

# Crossroads

By Terri Lee Demmons

*Stupid idiot. Now what?*

Voices and footsteps coming down the hall made the decision for him. He dropped from the second story window to the small porch roof but, unable to catch his balance he fell, twisting in slow motion. Air escaped through his teeth as he thudded into the soft snow bank on the flat of his back. Pain lanced up his injured arm. Wet snow drenched the back of his shirt. He didn't pause to gasp for breath. He rolled immediately to his feet and stumbled off around the side of the house, keeping close to the side of the house where the snow was melted and his tracks wouldn't show. As soon as he could, he headed into the dark woods behind the boy's home.

Once he was away from the boy's home and safe on the woods path he found a thick oak tree and sank against it, cradling his hand close. Panic and fear beat inside his head. Cold beat without. He had no plan, no place to go. He didn't even have his coat and his arm was burning with a stabbing pain that made him want to cry like a baby. Unable to do anything else, his eyes drifted shut as he sought his usual escape.

The dream came quickly. He felt the horse's flanks between his thighs. Blue skies and endless, plodding sand burned golden in the sun pushed the snow cold wind from his consciousness. As ever, tracks and hoof prints lay out before him like a map, disappearing into a horizon green with vague leafy shapes. His thirsty eyes drank in the green. It felt like home in that direction. That place he could never get to. Wasn't that why he always ruined everything? One foster home after another? No matter how nice, how grounded a family seemed it was never right. The dream would come again and drive him to do something, anything, to move on. Move forward.

The soft, clear voice haunted him again. *Never find peace until you find her. Never find rest until you bring her home safe.* Anger bubbled up momentarily. *Who?* he wanted to shout. *What do you want from me?*

It shocked him that today the dream had changed. No plodding, comfortable sway of movement took his mind from his trouble. The horse was still, ears relaxed back, waiting, instead of forward, ears on the goal. He gave the flanks a kick with his mental heels. The ears pinned back briefly. Sound swelled from the right. He shifted. Red foamed caps churned and swirled in the endless sea, spilling over the to break against the beach. Waves of pain, not water. More rushed in from the deep, pushing the angry sea towards him, engulfing him. The horse was gone and he was swimming in the pulse of his own agony.

"Caleb Jeffers?"

A voice. He started and stared like an animal, pulling himself up out of the pain and back to the real world. He shuddered in the winter cold. A girl crouched in front of him, visible in the light of the full moon reflected off the snow. The one with the tangle of reddish curls and big, serious eyes. The one the other kids like to push around every day after school when she tried to walk home. Underneath the pain he wondered why she was here in the woods at night. And why the heck she was wearing nothing but pink butterfly pajamas.

"What's... what's wrong? What happened to you?" Air hissed from her lips. She grimaced in pain, lifting her arm to cradle it against her chest, mimicking him. "Oh, you poor thing. Let me

see."

Before he could do anything, say anything, he was falling into her too large, too bright eyes, swimming in the compassion there as she somehow chased away the red haze. Her fingers were on his charred and ruined hand. Moonlight was pouring through her into him, burning away the waves, evaporating them like dew in the morning. There wasn't enough room inside him for both the pain and the light. One of them had to go. The heat overtook the pain.

"There now." She drew back, sitting on her heels. "That must be better." Her brow was dotted with sweat, reflected in the moonlight.

Better? Caleb gaped down at his hand- the one that had been burned and blistered in his stupid revenge fire. The skin was clear and pink. The pain was gone. He stared up at her and blurted the first freaked out thing that came to mind. "What- what the hell did you just do?"

She flinched like she'd been struck, her hand coming up to ward off his words. When she spoke again, her voice was stiff and stilted, just like at school. "I *helped* you, Caleb Jeffers. Don't worry. You don't have to say thanks."

"Thanks? You *healed* me! How-" But he was talking to air. He blinked, looking around. He should see her, disappearing down the path at the very least, or hear her. But other than the sound of his gasping, freaked out breathing, the winter night was silent. He flexed his hand and shook his head wonderingly before standing up, suddenly extremely aware of the dropping temperature. Now that the physical evidence of his stupidity was gone, he had no reason to leave the boy's home. Not yet, anyway.

That night, the dream came again. Again, there was shocking variety. In the distance was the green horizon calling. But the horse took a determined detour, his stepped quickening to a jolting trot as the focus became a small white farmhouse in the middle of a field of blueberries. The girl's house at the end of the woods path. One of the windows on the second floor was open, and pulsing gently with the light of the moon. He blinked. Suddenly the feel of *home* was coming from a new direction altogether. Again, the soft clear voice came.

*Now bring her safely home.*



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