

EXCERPT FROM
The Book-Breaker's Mission
by Sally Wright

March, 1957

(Ben Reese, a university archivist living in Hillsdale, Ohio, has taken his wife to the hospital. She's gone into labor at six months, after having had a previous miscarriage. Richard West is a professor with Ben at Alderton University and Ben's best friend. Sam is Ben and Jessie's dog, who looks a little like a yellow lab.)

They treated Ben like a trespasser. The older nurses were the worst, staring at him as though he were to blame, or he'd suddenly become a dim-witted child since he'd last looked in a mirror.

Dr. Boyes took him aside and told him not to expect miracles with a six-and-a-half month baby. That someday they'd be able to do better, but the time hadn't come.

Ben wanted to be with Jess while she went through it, but husbands weren't allowed anywhere near their wives, and except for when he called Richard and asked him to pray for Jessie, he'd walked a hall for six-and-a-half hours like Ike, waiting on D-Day.

The grey door to the delivery room opened, finally, the way Ben had been willing it to, and Dr. Boyes walked out (tall, disheveled, tired looking) and led Ben away from the waiting room toward the end of another hall.

"I wish I had better news, Mr. Reese, but as we suspected when we talked earlier, the baby wasn't developed enough to live on his own. There was also-

"-Jessie's okay, though?" Ben's eyes were locked on Boyes, and they weren't letting him go.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reese. I really am. An unexpected complication arose, and there was nothing we could do. An amniotic embolism, a blood clot in the placenta broke loose in Jessie's blood stream, and went into the -"

Ben turned and ran, slamming against two heavy metal doors, pushing his way through to the delivery room, where a nurse was taking a cloth-wrapped bundle away from where Jessie lay.

Ben said, "Put it down next to her and leave us alone."

A short, pudgy fiftyish anesthesiologist had been doing something to his equipment, and he was just starting to take his gloves off, as he spun around toward Ben. His voice was high and outraged when he said, "You can't tell Miss-

“-Leave us alone. Now.” Ben was taller, and broader shouldered, and looked a lot stronger, and he moved across the room with quick long-muscled ease, his behind-the-lines face fixed right on the doc - the face that had taken German command posts from Omaha Beach to Trier.

Boyes had walked in behind Ben, and he said, “Let’s give Mr. Reese a moment on his own, shall we, Fred?”

The anesthesiologist backed toward the door, as Ben took the blanket-wrapped bundle away from the oldest nurse. She and the rest stepped through the door, and Ben laid the small still body against Jessie’s left hip. He leaned over it and kissed Jessie’s lips, dry now, and rougher than usual, but not completely cold.

He smoothed her damp dark hair, and traced her eyebrows with the index finger he could still bend, then straightened the neck of her gown.

He kissed her eyelids and the arch of her nose, while tears slid through the stubble by his mouth and dripped off his chin. Then he pulled the blanket from what was left of their child - their second dead baby in four-and-a-half years.

“This one’s a boy, Jess. David. Just the way you wanted.” He leaned down staring at the tiny, pale, perfectly made body, at the fragile, dry looking skin streaked with blood and bits of afterbirth, at the elegant miniature fingernails on the smallest fingers he’d seen.

“I don’t know what to do, Jess. Your hands are so cold.” He was sliding his across hers, fitting the fingers of their right hands together, touching her cheek with his left. “What am I gonna do now here, living alone without you?”

Ben stood leaned-over like that for he couldn’t have said how long. Silent. Stunned. Wandering. Trying to memorize everything about her - the look, the feel, the smoothness of her skin. The shape of her collar bones. The curves of her lips. The feel of her hair in his hands.

Half an hour later, he was wondering where he’d go when he left. When he went outside, eventually, and got into the car.

There was nowhere he wanted to be now.

There was no good reason to choose one place over any other. Or to do one thing rather than another.

To do anything, actually, ever again.

There was no one he wanted to talk to.

There was no one he knew who knew him.

There was no one who needed him.

Except Sam. Waiting home alone.

Ben stood there, thinking and praying, what he never could’ve said to someone else, till Boyes walked in, some time later, and closed the door behind him.

Boyes stood still, watching Ben standing beside the body. Then he walked toward him, after a minute, carrying a large brown envelope.

Ben let go of Jessie's hand, and started past him toward the hall, saying, "Thank you for all your help."

"I thought you might want to read an explanation of the complication that arose."

Ben took the envelope, but didn't look at it, before he walked through the door.

He lay on their bed with his cloths on. Sam watched him looking worried, then sank down on the rug beside him. He scratched his face with a back foot, then rubbed his chin on the rug.

Ben pulled Jessie's pillow over and wrapped his arms around it, holding it tight against his chest. His eyes were open and he was staring at the ceiling when the phone began to ring.

He didn't get up and answer it. And Sam stood and looked at him, hot breath on Ben's face - before he lay down, and sighed softly, and laid his chin on his paws.

It stopped. Then rang again, ten or fifteen times more.

Half an hour later someone was knocking quick and hard, pounding on Ben's front door.

Sam stood up, but Ben ignored it.

And then he heard a key in the lock.

"Ben? I've used the key you gave me for emergencies. Where are you?"

Ben didn't answer. Which didn't postpone the inevitable. Twenty seconds later Richard West filled the doorway, saying, "Ah. Here you are. You and Sam."

"Yes. Here we both are."

"I'm *terribly* sorry, Benjamin. Sorrier than I can say. I phoned the hospital and was told you'd gone home. I wish there were something I could do to help."

"There isn't." The voice and eyes had both iced over. The mouth was tight and furious.

"No. No. I don't suppose there is."

It was still dark out. A little after five in the morning, wind blowing hard out of the west spitting snow across pasture and frozen plowed fields.

"It's chilly in here. Perhaps I should see to the furnace." Richard glanced at Ben again before he left the room, and was surprised to see what looked like sadness in the old dog's eyes - brown eyes, that followed his, from a graying yellow long-nosed face he'd generally ignored.

After he'd dug out the ashes, banked the hot coals, blown on them with the bellows, and shoveled more coal in the furnace, Richard walked upstairs to the mud room on the west side of the kitchen.

He took the key from a coffee can on the top shelf, then unlocked the closet under the upstairs steps where Ben kept his guns.

He locked the guns in the trunk of his own car, then picked up his old

battered briefcase.

Richard sat at the table in the kitchen grading mid-term blue books from his senior level novel course until it was almost nine. Then he looked in the refrigerator, before checking on Ben.

“You want any breakfast?”

“No.”

“It’s after nine. I can call the funeral home. And I can pick a plot at the cemetery if you want me to. If you want to bury them here, in Hillsdale. If you want to take them to your family’s place in Michigan, then-”

“-Here. You do it. Whatever you decide is fine.”

“Sam, you want some dinner?”

Sam’s tail thumped on the floor, but he didn’t set foot off the rug.

