

Sky of Magic **by Lucy Naylor Kubash**

My mother's friend Clara brought us the news. The local postmistress, Clara knows everything that goes on in Twin Pines and loves to keep us all informed. She comes out Sunday mornings after church to drink coffee, eat homemade strudel and pass on the latest gossip.

I've gotten used to Clara over the years, in spite of her wagging tongue. Sometimes I even find myself looking for her worn-out pickup to come rattling up our drive. But when she sat down at our kitchen table that day and poured her first cup of brew, I never expected to hear what she had to say.

As nonchalantly as if she'd been telling us tomorrow was Monday, Clara took a healthy piece of strudel and said, "You know who came into the post office the other day? Cameron McDonald, that nice fella used to work for you years ago. Course he's not so young anymore, but he sure is still a looker."

As if a frigid Montana blizzard had come slicing through the sunny kitchen, my hand froze while filling the blue willow sugar bowl. I couldn't believe I had heard right.

It just didn't make sense. Why—after all this time—would Cameron McDonald come back?

"Did you hear what Clara said, honey?" Mom passed the creamer to her crony and stirred her own coffee. "Cam's back. Maybe he's come to work on that new mining project. You know how he always dreamed of being a top mining engineer—used to talk about new ways of getting the minerals out of the earth without destroying the environment."

When I didn't respond, Mom glanced up to where I stood at the counter, silent as a pillar of salt. "Jodie, did you hear?"

"Yes," I said numbly. "I did." But I wished I hadn't, because it didn't seem right, or fair, that after this long—*this long*—Cam should come back.

"Been awhile since we heard from him," Mom chattered on, though she still eyed me curiously. "He was married, you know, but his wife died a year after Abe passed away. I think there were children. What a shame."

"Abe really was fond of him," Clara remembered. "And so was Jodie. Almost like brother and sister those two were."

Almost, I thought, but not quite. That last summer Cam had worked for us a lot of things had changed, including the way the rancher's daughter and the

hired hand had viewed each other. A romantic sixteen, I had fancied myself in love with Cam and had tried desperately to get him to see me in a new light. I'd succeeded, but in the end it hadn't mattered. Cam had gone away.

But that all seemed long ago—forgotten now, a part of the past, and that was precisely where I wanted it to stay. I had no idea why Cam had come back, but I was sure it had nothing to do with that one last summer night when, for a few brief moments, he'd treated me as something other than a little sister.

"I guess Cam was like the son Abe never had." My mother's voice sounded wistful, the way it always did when she spoke of my father. "If the boy wouldn't have had his heart so set on engineering, we would have liked him to stay on here and help run the place. Abe even talked about giving him his own piece of land."

"Too bad he didn't stay," Clara said thoughtlessly. "Jodie wouldn't have felt obligated to come home when Abe took sick. She's too young to be tied to this place, Bertie."

Clara's careless words had caused a sudden hurt look to distort my mother's gentle face, and protectively, I gave Mom a quick hug. "I'm not *tied* here," I assured them. "And I came back because I wanted to. Living on my own wasn't what I expected it to be. I like teaching in a small school and living on this ranch. It's where I want to be, and if you ladies will excuse me, I have work to do."

I left them to their coffee and gossip and went out to the barn, certain I would think no more about the news Clara had brought. Even on a small ranch, Sunday is not a day of total rest. There is always work to do. But no amount of pitching hay would keep the memories away, and when I took the horses to graze, I couldn't stop myself from leaning on the fence and gazing out at the cottonwood grove that edged the pasture, the place where I had last seen Cam.

For a moment I recalled what had happened there and the way I had felt at sixteen. But that had been ten years ago, and it didn't matter now. Whatever love I'd felt for Cam was gone, and all that was left in its place was anger.

It was anger that made me pray I would not see Cam and hope he would not decide to look us up. I even went so far as to avoid any unnecessary trips into Twin Pines. But there came a day a week later when we simply had to drive to town. School would be starting again soon. There were some things I needed to buy, and Mom wanted to look at material for new kitchen curtains.

I was standing at the makeup counter in Franklin's Department store, deciding between Apple-pink and Peach-brandy blush, when someone spoke from behind me.

“You don’t really need that, you know.”

I would have recognized Cam’s voice anywhere. It hadn’t changed a bit—it still had that deep timbre. The dread moment had arrived, and there was no escaping.

Plastering a smile on my face, I turned around.

“Hello, Jodie,” he said softly.

