

Dancing in the Red Snow
By Elizabeth Cain

5

Susan and Hank waited for weeks, then months. Sunny turned six somewhere without them, or maybe not. The FBI found no numbers in Winnemucca that matched the residence of a stolen child. They interviewed a woman that had seemed secretive and defensive. She answered their first questions with only a yes or no, but then she finally admitted that she used to have a friend with a similar phone number. "She had a dog but no children. She moved away some time ago," the woman said. She provided no other clues.

When they told the Roses this, sitting in the ranch living room with their notepads and their grave faces, Hank jumped up from the couch. "Dog?" he said. "What kind of dog?"

"A German shepherd, I think," one of the investigators said.

"Henry, what's going on?" Susan asked.

Hank couldn't sit down. He stared at the two detectives, his face pale. "Someone stole a German shepherd from me when I was a kid, that's all. It still bothers me ... but it probably has nothing to do with the kidnapping," he said.

"Well, I guess we can't track down everyone with German shepherds," one of the FBI agents said.

"No ... I guess not," Hank admitted. But the coincidence ate at him for days. The stolen puppy would be long dead by now.

Any hope the Roses might have had turned to despair. They tried not to think of where she could be, what she was feeling. Did she remember them, cry for them? No, not cry. Sunny would not cry. But if she was alive, as she got older, she would try to get away, they were certain. When they told this to one of the investigators, a sensitive woman who was still working on finding Sunny long after her assigned time, she shook her head and said, "That's not likely. Many times the kidnapped person is brainwashed into a needy relationship with the abductor. They don't try to escape, especially girls."

Hank sent new posters with an older likeness of their daughter into California and Arizona, even Canada and Mexico. There were crackpots who called wanting ransom, but they could never put Sunny on the line. The Roses were asked to identify bodies of six- and seven-year-olds that were never their child. They held each other and prayed, such as they knew how. They rode into the unforgiving desert, rounded up cattle, planted a garden, and Hank asked once, "Don't you wonder if Sunny will ever see the Nevada sunsets," as he and Susan faced the multicolored western sky from their swing on the porch. They talked about the times Julian and Serena had sat there watching the same sun in its glorious departure from the darkening azure sky with their own sorrows and fears. But never would Hank's parents know this, this utter helplessness and guilt. Susan and Hank had both let go of Sunny's hand at the moment a monster appeared in her shadow and snatched her from her innocent and beautiful life.

Mommy was happier on the road and too tired at night to hurt her in the bath. Sometimes she let Baby sit in the front seat but always cuffed her to the door. Dog rode in the back of the van and never barked. People didn't notice them.

One day, after they had been driving on Interstate 5 in California, Mommy asked her if she could read that sign, if she knew where they were, and Baby said, "I think it's an I and a five, but what's the N for?"

"I'll tell you later," Mommy said. She pulled into a rest stop that had a small food stand. Baby looked out at all the travelers walking their dogs in the open, children rolling on the grass and throwing balls to each other. She wondered what that would be like. Then her eyes fell on a tree with a big sign. There was a picture of a girl, just a sketch of what she might look like at age seven. Baby could read the number that had a question mark after it, but she couldn't read all the words. They were too far away, and she had never been to school. One word was a little larger, and she did recognize it, but she didn't know why—NEVADA. She would ask Mommy, because she needed to know why the little girl looked like her.

They had been driving for a long time when Baby thought it safe to ask, "Mommy, what does r-e-w-a-r-d mean?"

Mommy jerked her head around, "Why? When did you see that word?"

"Oh, a long time ago ... yesterday," she lied.

"Where?" Mommy insisted.

"On a post someplace. There was a picture of a girl that looked like me. Am I famous?"

"Oh God." Mommy groaned.

She stopped the van and chained Baby in the back with Dog. She slowed down and turned off the highway. They didn't stop to eat all day. Once, Mommy let her and Dog out to pee in the bushes on a lonely stretch of road near dusk. Baby never saw another sign that said REWARD. Mommy never told her what it meant.

The year Baby was seven, she and Mommy lived in Oregon in another trailer park on the outskirts of Ashland. The town was full of artists and actors and visitors from all over the world. There were lots of dogs for Dog to play with—or do whatever Mommy did with him—and people of all shapes and sizes and colors. Sometimes men held hands with men, and there was a black lady in the next trailer with three white-looking children. Nobody paid any attention to a striking red-haired woman and an Indian-looking child.