Richard phoned from the kitchen, coordinating with the funeral parlor and Ben’s minister, David Marshall. Who stood at Ben’s door twenty minutes later with a Bible under his arm.

Richard showed him where Ben was, and went back to reading essays, hearing the murmur of voices at a distance, telling himself not to listen. Marshall had lost his first wife fifteen years before, and he’d know how to talk to Ben, if anyone anywhere could.

Richard heard Ben say, “Thanks, David,” an hour later, right before the front door closed.

Richard walked back to Ben’s room and found him in Jessie’s rocker. “Have you called Jessie’s parents?”

“No.”

“I’ve talked to the funeral parlor and arranged for the funeral on Monday. I’ve called the Dean of the English Department. I’ve made notes for you about writing the obituary. The newspaper wants it before six p.m. I’ve arranged for a cemetery plot too, but it should be you who calls her parents.”

“Later.”

“It will take them-“

“-Not now.”

“It will take them some time to make the arrangements to get here.”

Richard’s voice was capable of rattling windows and doors, but he was speaking in a slow soft subdued tone few people would’ve recognized. “They lost their son on Corregidor. Losing their other child will be exceedingly painful for them.”

“Really! That never occurred to me!”

“I’m sorry, Benjamin. Mine was an imbecilic remark.”

Ben didn’t say anything. He sat and stared at Sam.

“Make an effort for *them*, Ben.”

Ben told Richard what he could do with himself.

And Richard left him alone with Sam and went to make himself coffee.

Ten minutes later, he heard Ben walk to the bathroom and close the door behind him. He heard Sam's nails click on the wooden floor, till he flopped by the bathroom door.

Richard tiptoed up to him and listened while Ben used the toilet, then showered and brushed his teeth. But when Ben turned off the water and started toward the hall, Richard rushed to the kitchen. He was trying to look nonchalant when Ben walked in buttoning a beat-up corduroy shirt.

Ben looked at Richard as though he hadn't been fooled, then sat in the chair in the corner and dialed the phone on the table.

Ben told Jessie's mother, Harriet Gerard, that Jessie had gone into labor and delivered a boy who was too small to live. "The worst part, though, was the other complication. A blood clot broke away from the umbilical cord. It got into Jessie's blood stream, and ended-up in her lungs. They couldn't save her, Harriet. There was nothing anyone could do. . . . I know. I know. I feel sorry for you too. . . . Do you want me to talk to Phillip? . . . Right. Exactly. How will we all live without her? . . . Monday. I'm sorry, I can't talk anymore right now. I'll call you tonight with more details."

Ben walked back to the bedroom, with Sam trotting behind him. And Richard began wondering what he'd do if Ben went back to bed and refused to come out again.

Then, Ben was in the kitchen, pulling a heavy navy blue sweater down over his head. He took the hunting jacket he'd had since highschool off a peg in the mud room, and tugged on a woolen watch cap until it covered his ears. "There was no reason to take the guns, Richard. You ought to know that."

"I'm sure you're right. You know how I am. One who errs on the side of caution."

"I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"You had every right."

"No. I should've been thanking you for all the help."

Ben stepped out the mud room door, with Sam right behind him, into a cold, grey, damp, winter day. They walked toward the west edge of the back field, to a farm track that bordered the west woods. Ben started to run north, as Richard watched, faster and faster, limping in places on uneven ground, till he disappeared into Vernon's north woods - two hundred acres of thick bare trees half a mile north of the house.

The woods belonged to a neighbor of Ben's - Vernon, the landlord who owned his house - who leased the north woods to a nurseryman for digging specimen trees. The track wound through most of it, then out beyond to open fields.

Ben and Sam were gone for four-and-a-half hours, but Richard stayed and

waited. Watching. Eating breakfast. Eating lunch. Pacing the kitchen while making soup for Ben - till he saw him at the edge of the west woods heading back toward home. Ben was holding one end of a long stick with Sam clamping the other in his teeth, the two walking side by side, carrying it together.

When Ben came in, a wall was up. A support of some kind had been pounded into place, and he thanked Richard and asked details about the arrangements he'd made.

Ben called the funeral parlor and chose Jessie's casket. (Plain. Closed. Their baby inside it.) Saying he'd take them clothes for her sometime the following day.

Ben drank a cup of coffee, tried to eat a piece of toast, and couldn't. And then he said, in a deep quiet voice, "It's strange how much grief feels like fear. The kind you get used to in combat. Physically, if you see what I mean. I hadn't realized it would."

"Ah."

"I think I'll go in and lie down."

He did. But he didn't sleep. He tossed and turned and sighed and shuddered, and Richard pretended he couldn't hear. He sat in the kitchen grading essays. And didn't go home that night. Or the next.

He stayed with Ben through the visitation and the funeral. But that night he packed his things. He put Ben's guns in the closet where he'd found them. Then took his clothes and drove home.

June 1957

(Three months later, Ben's been talked into going to a Columbus symphony concert for the first time since Jessie died by Richard West - largely to help a lonely introvert named Carl Walker whose seat is next to Ben's and who's never missed a concert. Ben came home early when Carl didn't show. Ben phoned him at home and got no answer, which was definitely disquieting with Carl's obsession with attending every concert in honor of his dead sister who'd started the symphony.)

Ben was in bed by midnight.

And awake again at one.

He'd dreamt about Jessie, lying beside him, laughing against the side of his neck, her head nestled on his shoulder, sliding her left hand across the muscles of his stomach, till he turned and licked the hollow between her collar bones, pulling her close the length of his body, taking her earlobe gently in his teeth - when he woke up in an empty bed blinking in a pool of moonlight.

He pulled on his shorts, and slipped out through the study without turning on the lights, carrying the pack of Camels he kept in the old oak table that had been Jessie's desk. He only smoked when he'd dreamt about her.

Or when he'd dreamt about his war in Europe. Blood. Death. Body parts. The dreams that left him sweating. Staring at walls. Caught behind-the-lines. Having to search the corners.

Those dreams always ended the way his own war had, with him on a stretcher, strapped under a Piper Cub, flying under the ack-ack fire through the tops of snow covered fir, hearing himself scream in the dark before the landing knocked him out.

So this wasn't that.

And that's something.

This is sadness.

This is grief.

Nothing neurotic here. No.

Nothing you wouldn't expect.

Ben smiled cryptically to himself as he stepped out onto the front porch, and sat in one of the bent-twigg chairs Jessie had found in Kentucky.

It was still and cool, and the sheep in the pasture twenty yards away looked like small shifting oval clouds in patches of swirling mist. Some drifted slowly, tearing at dew covered grass. Others slept, curled up together. Some lay tucked into shallow dips strung through rolling ground.

Ben watched, and listened, and reminded himself to think about it then - that trying not to worked when he was working, but not in the middle of the night.