The burnished auburn hair was trimmed to behave itself, but it still curled boyishly over his forehead the way it had the first day he’d come to work for us. He wore a gray and black flannel shirt and gray cords and a pair of well-worn work boots, and in spite of the way his tall frame had matured into firm masculinity, he was the same old Cam. The one who had once stolen my heart.

I was suddenly aware of how ridiculously plain I looked in my own faded jeans and sweatshirt, hair covered by a red bandanna. Old maid. Spinsterish. It was as if I’d purposely made myself unattractive today. Perhaps, subconsciously, I had.

“Hello, Cam,” I finally said.

His amber-green eyes held mine in that same bone-melting way of years ago, but I steeled myself against any reaction. There was an awkward silence before Cam said, “It’s been a long time, Jodie. A long time.”

Yes it had, and what did you say to a man you’d once loved with all your heart?

“Are you doing the work you wanted?” I thought to ask.

He smiled, and there were fine lines at the corners of his mouth. “I’ve traveled with mining companies all over the world. I’ve not worked the miracles I once dreamed of, but there have been some satisfying successes. I’m doing consulting for a firm in Butte now.”

“And just decided to see some of your old stomping grounds,” I said and wondered—had he married again? Where were his children? The first question was answered by a covert glance at his left hand. No ring. The second was answered a moment later.

A small boy and girl, whose mops of unruly hair matched Cam’s and whose impish smiles were full of that same guileless charm, each hung on a leg and entreated him politely.

“We would like some candy, Daddy.”

Cam’s hands rested on their heads. “No candy for now, kids,” he said gently yet firmly. “But I’d like you to meet a friend of mine. Someone I knew a long time ago. Emily and Eric, this is Jodie Thompson.”

They regarded me soberly. Their hellos were a bit shy, but their bright blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

I shook their hands. “I bet you’re twins.” They were as much alike as two little redheaded calves.

“That’s right,” Emily answered for them, undoubtedly the more forward of the two. “But I’m older, by three minutes.”

“Mmm, three minutes.” I nodded my head solemnly, as if that knowledge made all the difference in the world.

“Daddy says it’s cause I’m impatient I came first. He says I have to learn to take my time.”

I glanced up at Cam. Did he by chance remember another girl who’d been in an awful hurry to grow up?

“Patience is a virtue,” I said in my best teacher voice, then winked at Emily. “But sometimes we just can’t help ourselves.”

Mom came up then and hugged Cam, clucking over the children to no end. It was to her everlasting despair that I’d not yet married and given her grandchildren. She chatted with Cam for a few moments. I chose the Peach-brandy blush and touched her arm. “We should go, Mom.” Suddenly I had to get away from this too-cozy scene of Cam and his kids.

When we all stood outside in the brisk air, Cam hesitated, holding each twin by the hand. “We were just going over to the café for lunch. Would you care to join us?”

I started to say no, but Mom cut me short. “I’m on my way to see Clara now, but why don’t you go on ahead, Jodie dear? I imagine you and Cam have a lot to talk about.”

“Please come, Jodie.” It was Eric who looked up at me expectantly. He was a miniature of Cam, except for his eyes.

Ever a pushover for anyone under the age of ten, I agreed to go. But I barely tasted the ham sandwich I ordered.

The children had ice cream for dessert and then begged Cam to let them play the video game at the front of the café. He fished change from his pocket, and the two went off, promising to take turns. I took a hasty sip of coffee that had grown cold and felt uncomfortable now that we were alone.

“Clara tells me you teach at the elementary. What grade?”

“Third.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. You always were good with kids, in spite of being an only child yourself. ‘Spoiled lonely only’ never fit you.”

So what term had fit me? Impetuous? Impulsive? Or just plain foolish? What had Cam truly thought on that night long ago when, dressed in a lemon yellow sundress and too much make-up, I had enticed him into a walk down to the cottonwoods? What had been in his mind when, for a few reckless moments, he’d given in? It was humiliating to think about now.

When the silence became too strained, Cam rose to pay the bill. Despite his protests, I left the tip. On the way out the door, he gestured to the bag containing my newly purchased make-up.

“I meant what I said in the store, Jodie. You don’t need it now and you surely didn’t need it ten years ago.”

My breath caught in my throat. So Cam *had* noticed my special efforts that night. Then he must have known too that it had all been done for his benefit.

Had it given him something to chuckle over later? Had he shared the anecdote with his college buddies? Little Jodie Thompson making a play for big Cameron McDonald.

