

NO STRAIGHT THING

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F. NELSON SMITH



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To Tessa—who saved me lots of embarrassment

Southern Alberta, Early August 1936

“Wait for me at the end of the street,” Cat whispered to Joe.

She approached Frieda Hoffman’s house gripping little Charlie’s hand, making him scurry along beside her to keep in stride. All the while, she watched Joe move up the street to the corner without her.

“Wait for me,” she hissed at him again.

But Joe didn’t wait. Her stomach fluttering like trapped butterflies, she deposited her young brother at the doorstep and gave a sharp rap at the door before turning to leave. Her mother wouldn’t like that. Mrs. Hoffman had offered to take Charlie swimming with her own brood, and it was Cat’s job to ensure he arrived. She wasn’t fooled. The same trick had been played once before when her mother had shipped Alex off to a farm.

Cat left Young Charlie at the door and ran back down the street along the route Joe had taken. She found him three blocks away, looking at a bike, discarded in the schoolyard.

“You can’t take it,” she protested.

“It’s already stolen,” he said, and sat on it, trying it out for size. “Maybe you’d better go home.”

Ignoring his command, Cat perched sideways on the bike’s crossbar, gripping the handlebars while Joe began to pedal. Both rubber tires squashed against the rims under their double weight but picked up speed gradually, Joe’s heavy breath sending puffs of air against her neck. Nearing Thomson Hill, he stopped and made her get off, then pushed ahead of her up the gravel road leading to the top of the cliff, as if by hurrying he could leave her behind. Afraid he might, she scrambled to keep pace. Once there, with the prairie expanse spread out before them, he relented and waited

for her. They rode and walked through the short grass, scattering grasshoppers, until they came to the CPR siding near Macson.

Joe found this place upon the advice of a rail-rider weeks before. “Never flip a rattler in the town,” the rail-rider had warned. His eyes raked over Joe, and his mouth turned down. “You fixing to go out of town, boy?”

Joe looked him straight in the eye and nodded.

The man sighed, shaking his head. “Stay away from men who are too friendly, or say they’ll take care of you. What they do with young boys like you ain’t pretty. You understand?” He waited until he saw Joe nod, and added. “If you have to flip a rattler, go to Macson. There’s a switch there. You can jump the train when it slows. And don’t try to ride the rods. You ain’t strong enough.”

At Macson, the tracks continued east or switched towards the southwest, to Lethbridge and beyond, through the Crow’s Nest to Vancouver. Cat had tried to picture travelling on a train, through places with strange names like Crow’s Nest, and forests thick with trees, under mountains so high the tips were snow covered.

Now, watching Joe as he assessed the location, her imagination faded along with the tracks disappearing into the horizon. She moved closer to him, reaching out for him, and struggled to breathe against the pain in her chest.

The never-ceasing prairie wind flattened their clothes, wrapping around arms and legs whose childish roundness had evaporated along with ample food. A tumbleweed of dead Russian thistle rolled past, hooking itself against the sagebrush. Cat shivered even as the heat of the day lingered into evening.

They walked a short distance more until Joe decided this was the best spot. He led her across the track, picking his way along the ties, mindful of spots a snake might snuggle against a rail for warmth. Cat held Joe’s arm as he pulled away.

“Joe.” Cat’s amber eyes pleaded, worry lines creasing her small face. “Wait for Mr. Marchenko. Don’t leave me alone.”

Joe shook his head. “I have to find Dad. Go home, Cat. I shouldn’t have let you come.”

“But Vancouver’s big. You’ll never find him.” Uninvited tears sketched through the dust coating her cheeks. “The train bulls will

catch you. They beat up rail-riders. They'll put you in jail with the hobos and bums. If Mom knew . . ."

He yanked his arm from her hand. "Then why is she making me quit school? She doesn't care as long as I'm gone."

"It's not her," Cat said. "It's him. I heard them talking. They thought I was asleep."

Joe nodded. "I think he made her send Alex away too." They regarded each other.

"I hate cows." Joe blinked and swallowed hard.

"Please, Joe."

"I'll just follow the guys hitching," he said, ignoring her. "Dad will be in a work camp for sure. I'll tell him Mom can't manage. He's gotta know about Alex too." He took hold of her shoulders and bore into her with begging eyes. "Don't ever tell anybody I hopped the train. Just pretend Mr. Marchenko picked me up and I'm working on his farm." His voice broke, going deep and then without warning into a high tenor. It made him young, frightened.

"I'll be okay, Cat. . . . Get rid of the bike in the coulee behind the flour mill. By the time you get back, people will be gone from the mill, and nobody will see you. *Don't* tell Mom."

Cat answered with a weak nod.

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," she affirmed, feeling brave if only until the breeze picked up the words and carried them off.

They lifted their heads at the vacant echo of the train's whistle. The rails hummed. The freight train slowed for the switch. Joe had rehearsed his timing the whole last week—how he could grab the ladder on the boxcar. With luck, someone would reach out and pull him through the freight door. Another mournful whistle warned the train was closing in on the switch. Joe turned his face away, but not before she saw his lips begin to quiver.

"Bye, Cat. And keep our violin safe. Harley will sell it."

