the corrals, the scattered hay. Then she saw it.

A sheep had crawled beneath the feed chute, the little slot that funneled hay from the top loft. It was empty of hay now, but she could see the sheep trying to push a little further into the chute, trying to expose a little less flesh, trying to hide from the darting and nipping teeth that worried it. The blur of the attacker was all shaggy fur, dirty and matted. It was all white teeth and snapping jaws.

It was a dog.

A dog darted in, nipping at the sheep, growling. Not one of their dogs, but a stranger, part German shepherd she was pretty sure. She could see its snarled muzzle smattered with blood, flat brown eyes on the sheep's torn flank.

The sheep shrieked that high, panicked sound again, and Katie was cold and heavy with fear...dogs sometimes went wild, she knew, sometimes got hungry enough, abandoned on country roads, left the world of people...they would form a pack, they had no fear of humans, became ruled by their instincts, their fear. A wild dog wouldn't herd again, would see anything smaller and weaker as food, never again something to be protected.

And she had left the gun in the truck.

Before she knew what she was doing, Katie had yelled at it, "Hey!" She felt her cheeks flush with anger, with shame. Like it was a dog getting into the trash or something. How could she be so stupid?

The dog cowered for a moment, and stopped growling. It turned to look at her, tail dropped. She clenched her jaw, so it wouldn't fall open. The dog wagged its tail a bit, changing in an instant from a feral creature, into something recognizable.

Except for the blood across its muzzle.

The sheep whistled a soft scream behind it.

The dog was confused—Katie could see it. It couldn't make up its mind, decisions flickering in its eyes. It shifted its weight back and forth on its legs—her or the sheep, now bleeding onto the scattered hay on the floor.

"Hey now," she said, trying to be stern, but her voice shaking. "Get out of there. You don't want to do that."

The dog whined.

She couldn't move. It was a dog, just like any of the other dogs on the place. Except for its frantic eyes, darting between the sheep and Katie, paralyzed between instinct and familiarity.

The shot came from the door of the barn, and took the dog cleanly in the throat. It fell heavily over. Her father jogged through the door.

Katie nearly fell over with shock, with terror, with relief.

"There were three of them," her father said, clearing the shell from the chamber. "You know, once they go wild like that...there's nothing else really for them." He walked to Katie, and put his arm on her shoulder. "It's over, honey."

Katie looked at the bleeding sheep under the chute, saw the glazing eyes of the dog as it drew its final hard breaths, saw it reflected in both their eyes. The flickering glance, the look of hollow terror. It was never over.

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