He told himself not to write about it either. That he'd never get back to sleep if he did. That what he should do was read her letter. *Bring it out here and read it with a candle. Then go back to bed when you're done.*

He was back with it in a minute.

Pulling it out of the envelope.

Smoothing it across his knees.

Feeling the paper she'd touched.

March 1, 1957

Dear Ben,

I've been thinking about you this week while you've been working in Philadelphia. It's brought the war back, unexpectedly: all those years of waiting for your letters; of following the news with hot, flushed, heart-pounding fear; with bone-grinding worry from not knowing where you were, and what you were facing then.

I didn't call it fear then, of course, or worry either one. We kept those

moments private over here at home, to keep from unraveling one another. We knew very well that our lot was nothing special. Every father, brother, or son here - every woman with a husband, son, brother or boyfriend overseas - fought the same anxieties. Your work was riskier than some, of course, as you know better than I. And that I kept to myself as well, the way you did there, and have done since you've been home.

Wherever you were when you wrote the last letter, I knew meant nothing by the time I got it; that Intelligence would send you to whatever army needed you to scout. And all I could do was pray.

Pray, and read your letters over and over, and be thankful you were who you were. That's really all we ever can do, isn't it - in a war, or out of one - pray and take the next step required? None of us can get ourselves home with the groceries at the end of the day with our brains and bodies intact. Yet, we take our lives for granted, when all of us know better in some secret silent place.

I'm not saying that I've been afraid for you while you were gone this week. First of all, there was no good reason to, and secondly, you know me. I hold myself together. I'm not wildly sentimental. I love my work. I lose myself inside it. I like being here alone, with Sam and the sheep and the cats in the barn, with woods and fields that keep telling me to watch them and listen.

You have been on my mind, though, a great deal more than normal. And I feel the need to talk about it.

You're the only man I've ever met that I could have married. Your mind and soul make me whole, and amaze me too, as you very well know, to say nothing of your body (which was the first thing that attracted me to you, though that wouldn't have taken us anywhere if talking to you hadn't been what it was).

The things you wrote from the front line? Who else could have done that in just the sort of way that suited my own peculiar character? (I can hear you paraphrasing Samuel Johnson right now, "Being likely to die at any second, concentrates the mind wonderfully.") It's what you believe, and what you think is important in life, and the way you stand on that when pushed; it's the interest you take in all kinds of things that I know nothing about; it's the way you play, and make me laugh, and surprise me daily when I least expect it - it's made me better than I could be without you, and comforts me deep in my bones.

This isn't well written. I could do better if I weren't so tired. I was soaking in the tub, smiling at the way you were playing with Sam the other night when you put your t-shirt on his hairy old head, and I suddenly felt compelled to haul myself out and dash this off before I climb into bed. I'm teaching George Eliot at eight tomorrow morning, and need to be at the office by six.

If anything happens to me, at least you'll have these few lame, limited words to help remember me by. I love you, Ben. I thank God everyday that He brought you home, when, and how, and in the shape He did. That first year-and-a-half when you were in the hospital was indescribable. The fact that you lived,

and were going to be whole, despite the pain and the all-too-many surgeries - we saw how much we were given, and it changed us both forever.

Do not let this flattery go to your head, however. Due to your many deficiencies, I will continue to beat you at Scrabble and other related games without pity or mercy.

I appreciate the way you keep the furnace stoked too. Absence makes the cold heart grow fonder. Coal shoveling's a pain in the back, especially in my blimp-like condition.

*Your reasonably honest, but obstreperous, consort,
Jessie Gerrard Reese*

Ben folded the letter and laid it on the table. Then lit another Camel, thinking that at least he could remember what she looked like right then, and that that was a definite gift. *Being able to stare off into space and see her the way she was. Yesterday was painful. Trying, and not being able to.*

A lot of things could've been worse. You got home. They put you back together. Whole enough to rope her into marrying you. You had twelve years that were better than anyone has a right to expect. How many Scouts like you had that? How many Rangers either?

Ben started thinking about their last afternoon, when Jessie had met him at the library. When he'd driven them home, and they walked the west woods, throwing a tennis ball for Sam. She'd heated up pot roast she'd made the day before and tossed a salad with homemade dressing, while he took the garbage out to the barn and fixed the bathroom faucet.

He'd read her excerpts from *The Rambler* after dinner. She'd read him *Pride And Prejudice* while he built a fire in the parlor. They'd sat on the sofa and talked for an hour. About how to mentor their students better. About how to help them have some perspective on learning to live well. An education that would mean something more than a way to make money.

There was one kid in particular, a former student of Jessie's, who got thrown in jail for being drunk-and-disorderly on a fairly regular basis. Ben had bailed him out the week before, and he and Jessie talked about what they could do to spend time with him and see if they could help.

They'd talked about how to raise their baby, once it actually arrived. And bemoaned the barbaric treatment of twenty-two Negroes on buses down in Birmingham. They talked about the plight of the Hungarian refugees who were pouring into the States to keep from getting killed. Then discussed MacMillan's election in England, and Toscanini's death. And then Jessie started grading essays, while Ben deciphered a pioneer letter he'd dug out of Alderton's archives.

He could almost see the faded ink and smell the musty paper, and he told himself to stop right there. To leave the rest of Thursday night alone. *Write*

it down tomorrow if you want. Though you're beating a dead horse with that. Doing it too many times.

Jessie filled-in the empty places. Body, mind and soul. Though "holes" might be a better term. She was much more than a lover, and a wife, and the best friend I'm likely to get. She taught me all kinds of things, and grilled me when I needed it. She was a brother-in-arms, in an odd way, when we faced the outside world. Someone strong enough to hold me when I woke-up from the war. Who was also a shy little girl who needed me to watch out for her.

I s'ppose that's what wive's and husbands do do. At least the kind that we would've wanted, being the way we were.

Okay.

Fine.

It's time to go to bed.

Remember to call Richard early and tell him about Carl.

Ben crushed that cigarette out in the ashtray, then picked up the letter and went into the study. He was thinking, *How can three months feel like a lifetime? And less than a minute too?* as he put the cigarettes back where they went and walked into his room.

It wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be last, that the time since she'd died seemed surreal.

A string of days in no-man's-land.

Caught alone between the lines.

With no chance of reinforcements.

(Later that morning, Saturday, Ben went to Carl's house, was let in by a young woman named Beth Morland who'd taught with Carl's dead sister. Carl had given Beth a key since he traveled a great deal in the summer and she lived nearby. Ben finds evidence that Carl's house and office at Ohio State have been searched, and also learns that Carl had mailed Beth a letter from home on Wednesday with an unaddressed letter to Ben enclosed, asking her to get Ben's address and mail it to Ben; that Carl had to leave town fast, but would be back before Friday for the concert, and wants it mailed right away to Ben. Ben has just left Carl's house in Worthington, a few miles north of Columbus.)