The big mountain engine rumbled at them before she could reply. *Is it coming too fast?* Her stomach flip-flopped.

They ducked low in the darkness, backs turned and eyes closed against flying cinders until the engine rolled past. Boxcars thumped, wheels click-clacking over the joins in the rails. Joe grabbed his

small bundle, an extra pair of pants and shirt, with the jacket's sleeves tied to make a handle. She shouted goodbye, but he was running towards the train.

His figure got smaller, a thin arm reaching out for the ladder on the side of the boxcar. In spite of herself, there was a small thrill watching him. She's watched him before, a show-off, daring her to try. The timing was everything. First, grab the ladder, put his foot on the ledge below the boxcar, and climb. Easy, he told her.

Then he was gone, the sight searing through her eyes and into her head. She thought he cried out her name.

Overwhelming despair cemented her legs into the prairie. She put her hands over her ears to stop the thrumming noise, but it only increased. Her surroundings began to whirl in dizzying spirals, and she sank to her knees, closing her eyes waiting for her head to explode. Instead, a wave of nothingness surged through her, as though a hand had mercifully thrown off a switch. Welcoming the tranquil peace it brought, she opened her eyes.

The tail end of the caboose was already shrinking into the distance, its last mocking whistle echoing in her brain, repeating, *"Don't tell . . . don't tell."*

AN eon ago, in Southeastern Alberta, a geological rift appeared along the South Saskatchewan River, spewing up fine sandstone and clay that formed into cliffs and coulees. What remained was a valley dotted with hillocks curving round the land and river.

Within this rift, the city of Cypress Landing developed. Sandstone cliffs contained the prime ingredients for manufacturing industries, and the city flourished with cheap heating, water, and electricity. Wheat prices soared, and five flour mills operated at full capacity. The CPR network of rail lines brought markets close. In the unblemished prairie air, the stars formed a golden halo over the city. Despite warnings, optimistic farmers in an area called the Palliser Triangle broke up progressively more land rooted with stable short grass to plant evermore wheat.

The reckoning began with a persistent drought followed by the stock market crash in October 1929. Then the winds came. Heartless winds scooped up all that rootless, arid dirt and blew it away from the earth.

Within the city of 9,500, prosperous people found themselves destitute. The CPR was the largest railway terminus between Winnipeg and Calgary, and as a consequence, there arrived a daily influx of train-riders; homeless, transients, and just plain hobos, seeking work or camping for a few days before moving on. And the city police chief, Captain Sam Embleton, and his force of eighteen men made sure they did. Transients got fifty cents for food and shown the way out of town.

The second Tuesday in August started out as expected that summer of 1936, hot and airless. As the day wore on, the heat

radiating off roads and sidewalks dissolved into watery illusions. The occasional breeze wafted heat-laden air against people and buildings as if to suck out the last bit of moisture. Near four o'clock in the afternoon, a few wilting citizens remarked on the large ring around the sun, but experienced people sprang into action. Proprietors shut up stores, housewives slammed windows closed and stuffed rags or mats around thresholds. Mothers with shrill voices urged children into shelter while whipping the washing off clotheslines.

In the distance along the horizon to the east, a huge black cloud, roiling in on itself, tossed in silent fury as it moved toward the city. It covered the entire width of the horizon, growing larger with frightening speed. Sound arrived first, like the moan of a distant train, then small swirls of dirt, tumbleweeds and other debris danced along the streets.

The wall of dirt hit the city twisting and blowing the ground from under feet, stealing breath and loose items away, roaring against everything in its path. In minutes, the tall, dense cloud covered the sky, and day became night.

On the edge of town, the whine of the storm smothered the sound of cracking glass in the rows of greenhouses. Sucking winds scooped up loose wheat and detritus around the flour mills, firing the missiles against the warehouses. Fine grit found its way into every nook and cranny, affecting rich and poor alike, on both sides of the tracks. In the downtown business core, drivers blinded by the black clouds parked helter-skelter on the street. Shoppers caught outside groped their way to the doors of Eaton's, Woolworth, or any handy hiding place.

Fergus Muir later remarked to his father, Malcolm, if these storms kept on any longer, the whole of Saskatchewan would pass through Cypress Landing. Years later, people remembered the lamenting howl and grime of a black blizzard, the worst they'd seen.

When it was over, folk came out of their houses and did as they had done before; scraped away the drifts from the doors and windows, hosed down the vegetable gardens and inspected the remains of the bounty that was to keep them in food during the winter. Housewives or servants swept, cleaned, and polished inside.

City crews were out doing the same maintenance on the streets, parks, and boulevards. Industry owners inspected inventory in the open, awaiting shipment.

And early the next morning, a pottery worker approached a kiln scheduled for the first load of pottery. Grumbling to himself, he would first have to sweep up the usual detritus left by transients who had sheltered inside. What he didn't expect to find when he opened the door was a body.

2

ON the day of the storm that ravaged Cypress Landing, Cat felt driven to risk another afternoon at the Hobo Camp under the railway bridge. She dressed in a pair of Joe's overalls, tucked his cap into the bib and went into the kitchen. Her mother stood over the stove emptying the kettle into the teapot. Rose and Harley sat at the table, squabbling as usual.

