

## Best Friends

As she picked up her car keys and closed the blinds, Laura watched the final moments of a wedding documentary and, for the hundredth time, thought of the wedding of her once best friend, Jonesy.

From fourth grade to college, they had been inseparable. One Saturday, in sixth grade, they had each poked a finger with a sewing needle until a red drop appeared. Then, holding their fingers together and swearing loyalty forever, they became blood sisters.

Audrey Jones was christened *Jonesy* by Laura in fourth grade, and it stuck. By junior high they both had quarter horses and rode almost every weekend. Once in a great while, Jonesy's father would trailer their horses and drive them to the foothills for a long ride. With sandwiches and bottles of Tab in their saddle bags, they would ride the trails for hours, and finally tie their horses to a favorite century oak tree by a stream to have their lunch. It was their heaven. They took summer vacations with each other's families and spent countless overnights sleeping on their saddle pillows behind Jonesy's house under the stars.

Jonesy was the only person in Laura's life who understood her love of horses and that she had to be a veterinarian. With no brothers or sisters, an indifferent mother, and a very busy father, Laura could not imagine life without her best friend.

Jonesy had told Laura more than once that she'd never have gotten through school without Laura's coaching. "You're the reason I graduated kiddo," Jonesy would say matter-of-factly. Laura smiled at the memory as she left town and drove toward the foothills east of Fresno.

Three years after high school, Jonesy met Allen. Besides being tall, dark, and ruggedly handsome, he rode. He shared Jonesy's love of horses and was a ranked rodeo competitor, winning enough cash prizes to make a comfortable living. Jonesy was the captain of a horseback drill team that performed with American flags to officially open the bigger rodeos at the Cow Palace, and Calgary, Canada, where Allen would compete. It was an exciting time and they fell in love.

Laura's focus changed in college when she found English literature more appealing than veterinary medicine. Jonesy was engaged by now, and the best friends still spoke almost every day. Jonesy called Laura first after she and Allen decided on a wedding date, and when she asked Laura to be her maid of honor, the friends hugged and cried happy tears. Laura was thrilled to see her friend so in love.

No cowgirl wedding for Jonesy-tradition prevailed. There was a long, white gown with veil, black tuxes for the men, and, keeping with tradition, never to be worn again, turquoise dresses with bubble skirts and hobble hems for the four bridesmaids.

When asked her opinion, Laura expressed concern that the dresses might not work with the different body types, and Jonesy agreed. Then, Diane Porter, a bridesmaid, and a neighbor of the Jones's, had argued strongly in favor of the dresses. Jonesy acquiesced, and it had struck Laura as odd since Diane was two years younger than Jonesy and not particularly close. Laura said a mental *so what* and quickly forgot about it in the pre-wedding tumult.

Then, two days before the bachelorette barbecue, Laura got a call from Jonesy that changed everything.

"Hi."

Laura knew instantly something was off. "Hi yourself, how's everything going?"

“Okay, I guess. Can I ask you a big favor?”

“Of course—anything.”

“Would you mind terribly if I make Diane my maid of honor?”

Before the eighties, wedding protocol was etched in stone. Being maid of honor was huge. Bridal magazines were studied more intensely than some textbooks. Weddings launched most women’s lives then, and they were managed with military precision down to how many pastel Jordan almonds went into little net bags. Few women eloped or opted for a simple civil ceremony. A woman’s wedding was her one big shining moment, and her best friend was almost always the maid of honor.

*So, this is what a knife in the heart feels like*, Laura remembered thinking.

“It’s your wedding Jonesy,” was all she could say.

“Thanks for understanding,” was followed by a convoluted explanation. There was no explanation to render this whole. The hurt ran too deep; the damage was done.

The next day, Laura left a message with Jonesy’s mother that she would not be coming to the barbecue. Mrs. Jones knew and began apologizing in a roundabout way that made no sense to Laura, but it didn’t matter. She would fulfill her responsibility as one of the bridesmaids and be done with it. *Oh, but the pain.*

Somehow, she got through the wedding and photo sessions with a practiced smile. *She’ll have these pictures forever and I want to look good every time she looks at them.* During the tossing of the bouquet, Laura stood back with old classmates and watched. Finally, the question she knew was floating around the room landed on her like a slap.

“Laura, we thought you’d be Audrey’s maid of honor, what happened?”