Ben didn't go home directly. He stopped by his office in Alderton's library to pick up his mail - and found a package waiting on his desk.

That wasn't unusual. Friends, and colleagues, and Alderton donors sent him things all the time to be dated, identified, or appraised. There wasn't a

return address on this one, and "PERSONAL" had been typed on the label to the left of his office address. It was postmarked "Massillon, Ohio." Which didn't suggest much of anything to Ben. And he put the package in his briefcase to open when he got home.

He actually didn't give it a thought, as he drove out of Hillsdale headed west toward the farm. He studied the world darkening in front of him where leaden grey clouds rolled in from the southwest.

Five minutes later, he watched thick shafts of solid looking rain slant down and pound the ground a mile or more away, underneath a broad ink-black bank of low fast-moving clouds.

He watched drizzle bleed and blow across his windshield a quarter of a mile on, and cranked-up the wipers that never did much but smear the surface of the glass.

They did less the next six miles, as the rain hit harder and the wind picked up and the windshield fogged over.

Ben drove slower because of that, without much noticing, on roads (by then) where he rarely saw a car. He was beating his head against Carl's disappearance, asking, *What could he have that was so important, that someone would risk breaking into his house, and Ohio State premises as well?*

He was concentrated on the letter, as he parked by the sawn-off pole that held his old metal mailbox, and tried to keep his window rolled high and still pull out his mail.

He stopped noticing the rain on his face when he saw the letter from Carl - the typed name and city, the handwritten street in between.

He tore it open with his right hand, closing the window with the other - while thunder rolled and lightening flashed close above his head.

Wednesday, June 12, 1957

Dear Ben,

This letter will come to you out of the blue, with no preparation from me, or chance of explanation. I am leaving town this evening and must get this mailed with some haste.

I have taken the liberty of discussing you and your army record with an acquaintance of mine who was in Army Signals during World War II. He, and associates of his, have provided me assurances and background information which has given me the confidence to approach you in a matter of urgency and importance.

I know that you are beginning your summer schedule, and may have plans to leave Hillsdale for much of the summer. May I take the liberty of asking you not to do so in the next two or three weeks; not until you and I have

conferred on the matter I refer to above? I do not overstate the case when I assure you that there are issues of security involved that go well beyond anything you would imagine I might be privy to.

If all goes well, I shall return no later than Friday, and very probably sooner. I will contact you as soon as is possible thereafter. If events beyond my control interfere, I will have set in motion methods of communication to replace a personal meeting. Keep this letter in an extremely secure place: a safe, or safety deposit box.

43-24-4

Carl Walker

Ben checked to see that the letter was typed on the same machine as the envelope. Then he reread the letter, and returned it to the envelope, and slipped it into his briefcase. He stepped on the gas and let out the clutch and eased the old grey Plymouth down the wet rutted drive, asking himself a string of questions he couldn't have asked before.

A pheasant startled in the side drive - the farm track that cut through Vernon's west woods, which were on his left at that moment - and when he turned to watch the cock, he noticed what looked like fresh tire tracks stamped into the mud.

They weren't tractor tracks. Anyone could see that.

Though they could be from Vernon's pick-up.

Or maybe one of his sons'.

Either that or the stranger who didn't put your car registration back exactly the way you'd had it.

Beth didn't need to hear that. But you can't forget it. You've got to start paying attention and making connections now.

Carl's nowhere to be found. Somebody searched his house and office. You have no idea what either of them is up to. So take the letter as a warning.

You're working in the dark again.

And that's not safe, or easy.

The rain was beating down hard then, when Ben pulled into the gravel beside the long west side of the barn. He parked parallel to the double wooden doors, twenty feet away, so Vernon could drive closer if he needed to get in the barn.

Ben sat for a minute, waiting for the downpour to taper off. But when it looked as though it wouldn't soon, he took off his jacket, laid it on top of his briefcase on the floor, and sprinted into the barn.

He turned around just inside the doors, watching the rain slant toward him as he slid them closed one at a time, leaving a foot wide gap.

He turned his back to the outside, then took the lid off a dented metal garbage can and reached in for the bag of cat food, intending to fill the three

metal bowls he kept near the right hand door.

Then he stopped. And listened.

Stepping farther away from the slice of gray light that fell across the stone floor.

No cats.

That's odd.

Not one running up to me.

Somebody else is in here. Somebody they don't know.

He could feel it, standing there in damp dusty air, his wet shirt sticking to his back, the hairs up on his neck.

He slowed his breathing as he listened, eyes scouting the corners, the left side of the barn first, behind Vernon's corn seeder, past bags of just-bought wheat seed and stacked bags of fertilizer.

Ben stood in the two story center, at the edge of the right side loft, three or four feet now from the long west wall, keeping himself in the dark, staring next at the hay and straw stored in the lefthand loft.

There was nothing strange he could see from there.

Not in the front few feet.

So check the ground floor first.

Then climb up to make sure.

The right side of the first floor - with the small tractor, the drill press, the table saw, the folding sheep pen, the tangle of farming and repair equipment packed close together - wasn't easy to evaluate in the dark, not from where he stood.

He was beginning to turn farther to the right, getting ready to edge his way in and search through the clutter - when he heard a noise above him that he knew came from the left.

Something hard and heavy, something with sharp edges, swung down in a wide arc and smashed into his skull.

.

Ben came-to ten minutes later, lying on his face on cold damp fieldstone. Right arm under him. Head exploding. Lightening flashing behind his eyes.

He could taste dirt, when he started to open them. He could smell hay, and feed, and fertilizer, without knowing what they were. He knew a cat was rubbing against his side, somewhere below his shoulder. But he couldn't connect it so it made sense, and explained where he was.

When he tried to get up it got worse. So he waited a minute, checking body parts, tentatively moving his arms and legs - before slowly, carefully, picking his head up two or three inches off soil splattered stone.

He pushed his shoulders up, propping himself on his hands, then pulled

his legs up under him, shoving himself till he sat on one hip, braced on his good arm.

Something warm's dripping in my ear.

Blood.

But not too much.

From what?

Ouch.

Large lump.

Behind my ear that hurts.

What's the sound?

Like something creaking.

Somewhere close. I think.

No, somewhere up above my head.

He looked, trying to clear his vision, telling himself to overlook his stomach rolling in a sickening slide - and saw a wooden block-and-tackle swinging above his head.

In the loft.

Before.

Ah. Then I'm in the barn.

Why didn't I know that?

Which loft?

This side? Or that?

Left?

Right?

Can't remember which is which.

Loft on the left. Left side.

That's the hand with the scar.

Wooden thing couldda killed me.

That weight.

On a long rope.

Couldn't've come undone because . . .

Shhh . . . listen . . .

Car.

Truck?

Starting-up in the lane.

Off in the woods. Sounds like.