“Thanks for the compliment, Cam,” I said icily. “But it’s ten years too late.” With that, I walked away and didn’t look back.

I was in a dark mood for days after that. Mom kept trying to get me to talk.

“Doesn’t do any good to keep it bottled up inside,” she insisted. “Better to let out what’s bothering you.”

“There’s nothing to let out,” I said with a shrug. We were doing supper dishes and I rinsed a plate to hand her.

She didn't take it right away but stared down at the frayed dish towel in her hands. "I know it's got you upset that Cam's come back."

"Now why would that upset me?"

"You were in love with him, and I think you still are."

I put the plate in her careworn hands and swirled the soapsuds around, looking for the silverware. "That's crazy, Mom. I might have once thought I loved Cam, but that was only a teen-age crush. With his coming back here every summer, it was bound to happen. I got over it."

"Did you?" she asked quietly. Her gentle eyes searched mine for a moment before I turned my face away.

"Yes, I did, and as far as I'm concerned, Cam can go back to wherever he came from."

"I don't think you have to worry about that."

"What do you mean?" I asked, holding my breath.

"I mean, Jodie, that whether you like it or not, Cam is back in our lives. This isn't just some vacation he's taking. He's moving back here for good."

My eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How do you know that? More of Clara's gossip?"

"No, Cam called yesterday while you were outside. Said he's decided to stay on here, at least till his children are grown. He seems to think this big sky is just what they need."

"So we'll see him in passing," I said indifferently. I pulled the plug to drain the dishwasher.

"That isn't all of it, Jodie. Cam...wants to buy a piece of land. He asked if I'd consider selling him a few acres, twenty or so. Just enough to build a house and—"

"No!" I exploded. "You can't do it! I won't let you!"

All my bottled up resentment bubbled over, filling that protest to bursting.

My mother went on mildly. "By all rights, I should just give it to him. You know your father wanted him to have his own land here, but Cam thought maybe we could use the money and also a little less land to worry about."

“How generous of him,” I sneered. “Well, I won’t hear of it, and that’s final.”

I’d never in my whole life talked to my mother that way, but then I had never felt so strongly about anything. There was simply no way I was going to have Cam owning a piece of *my* land and showing up whenever he felt like taunting me.”

He had left Montana to make a life of his own ten years ago, and he didn’t deserve to be able to come back and pick up where he’d left off.

I ended the discussion by drying my hands and pulling on my worn denim jacket. “I’m going to finish the chores in the barn,” I announced and slammed out the back door.

A week went by and we didn’t see Cam or speak of him. Clara didn’t even mention him when she came for her Sunday gossip fest.

School started, but luckily I saw the twins only enough to wave hello and goodbye each day. As much as it bothered me to think of their being without a mother, I couldn’t afford to let them get too close.

I was busy teaching my students and trying to get the hay cut while the weather was still dry. I didn’t have time to think about Cam. Except at night when I lay upstairs in my room.

It was then that I couldn’t keep from wondering why on earth he’d come back in the first place. If it was ranch property he wanted, there was certainly better to be found than what we had to offer.

So what had brought him back to Montana? Was he so perverse that he came back only to torture me? Did he enjoy knowing that while he was a successful engineer and the father of two lovely children, I was a single schoolteacher who lived with her mother in a rundown farmhouse?

The thought rankled me, and I made up my mind that when I did see Cam again I wouldn’t hesitate to tell him that there was no way he was going to get that piece of land. No matter what my father would have wanted, no matter what price Cam might offer.

It was a Friday evening and the dusty scent of freshly mown hay lay heavy in the air, when Cam drove up in front of our house. I was sitting on the porch steps watching the last crimson trails of sunset fade over the Tobacco Root Mountains and I pulled my sweater tighter around me, steeling myself for the confrontation.

The twins tumbled from the late-model station wagon and ran up eagerly to greet me. The grudge I held against their father didn't extend to them, and I hugged them both.

"Daddy said he used to work here a long time ago," Emily, said, as she looked around, a bit awed by the huge barn, far-flung pastures and big violet sky that went on forever. "He told us 'bout Montana lots of times. He said the sky here is magic."

I glanced cautiously at Cam and murmured, "Did he now?"

Eric tugged on my arm, demanding his share of attention. "Do you have horses? Could me and Emily ride one?"