"Keep your hands off my things." Rose pointed a finger at her brother. "If I find anything missing, I'll march you right down to the second-hand store, and you'll get it back."

"Who'd want your old junk?" Harley sneered. "Anything you got ain't worth a penny anyhow."

"Be quiet, both of you," her mother interrupted. "And don't say 'ain't.' In all your sixteen years at school, you might speak proper English."

"Where's Young Charlie?" Rose asked.

Her mother pursed her lips and gently placed the teapot back on the counter and adjusted the cozy as to look undisturbed. "He's staying with Frieda Hoffman."

"Why is he at Frieda's?" Rose demanded. "Mother, have you . . ."

"No! It's for a couple of days. And you mind your manners! Frieda Hoffman is *Mrs.* Hoffman to you. You know very well that you do not dream of using first names with anyone, and I mean anyone at all, unless they're your good friends. Until then, they are Miss or Mrs. Is that clear?"

"Yes, mother. I'm sorry."

Her mother's attention focused on Cat and her overalls. "Just why are you dressed like that, young lady? The neighbors will think you don't have any dresses. Go change your clothes right now."

Cat said nothing, lowering her gaze to the floor.

“Did you hear me, Madam? What’s the matter with you lately? You seem to be mesmerized.”

“Cat has her tongue.” Harley sniggered at his wit. “Ever since . . .”
“That’s enough!”

Startled at the note of hysteria in her mother’s voice, Cat looked first at her then Harley and Rose. Both were staring into their bowls as though something foreign had crept into them. Her mother raised a cup to her lips, then put it down again without drinking. “You better not be going near any hobos. Mrs. Roberts took pleasure in telling me Mr. Roberts saw you going down beneath the train bridge. I’ll skin you if you bring home any bed bugs. Fine thing when the neighbors see my kids running wild, talking to those *people*.”

At last, her mother took a delicate sip of her tea. “Besides, it can be dangerous.”

“I’m doing garden work at the Muirs’,” Cat lied. “I don’t want to get my dress dirty or torn. When I bend over, people can see my pants,” she added for good measure.

“We see London, we see France, we see Cat in her underpants,” Harley sang.

Rose rolled her eyes. “You are such a hero.”

“Do the Muirs pay you? Or do they expect you to work for nothing?”

“I get meals, and Mrs. Mann pays me if I’m there all day. Sometimes I get twenty-five cents. I’ll bring you the money if they want me the whole day.”

“Well, get some porridge into you.” Her mother lifted the empty bowl off the counter and held it out to Cat, her expression plainly showing she wasn’t totally convinced with Cat’s explanation.

At the stove, Cat lifted the lid of the pot and grimaced at the sight of skin covering the porridge. Scraping the pot into her bowl, she mixed it up at the same time and sat at the table again. Harley passed her the milk bottle. The milk was almost clear. Watered down again, thought Cat, and she poured some over the oatmeal before adding a generous amount of sugar.

“While you’re all here,” her mother said, taking a seat at the table and inspecting her fingernails. “Don’t come home till suppertime.”

I am having company this afternoon, and I don't want a bunch of kids galloping all over the house."

Rose raised her eyebrows.

Harley snorted. "Does it mean we'll have eggs and bacon for breakfast tomorrow?"

Their mother's open hand shot across the table and met Harley's face with a piercing clap. Harley gasped and put his hand on the spot. Cat dropped her spoon into her porridge and sucked in her breath. Rose's mouth opened in a round 'oh.'

"You'll get a lot worse if you don't stop the dirty insinuations!" Her hand shaking, she snatched up a napkin, dipped the tip in her tea, and began expunging invisible grime from the table top. "Why are you still sitting there anyway? Get out and find work. I can't get relief for you now you're sixteen. So either find work"—she stopped rubbing and looked Harley straight in the eye—"or go to a farm."

"No!" The word exploded out of Cat's mouth, shocking even herself. Her chest tightened. She had trouble finding air. A buzz like angry bees started in her head. Blinking back tears, Cat continued looking at her mother. "I just meant, don't send Harley away, Mama. Please. There won't be anybody left." She bit her lip, wondering what made her speak up. Why shouldn't Harley go to work on a farm? All he did was tease her. He was now looking at her, more astonished than her mother or Rose.

"You can count on me to stay away," he finally said, his tone resentful. "Carl and I can find plenty to do."

"Carl?" Rose echoed. "Is that the kid who spends his time explaining to the police why he chases young girls?"

"Now what?" Her mother said, sitting up. "What are you talking about?"

"He's a slimy hoodlum. According to Bessie Hutchinson, he can't keep his hands to himself. And she's only thirteen!"

"Ah, he isn't like that," Harley said. "A bunch of lies. He likes to tease, but he's never bothered anybody."

"Oh, well. Don't take my word for it," Rose's voice was sarcastic. "Just wait until you end up in reform school, along with him."

With a grunt of disgust, her mother threw the napkin at the table, face crumpling in self-pity. "Oh, I can't stand this much

longer. What is the matter with the lot of you? You know I get upset easily. Why aren't you helping me? Women aren't meant to be both a mother and a father."