Heading the other way. Thank God.

Don't know what I'm doing.

Don't know what's going on.

Ben stroked a half-grown kitten that had just climbed in his lap. The last of the litters there'd be, with any luck, since he'd taken Vernon's barn cats to get fixed earlier that spring.

He didn't remember that then. He couldn't have said Vernon's name. All

he knew was this was a cat.

He was sitting on the floor of the barn.

And his head made it hard to think.

He grunted quietly as he got to his feet, standing and swaying while his head twirled. Before he carefully walked toward the doors, heading toward the car.

Something outside.

I'm s'pposed to do.

Can't remember what. Or why.

Something about the car.

He was moving slowly, quietly, tentatively. Trying to protect his scrambled brain from any kind of jarring. His hands were out in front of him, as though he were trying to feel the air, or keep from stumbling in the half-gray dark.

Something's there.

Something I have to see.

What?

Something out there.

Got to see if something's safe.

Stop saying something.

Now. Don't say it again.

Have to keep something safe.

What, I can't remember.

He stood by the old gray Plymouth, drizzle sliding down his face, supporting himself with his hands on the roof, trying to make himself think.

"Rats."

I'm going to be sick.

He lurched over to the edge of the woods, and was, behind a wild shrub. He stood there, weaving on his feet, one hand holding a tree trunk, trying to get his bearings.

He turned his face up to the sky, letting the rain wash over him. Wanting the cold and the shock of it. Trying to jumpstart his brain.

He wandered slowly back to the car, and stood there getting rained on. Till he opened the passenger door, finally, without really knowing why.

He saw his sport coat and his briefcase on the floor.

He knew he knew what they were.

But not why they were there.

Or what he ought to do.

A minute went by before he picked them up, and stared at them in his hands. Then he turned around slowly, aware of the weight of them, heavier than normal, hanging loosely in his hands, and stared at the double doors.

He took them with him, the briefcase and the coat, stepping slowly, easing into the barn, then stood there with his back to the doors, trying to

decide what to do.

Car door.

Open?

Can't remember.

Go see, and close it.

If you didn't before.

Cats were swirling around his feet, eight or ten from what he could tell. And he laid his things down without thinking, and poured food in their bowls.

He stood and watched them eat.

Then he sat and let them crawl on him.

Then he got up to close the barn doors. And saw the car door open.

It was black inside the barn. (When he'd closed up the car and slid the barn doors together.) The only breaks in the darkness were small patches of faint grey light from widely scattered windows.

The top of one door, too. It looked like. A people-size door. Or so he assumed. Across the short side of the barn.

He started toward it, without thinking much about it, and then went back, to find the coat and briefcase. Why, he couldn't have said. And yet he knew he should take them with him when he walked outside.

He felt for them on his hands and knees, and carried them with him to the door. He stepped out, into a softening mist, and stared across at his mud room door forty feet away.

It was unlocked, when he got to it. Just as he'd left it that morning. Exactly the way most people would in his part of the world.

He knew that's how he *had* left it, without any thought or effort, and as he wiped his feet on the inside mat, he wondered why he'd remember that when so much else was gone.

He looked at his shoes and saw mud and dried dirt, and that his pants were smeared with mud too, with flecks of hay and straw. He stepped outside and swatted at his clothes, and took his shoes off there.

He carried them back to the mud room and laid them on the throw rug in front of the sink by the washer.

And then he saw, through a muddled mind, without knowing how exactly, that something inside was wrong.

It took him awhile, figuring it out.

He stood there and closed his eyes and held his head in his hands.

He sat on the dryer and made himself breathe more deeply than he normally would - telling himself to wake-up and concentrate, and see what he needed to see.

Someone's been in here.

The mud room's been searched.

Canned goods and tools had been shifted on the shelves. Mail had been shuffled in the basket on the wall. A cabinet drawer that stuck on itself hadn't

been shoved all the way.

Ben went through every downstairs room, as well as the guestroom and darkroom upstairs - and almost everywhere he turned (slowly, awkwardly, semi-unsteadily) there were differences he could see.

They probably weren't meant to be. Care had been taken. But Ben had spent too many nights analyzing the contents of German command posts across western Europe to not see the subtleties in his own house.

His mind was beginning to gear-up again. Not like normal. Not like before. But enough to see a chair pushed back too far, a row of books out of order, a stack of records by the hi-fi lined up too neatly.

Why he could remember the visual parameters of the inside of his house when so much else had been erased made no particular sense. But as he stopped and tried to think about it, standing in his kitchen, he knew head wounds were like that, having seen more than enough of them during the Second World War.

You're still sidestepping the question.

You know that, don't you? Even now.

Who could've done it? And why would they?

And what does it mean to you now?

The block-and-tackle didn't hit you on its own.

You know it was tied to that beam.

Why would someone want to hurt you?

Why would it happen now?

Ben turned on the faucet in the old stone sink and stuck his head under a fast running stream of icy artesian water.

He had to try to clear his head, and clean the wound too. But he still swore when the water flushed through it. And once he'd touched it - fingering it gently, doing damage assessment, blotting the blood with a clean kitchen towel - he started off to the bathroom to find the peroxide and iodine.

He picked up his briefcase after he'd finished, opening it up on the kitchen table, knowing something important was in there, but not remembering what.

He took out a package and laid it aside, something sent by a donor, probably, without a return address. One of the usual elderly alums asking Ben to research something the family had sitting around.

He read Carl's letter next, and recognized the seriousness. For he remembered then, suddenly and unexpectedly, having forgotten completely before that, that Carl Walker was missing. That he himself had searched Carl's house, and his college office as well. That someone else had gone through it too, looking for who knew what.

Ben found himself reading the letter again, without really meaning to, before the kettle on the stove got hot, holding the paper in one hand, spooning powdered coffee with the other, until he said, "Wait a minute . . ." and reached

for the brown paper parcel.

The label was typed on the same machine Carl used for the letter.

That's a relief, that I can make a connection. That something's still in there somewhere. Carl, and Beth, and what we did today is still traceable in the brain.

Whether I remember it all, I'm in no position to say. Though it could be worse, I know that. I've seen concussions turn people into sausages, and the wounds looked just like mine.

Ben cut the string on the package, and pulled off the paper, exposing two novels by Leo Tolstoy - *Anna Karenina*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Hardcover. Ordinary editions. Which made no sense at all.

There was a folded piece of typing paper in *Anna Karenina* with a handwritten note from Carl that read, "Keep everything I'm sending you in an office vault, or a bank deposit box, or another place as secure."

There were numbers on a smaller sheet of notepaper too, stuck in the front of *Ivan Ilyich*, "23-33-180-678-374," followed by, "Identification with photo. Passport or similar." Written in Walker's hand.

It doesn't make any sense.

Nuts.

Not that I can see.

What's he trying to tell me?

