Burn Down The Barn

Storyteller: K W Sercombe

Songwriter: Roland C Hollis

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John Morey writing as Kenneth William Sercombe

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The Song - "Burn Down The Barn"

Written & performed by Roland Canning Hollis

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Burn Down the Barn - Storyteller K W Sercombe

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Part I: The Loft and the Lie

The barn stood a colossal, weathered sentinel against the bruised Missouri sky. Two storeys of sun-bleached wood, its vast double doors always slightly ajar, breathing out the earthy, comforting scent of hay, dust, and old woodsmoke. For two young people at least, it had a presence - had always drawn them closer - to protect them, perhaps? Or to own them? Parts of them - parts of each other that they felt were their own, stored deep inside each of them, made of each other. It was theirs alone, and no-one else's.

Certainly the barn had no part of them although maybe, just maybe, they had part of the barn. Its seclusion. Its privacy. And again, its protection? Guardian? Custodian? Keeper of their secret. For this was not just a storage space for the MacAfee farm, twenty miles south of Kansas City; it was the sacred, stolen sanctuary of Freya MacAfee and Jimmy Doyle.

Freya was eighteen, all wild auburn hair and a spirit that felt too big for the quiet farm life her parents, Robert and Martha, had meticulously planned for her. Jimmy was nineteen, built lean and strong from working construction across the state line, with eyes the colour of faded denim and a smile that promised trouble—the kind Freya craved.

The barn's loft was their secret cathedral. The scent of sweet alfalfa and warm air hung heavy there, cut only by the occasional sunbeam slicing through a crack in the siding. It was there, on rough-spun blankets nestled between bales, that they stole the nights, whispering promises beneath the

groaning rafters. As if the barn were speaking to them.

“Solid as a rock we were. Our dreams were too,” Freya would later recall, the memory sharp as glass.

Those dreams - shared - were simple, yet seismic: A small place in town, Jimmy working days and taking night classes, Freya finishing her teaching certificate. A life free from the suffocating weight of MacAfee expectations.

The MacAfees were ‘old money’—at least, old farm money. They expected Freya to marry well, meaning a respectable local boy from a family whose roots ran as deep as their own, preferably a college-bound farmer like young Harrison Miller.

Jimmy Doyle, an orphan raised by a distant aunt and making his own way with calloused hands, was seen as a dangerous, temporary obsession. He had fire in his belly, but no future in his pockets, Robert MacAfee insisted. His wife agreed and, being a woman, knew the depth of her daughter’s feelings. Feared them, you might say, or even wishing they were her own - for someone just like Jimmy.

Freya’s older brother, Caleb, the quiet heir to the farm, was the only one who knew about the rendezvous, and the only MacAfee who didn't entirely condemn Jimmy. Caleb was four years older, burdened by the farm’s legacy. Against the weight of that responsibiity he had seen the raw, unadulterated happiness on his sister’s face, and while he worried, he also felt a pang of envy for their reckless courage. Envy, yes, but not jealousy. He was happy for her. He owned the barn in a practical sense, it was his domain, and he guarded their secret with a weary silence. He would leave the back door unlatched on moonless nights, a silent accomplice.

As for her parents, soon their suspicions became reality. But quiet disturbances to the order of things. Their order. Then, the whispers became shouts. Martha MacAfee, visiting her sister in Independence, saw Jimmy's beat-up Ford pickup parked near Freya's college campus. That was enough to send her mind chasing her worst fears. She followed him. It led her nowhere. That time. But when she drove by their farm later that week, she saw the faintest trail of smoke—Jimmy's cigarette—drifting from the loft window of the barn.

Doubt became certainty.

The confrontation was swift, brutal, and final. She alerted her husband and as dawn broke the next morning, Robert MacAfee waited for Freya by the kitchen door, his face a granite mask.

"He will not set foot on this land again, Freya," he said, his voice low but carrying the weight of a judge's gavel. "You will not see him. You will cease this nonsense now, or you will forfeit every privilege you have ever known. Everything. Do you understand?"

Freya understood. At first, she fought, she pleaded, she screamed, but the MacAfee resolve was indeed solid as a rock. They were threatening to pull her out of school and send her to live with a stern aunt in Chicago until she "came to her senses."

And, was there some other hold, some other leverage her father had over her? To persuade her? Force her? Whatever it might have been, it was enough. The next day, Freya met Jimmy for the last time behind the rusted tractor shed, just off the property line. Jimmy could see the change immediately, even though he knew nothing at that time of her parent's

controlling nature. He could see it in her face. She was a ghost of herself, her eyes swollen.

“They’re sending me away,” she choked out, clutching his worn leather jacket. “They’ll stop at nothing. If I stay, they’ll ruin you. They’ll have Caleb fire you off the construction crew, they’ll blackball you everywhere.”