Harley's hand moved over his mother's. "Mama, I'm sorry. Couldn't I just . . ."

She moved her hand away, and Harley's eyes fluttered before hardening along with his jaw.

Cat felt a prod of sympathy for him. She wondered if she should tell him Joe had gone to find their father, but a tiny voice echoed in her head, "*Don't tell, don't tell.*" Calm again, she returned to her porridge.

Unmoved by her mother's distress, Rose got up and took her bowl to the sink. "Well, I'm off," she said, smoothing her dress front. Rose worked as a maid for the Hutchinson's on First Street. She made good money, working from nine in the morning until nine at night, for fifty cents a day, with lunch and dinner thrown in. She got Sundays and one half-day a week free.

Her mother looked her up and down as if seeing her for the first time. "That looks like an expensive dress to go to work. In fact, the dress looks *too* expensive for a seventeen-year-old girl to have, or my name isn't Clara Perkins."

"Eighteen soon."

"You don't make enough to buy a dress that nice," her mother continued, eyes narrowing. "Are you doing things you shouldn't?"

Rose's face turned red, whether from guilt or humiliation, Cat couldn't tell. "It's a castoff from Mrs. Hutchison if you must know. I'll be home late tonight. Nell and I are going to the show to see Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy in *Rose Marie*." She headed for the door. "It'll be nice to listen to something pleasant for a change."

As soon as the door closed behind Rose, Harley rose from the table. Cat heard him rummaging around in the bedroom where she and Rose slept, searching for things he could sell on the street or at the second-hand store.

Harley soon left, with his mother's shout "get a job!" echoing behind him. Cat supposed he would head to what he called his '*trap line*.' First, to the heap of broken rejects outside the potteries.

Sometimes the large pile contained unbroken crockery, and even with a minor flaw it was still useable. Then he'd head over to the bottle factory and rummage through their pile for an unbroken bottle or phial. As a last resort, there was always the unloading area at the flour mills, where he would gather up wheat fallen to the ground to sell in the neighborhood as chicken feed. If he were caught, there would be hell to pay. Perhaps the managers believed someone might get the idea to steal a whole truckload. What money he gleaned from his efforts, he never shared. He likely spent it at Mercier's Store or the Dreamland and Monarch Theatres.

Cat slipped her bowl into the sink and left the room before her mother found something new to question. She drew the violin case out from under her mother's bed, found an old belt of her father's, and threaded it through the handle. Buckled and looped over her shoulder and under her opposite arm, the case fit snug against her back.

She headed for the hobo jungle. The camp was not cluttered chaos as might be expected when hearing the word 'jungle.' Fear of being turned out by the authorities kept a certain order in the camp. She had learned that if the men proved they had a temporary job in town, they were allowed to stay as long as it lasted. Cat followed the path under the train bridge, passing two women hanging washing between the willows, and returned their wave of greeting. The women travelled with their husbands, in charge of meals for the camp, always a daily stew to which camp people contributed what they could: meat, vegetables, or a loaf of bread.

Cat hunted through the camp, growing anxious. Had he already left on a train?

"Looking for Pete?" One woman was behind her; a clothes basket tucked on her hip. Cat knew her only as Helen, a large-framed woman whose bones stuck out at all angles. She dropped her basket and inspected the contents of a paper bag on a small table, then dug into it with a broad hand and pulled out a bunch of carrots. She smiled over them at Cat.

"You mean Sir?" Cat answered. "Have you seen him today?"

"He's down at the river, having a wash, I expect."

Cat heaved a sigh of relief. Helen waved Cat closer and indicated

a canvas chair. With Cat seated, Helen inspected the carrots, then dug into the bag and pulled out a few potatoes. “You call him Sir? Why?”

Cat blushed. “When I first came down here, he rescued me from a man who bothered me. Then called me his Lady.” She giggled. “I called him Sir Knight. It was like a pretend game with us. You know, the Knight who rescued his Lady?”

“Humph,” Helen said. “People pretending they are what they aren’t is why the country’s in this mess.” She studied Cat for a time. “Do you know what the Hobo Code is?”

“You mean that stuff they write on telephone poles and back fences?”

Helen laughed. “No. The Hobo Code are rules about how people should behave in the camps. It means we help one another, and do no harm, but some camps don’t bother with the code. That man you mentioned. His name is Sam. Pete chased him off, but I still see him hanging around, maybe looking for you.”

Cat felt a shiver down her spine. “I was scared at first,” she admitted.

“You should be,” Helen said. “You could have been in big trouble young lady if this was one of the bad camps. Pete makes sure everyone here obeys the code, or he runs them off. But some men don’t like it and vow to get even. They are the most dangerous.”

Helen put her hands on her hips, looking accusingly at Cat. Knowing sometimes it was best to say nothing, Cat just looked at the ground.

“What are you doing here anyway?” Helen continued. She sounded crabby.

“My dad has been gone so long. I have to know if he’s okay. Maybe someone who comes here talked to him.”

“Oh, Mercy,” Helen muttered. She brought another canvas chair from the tent and sat beside Cat. “Your dad is on the rails? Where’s your mother? Does she know you come down here?”

Cat blushed again, looked down at her feet and shook her head. Helen gave an exasperated sigh. “Now then, tell me. Where do you think he is?”