Numbers that big aren't a combination to a safe.

Not the standard sort you'd expect. Although . . .

Ben couldn't make himself finish the thought. And he sighed quietly, and sat still for a minute, his hands on the kitchen table.

Someone went through my glove compartment.

Someone searched Carl's house and office.

Someone searched my house.

Someone shoved the block-and-tackle.

Something important's at stake.

Ben picked up *Anna Karenina* and began fanning the pages, studying the printing, and the edges, and the space behind the spine - looking for signs of fore-edge painting, or a message somewhere, of some kind.

He stood-up slowly, and eased himself down into the old wooden rocker, his brain beating painfully against bone, as he reached for the phone to call Richard.

It rang before he touched it - Richard calling him with news from

Chester Hansen, Hillsdale's Chief of Police.

Carl Walker's body had been found by a couple of boys about 6:15 on the banks of the Tangey River.

(At the end of *The Book-Breaker's Mission*, when the mystery's solved and the danger's over - Ben's back home trying to adjust to life again with the summer stretched out in front of him. Richard West has just visited him, leaving several

days' worth of chicken curry, after having failed to get Ben to agree to seeing a movie that night. Walter Buchannon's a farmer of Ben's acquaintance who sometimes boards horses for friends.)

Ben's phone rang while he was putting the chicken in the freezer. And he said, "Hey, Walter!" the second he heard the voice. "I was just thinking about you this morning. How're you and June doing? How's your boy doing with the new horse? . . . Really? Now? . . . Why? . . . What kind of help? . . . Okay . . . Sure . . . I'll be right over."

When Ben drove into his driveway, Walter Buchannon was standing by his pick-up truck between the house and the barn, looking at his watch. He was a big man, tall and broad-bodied, who'd spent a lifetime working outside, turning his hands hard and calloused, putting creases in the tan skin at the edges of his eyes.

He walked over to Ben's car and said, "Why don't I drive, if you don't mind, since I know where we're going?"

"So what's this all about?" Ben was getting into Walter's cab, slamming the door behind him.

"Well, I've got this friend . . ." Walter Buchannon cleared his throat, as he turned right out his driveway - then he smiled fast, and started over, looking briefly across at Ben. "He's more of an acquaintance, I guess. And he's an odd bird, but an okay-guy, and he's crazy about horses, and he called me all hot-and-bothered 'cause he bought him a buncha horses in a group sale at an auction. That's where they sell a bunch real cheap, and you have to take 'em all to get the one you want."

"And?" Ben was watching Walter over her dark glasses thinking he knew where this was headed, and how it ought to end.

"Well, he likes sulky racin', and he don't have a whole lotta money, or land either one, and he can't afford to keep them all, and there's one, this thoroughbred, and this guy's gonna have to send him to a rendering plant tomorrow with the others that're lame and broke down, and yet he figures this one's . . . I don't know, he kinda figures this one shouldn't get put-down, but he don't know what to do with him."

"Walter -"

"I don't need another horse. June don't ride, and Buster's got one, and I thought about you. I mean I know you used to ride and all that, and I thought you might want to take a look." Walter glanced at Ben then, sheepishly, as though he weren't sure what kind of reception this was going to get, or what kind of reception it *ought* to get from someone he didn't know any better than he knew Ben.

"I'm not planning to get a horse, Walter. I mean, I like horses, you know

that, and I'd like to have one sometime, but this doesn't seem like the time to me."

"I figured that'd be the case, but we've only got till tomorrow, till Henry has to go to the killers with the rest of them, and I didn't know who else to ask. I thought maybe, if you didn't want him, you might know somebody who would, that I don't know to ask."

"Nobody comes to mind. But I'll give it some thought."

They were quiet then, watching the land fly by - the woods, the cornfields, the winter wheat and the hay, the streams winding through low places, the one small herd of black-and-white cows grazing on smooth green hills.

"How've you been?" Walter asked, with his eyes on the road.

"Oh, pretty good. You know."

"Yeah. Here we are. Least it quit raining yesterday. That'll help. Less standing water. His name's Henry Rivers. A friend of mine says if there was a button that'd kill him, and he could choose who'd guard it and keep anybody from pushing it, Henry would be the one he'd choose. I wouldn't go that far, but he's got a big heart. Impractical, though. Bites off more than he can chew. Can't take care of what he's got. I don't like to see it, and I'll bet it's worse than normal now, with him buying the whole bunch."

Walter pulled into a rutted mud track, then drove past the side of a small dilapidated house into a mud and gravel parking area between the house and a shed-like barn with holes in the roof and walls.

It was surrounded by postage-stamp-sized paddocks packed with milling horses. There was mud and manure halfway to their knees, and they looked beaten and listless, when they weren't pinning their ears. Some had wounds and bald spots on their hides. Most were skin-and-bone.

"Walt! How you doin? Good to see ya." He was small and thin, a bandy rooster kind of a man, wearing ripped jeans and beat-up boots, hurrying over to Walt and Ben from hitching a rusted six horse trailer to an older rustier pick-up. "Glad you could come so quick. Sad bunch, hunh? Ones in the front here are from the group sale."

Walt introduced Ben, and the three of them shook hands.

Henry said, "He's a real good looking horse," while he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief that could've used soap and water. "I got him in a stall in back. Got a real sad story behind him. Hurt his leg on the track. Run pretty good till he done that. You can look at his papers and see what he won. Small tracks, though, nothin' fancy. Looks like he cut the leg on wire, or a startin' gate or something, and the folks who owned him give him away to some fella from up in Michigan. Story goes that he put him in a field and didn't feed him for three years. Let him scrounge what he could off the land."

Walter shoved his hands in his pockets, his big tanned face turning red, his eyes looking hotter still. "A guy like that oughtta be horse whipped!"

“Yeah. Think what that mustta been like in the winter. It’s a wonder he’s alive. Musta been a stream there, where he’d kick the ice in and get himself water, you know how they do. But he went right down to bone. Weighed eight hunnerd pounds when some guy bought him in a big sale for dog meat up near Detroit.

“I got him in this group sale last week like I said, and I been fattening him up on corn for the killers, ‘cause they pay by the pound as you know. But there’s something about him. I don’t know. You can see the leg wouldn’t a held-up for racin’, but he could be a riding horse, I figure, for somebody. But if you folks want him, you gotta decide today. I’m taking him to the killers tomorra morning, him and twelve others I can’t pay to keep.”

Walter said, “Can we take a look at him?”

“Sure. Sure, I’ll get him right out.” Henry ambled around to the back of the barn, where he moved two horses from a tiny fenced-in space into the one next to it, starting a dust-up that didn’t last long with the two mares already there.

There were two stalls in front, and two stalls in back, that backed-up against each other with no aisleway between. All four stalls had top-to-bottom doors to the outside, with no windows, and no other light. And the stalls were so small a normal size horse could barely turn around. When Henry opened the stall door, Ben saw exactly what he’d feared - the floor was more than a foot-and-a-half deep in filthy mud and muck, and the heat and flies were horrible.