Baby made no friends and went to bed hungry and sometimes exhausted from Mommy's bath time games. It was better to play than to struggle, and Baby thought maybe all children had to do these things in order to grow up.

"This is easier than I thought it would be," Mommy said once, coming into the trailer with Dog after a long day doing business.

She showed Baby, handcuffed and thirsty beyond belief, a fistful of bills. Some had the number one hundred printed on them.

"Are we going to move now?" Baby asked.

"Why ever do you think that?"

"If we have more money, we could get a house and have more food and maybe have different bedrooms," Baby said hopefully.

“Well, the food and a nice hotel now and then I could do, but we are never going to have separate bedrooms. I’ll be old and gray before that happens,” Mommy said, not yet releasing the cuffs.

Baby said, “Can I have some water?”

“Sure,” Mommy said. “Can I have some of this?” And she started taking Baby’s clothes off in the middle of the day.

The weeks passed. When Mommy went out to shop or see dog-people, sometimes without Dog, Baby curled up next to the never-a-puppy gentle animal and tried to sleep. She was afraid to sleep at night because of the things Mommy did that woke her up. She dreamed of the girl on the poster. She lived in a trailer park like Mommy’s, didn’t have any friends, and cried a lot. But that is one thing Baby would not let herself do—cry.

Baby lost track of the years, but sometime after her eighth birthday, Mommy bought her a few books and tried to teach her how to read. “You might as well not be ignorant all your life,” she said.

Baby was grateful and tried to hug her, but Mommy pushed her away. “You don’t need to like me, Baby. That’s not part of my plan.”

Baby had just learned that word plan, so she asked, “Where are we going? Why are we driving so far?”

“Don’t make me sorry I gave you those books!”

They left Oregon and slept at run-down motels. Mommy found people to pay her for Dog to visit their dogs. He began to age a little and had no enthusiasm for life. He didn’t gobble up his food like he used to and seemed to want to hide when strangers came too close. Sometimes Baby thought she saw tears in his eyes, so she told him, “Don’t worry, Dog. I’ll make a plan for us to leave Mommy. We can run in those green fields out there and maybe go back to Nevada. I remember Nevada. Open space and cactus and snow at Christmas, not so many cars or brown skies. You’ll like it, Dog, you’ll see.”

“What’re you mumbling about back there?” Mommy asked.

“Just telling Dog a story,” she answered.

“I might as well tell you his name. I think you’re old enough to learn it.”

But it was a name Baby had never heard. Mommy spelled it out, but Baby could never find it in the dictionary. She asked Mommy what it meant, but she didn’t know. It was just a name she liked.

“Is it a place in Nevada?” Baby asked.

“God, child, you’re getting too big for your britches!” And she stopped and threw all the books out of the car. For the first time in her entire life, Baby cried out loud. Those books were the key to the world, the key to the cuffs that more and more frequently bound her to Dog, a motel bed, a bar in the back of the van, a tree in an isolated campground.

Baby thought if she read enough, she would discover who she was and make sense of everything else. Mommy fed her and kept her clean, especially those parts Baby hated her to touch, and let her be friends with Dog. Mommy was all she knew. She began to be afraid of all the people outside the van or the motel room. She hid. She didn’t talk to anyone. Mommy seemed to like her as a shy Baby and encouraged her to be a silent, good girl so she and Dog could go off and make money to keep them alive.

The summer she was nine, Baby tried to count the marks she had scratched in the van in the dingy white paint. There were eight marks, but she wasn’t sure how old she was when she began to keep track of the

years. She would glance at calendars in gas stations and motel laundry rooms, and when a month she had chosen as the one came around again, she took a tool from Mommy's car-bag and dug into the inside of the back door. One thing she was sure of—she was older than the girl on the poster.

They turned off the road called 5 and took one called Highway 101. It was a warm and, what Baby called, a friendly season. She saw the ocean for the first time and couldn't believe her eyes. "Oh, oh," she cried. A vast expanse of roiling water and waves that went on forever, a color she had no name for. "What's that called? Why is it so noisy? Can I touch it?"

