

Rowdy

by Jo Deurbrouck

Mal stood beside his wife on their brown lawn, watching a battered Ford ¾ ton pull away down the lane. Riding high on the toolbox was a big border collie with matted fur and a rumbling growl Mal could still hear. In the bed stood Flash, one of two heeler-cross rescues who'd lived with them all winter while Becky searched for what she called their "forever home."

Flash's hackles stood brushlike but he kept his head bowed just enough beneath the bigger dog's stare to delay the inevitable fight. Flash, Mal thought approvingly, would pick the time and place.

He couldn't see Flash's brother, the ridiculously misnamed Rowdy, but he could almost feel the timid dog shivering against the tailgate.

Mal stared down at his wife.

"I thought I told you they were only interested in Flash."

"I -- Rowdy would have been heartbroken. So I explained that they are packmates. They love each other and - and provide each other emotional balance - " Becky faltered, then added more brightly, "And Spring is for new beginnings."

"Those are ranch people, Becky --"

"I know they are."

"-- Who called about herding prospects. You know what that means: It takes a tough dog to withstand a tough life."

"It's in his blood," said Becky, but her eyes dropped to her bare toes, pink with cold in the new sandals she'd been wearing all week, even though snow was still in the forecast.

And Mal, who loved what he called his wife's dreaminess, put a heavy arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. At times like this she felt so tiny he could imagine crushing her.

"I b'lieve you're right," he spoke into her soft hair. "It's in his blood."

On his way to town the next morning, Mal saw a slim corpse beside the road and realized he'd been half watching for it.

He was a little surprised that the dead dog was lying, unconcealed, on the shoulder. But then he imagined the impassivity with which the rancher would have surveyed Becky's tie-dyed skirt, her long loose hair, the squint-eyed way the man would have listened to her 'packmate,' her 'love.' The way the man would have finally drawled, mostly to shut her up, "Lemme get this straight. If I'd like to try the one that's got a pair, I gotta take that one?" He'd've been hooking a thick thumb toward Rowdy's nose, since the rest of the dog cowered behind Becky's skirt.

Mal horsed the truck into park and walked back to the body. He noted that the fleece bandanna Becky had knotted about the dog's neck before hugging him goodbye was gone.

He picked up the small corpse. It was unpleasantly stiff. The legs jutted like sticks and frost sparkled in the soft fur. One side of the head was ruined. Bullet or impact, Mal didn't need to know which. It all came to the same thing.

He put the body in the back of his pickup. A few minutes later, when he saw a dumpster, he stopped to throw it in.

On the way home that evening, he decided, he'd swing by the pound and see about a new rescue for Becky and her 'forever home' project. Something to capture her attention and stop her asking, as she had twice the night before, if Mal really thought Rowdy would be ok. Something small and pretty and useless.