The mud-encrusted hindquarters of a medium sized chestnut horse were right up against the door too, and as soon as it opened, he backed out a foot, and turned his head toward the outside, blinking his eyes over-and-over, trying to adjust to light. He was wearing a rag of a halter that was too small for his head, so that the webbing was pressed into his hide and had been for sometime.

He started to try to turn around, but Henry squeezed in, wading through the filth, carrying a threadbare lead rope, and backed the horse straight out, holding him there in the fenced-in space in foot-deep mud and manure.

The gelding had no muscles anywhere, and there were bones sticking out where they shouldn’t be, and a stomach too, hanging underneath him, from no exercise and extra corn, to fatten him fast for the killers.

“His name’s All Sun. He got bred down in Arkansas. The left fore got cut on the track. See how thick the leg is? Fetlock up to the knee?”

Ben was staring at All Sun’s face, the broad-browed copper-colored face with a white blaze that was turned toward his. He was filthy and sweating and matted with unbrushed winter hair, but the eyes didn’t look mean or crazy, and he let Ben stroke his neck. He didn’t try to bite or kick. And with everything All Sun had had put up with, plenty of horses might have.

He looked resigned, to Ben. Stoical. Self-contained. Without illusions, or expectations, or respect for the likes of men.

Ben knew he was anthropomorphizing, as he took the lead rope from Henry. But he'd lived with horses growing-up, and he saw what he saw from experience, and the kind of instinct too that sprouts when you're a kid.

He led All Sun through the mud and the muck into the drive by the trucks. He patted his neck, and felt his injured front leg - the scarred tendon, the thickened splint bone - before he walked him around in a circle watching the way he moved.

All Sun watched him back, and did what he was told. "Ho . . . Walk . . . Ho." He let Ben pick his feet up, which stunk with thrush, from standing in weeks of crap. And he held his head reasonably still and let Ben examine his teeth.

"Henry, do you have a lunge rope I could use for a minute? And a place big enough to lunge him?"

"Sure. You can take him behind the barn. My neighbor don't mind if we use his land. I'll go grab you a rope. Did I tell ya he's twelve years old?"

Ben talked to All Sun while he waited. Then snapped the twenty foot lunge line on his halter, and led him back to the patch of muddy grass where there was space to get him trotting in a circle and see more about how he moved.

All Sun was so out of shape, and so nervous, he was breathing hard as he trotted around Ben. And yet Ben still cantered him a few minutes later, not quite half a circle, careful not to ask too much, but wanting some kind of idea what his canter was like.

His gates weren't nearly as regular as they would be if he were fit, but Ben could see enough to know All Sun wasn't lame, and he'd probably move reasonably well, once he got in shape.

He was quivering when Ben stopped him, and Ben patted his neck, and told him to settle down, that he'd be okay, that he'd been a good boy, that he was done for the day.

As they walked back to the parking area, another truck drove in, and All Sun shied sideways. He was anxious, and could've been high strung by nature. It was hard to tell with him eating corn, since sugar makes horses hyper.

But he'd jumped away from Ben instead of into him, and Ben was glad to see that. If a horse acts silly about something, you want to see them deliberately do it in a direction other than yours.

When the truck door opened and the man got out, All Sun stood and watched him - and then began to calm down.

Henry said, "Hey, doc. I didn't expect you this morning."

"I was in your neck of the woods, and thought I might as well stop. You still want the Coggins test done on the Morgan you want to race?"

"I do. Sure. You wait there and I'll go get him. Can I leave All Sun with you folks a minute?"

Ben said, "Sure," and then nodded, as Walter introduced him to Dr. Rick Martin. Ben listened when he talked to Walter, describing a colic he'd just treated. And then Ben, who'd been watching All Sun, turned to Dr. Martin. "Have you got time to check this guy out? The leg that got hurt on the track especially. The usual stuff too. Heart, lungs, teeth, gut. Henry wants to sell him. He bought him last week in a group sale."

"Sure. Hold on a second." The tall, dark-haired vet got his bag and stethoscope from the truck seat, and walked back to Ben.

He started with the old injury, and said it probably wouldn't be a super big deal. "The big scarred tendon's been healed a long time. The splint bone's healed okay too. It's nothing you'd want him to stress on the track, but he'd be okay to ride as a pleasure horse, for quite a few years to come. Probably. Meaning, I can't guarantee that. I might not buy him for a kid who'd be crushed if things turned out differently. But the cannon bone, that's critical, that was never injured. His heart, and lungs, and his gut-sounds are normal. His eyes are fine. He's anything but fit, but he could be again, with the right food and exercise, after his feet get proper attention."

Henry arrived leading a small bay Morgan, and Martin stepped across to him, taking a syringe from his pocket.

Ben asked, "How much do you want for All Sun?"

And Henry said, "I gotta get me a hunnerd bucks, to pay for what I got in him. I'm not looking to make nothin'. I'd like to find him a home."

"Okay. Good. You got yourself a deal. If Walter's willing to keep him for me." Ben looked at Walter.

Who smiled and said, "Sure. We can go home and get the trailer now, and be back in close to an hour."

"Dr. Martin, could you give him whatever immunizations he needs while you're here? Look at the papers Henry's got, and fill in whatever's missing? Check the thoroughbred number tattooed inside his lip with Henry's papers too, to make sure we've got the right horse."

"Sure. No problem at all." He gave Ben his business card, and Ben wrote his address on the back so Martin could send him the bill.

Walter and Ben were back an hour-and-a-half later, having gotten a stall ready, and brought Buster's horse in so All Sun would have company when he arrived and know he wasn't alone. Ben had also borrowed two carrots from June Buchannon and stuck them in the pockets of his jeans.

He didn't need them at Henry's. All Sun loaded into the trailer like what he was - a pro who's been loaded a hundred times going to-and-from trainers and tracks.

He was dripping with sweat, though, when he got out. And he was really nervous in Walter's barn. He circled constantly in the big clean stall, pawing at the saw dust, not touching his hay at all, while Ben and Walter watched.

Ben told Walter he'd stay with him for awhile, and feed him the carrots when he'd settled down. "I'll stop by the house before I go, though. I have to buy him a halter that fits, and a lead rope, and a hoof pick, and all that, and I'll bring everything back sometime this afternoon."

"What would you think about me putting Buster's horse out in a couple of hours, and putting All Sun out in the paddock next door? Get him out, with company, and let him run around some. I'd keep my eye on him so he don't act stupid and hurt himself. But he's been cooped up a long time, and I gotta believe it'd do him good. Ordinarily they'll be turned out all day long. Or all night long, when it's really hot and the bugs are bad during the day. Now he needs to get used to his stall, and begin to feel at home."