“That’s a question for Audrey.” Laura’s *Jonesy* was gone.

She dutifully stood outside the church and threw rice as the bride and groom ran to their car. Then, she watched their friendship and her happiest childhood memories disappear into the night.

The turquoise dress and matching silk heels were packed in a box and donated to charity. Ten days later, the newlyweds called to invite Laura to view the wedding gifts and hear about their honeymoon to Yosemite.

“I can’t. I’ve got finals and my job, but I wish you and Allen every happiness; goodbye, Audrey.”

*At least, I think that’s how I put it 47 years ago.* Laura was still going through one of the most painful times of her life as she pulled into an ancient little two-pump gas station in the high foothills. The place looked abandoned. Leaves swirled in the small lot, and cobwebs covered the windows of the tiny office.

Just as she was about to drive away, a big ginger-haired man came around the corner and gave her a friendly wave. As he walked to her car window, she noticed his black and green checked flannel shirt and a big golden Lab following along, wagging its tail.

“What a handsome dog; what’s his name?”

“Oh, this is Runner.”

After the man filled her tank, Laura realized she was famished and asked him if he knew of a good restaurant nearby.

He had a beautiful smile and nodded with enthusiasm.

“Yes, ma’am, I do, with the best coffee and biscuits around. You’ll want to drive on up about seven miles; it’ll be on your right, and you can’t miss it.”

Laura waved her thanks and soon found the funky little diner with a blinking neon “LJ’s” sign in the window. When she needed downtime to recharge, she always drove to the mountains, but she usually went north of this area, nearer to Shaver Lake. It was all beautiful and serene. The cool breezes and sunlight through the pines, fresh snow melt rushing over granite boulders in countless streams, blue jays squabbling, the occasional deer and butterfly; this was her therapy; this kept her centered.

The few window seats were empty now that lunchtime was over. Laura sat where she could see her car and began looking at the menu. *This is comfort food central; she thought as she read: home fries with eggs sunny side up, biscuits, and red eye gravy with sausage patties. My, oh my, they even have grits, here in California.* A young woman with purple hair and bright blue eye shadow came to take her order.

“The biscuits are bad to the bone,” she offered with a crooked hot pink smile, “and the soup is homemade.”

“Sounds good. I’ll have coffee, an order of biscuits, and a bowl of beef and barley soup”, Laura decided, throwing calories to the wind. As she waited for the food, she remembered that Mrs. Jones’ biscuits had been the best she’d ever had, and with her homemade apricot preserves, Laura mused, there must be five permanent pounds on her hips from those wonderful meals alone.

“Was that a nature trail sign I saw when I parked the car?” Laura asked when the waitress brought her coffee.

“Yeah, it’s pretty nice. The owners put it together about ten years ago. After lunch, you can take a walk if you like.”

A head poked out of the kitchen for an instant, *must be wondering who’s talking so much.* The food arrived, and Laura savored every bite. There were even preserves of blackberry and plum. During her meal, she heard the kitchen door open again but didn’t look up. After another cup of strong coffee just the way she liked it, she paid her reasonable bill and decided to try the nature walk.

It was clear that whoever designed the walk wanted to leave nature as undisturbed as possible. Simple river rock marked the trail. About a half-mile along in a natural clearing, a stone bench invited the hiker to rest. Laura sat down, grateful for the break. She looked up into an ancient, stately Sequoia and closed her eyes to listen to the woods.

“Hello, Laura.”

Laura’s eyes flew open. A woman in jeans and a blue tee shirt with a faded “Trail Boss and Cook” across the front stood about ten feet away. She had short, chestnut, and gray hair, and...there was something familiar about her carriage, the way she smiled...her voice.

“Do we know each other?”

“Well, among other things, we’re blood sisters.”

They looked at each other for several long moments, a tentative smile on the woman’s face, eyes wide on Laura’s.

“Audrey?”

The woman’s smile faltered for half an instant before she rallied. “Yep, I recognized your voice the minute you spoke to my waitress. How are you, Laura, after all these years?”

It was too much for Laura. Lost for words, she got up and rushed to hug her dearest friend. They held each other there in the woods they both loved until Audrey asked if Laura had time to visit.

“My apartment’s attached to the diner; I have a couple of hours before the dinner crowd. Let’s catch up; I have so much to tell you.” Laura readily agreed, and they walked back arm-in-arm as they had as children, laughing and wiping their tears, and then laughing all over again.