“He said he was heading for Vancouver.”

“Vancouver. That might explain why you haven’t heard from him.” Helen slapped her hands against her knees, as if that settled the matter. “Poor guy. He’ll be in one of those work camps. Our Prime Minister’s answer to unemployment.”

Another cold shiver went down Cat’s back. She opened her mouth to ask if the work camp was one of the camps without the Hobo Code.

“Well, well, so here you are,” a cheerful voice interrupted.

They both turned and there he was, his sturdy frame radiating security and strength, reminding Cat of her father. His smile drifted all the way up to bright blue eyes, crinkling the corners. He took off his cap, flourished it in a circle, and bowed low to Cat.

“Washed and dressed fresh. How do I look?” He grinned at Helen. “Thanks to Mistress Helen here. She cleaned and pressed my suit. A fortunate man I am. Two m’ladies at his beck and call.” His eyes darkened, and Cat thought he looked sad, but the moment passed. He threw back his head and grinned at them.

“Oh, you are so full of it,” Helen said, laughing. She pointed at him and whispered loudly to Cat. “He’s kissed the Blarney Stone, you know.”

Cat was glad to see him if only to quit answering Helen’s pointed questions. Sir did indeed look pressed. He wore a blue shirt open at the neck. There was fraying around his trouser hems and jacket cuffs, but he looked neat in what her mother would call a ‘*suit of good cloth.*’ His black curls were drooping wetly over his forehead.

Helen rose and went over to him. Her voice was low, but Cat heard her say, “She shouldn’t be here.”

“Ah, but the Lady is desperate to find news of her father, Helen,” Sir replied. He spread out his hands. “Who are we to tell her she shouldn’t? Besides, aren’t I born to make sure she stays safe? If it isn’t us, who and where might it be? She will only find another place where people are, well, you know, bad.”

“But the townspeople might have different ideas. There’d be trouble if they think we are sheltering a kid from the town. And what about Sam?”

Sir’s eyes narrowed. “What about him?”

“He wasn’t happy being chased away. I’ve seen him around. He’s

got it in for you.”

Sir chased her concern away with a wave. “I know that Helen, and I’m careful. And as for the town, we stay on the outskirts.” His eyes dropped, but Helen read his expression and latched on to the message.

“You know this place, this city, don’t you? I guessed there was something. A man like you doesn’t hang around for no reason. Was there trouble?”

Sir didn’t reply, only smiled again. “Right now, my priority is Cat, and her task. Besides, we’re very lucky that she likes us too and having children around reminds us that life has a future. Wouldn’t you agree, Helen?” Sir pulled a small package from his pocket. “Here, Mistress, a bit of meat for the stew pot.”

“Where . . . ?

“Ask not, and you’ll hear no lies,” Sir replied, blue eyes laughing at her again.

Helen took the package and started back to her vegetables, swiping a hand at him on the way by. “You’re lucky you are fine looking too, Mr . . . ah, *Sir*. Otherwise, we might run you out. I know you’ll keep her safe. And she’s lucky to have you too. Get lost now. I’ve no time to be jabbering away.”

Sir began walking away, waving Cat to come with him. “She’s a nice woman, that Helen, but she’s too sharp sometimes. I bet she quizzed you without mercy too.” He chuckled at Cat’s expression, then added, “Come on. We’d best get to the Salvation Army soup kitchen at the end of East Avenue. A train gets in at noon, and the newcomers to town will be lined up for food. We might learn something about your father.”

“I know another soup kitchen across town if we don’t find anyone at the Sally Ann, At the Lutheran church—”

“No.” Sir shook his head and said firmly, “We’ll stay away from that one.” He stopped talking and increased his step.

Cat hurried after him, surprised, but accepting. Perhaps he was afraid they would try and convert him into going to church.

The lineup was shortening when they arrived. Sir led her into the building and the line of counter at the front where two Salvation Army ladies in their blue uniforms were dishing out soup and bread.

Sir got a bowl filled with a soup of vegetables and bits of chicken floating on the top. The ladies gave Cat a head to foot inspection before looking at each other, their expression questioning. Sir put his hand on Cat's shoulder and at stared them until Cat was handed a bowl of soup as well. The woman had to tip the pot to get the last bit out. "We need another pot," she said to the other.

Cat and Sir continued down to the end of the hall, lined on both sides with long tables and set with spoons. Sir nodded and smiled at the men beside them and across the table, murmuring a good day. One or two nodded acknowledgement, but for the most part, the men stared blankly with hollow eyes devoid of hope, faces gaunt and dried like they'd been in the sun too long.

Cat broke a piece of the bread and pushed it into her mouth. It was still warm and crusty. She picked up her spoon. The soup smelled good too.

Two men sat down across from them. One rested his elbows on the table and held his head. The other closed his eyes and sighed, then patted his companion's shoulder in sympathy.

"Where's your soup?" asked Sir. At his tone, Cat put down her spoon without tasting hers.

"They ran out," said one. "We asked if we could sit here and rest a bit." He eyed their soup and swallowed hard.

Sir pushed his bowl and bread over. "We had a good breakfast," he said, explaining. "We don't need this as much as you do. He looked at Cat. "Do we Cat?"