"Makes good sense to me. I'm going to change his name, by the way. I want to call him Journey."

"Better than All Sun, I'll say that. How'd you come up with it?"

"I don't know. I guess I just like the sound."

"I'll see you up to the house."

Walter stood in his kitchen where he could watch both barn doors, and dialed a number he had to look up. He waited quite awhile for someone to answer, and then said, "This is Walt Buchannon, Dr. West. . . . Okay, Richard, sure. I thought you'd want to know Ben bought the horse. It's lucky you gave me a call last week, 'cause this one come-up just at the right time, and I wouldn't've gotten in touch with Ben if you hadn't gotten me looking for one. . . ."

"That's what I'm tellin' you, he bought it right then. We've got the horse to my place now. He's a thoroughbred gelding, and real unfit. It'll take time to build him up, but he's not mean, that I can see. 'Course, he could change down the road. Sometimes they can seem real docile, just 'cause they're so unfit, and then when they get the right groceries and build up some muscle, they go and change for the worst. I don't expect that's what'll happen, but . . ."

"Nope, once he saw that horse, and how he was livin', and heard what he'd been through, Ben bought him right then. The vet showed up like I asked him to, and he gave the horse the once over, and that kinda clinched the deal. . . ."

"Ben'll have to spend a good bit of time working with him, and I kinda think that's a good thing. . . . No, my pleasure . . . What? . . . He's changed his name to Journey."

Ben stood by the stall door and watched the mud-caked chestnut peer anxiously out the open window at the back of his stall. It was covered with stiff metal fencing so he couldn't break the glass and cut himself, and he felt the wire with his nose, from one side to the other.

He stretched his head up to the top of the stall and stuck his muzzle over the heavy horizontal boards that separated him from the old bay gelding in the

stall next to his. The bay raised his nose and snorffled at Journey for a second - an interested, easy going, good will kind of greeting - before he walked to his own half-height stall door and hung his head over the top so he could watch Ben in the aisle-way.

Journey twirled around twice, then peed in a back corner, before he looked out the window again, trumpeting nervously four or five times, calling to every other living horse who might be anywhere near him.

He sniffed the feed box, and the floor of the stall. He looked up at the ceiling. Then, finally, he turned his head toward Ben, who was still standing, silent and still, by the closed half-door.

Ben looked away from Journey, as soon as their eyes met. He turned his back to the door. And waited for Journey to come to him.

He did. After a few minutes. And Ben paid no attention, except that he talked in a low quiet voice. Speaking slowly, speaking soothingly, keeping his voice deep and rumbling, talking on about nothing whatever, without looking at Journey.

After another four or five minutes, Ben finally turned slowly and opened the half-door. He stepped in and closed it again, turning to face the aisle-way, till Journey stopped circling and stood still behind him.

Ben said, "Come here, kiddo. You want a carrot? Come on. I won't hurt you. You aren't going to have to worry about that ever again."

Journey was absolutely drenched with sweat, and Ben told himself to bring towels when he came back, and to give him a really good iodine bath after he'd calmed down. That could be a day or two, depending on how it went.

"You're a good boy, aren't you, Journey? All you need is a home. You need to get fed, and get your feet taken care of, and get turned-out so you can run around, but get brought in when it's cold, or hot, to live in a big clean stall. You need to get washed, and brushed, and learn that you can count on that. That you'll get what you need everyday." Ben stopped, still staring at the aisle-way, while Journey paced the stall.

"I'm going to get you fit, and we're gonna have some fun. I'm going to take care of you, Journey. Walter and his boy will too. You won't have to worry again. Never. Not as long as you live."

It wasn't that Ben thought Journey understood any of that. He was talking so Journey could hear his voice and get used to the care and the calmness.

He was talking to himself as much as to Journey.

Pledging himself to what would come too.

Committing himself to the future.

"You want another carrot?" Ben held the carrot up, and Journey stopped pacing long enough to eat it. Ben reached over and stroked the side of Journey's nose, then blew softly into Journey's right nostril, which Journey then moved closer to Ben, so he could smell Ben better.

Journey stood there, as long as Ben breathed on him. Then he rushed over to the window and stared out at the yard.

"I'll be back later. You be good. Don't give Walter a hard time."

Journey didn't look at him when he left.

Journey didn't trust anybody.

Journey would have to have reason to. And that was going to take time.

Ben wrote Walter a check for the first month's board, and made a list, with Walter's help, of what he'd have to buy. He got the phone number of the cavalry colonel Walter knew too, who trained horses and taught dressage, now that he'd retired.

Ben started out the kitchen door, then turned and looked back. "Thanks for all the help, Walter." He stood there for a second or two.

Till Walter said, "It's nothing. You two are gonna get along real well."

"Yeah. Maybe. Yeah, I think we are. I'll be back this afternoon."

Ben started his car, and put it in reverse. Then sat and stared at his hands on the wheel.

He said, "What've you done?" out loud, out the window, the clutch pinned to the floorboards, the gas pedal untouched. *You don't make snap decisions like that. Not with this much commitment attached. What if you can't afford it?*

You don't have any idea what a saddle costs, even an old used one. You don't know where you're moving, or how much you'll have to pay for a house, or what kind of work'll be involved in fixing-up a new place.

You've saddled yourself with a horse who's so unfit you can't begin to know what he's like. Because once he gets his strength back, he could turn into a rogue.

Saddled yourself with a horse.

Would that be considered a pun? No.

There's probably a proper term only Richard would know.

Ben smiled, and shook his head. Then stepped on the gas and let out the clutch, and said, "Yeah? Well, why not?" *You're a sucker for a challenge, and life with Journey won't be dull. Right?*

Which is probably a good thing. It'll get you up, and get you out the door. And he could use the help.

He can't talk, that's something.

He'll be far easier to be around than Richard West on a bad day.

And now that I stop to think about it, I bet Richard had something to do with this!

Why would Walter phone me out of the blue? When he doesn't know me any better than he does?

I bet Richard called him.

I should've thought of that sooner.

I'll get the truth out of one of them, and tell Richard to back off.

Yeah?

Why?

Let him have the pleasure of thinking he pulled it off.

It's not like he doesn't deserve it, with everything he's been doing for you.

Starting the night Jessie died.

Let him have it his way. If he gets really uppity, you can spring it on him later when he thinks he's gotten away with it.

Ben grinned, briefly, as he turned left toward Hillsdale at the end of Walter's drive. It's going to be fun to ride again. Walter's got lots of land we can trail-ride through, woods and open ground too. Let's just hope I can find a used saddle that doesn't cost the earth.

I should probably talk to the colonel first. I don't want a jumping saddle. Maybe a used cavalry saddle.

I need to start Journey slowly, I do know that. A lot of lunging at the trot. A lot of walking under saddle. Take enough time to get him fit before I ask too much.