

Chapter 9

Goodbye to a Friend

The grasses whispered like children in a far off land, as the breeze blew across the hill. It rustled the flowers and lifted their pollen in soft clouds towards the sky. The sun smiled kindly down on the horses as they stood, shoulder to shoulder, by the edge of the lake. The sky, the sun, and the earth gave this beautiful day as a gift to the horses as they mourned the loss of a friend. A few days before, beloved Little Black passed away at age 33. He was happy and well cared for until the end, surrounded by horse and human friends. The horses were now gathered to celebrate his life and friendship, on the hill overlooking the ranch where Little Black lived so many happy years. Even Marley, who now lived in Twisp, had made the journey to send off his old friend. The lake was peaceful and still, reflecting their sad faces in its shimmering depths.



Buttons cleared her throat and stepped forwards. "We are all here. All the MVRU horses except for one. It is that one who is not here, Little Black, who we will celebrate today. This is a time to mourn the parting of a dear friend, reminisce on good times, and send love and hope to Little Black on his new journey, wherever that might be." The horses' heads were low. They were perfectly still, except for the occasional sad swish of a tail. "Please step forward if you would like to say something in memory of Little Black." Buttons stepped back, and looked down into the shimmering lake. After a few moments of silence, Ginger stepped forward. "Little Black taught more little kids to ride than any other horse I know. His patient and fiery nature made him a wonderful teacher and friend. Do you

remember all the adventures he and Tulie used to have together? And all the tricks he played on her?" A few of the horses smiled and chuckled. "We will miss you, Little Black, but you live on in our hearts." Marley stepped forward and cleared his throat. There was a smile on his face as he began, "I remember one time in particular, Little Black and I were moving cows with Annie and a very young Tulie. We started early in the morning, as we were moving them from Upper Bear Creek, all the way up towards the Loup. It was cool and crisp when we set out, and Little Black was about as fresh as they come! Tulie fell off at least twice in the first couple hours. The first time, he turned and galloped back almost all the way to where we had started! Annie and I had to turn and go after him, and lead him back to Tulie. What a rascal! Good thing I was there to keep him in his place." He stopped talking to have a good chuckle. "Little Black was so small and black, all the cows just thought he was another cow. Tulie had to carry a giant branch and wave it over her head to get the cows to take them seriously. I loved teasing Little Black about that. I'm going to miss you, Little Black, old friend. We've sure had some adventures together." It was Paddy's turn next. "I always admired Little Black. He could be grumpy and opinionated, but under all the tough stuff he had the kindest heart. I learned from him, and everyday I strive to be more like him. One thing I loved about Little Black, was his sense of humor. If he were here today he would be rolling his eyes at all of us horses crying and mourning! He would say, 'Hmph,' in that way of his, and say, 'okay, okay, enough emotional stuff. Let's get on with the party!'" Everyone smiled and laughed. They knew how Little Black loved to party! Even if he pretended not to.

"Little Black would say that," Finn spoke up, "but underneath all the gruffness he would be beaming inside from hearing how we all love him and how much he means to us. He loved Tulie, Taylor, Evie, Hana, Neva, and so many other little girls and boys that were lucky enough to cross paths with him! And despite being annoyed when they baby talked to him or wove flowers into his mane, he loved the attention and loved the children. And we all loved him."

All the horses wore bittersweet smiles. They were smiles of hearts that were glad for a life well lived, and proud to send their friend on to his next great journey. But the smiles also showed something that looked a little like fear and doubt. How would life continue without Little Black? Of course it would continue, it always does, but sometimes it feels like it won't or it can't. The smiles showed pain, a pain that grows out of the heart. And the smiles showed emptiness. They would miss Little Black more than they knew how to express.

Berry stepped forward. "I haven't known Little Black as long as some of you, but I loved him. And I was always caught between being in awe of him, being afraid of him, and the urge to tease him. Do you remember that story he told about his sailing adventures?"

Forest stepped forward. "Yes. And his nicker. He had the sweetest, little nicker at dinnertime! And if he was really hungry he would nicker, nicker, and nicker until he was almost frantic. I'm going to miss that nicker."

As Forest finished, Brushy stepped up and said, with a smirk, "Well I remember one time, Little Black and I..." Brushy launched into tales of the mischief he and Little Black got into together. The stories unfolded, rippling out across the lake and into the hills. The horses laughed, cried, and then laughed some more. The morning sun rose high above their heads, then took its daily descent towards the west, nestling into the blue hills, and casting the valley in long, slow shadows as day passed away into night. "It's time for us to go down to our pastures," Buttons said. "But we will carry this memory with us, just like we will carry Little Black with us in our hearts. We will meet him again, sometime, somewhere."

Until then, we will just keep on living and laughing, like he would have wanted us to do. Goodbye, Little Black. We miss you, and love you, and will see you on the other side."

"Yes, we will see you again Little Black. Little Black is up there waiting for us with our old friends, Ricky, Brownie, Luke, Henry, and Poco," Marley said with tears in his eyes. "Goodbye for now, but not forever."

The horses picked wild flowers from the edge of the lake and tossed them into the water. They stood for several minutes, watching them float away across the deep blue lake. Then, one by one, the horses started down the hill, until the only horse left was Homer.

Homer was the only horse who hadn't spoken at the celebration. Somehow, he couldn't find words for what he was feeling. Not yet, at least. Little Black had lived a long, happy life and died happy. What more could one ask for? But at the same time, Homer was not ready to face life without Little Black at his side. His heart felt like the lake. It was endlessly deep, cool, and quiet. There was beauty and joy there too, he knew, but at the moment the sadness engulfed him.

Buttons and Marley said they would see Little Black again. But when? And where? And



how? The promise of someday felt too far away for Homer's heart to bear at the moment.

He stood up to leave, and gave one last look across the lake. And that's when he felt it. There was a rustling of leaves, a little burst of warm wind, and a feeling. At that moment, Homer knew Little Black was there with him, and that he had come to say goodbye. Homer didn't walk down the hill alone that night. When he said goodbye at the bottom of the hill, he smiled and felt at peace. Little Black was on to his next great adventure. But friendship and love can never die. Little Black was with him still.