Cat immediately pushed her soup and spoon across the table. "I had a piece of the bread," she apologized.

"That's no matter," said the man. "Thank you kindly."

His companion agreed. He pulled the bowl of soup close, picking up the spoon. "We ain't had nothin' to eat in two days," he mumbled through a bite of bread.

"There's another soup kitchen across the tracks along the West Avenue if you're still hungry after," Cat volunteered.

"You just arrived?" Sir asked. At the other's nod, he continued conversationally. "From where may I ask?"

"We started out from Vancouver early yesterday morning."

Sir smiled. "Well, maybe you can help us out. We're looking for

a man who travelled the rails to Vancouver. His name is Charles Perkins. Have you run into a Charlie at any time?"

"Who wants to know?" the other man asked in between chews. His left arm curled around the bowl, protecting it from any intruder. He took another spoonful of soup, slurping noisily.

"Now, Russ. That's not our business," his companion said. He seemed to be the leader of the two.

"Yeah," piped up the man next to Sir. "Seeing he gave you his soup and all."

Sir laughed and waved the objection aside. "Maybe I should explain. Charlie is the father of this girl here. She hasn't heard from him since he left. We wonder if anyone has talked to him or seen him in a camp off the rails."

"That's different." Russ waved his spoon. He exchanged looks with his partner, who hesitated then nodded.

"What's his name again?" the other man said. "Perkins or Charlie? No, I wish I could say I know him, but I never ran into him. Have we Russ?"

Russ shook his head 'no' and drank up the last of his soup right out of the bowl. "Unless he's at another work camp. If he is, he's doomed."

Cat shivered and looked at Sir.

"Another work camp?" Sir asked quickly.

Russ had suddenly become talkative. The other men within earshot leaned forward to listen, some nodding their heads. "If he's in one of Bennet's work camps, he won't get out much. It's more like a slave camp."

Slave? Cat shook her head. Sir put his arm around her shoulders.

"Careful, Russ," his companion interrupted.

"Well, only what I call a slave, Missy," Russ said, a small smile creasing his tanned face. He didn't look like he smiled often. "They get twenty cents a day for a forty-four-hour week. It supposed to cover meals if that's what you call them."

"You sound familiar with the camp," Sir remarked.

"Me and Steve were in there," Russ said to sympathetic remarks from the men around them.

"I heard they were infested with bugs too," one man said. "And

beatings.” He got a poke in the ribs from the man beside him as Cat gasped.

“Fights between vagrants,” Sir whispered to her. “Not your dad’s way, is it?”

Cat sat up, defiant. “My father would never put up with being a slave,” she said boldly. “And he would never fight either.”

Another piped up. “A man can always leave if he can’t take it. Like you two.”

He got a disgusted look in return. “If you leave, they put out a vagrancy charge on you, so you have to get out of town fast. And avoid the railway bulls.”

“Everybody knows about the railway bulls,” said another man. Cat and Sir nodded with the rest of them.

“If they tell you to get off the train, you’d better get off running,” said another, followed by murmurs of agreement all along the table.

“Didn’t the government order the camps closed this year?” Sir put in.

Russ laughed. A derisive bark. “If they did, nobody told the camp bosses.”

The man called Steve looked at Cat and said, “Don’t worry young missy. Your dad would be mighty desperate to stay in a camp, even if he ever was in one. Maybe he took another name. A lot of us take on different names.”

“My dad looks a lot like Sir, here,” Cat said hopefully. “Except his eyes are brown like mine. Have you seen anybody that looks like him?”

All eyes swiveled from Cat to Sir and back to Cat again. Sir grinned at her, his blue eyes teasing. “By my faith, don’t I have my very own good looks?”

“We seen a few hundred men like him. But can’t recall anyone with eyes the color of yours.”

“We only worked in the camp in Vancouver,” Steve added. “So he could be at building roads outside Vancouver and not able to write.”

Sir rose, as a signal they wouldn’t learn anything else. Disappointed at another day with no success, Cat rose too. Sir reached into his trouser pocket and laid two quarters in front of the

men. "I have a job," he said, waving away Steve's protest and Cat turned her face away, in case her expression reflected his lie.

By two in the afternoon, Sir and Cat walked near the pottery factory. They headed across the railroad siding, taking a shortcut to a small creek in the nearby coulee, expecting to find vagrants camping there.

Sir didn't talk as he usually did while they walked. Cat wondered if he was thinking it was time to move on. The thought depressed her. She had come to rely on him.

"I haven't said thank you yet," she began.

Sir looked at her as if surprised to find her there. "I'm sorry Cat, I've been miles away. Thank me for what?"

"For taking me along to ask about my dad. I'd never think of going to the places you've taken me. I'd probably just wait for the men to get off the trains and go to the camp." She thought about Helen's warning of the camps. "He needs to come home or . . ." She stopped.

"Or what?" asked Sir.

"There's a man who keeps coming around to the house. My mom is beginning to . . ." Cat kept her head down, knowing she shouldn't be discussing her mother with other people. But she trusted Sir to understand. "My dad always made the decisions, and now my mother thinks she has to be both mother and father. But now *he* is starting to make decisions for her. And then Alex . . ." She swallowed hard, not liking what she was thinking.