At his clear blue gaze I couldn't help softening, and playfully ruffled his mop of dark red hair. "We'll have to see," I said, avoiding making a promise. "But for now, how'd you like to see our new kitten? She's inside with my mom."

When I was about to accompany the twins into the kitchen to keep them as a buffer between Cam and myself, Mom came out and whisked them away for hot chocolate and cookies. Once again I was left alone with Cam, and suddenly I'd lost my taste for a confrontation. I only wished now that he would leave me alone.

He didn't, but instead sat down on the steps beside me, stretching his long legs out in front of him. I fixed my eyes on the scuffed toes of his work boots and forced myself not to feel anything.

"Well, the place hasn't changed much," he said. His amber-green eyes scanned the fields and pastures where a light mist crept in past my small herd of Black Angus. "Abe would have been proud of the way you've carried on. It must be hard—just you and your mother."

"We manage," I said crisply, refusing to accept his compliment.

There was a length of silence, then Cam said, "I thought of your father, Jodie. He taught me a lot...about the land and about being a man. Growing up in foster homes the way I did, the friendship Abe and I shared was special. I tried not to do anything to jeopardize it."

It seemed that with that simple statement Cam was telling me something important. But stubbornly, I would acknowledge it.

Shifting away from him, I leaned my head against the porch railing where the ivy grew, already rust red. Autumn was coming on early this year.

“How are the children doing in school?” I picked what I hoped was a safe topic.

“Okay, so far. We’re renting a small house just outside of town until we can get our own place. After living in an apartment complex in Denver all their lives, they love being able to run around outside. I bought them a puppy last week and now I’m sure they’ll be working on a kitten.”

He related that last bit as if to humor me, but I ignored it. It was wonderful the twins were so happy here, but they would have been content in any rural setting. Why did it have to be Twin Pines?

“Whatever happened to that old Appaloosa I used to ride?” he asked.

“He’s still around.” I nodded toward the barn “Getting on in years but still a darn good cow pony.”

“And that yellow dress, Jodie? What became of it?”

“I burned it,” I said flatly. But it had been done only after we’d heard about his marriage. For two years it had hung in my closet.

“I would have like to see you in it again.”

“Please don’t, Cam. Don’t make fun of me. I know how naïve I was back then. You needn’t remind me.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” he said quietly. “And I never meant to hurt you.”

“But you did!” There! It was out, but I could have bitten my tongue.

“I would have hurt you more had I stayed.”

An uncontrollable shiver rippled through me, and then Cam’s hand was on my arm. Could he feel my trembling?

“You were so young, Jodie. I had no right to keep you from becoming everything you could be.”

“Why are you saying this now?” I shook off his hand, angry at him for coming here tonight and at myself for listening to him.

His hands came up to grip my arms and he turned me to face him. "Because things are different now. We're different."

"Are we?" I stared into his sun-browned face and tried not to see the strange anguish in his eyes. "I don't think so."

"Does it have to be this way?" He searched my face, as if desperate for me to give in, but my own hurt went too deep for easy amends.

"Yes, Cam. I guess it does." There was no way we could ever be just friends.

"So you can forget about that piece of property. None of my land is for sale."

As if I'd slapped him, Cam dropped his hands and sighed wearily. "That wasn't why I came here tonight. Bertie told me how you feel about that. I wouldn't push it."

"Then why did you come? Why did you come back at all?" I was very close to tears, but pressed a clenched fist to my mouth to hold them back.

Putting his hands on his knees, Cam pushed himself up from the steps. "I don't know why I came back," he said. "Maybe to find myself again. To try to instill in my kids the same feeling for the land that I have. To give them something solid to hold on to. Maybe...just to try to recapture something I left behind."

He went into the house then, and a short time later the three of them left. That night I lay awake for a long while, trying to figure out what it was that he had left behind.

It wasn't until the following week that I discovered what Cam had meant.

Worried about the latest weather bulletin that warned of a storm brewing over the mountains, I hurried home from school, anxious to get in all the hay.

The sky was already turning turbulent as I pulled my aging Chevy into the drive, and I wasted no time dashing into the house. Most of the hay was stacked neatly in the barn, but a dozen or so bales remained scattered about the far field, looking like loaves of golden bread. I needed that hay to feed my stock this winter and I couldn't afford to lose even a few bundles.

Quickly I changed into my old work clothes, wrapping a knitted scarf around my head against the biting wind.

Mom met me at the door. "Let me help you," she insisted. "I can drive the tractor."

