



2014 Third Place

The Telegraph Tree *by Linda Broday*

**Kansas Prairie
1880**

“Come on, Belle, get on out of there. You’re a dumb cow, you know that? How on God’s green earth did you find what is surely the only mud hole left in all of Kansas?”

Maura Killion blew a strand of chestnut hair from her face and stared at the brown and white Jersey that was bogged down up to her hocks. The heifer’s frightened bellows, along with her eyes rolling back in her head, struck a blow to Maura’s heart.

Tears clogged in Maura’s throat. She sagged against the milk cow, cursing this godforsaken land that had stolen her husband before he’d even known he was to be a father and left her all alone with a broken spirit.

If not for her baby girl, Allie Rose, she’d give up completely. At three months old, the babe depended on her for survival so she had no choice but to keep going.

When Maura’s milk dried up four days ago, fear paralyzed her. Allie would die without nourishment from the heifer.

She glanced at the infant lying in a basket at the edge of the bog. How the child could sleep with all the racket was a mystery. Even when awake, Allie seldom ever cried. It was as if she, too, had lost the will to live.

Sudden anger swept through Maura. Giving up was not an option. God help her, she’d fight to give her baby girl the right to thrive and grow up strong.

Though thick mud of the buffalo wallow sucked at her legs, gripping them like bands of iron, Maura made her way to Belle’s wide rump. With loud shouts and a mighty shove, she applied the last of her waning strength.

The cow must’ve sensed her desperation because somehow, somehow, Belle managed to pull herself out. Maura collapsed into a sobbing heap under the mid-morning sun.

This was too hard.

She raised her head and stared at the vast blue sky that seemed to swallow everything, leaving nothing but empty dreams, loneliness and sorrow. She’d scream if she had energy left.



This land took and took, giving nothing back except endless days and hopeless nights.

Maura wearily pushed aside the drowning sensation. Gathering the wicker basket cradling Allie, she yelled to the cow, “Come along, Belle, you ornery critter. If you happen to find yourself in another mess today you’re on your own. I’m done for.”

The heifer’s last bellow of indignation seemed to say she took exception; nonetheless she followed along docile as a lamb.

With the mud in Maura’s shoes creating sucking sounds, she trudged through waves of tall brown grass toward the little soddy that sheltered them.

No matter how big a toll this land took on her she knew she’d continue to keep putting one foot in front of the other. For Baby Girl and for the slim hope that someday her struggle would all be worth it.

She had no other choice.

* * *

An angry howling wind battered at the door all night, insisting she let it in. Feeling as though she’d only crawled into bed, Maura rose and started her day.

Allie stared silently from a crib fashioned from a crate that Maura had lined with part of an old frayed quilt. Apparently, Baby Girl hadn’t slept either.

When Maura’s time had come three months ago, she gathered her fortitude and delivered the baby herself. Mrs. Fletcher on a farm eight miles away, promised to help with the birthing, but the wind and emptiness drove her mad. She’d taken her own life two months before Allie arrived.

Now, with Mrs. Fletcher gone no one remained within twenty-five miles.

Maura changed Allie's diaper then, putting the babe in a sling contraption tied around her neck, went out to milk Belle.

Thirty minutes later, she patiently spooned milk into Allie's mouth. She returned the babe to the sling and trudged out to hitch the plow to her mule. Time to plant a garden if they expected to eat.

Halfway through the plowing, she stopped and leaned against the mule to catch her breath. A spindly tree no more than five feet high that stood at the edge of the homestead snagged her attention. It might be the only tree as far as the eye could see, but the branches spread wide as though challenging the wind to rip it out by the roots. She'd often wondered who'd planted it. Other nesters? Had they been dreamers who yearned for a bit of green?

She'd noticed the tree before but had never heard it whisper in the wind. Never heard it call to her. Until now.

Speak your heart it seemed to say.

As though in a trance, she dropped the mule's reins and went into the soddy. Finding a scrap of paper, she dipped a goose quill into a small bottle of ink.

I fear I'm going mad like Mrs. Fletcher. This blessed silence is a curse. Dead dreams and solitude fill the unending days. I yearn for a touch, a smile, and the sound of another human voice. I long to be loved, cherished, kissed. To know I matter.