"Who is Alex?" Sir asked gently and squeezed her shoulder.

"My brother. He was twelve."

"*Was* twelve?" He cleared his throat. "What happened to Alex?"

"Mom sent him to a farm to work. He died."

Cat looked up at Sir. His eyes were closed, and his lips pinched together in anger.

"And this man who comes to your house. He had something to do with Alex being on the farm?"

"Yes. Maybe." Cat shrugged. "I don't know. That's why I have to find out where my dad is!" she burst out, rushing her words. "If people haven't seen him before, they might sometime. And they can tell him I was asking." She looked up at Sir, her face earnest. "So I

have to say thank you. Besides, now, you're my best friend." She smiled up at him, wanting him to think she was joking when deep down she wasn't joking at all.

He studied her face, patiently considering all her words. "I'm your best friend, am I? I'm happy to hear that. But there's no need to thank a best friend, Cat." His mouth turned down at the corners in a way she'd never seen before, and he muttered, "For sure, best friends don't need to feel guilty because you did them a favor."

That puzzled her. She didn't feel guilty. Just grateful. She opened her mouth to tell him, but he was grinning down at her, in the old twinkling way. As if he knew all along what had been in her mind. "Anyhow, you remind me of someone I knew a long time ago." He paused and took her hand in his. "But people like me must keep moving in this city and not stay too long in one place, like the camp, or the soup kitchen, for instance. Otherwise, the police feel a duty to move us along."

Relieved somewhat, she took it to mean he wasn't moving soon, and he confirmed it, rather grimly.

"I have things to do and can't leave just yet."

"Everybody goes someday," she told him.

He looked startled. "Yes, I suppose so. But your father will return sooner or later."

"And my brother, Joe," she added without thinking. She looked at him, alarmed.

"Another brother? I've just assumed . . . well, anyway, is he older?"

"Yes," she said, resigned now it was out. "He is twenty minutes older than I am. I was a surprise. They weren't expecting me. September is our birthday. He was my best friend before I met you."

"He's barely twelve, and he's riding the rails?"

Her head began to buzz. A small sound escaped her.

"Are you alright?"

Her throat felt clogged with dust. She forced out, "Yes," then explained, "Joe was sent to a farm, but he hopped a freight instead. He went to find my dad, to tell him to come home and be with my mom. But Joe promised to come back. He might even be back at the farm where he's supposed to go. It isn't far." The buzzing stopped,

and she smiled up at him, relieved.

“Well, you’ll hear soon I’m sure.”

She heard the doubt in his voice and frowned. It was stupid to say Joe might have come back. If he had found their dad, he wouldn’t have gone to the farm. She didn’t want Sir to think she was a liar. “I miss him.”

“Yes. I know,” Sir said, and after a pause, added, “I had a sister,” then so softly she barely heard him, “Once.”

“Where is she?”

He hesitated so long she regretted asking. Finally, he shrugged. “She’s gone.” And before she could find out where his sister was living, he said, “Any other family at home?”

“My sister, Rose,” answered Cat, grateful they were off the topic of Joe. “She’s almost eighteen and has a good job. And Harley. He’s sixteen.” Should she say it would be nice to have a big brother if he wasn’t always in a temper? “It’s like he lives somewhere else,” she said instead.

“He’s working on a farm too?”

“No. He’s at home. Mom wanted to send him to a lumberjack camp up North somewhere, but Harley won’t go. He won a medal when he graduated from school, and he could go to higher school in Edmonton, but . . .”

“He’s sixteen and finished school already?”

“Yes. He figures in his head. Math and Trig . . . trig.”

“Trigonometry?” Sir asked, and she nodded.

“Good heavens. So why doesn’t he go?”

“Mom said it would be a waste of time going on to another school if there’s no jobs. He should find work, and make the best of it.”

He shook his head and muttered something under his breath.

“We have another brother,” Cat said, not liking the solemn mood overtaking them. “Young Charlie. He’s only eight. He’s named after my dad, so we call him Young Charlie. Everybody loves him. He doesn’t remember the way it used to be anyway. He thinks everyone gets relief money.”

They came to the tracks connecting the pottery warehouses to the main railway line. Cat nimbly scrambled up the scree of the train ballast and balanced on a rail, stepping along with her arms

spread wide. She jumped off the track, and they continued together over the ties and down the other side of the ballast. A faint smell of sage radiated in the hot, dry air, and she sucked in her breath, almost tasting the spice on her tongue. They continued away from the pottery towards the creek in the coulee fifty feet ahead of them.

“Barely twelve,” repeated Sir, shaking his head.

“It feels older,” Cat stated. Sir patted her shoulder, and they carried on in silence.

At the coulee, they inspected a campfire beside a small creek where four vagrants poured them coffee from a pot on a makeshift spit over a small fire. “We got a few sandwiches if you care to share,” a tall, thin man said, after giving them a close inspection.

Cat’s stomach rumbled in response, but Sir shook his head and said they had been to the soup kitchen at the Sally Ann. They all looked blank when Sir went through his routine of questions about her father. Sitting under the shade of wild chokecherry bushes, the men sipped coffee and exchanged news.