She looked so determined in an old wool shirt my father had once worn, but it was a long time since she'd driven that unpredictable beast or a machine. I didn't want her taking any risks.

"I can handle it, Mom," I said and ran out the door before she could argue.

Loading the awkward bales alone hadn't been easy when the weather was being cooperative, and now that the wind screeched like a banshee across the valley, it was nearly impossible. But I refused to give up. I didn't even stop when I heard a shout above the howling.

"Get up and drive the tractor," came Cam's deep voice. "I'll do the loading."

"No!" I shouted back, struggling with a clumsy bale. "I can do this myself. I don't need your help."

"Don't be stupid. It's going to cut loose any minute and you'll just lose it all."

I looked up at Cam through my wind-whipped tears. Hands planted firmly on his hips, he didn't look like a man to be argued with, and besides, he was right. If I had to sacrifice my pride, at least the hay would be saved.

I scrambled up to the tractor seat, and Cam hoisted himself onto the back of the wagon. With the sky churning black above us, we bumped off across the field.

Together we loaded the rest of the bales and drove the hay wagon into the barn just as the first splattering of raindrops hit the ground.

Chilled to the bone, I slid from the tractor and pulled off my scarf, too tired to even care that I must have looked a terrible sight.

"Thanks," I said stiffly. "I appreciate your help."

"Do you?" For a second his eyes burned into me. Then Cam strode away to the door. He didn't go out, but stood staring at the rain that was driving in gray sheets now across the yard.

When I stood beside him, he didn't look at me again, but only spoke in a tight voice. "Do you hate me that much? Is it so hard to forgive?"

Hate. The word struck me, and like the rain running in rivers from the roof, my anger drained away. “No, Cam,” I whispered, “ I don’t hate. I never hated you.”

It was true. Even when I’d been so angry with him, I’d never hated Cam. I’d only loved him. I supposed I always would. But he had never loved me—not like that, not with the fierce need. If he had, he would never have gone away.

“You and this big land,” he was saying, very softly. “You’ve always been tied up together in my mind. Coming back was like coming home after a very long journey. I never wanted to leave either of you, but I was a man. An ordinary man. You might have been a gangly kid at first, but you quickly turned into a lovely young woman. You think I didn’t see that? You think I didn’t care?”

“Did you?” I was stunned by his revelation. “Did you hurt the way I did?”

For an answer he suddenly dipped his auburn head and kissed me soundly on the mouth.

For that instant I was acutely, painfully aware of everything—the drumming of the rain, the wild roaring of the wind, the fire of Cam’s touch. When he drew away, I stared, completely shaken by the intensity of the moment.

“I left *because* of what I felt for you,” he said, after a moment,” and because I knew what would happen if I stayed. But I never stopped caring.”

“But you married someone else. Why? Why didn’t you just come back when I was older?” I felt myself trembling inside, now that all those old feelings were being dragged into the open.

“I guess I was afraid.” Cam’s rough fingers curled into my tangled hair. At that instant, he looked so vulnerable, was so achingly close, that I almost reached out and laid my hand along his tensed jaw. Yet still I held back.

“Afraid of what, Cam?”

“That you had only been infatuated with me because you were so young. I didn’t want to come back and find out that’s all it had been between us—youthful passion. I couldn’t have stood that.”

So he chose not to come back at all—until now. I probably should have hated him for that, but it wasn’t entirely his fault the way things had turned out for us, and I couldn’t blame him.

“Did you love her?” I had to know.

The grooves about his mouth grew deeper. “Yes, but we had been separated a year before she was killed in a car accident.”

A shudder went through me. Did Cam think it would make me feel better to know that he hadn’t found true happiness with another woman? It didn’t. Only sorrier—for all of us. Tears I hadn’t been aware of trickled down my face.

When Cam realized I was crying, he pulled me into his arms, and for the moment, I gave into the sheer contentment of having him hold me. When I tipped my head back he kissed me again gently. “I still love you,” he said. “Is there a chance for us?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “But I would like to try. I still love you too.” It might not be easy to give him my trust again, but we simply had to try. Cam was the only man I’d ever really loved and that was reason enough.

The storm abated for a while, and before we went to the house Cam and I walked down to the cottonwoods. The kisses we shared beneath their spreading branches this time were a pledge to one another—a firm promise—and I knew there would be no running away.

“Maybe Emily was right,” I said, looking up to where the clouds had suddenly parted to reveal a patch of blue as bright as her eyes. “Maybe it’s a sky of magic after all.”