That’s all she said, altough Jimmy sensed there was more. Something deeper, more menacing; more permanent. Jimmy’s jaw was tight. Perhaps he could still persuade her. “They can try, Freya. We can run. Right now. We can be married by the end of the week.”

“And live in a trailer park? Scraping by? No, Jimmy. I won't let them do that to us,” she whispered, the tears blurring his face. “They think if we’re forced apart, we’ll forget. They think if we lead separate, respectable lives, the flame will die.”

It was Freya, not her parents, who spoke the final, sad, heartbreaking words of separation. She pushed him away, giving her parents the appearance of victory, a terrible sacrifice to protect his future. That was then. “I guess one of us had to go,” she’d think twenty years later, the guilt still a bitter taste.

She left for Chicago a week later. Jimmy, heartbroken and enraged, packed a battered suitcase and drove west, not knowing where he was going, caring even less, only that he couldn't stay a moment longer in the shadow of the MacAfee farm. He knew he had to take on another life. Eventually, perhaps reluctantly, he would take on a wife. But, down to his very soul, he knew nobody would make up for is loss of Freya. He drove past the barn for one last time, leaving, unnerved when hearing its ageing timbers seemed to groan in sympathy.

Part II: The Ashes of Yesterday

Twenty years melted away like snow on a Missouri spring day.

Freya MacAfee—now Freya Miller—lived the life her parents had engineered. She was married to Harrison, a kind, stolid man who eventually took over his own family's large farming operation, making them a powerful land-owning couple. They had two children, a beautiful house that smelled of lemon polish and safety, but shared a life entirely devoid of passion. Harrison was a good man, but he was a gentle pond, not the raging river that was Jimmy. She taught history at the high school, her students fascinated by her intensity when discussing ancient, tragic love stories.

She had fulfilled the bargain. She was 'respectable.' But her heart remained a fractured, empty, hollow vessel.

Jimmy Doyle—now James R. Doyle, P.E.—had become a highly successful structural engineer, specializing in bridge design. He had chased the biggest, hardest projects across the country, building a life of material success to compensate for the emotional wreck he carried inside. He had married Sarah, a pragmatic, gentle woman who admired his drive. They had one daughter, and a large, modern home in suburban St. Louis. Sarah was his anchor and they had their moments, but the shadow of the barn loft, the smell of hay and the ghost of Freya, remained in his dreams.

He'd often catch himself sketching not a bridge truss, but the massive, sturdy frame of an old barn. One particular barn.

The final, physical act of separation occurred five years after they parted. Robert MacAfee, in a fit of furious, retrospective control—or perhaps fear that Freya might one

day return to her teenage rebellion—ordered Caleb to demolish the old barn. It would draw an indelible line.

Or so he believed.

Caleb, his face etched with regret, couldn't bring himself to do it. He knew what the structure meant to his sister. He planned to dismantle it slowly, piece by piece, and re-use the lumber. But Robert, not a man to be denied, hired an outside crew one sweltering July day when Caleb was at the grain silo. The crew didn't use a wrecking ball. They used fire.

Freya received the call from Caleb hours later, but it was already too late.

"They burned down the barn," Caleb's voice was hoarse. "The one where you and Jimmy…," He couldn't finish the sentence. " Dad just… he watched it go. Said it was cleansing the land."

The news didn't hurt; it just confirmed the death of the life she'd mourned for years. The physical act cemented the metaphorical one.

Part III: The Catalyst

Consequences from that incident began innocently, with the cracked foundation having inevitable fallout. Fate.

Harrison Miller's farm, now a sprawling operation, was building a massive new grain storage facility on the very corner of the MacAfee/Miller properties—the old MacAfee land. After breaking ground, the construction crew found a

catastrophic instability in the underlying soil composition, an ancient pocket of soft clay. Missouri's red clay soil is often "expansive," meaning it absorbs and retains moisture and then swells significantly when wet, and shrinks when dry. This is a common challenge for engineering and construction projects, such as home foundations, as well as commercial.

Harrison, desperate to save the project and facing crippling delays, was advised to hire James R. Doyle, the most sought-after forensic engineer in the state, known for his work on sink holes and other challenging rural infrastructure.

James Doyle accepted the contract, intrigued by the geological challenge. He flew into Kansas City, rented a black sedan, and drove the familiar twenty miles south, toward the center of his own tragedy. It hadn't been aneasy decisio; half of him dreaded the prospect of rediscovering old emotions and those associated with them, the other half welcomed the opportunity to face old fears and… he wasn't quite sure. It was no surprise to him to feel an unnatural unease the closer he came to the source of that distant trauma.