“We caught a freight out of Central B.C.,” one said. “It was full of horses and the smell ain’t so nice, to use a polite word.” He inclined his head sideways towards Cat. He unfolded a sheet of newspaper and began to break apart a number of cigarette butts, collecting the tobacco into a small tin. Sir reached into his pocket and handed the man a packet of cigarette paper, and he nodded his thanks. He spotted the violin case Cat carried on her back. “Can you give us a tune?”

Cat became suddenly shy. “It belongs to my brother, Joe. My mother forbids me to play. She says it is unseemly for girls to play the violin.” Then, not wanting to be uncharitable with someone who had willingly answered questions and offered them food, Cat opened the violin case. “I’ll do the best I can.”

After a few tune-up passes, she broke into *Little Brown Jug*. The presence of the others flew from her mind as she became absorbed in the instrument. When she finished, she looked at Sir looking for approval. His expression flickered between surprise and sadness. Maybe he didn’t think it was very good? Embarrassed, she turned her face away from them all and stowed the violin back into the case before they could ask her to play again.

The man with the cigarette tin asked, "How'd you learn to play like that?"

"My mother makes Joe practice in the bedroom with the door closed, and I go with him. She doesn't know I play." She blushed at the confession. *I hope Sir doesn't think I'm sneaky*, she thought.

Before they left, Sir said something to the men, and one put a hand in his well-worn carryall and brought out two sheets of writing paper and an envelope. Sir offered a cent for each, but the man waved it away, and they left, walking back along the rail spur leading to the outside kilns at the pottery. At one point, Sir stood still, eyes fixed far down the street. Cat followed his gaze and saw a man leaning against a lamp post. A brief moment later, he vanished from sight around the corner. Something in the way he moved seemed familiar. A policeman? She turned toward Sir who stared hard at the sidewalk, frowning.

"Cat," he said finally, "I need your help. It isn't very hard, or I wouldn't ask you. Do you know Mr. Muir and his son who live over by Waterloo Park?"

She nodded, eager. "Mrs. Mann is the housekeeper. I do chores for her sometimes."

"I may have to go away suddenly, you know, if the police send me on. I'd like you to go to their house and tell Mr. Muir's son about how you found me. Don't worry, you can trust him." He gave a weak smile. "I'll write a letter explaining everything. Can you do it?"

"I can."

Sir stared up at the ring around the sun, smelled the wind, and said to her with a laugh, "It seems we are in for another dust storm." He held out his arm and bowed. "Pray, my good lady, shall we make haste to shelter and stable our noble steeds before they are blown away over the moon?"

Delighted, Cat bowed her head and curtsied. "Yes, Sir Knight, lead on." Both laughing, they ran toward the large brick kilns standing in the pottery yard. At least one would be empty and cooling before they brought in the next load for firing. They didn't have to search, as a line of people were filing through the doorway, including the men they had just left by the creek.

As the storm hit with a vengeance, more people crowded into

the kiln. Sir led Cat behind two twenty gallon crocks the pottery workers had moved into the kiln out of the storm. There was just enough space just for her. She sat down with the violin beside her on the dusty floor.

“You’ll be safe here, Cat. If any fighting or arguing starts, stay down and don’t get caught up in it.”

She saw him find a space across the kiln where he could keep an eye on her. He lit a candle and others did the same. For a while she watched the shapes drifting back and forth in the gloom as they settled down. Lulled by the soft murmurs of people, she stretched full length on the floor with her head resting on the violin case. But even as the wind whirled and moaned up against the kiln, her eyelids drooped and the next thing she knew Sir was shaking her awake.

“Storm’s over, Cat. You should go home. Your mother will be worried about you.”

He led her over to the door and outside into the dusty air. Most of the people had gone. “Have you far to go?” Sir asked, absently. His eyes swiveled around the whole area as if searching for someone.

Still groggy with sleep, she shook her head. “It’s only a few blocks.”

He turned then and ruffled her hair. “Goodbye Cat. Take care you go home right away. You’ve been gone all day. I don’t want your mother to come after me for keeping you out.” He held out her violin case. As she reached out for it, he said, “Your violin case had a tear in the lining, Cat. You should take it in to Mr. Levinson before it gets worse.” He held on to the case while staring at her as if to stress its importance.

“I will first thing tomorrow,” she promised, and he seemed satisfied. He gave her a little shove to get her going, giving her the impression he was anxious to be rid of her. After a few steps, she turned for a last wave, but he was already moving away.

A man alongside a neighboring kiln watched her walk down the road towards home.

Just before turning down the street leading to her house she remembered the letter Sir was going to give her for Mr. Muir. Sir must have forgotten. She turned and started back.

THE next day at the camp, she searched for him, but Helen said he had not been seen since the storm. But she looked worried. “Pete’s probably moved on, Cat, and you shouldn’t come here again. We’re all sorry to see him leave, but nobody can dodge the police forever.”

Cat’s stomach convulsed into a knot. An uneasy image wormed into her consciousness but that space was already too full, and a door slammed shut against the intrusion, calming the nausea rising in her throat and leaving her in peace again.