After punching a hole in the paper, she found a piece of yarn. Marching across the partially plowed furrows, she tied the paper onto a tree limb.

No one would ever read her scribbles. No one would ever hear her heart's hope, but she felt a calm wash over her for having voiced her thoughts. Feeling somewhat renewed, she tried to spoon more milk into Allie's rosebud mouth before returning to her plow.

* * *

During the night, a snarling pack of coyotes awakened Maura. They were very close to the soddy. She rose and lit the lamp. Snatching up a loaded Winchester that had belonged to her husband, she opened the door about six inches. At least half a dozen pairs or more of glittering yellow eyes stared back at her. The way they bared their razor sharp teeth and lunged at each other's throats they had to be from rival packs.

She stilled her trembles. Opening the door a little wider, she aimed at the predators and pulled the trigger. One went down. Three of the pack pounced on their brother, feasting and snarling. Orange flame shot from the barrel of her rifle again, then again. At last, pulling the dead coyote, they retreated into the safety of darkness.

Fear crawled down her spine. They were still out there whether

she could see them or not. And they sensed her terror. They'd kill her without hesitation.

Holding the lantern up high, she inched toward a large dark form lying several yards away. Her cow? Relief made her knees weak when she found it was a dead antelope the coyote pack had brought down.

A quick glance at the barn assured her she'd remembered to bar the door

earlier to keep Belle safe for the night. She couldn't take any chances with Allie's only milk supply.

Allie! She had to get back to Baby Girl.

But she had herself to think about also. This meat would feed her for weeks. Her clothes hung on her because she'd had so little to eat.

Did she dare to fight the vicious coyotes for

what she could salvage?

Without hesitation, she grabbed the antelope's hind leg and yanked. Halfway to the soddy, the coyotes started closing in. They would risk death to get the fresh carcass.

She put the rifle to her shoulder and fired. One lunged at her and she shot it. Bone-chilling snarls echoed in the night air.

Unable to remember how many shots she'd fired, panic gripped her. If she ran out, they'd swoop in for the kill.

Maybe she should abandon the antelope and let them have it.

Allie's life and hers depended on this food. She'd not quit. She couldn't.

Tightening her grip and using her remaining strength, she managed to drag the antelope up next to the wall of the soddy.

No time to rest her aching muscles.

No one would ever read her scribbles. No one would ever hear her heart's hope, but she felt a calm wash over her for having voiced her thoughts. Feeling somewhat renewed, she tried to spoon more milk into Allie's rosebud mouth before returning to her plow.

She hurried inside for a sharp knife and began cutting off chunks of the meat while keeping one eye out for the desperate, hungry predators.

By the time rosy ribbons of light finally spread over the land, she'd washed off the blood and went in to feed Allie. The babe had become even more listless and that struck fear so deep into Maura's soul she couldn't breathe. Over the course of an hour, she managed to trickle some nourishment at least into the child's open mouth without strangling her. But she needed more.

Sobbing with frustration, Maura had to find a better way of getting milk into Baby Girl or her daughter would surely die.

Gathering her sharp knife, Maura again tempted fate, going out to harvest the antelope's stomach. She'd heard tales of such things serving as a feeding implement for babies. Willing to try anything, she gently removed the stomach and formed a makeshift pouch by sewing it tight with some of the animal's sinew. Several washings with hot water made it ready for use. She quickly filled it with milk.

Minutes later, Allie sucked greedily from a pinhole left unbound. Once full, the babe gave her a weak smile. This was going to work. Maura said a quick prayer of thanks and knew just how to share her joy.

* * *

That morning Maura got out her paper and wrote:

Thanks be to God from whom all blessings flow. I have food and I've pushed death away from my door yet again. I won't let it have my baby. I won't let it silence my hope.

Then trudging across the furrowed garden to the little tree, she tied it to a branch. Now two notes fluttered in the breeze like little doves carrying messages. She desperately wanted one to return with a green leaf, an olive branch, some hope of better times like the bird once had to Noah.

Maura stared across the unending waves of brown grass that stretched as far as the eye could see.

She needed to believe.

She needed something besides toil and exhaustion.

Most of all she needed to feel alive again.

This couldn't be all there was.

* * *

Though exhausted by the long previous night, she kept busy. When dusk came she thought back over her day and all she'd accomplished. The dead carcasses lay well out of range of the soddy for the wild animals to finish devouring. Her food stores were replenished.