She asked ten questions all at once, and Mommy jerked her arm viciously. "I can't drive while you're jabbering," she said.

Baby said, "Mommy, why are you keeping me when I'm so much trouble?"

"I am exacting revenge."

Baby had no idea what that meant and was afraid to know. She just asked, "Can I go to school now?"

"Maybe in the fall," Mommy answered cautiously. "I could certainly make more money with you in school. What would we call you?"

"My name is Baby."

"But we can't use that. Kids would tease you. It's not a good school name."

"Sunny," Baby said suddenly.

Mommy punched her arm hard. "Why on earth did you say that?"

"I don't know. It just sounded right."

"Well, it's not right. It's a silly name. You'll be Patricia."

"I hate that. Why can't I have an Indian name?"

"Do you think you're Indian?"

"Maybe. In a book, there were pictures of Indian children. I kind of look like that," Baby suggested.

"How 'bout Rainbow?" Mommy gave in.

"Okay."

"But you're still Baby to me," she insisted.

"Okay," Baby said, thinking of the first day of school. As scared as she would be of the people, there would be books and maybe paints. She had dreamed of holding brushes and dabbing them in the colors of the world she had seen, the new places. She'd paint the Pacific Ocean—Mommy had told her its name—the redwood trees, the miles of vineyards and meadows full of horses and cows. She had wanted to stop once when they first saw the horses. There was a small, grey-colored one right by the fence, but Mommy had said no, they were evil creatures.

Baby looked back for a long time at the white fence and the grey face reaching over the top for fresher grass, and her heart pounded fiercely in her chest. She wanted to stop to see if it was real. She wanted to pull up the wild oats that were just out of the animal's reach and feed him out of her hands. She thought of different names that would fit him as he disappeared from sight. She knew that horse.

Grey Boy sat on a windowsill in Sunny's bedroom in Nevada, the last rays of a bitter summer sun raining bleakly on his lonely gaze.

The Roses were forty now. They were not going to have any more children. Uncle Jason died that year, Hank and Susan were sure, of a broken heart. It seemed he had come into their lives for Sunny and could not stay without her. He, too, was buried at the canyon house where he was born but at some distance from Julian and Serena, respecting the break in his relationship with his brother, the hurt feelings buried in the same ground.

Hank had sold most of the cattle and the horses. He kept the best riding mounts for his family and loyal wranglers and the few friends who came out to ride with them. They tried to join a support group for parents who had suffered the loss of a child to abduction, missing still or entrenched in some odd landscape, but they just couldn't hear those stories over and over or look at the grim, tear-stained faces or hug another grieving mother or father. *Do we appear to others like that? Gaunt and round-shouldered and utterly hopeless?* Hank wondered.

Hank taught Susan to ski, and they pushed out across the country that winter into the forbidding white desert, stopping to breathe heavily and wondering if Sunny was feeling as alone as they were. They talked about the kidnapper. Was it a man who might be abusing her? A woman who couldn't have a child and took theirs for her own? Was someone still hoping for a ransom but didn't know how to contact them? Could someone have killed her when she began to struggle or ask too many questions? Which she surely would. It was her nature. They skied on a few miles, letting the pain in their hearts transfer to their legs and lungs, pressing their feet into the cold tracks as if branding the kidnapper with pent-up rage.

Then spring came and the hot, dusty summer of Sunny's ninth birthday, the only storms in the psyches of Hank and Susan. They grew close, which was a blessing. Some marriages they knew didn't hold together after the gut-wrenching loss of a child. They watched their friends' children grow and change, show their animals, act in the school plays, and march in the band on parade days. To them, Sunny was still the petite four-year-old sitting on Jason's shoulders, the curious youngster helping her dad turn the pages of Walter Farley's *The Black Stallion* that Hank read to her every night, the serious little equestrian scrambling up on Grey Boy with her child's enthusiasm. But that girl would never return. That girl had truly died, even if she were still breathing, someplace.

No one went to the fair that October, but the ranch honored Sunny's disappearance with a small ceremony. Everyone gathered in the round pen with Grey Boy, now fifteen, and showered him with carrots and apples. Native Americans, Latinos, and two African friends of Akmal's danced around the missing child's horse, and prayers were sent to heaven in three or four languages.