Audrey’s home was just as Laura would have imagined. Over a cool stone floor, a Navaho rug centered the knotty pine couch and armchairs, and above the small dining table, a deer antler light fixture hung low and cast a golden glow about the room. A beautiful old saddle, trimmed in silver, sat on a display mount and filled the room with the leather smell that horse lovers never tire of.

“I’ll fire up the coffee pot on my, can you believe, wood stove?” Audrey laughed as she walked to an alcove that held the stove, sink, and storage cabinets.

“Look around if you want. The place is small, but it works well with the restaurant next door. My commute is perfect.”

While Audrey stoked the lazy fire, and assembled a tray with cookies, mugs, and cream and sugar, Laura went to a sideboard that held several framed pictures. One caught her eye, and she was about to ask, but Audrey was back with the tray, and they sat down together on the couch, arms entwined.

“I can hardly believe this, Laura, can you? Here we are, what, 55 years later, and we look goood!” Audrey passed Laura a steaming mug of dark coffee.

“Well,” Laura laughed, “at least not bad for two tomboys who rode off into the sunset.”

“Listen, Laura, before we catch up, I’ve got to explain something that happened a long time ago but still weighs heavy on my heart.”

Laura held her breath as time stopped; *so long ago, so painful still*. “Okay” was all she could whisper.

“Remember when I called and asked if you wouldn’t mind if I made Diane Porter my maid of honor?” Laura could only nod and swallow hard.

“Asking you that was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. My parents and I were sworn to silence. Diane’s mother called my mom and asked if Diane could be maid of honor. Her family had just learned Diane had leukemia. Her mother panicked and was convinced she had only weeks to live. You remember how hysterical Mrs. Porter would get about even little things.

Mom and Dad were in a bind, but it was the wrong thing to do to you. I should have stood up to them, and I’ve regretted it every day of my life since. I knew when you called me Audrey at our reception that the damage was done.” Audrey gripped her mug with both hands and studied the pattern of the rug.

Laura finally managed to ask, “Why didn’t you call me later and explain?”

“You’ll never know how much I wanted to. I argued with my parents so many times. But the Porters were terrified people would find out and ostracize Diane. They were in the Dark Ages about illnesses. Diane lived for five more years, and I tried to find you then, but you had moved away, and I was going through a rough divorce with Allen.

I heard once you were visiting your friend, Mary. I called, but she said you were moving overseas and wouldn’t give me your address. Several years later, I met Paul. We fell in love and moved up here to run this little place and get away from city life.”

“You hurt me,” Laura told her, looking out the window at the dark pines. “I barely made it through to your wedding. I couldn’t understand how I’d been so naïve. It wasn’t

about being maid of honor but that I didn't matter that much to you. It took me a long time to trust anyone with my feelings."

"We were so young," Audrey spoke in a strained whisper, "I worried about pleasing everyone else, and took my best friend for granted. I've had casual friends, but closeness scares me; it shook me more than you'll know—how unnecessary it all was. I named this place for us, thinking maybe you'd come one day and... I'd find my friend at last."

*LJ's, Laura and Jonesy's.*

Laura swallowed, holding down a sob, and felt a welling up in her chest of a kind of lightness mixed with euphoria, regret, and soul-deep relief.

As the afternoon shadows crept across the floor, the friends sat listening to the soft pops from the wood stove and the ticking of the mantle clock, salving wounds that could finally begin to close.

"Got any more of this good coffee?" Laura asked, as she gently nudged her friend.

"You bet."

While Audrey refilled the mugs, Laura remembered the photo and walked to the table, picking up a picture of a man standing near water.

"Jonesy, is this handsome guy by a lake a neighbor of yours up here?"

Audrey smiled, absorbing the axis change in hearing "Jonesy" once again, and glanced at the frame Laura held.

"That's our dog standing with Paul, my late husband. Paul was the best, Laura. He tried to find you for me so many times and made hundreds of phone calls over the years from this very room. Paul and Runner both passed away eight years ago. I miss them every day, still." Jonesy brought coffee to her friend as Laura stared in stunned silence at the picture of a big man with ginger hair and a beautiful smile, wearing a black and green checked flannel shirt, with a big golden lab by his side.