The antelope stew with its thick juice simmering on the stove filled the dwelling with a delicious aroma. She moved over to stir it, remembering the joy she took from serving this dish to her dear husband. Of course, they'd had combread to go with it then. She'd had plenty of flour and meal in those days.

He'd come in after a full day's work, sniff the air and a smile would spread over his face. Then he'd put his arms around her and nuzzle her neck. Tell her how much he loved her.

Oh God, how she missed that man.

She brushed away a tear and glanced over at Allie. Maura had fed her every two hours. Color had begun to come back into the babe's wan little face, a testament the makeshift bottle would do its job.

Before complete darkness descended, Maura got out her paper and tore off another piece.

Is there anyone out there? Am I and my baby the only ones left on this earth? I desperately need to know, to hope.

When she closed her eyes in sleep, she dreamed of a man with laughing gray eyes and strong callused hands.

* * *

The image stayed with her when she awakened. Who was this man of her dreams? Her husband's eyes had been dark brown and he'd had a withered hand.

A strange sound met her ears.

A baby's coos.

Maura peered into the wooden cradle. Allie was staring at her hand and cooing.

"Hey there, little darlin'. How's my girl? I hope you're hungry because I'll have some warm milk as soon as I get Belle in the mood of giving." Tears stung her eyes. She lay back on the pillow, contemplating this wonderful gift she'd been given.

And so began her day. After feeding Allie, she put the child in the sling around her chest and went to work. She had to get seed into the ground. More spring rain would hopefully come and she wanted to have her plot of land ready.

But before she got started, she tied

her late night note onto the little scraggly tree. In a way, it was like talking to God. No one would ever read them, but they helped relieve her frustration and voice the deep loneliness that seeped into her soul.

With the notes rustling in the wind murmuring words of hope, she went about the job of living.

* * *

The next morning after feeding Allie and herself, she got out her writing implement.

I dreamed of strong arms around me, holding me with love. Am I destined to never know that again? I yearn to hear another's heart beating softly next to me, feel his touch on my body. I cannot bear the thought of living the rest of my days all alone.

Once more, she tied it to the tree. Then she jerked back.

One note did not belong to her. It had a bright red string. She always used a length of gray yarn.

Who could've put this strange one there?

Maura quickly glanced around, scanning the flat land. Nothing. No evidence of another human within sight.

Nothing but this note to say another had walked near.

Her trembling fingers fumbled with the red string. At last she got it untied it and read:

You are not alone. I am here. I care. You matter to someone. You matter to me.

A tear trickled silently down her cheek. Someone felt her pain and took the time to let her know. She carefully retied it to the branch and again surveyed the area. Still no movement anywhere.

Over the next three weeks, Maura and this mysterious person conversed back and forth. She learned his name was Sam and that he worked for Western Union Telegraph Company as a lineman in charge of repairing broken telegraph poles and downed lines. She savored each of the lonely widower's messages.

One of Sam's notes read:

If wishes were dreams I would hold you in my arms, darling Maura, and never let you go. Each time the sun goes down I kiss you goodnight and dream of your beautiful face. What do you wish for, pretty lady?

She quickly penned a reply.

Sam, you don't know how much you've come to mean to me. My wish would be for your strong arms around me, your lips on mine, our hearts beating as one. I dream of meeting you beneath the stars and walking hand in hand across the heavens.

Their conversations through the notes brought Maura much comfort and strength. Though they never met, she developed a deep abiding love for this man.

Each morning she couldn't wait to visit the tree and see the new notes waving gaily in the breeze. He was the green leaf, the olive branch she'd desperately wanted to find.

Her heart skipped several beats when she received this one:

What is the face of love to you, dearest Maura?

To which she immediately replied:

It's what's inside a person's heart, deep down past the scars of hurt and grief. You wear the face of love, darling Sam.

Maura floated through the days, feeling loved and cherished. Sam was the answer to her heart's yearning. He'd given her strength and hope and courage. No task was too difficult or impossible. His words of love made her feel like a woman again. She'd almost forgotten what that felt like.