When he first drove onto the Miller property, Jimmy felt the air thin. The massive MacAfee farmhouse looked the same, but the land was different—more manicured, less wild. And then he saw it: a black, low-lying patch of ground where the barn should have stood. A few charred timbers lay scattered, long bleached by rain. He could only speculate on what might have happened but, for the time being, was resigned to is assumption that, whatever had caused it, had been an accident. Spontaneous combustion in a haybarn was not unusual. Even lightning strikes, especially in the tornado season, could not be ruled out. Only later did he discover the real cause but, even

so, he couldn’t help but feel a loss that the symbol of his undying love for Freya should have met such an end.

It was as if more than one fire had burned out.

He spent the first two days on site, talking with Caleb MacAfee, who was managing the construction. Caleb had changed. His youthful envy was replaced by a deep, tired resignation. Caleb immediately recognized Jimmy, at first happyto see his old friend before a wave of guilt took over.

“Jimmy,” Caleb said, extending a hand that felt brittle. “You came back.” He struggled to look him in the eye.

“The work brought me back, Caleb,” Jimmy replied, his voice flat. He didn’t mention the burning. He didn’t have to. The scar on the earth was eloquent enough. He didn’t need to know, or thought he didn’t.

Caleb hesitated. “Freya… she’s married to Harrison Miller. You know that, right? They live here.”

“I know,” Jimmy lied, the information hitting him like a physical blow. He didn't know. He had deliberately avoided all news of her. Their first encounter in twenty years happened that evening. Harrison hosted a project dinner to introduce the engineering consultant, Mr. Doyle, to his wife, who oversaw the farm's payroll.

Freya walked into the dining room, holding a chilled pitcher of iced tea. She wore a simple sapphire dress, her auburn hair pulled back, revealing the elegant lines of her face. She looked like a woman who had spent two decades suppressing fire. Or deep-seated emotions similar to it.

Jimmy stood by the fireplace, talking to Harrison, his back to the door. It gave her the opportunity to look over to him, unnoticed. Raw, hidden emotion resurfaced. He’d changed, in

some ways; in others, he was the same. He was heavier than she remembered but his shoulders were broader, his hair flecked with grey at the temples, making his profile look distinguished. Even more attractive.

He turned as she set the pitcher down. Clumsily.

The world stopped. The polite chatter, the clink of ice, the low hum of the air conditioner—it all dissolved into the roaring silence between them. A silence only they could hear.

"If we meet again Jimmy," she'd said, " I know our love will feel like yesterday." He remembered them, instantly. They were the final words she'd spoken all those years past; they came to him again, now. Twenty years simply dissolved. They were just Freya and Jimmy again, smelling the hay, bathed in the stolen light of the moon. Together. Inseperable.

"Mr. Doyle," Freya said, her formality tasting foreign and wrong on her tongue. Her voice was steady, a miracle of discipline, but her heart was like a racing clock.

"Mrs. Miller," Jimmy replied, his own forced formality a necessary, agonizing shield. He saw the ring on her finger. It seemed to represent a high wall, a barrier, a symbol of the life built around her.

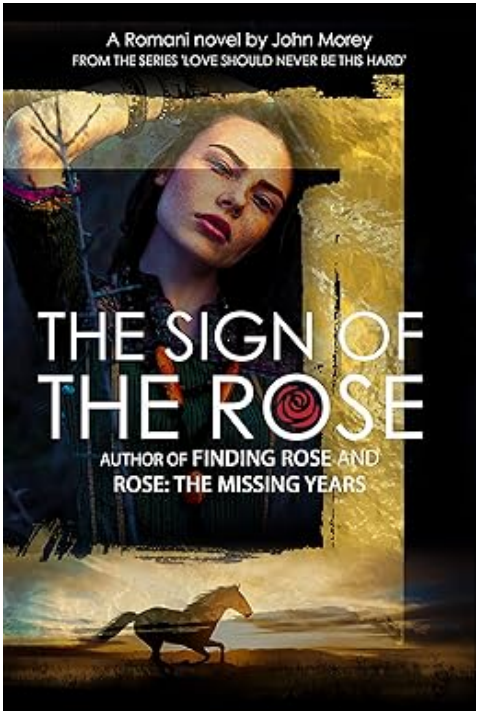
Harrison beamed, oblivious. "Freya, this is James Doyle. The man who's going to save my grain facility! Best in the business. Jimmy, this is my wife, Freya. She's a MacAfee, grew up right on this land. If there's anything you need, she's at your service - including getting paid."