Then one day this message came that shocked her to her core:

My job in this part of Kansas is over. They're sending me to Julesberg, Colorado Territory. I'm so sorry. Knowing you has meant the world to me. I wish you well, dearest Maura. Think of me from time to time with fondness as I will you. When the wind blows from the west and touches your face it'll be my fingers caressing you.

Pain doubled her over. He was gone. Maura fell into the cushion of tall grass weeping. Once again she had no one to talk to, to share the lonely day's struggles with.

No one to care.

Sam had surely died also even though she had no grave to visit.

* * *

One month went by then two more with each day crawling straight into the next.

Nothing to break the monotony.

Nothing to ease the isolation.

Nothing to bring solace when the rigors of life beat her down.

After carefully removing each note, Maura tucked them safely away and avoided the place that had brought her much happiness.

Yet, when the morning sun's golden rays caressed the outstretched branches of the sad little tree, she paused for just a moment remembering the man named Sam who had taught her to dream again. She'd felt his touch, his kisses even though they'd existed solely in words.

Because of Sam and the strength he'd given her she was able to go about the business of living and caring for her darling daughter. He'd given Maura much more than he knew. And when the wind blew from the west, she felt him watching over her.

Allie grew and continued to thrive. The child babbled continuously. Maura taught her to say "Mama" and made a point to laugh at her silly antics.

On a sweltering summer morning in August, she casually glanced out the window while she prepared breakfast.

Something waved from the little tree. Her imagination played a cruel joke on her for sure. Still, Maura ran outside to get a better look.

Shielding her eyes against the sun, she could barely see a glimpse of red, but it was there. Trembling, she grabbed Allie and raced across the small field from which rows of corn, squash, turnips and other vegetables grew.

When she drew closer, she saw a man sitting beneath the branches, propped up against the trunk. He grinned wide.

She slowed to a walk. What if this stranger had evil on his mind? Her rifle still rested on the wall of the soddy. Something inside told her to keep going.

His laughing gray eyes held kind-

ness like the man in her dream. A voice whispered she had nothing to fear. Five yards away from him, he pushed to his feet. He stood over six feet tall.

"Sam? Sam, is it you?"

"It's me. I've wanted to meet you for a long time, Maura." He held out his hand. "Come here."

In a daze, Maura lowered Allie to the grass then went into his welcoming arms. "I thought I lost you," she whispered.

"I found that no matter how hard I tried, you're impossible to forget. I had to get back here. So I quit my job and rode night and day to get here. I was afraid my ugly mug would frighten you. That's why I didn't come to the house and knock on the door either today or all those times when we tied our messages to the Telegraph Tree here."

The Telegraph Tree. What an apt name.

She stepped one foot back to drink in the sight of him. A long scar ran from his cheek to his square jaw, but she'd never felt safer.

He was beautiful. She took his hands and noticed they bore big calluses.

"Sam, this may sound odd, but I dreamt of you before we ever started corresponding. At the time, though, it made no sense to me."

"It must've been Heaven's way of an introduction. The Good Lord appears to be an architect in these matters." Sam knelt to say hello to Allie and brush her soft golden curls. "I used to hide in the tall grass and watch you both. I saw how hard you worked and wished for the courage to knock on your door. You're the kind of woman I always wanted, nothing like

my wife who could barely stomach the sight of me after I came back from war."

Maura's heart broke for him. "Let's forget the past. We've had too much sorrow."

Sam rose and gently caressed Maura's cheek. "Do you mind if I kiss you?"

"I thought you'd never ask," she whispered.

Tenderly, he put his large hands on both sides of her face and pressed his lips to hers. At that instant, Maura knew she didn't want to be anywhere but in his arms.

It was like a beautiful dream. If that's all it was, she didn't want to wake up.

She got out all of their notes she'd kept. With his help, she tied them all back on along with new ones each of them penned. The tree was awash with glorious color and hopeful dreams.

They discussed marriage and the fact it would take a long time to be wed. Neither wanted to wait six months or a year.



An old symbolic custom came to mind for just such a situation. Maura turned to him. "Let's jump the broom, Sam."

That evening as the sun floated low on the horizon, Maura and Sam pledged their love for all eternity beneath the limbs of their tree. Then laying the broom on the ground, they held hands and, taking a big leap, jumped over it.

Allie Rose, who refused to budge from Sam's arms, laughed and clapped as though she understood everything.



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