There was a hidden irony in those last words; on the one hand innocent and naive, on the other, prophetic. They were not lost on either Jimmy nor Freya. The dinner was a slow-motion torture. They spoke about soil reports, stress

tolerances, and logistics. Not once did they look directly at each other for more than a fraction of a second, afraid of what might escape the carefully constructed prisons of their eyes.

Part IV: The Truth Unburdened

Hosts and guest woke to the familiar sounds of a farm greeting a brand new day. Jimmy stayed in a small cottage on the property, but he could see the big house plainly and clearly from the window of his room as he rose. He peered across the yard for the longest time until resigned that he would not catch sight of his beloved Freya. He allowed the half-open curtain to fall, ignorant of the fact that another pair of eyes shared the same wish; to catch, perhaps just a glimpse.



Jimmy was to take breakfast in the big house where he was hoping… only to be disappointed. Frightened that she would fail to keep her emotions in check, that she would be unable to cope with the joint pretence so very soon, she stayed in her room until she heard the door to te front porch close, to be followed by Jimmy starting the engine to his old pick-up - the same, now battered utility - they

had used to seek privacy away from the house, and away from the barn.

But she knew she had to face him for… exactly how long? That would depend on what progress he made on the work commissioned by her husband. Harrison. Such an innocent victim in all his but - then - were not they all victims?

But victims of who?

Their first meeting - alone - was tortuous. Going forward it was with some relief, for Freya at least, that they were joined by others who were central to the project. Even Harrison. The work demanded long hours, and he and Freya were forced to interact over documents, budgets, and scheduling. It was an intimacy of logistics, cold and professional rather than emotions and feelings, but it was time spent together.

One afternoon, a week into his stay, Freya found Jimmy standing in the black patch of dirt, kicking at the charred stub of a timber beam. It was a rare encounter alone. She walked up silently and stood beside him. The past returned like an unwelcome storm. Unwelcome? Perhaps that was a lie. But just as powerful. The air was thick with the ghost of the past.

“They burned it down, didn’t they?” Jimmy finally said, his voice flat. “Couldn’t help themselves.”

He’d asked one of the team members, Harrison’s forman, what had happened to the barn, and his suspicions were aroused even though he knew none of the detail behind it. It was Freya who confirmed his worst fears, dragging up the bitterness and contrivance from all those years ago. Again.

“Five years after you left. They said it was an accident, a faulty wire in the old junction box. But we all knew better.”

“Robert,” Jimmy spat out the name of Freya’s father like a

curse, turning to Freya just for a hint of what she might be thinking. Was it still as raw a memory for her? She attempting some logical explanation.

“And Mom,” Freya added softly. “They didn't want the ghost of us hovering. They wanted it gone. They wanted us to forget.” Jimmy was having none of it.

“So burn it down, burn down our lives, that’s all that’s left to do. Was that their revenge? Did you forget, Freya?” he asked, turning again, his denim eyes finally blazing into hers.

The dam broke. “Every single day, I have heard the sound of that wood groaning overhead. I have smelled the hay. I have felt your hand on my shoulder, Jimmy. I only married Harrison because he was the escape route my parents forced me to take. I did what I had to do to survive, to keep my mind. I am married, yes, but I have not lived a single day of happiness since I said goodbye to you in the shadow of that barn.”

Jimmy stepped closer, his successful, polished life falling away, leaving only the fierce, wounded boy of twenty years before, from a construction site.

“You left me, Freya. You told me it was over. I drove for six months straight, to get as far as I could away from here, just working dead-end jobs, trying to erase the MacAfee farm from my rearview mirror. I built a life—a fortress closed to

everyone—because you smashed the foundation of my first life. I took a wife because the one person I really loved told me she didn't want me."

Freya was just as bewildered. Jimmy wasn't finished.

"Why did we break up, I really still don't know? Even after the last twenty years or more."

"My parents broke us up!" she cried, tears finally tracing paths through the dust on her cheeks. "They threatened to ruin you! To drag your name through the mud and destroy your chances at a decent job! I pushed you away to save your future. I was eighteen, Jimmy! I thought I was protecting you by giving them what they wanted!"

So the truth was out? Or was it? Silence returned, heavy with the weight of twenty years of shared pain and separate, lonely lives. "It was your folks who broke my heart, though they didn't feel my pain," said Jimmy, finally.

Then an unexpected revelation came from Caleb. He had witnessed some of their other fraught interactions over the days, with a growing sense of dread and guilt. Even he had been equally shocked at the ending of such a closeness his sister had shared with Jimmy, although he knew and understood the underlying pressures and expectations that his parents had imposed on Freya. The next morning, Caleb approached Jimmy at the construction site. He had a battered, old wooden box in his hands and a worried, almost apolagetic look on his face..

"This was in the walls of the old pump house, near the barn foundation. I found it when we started digging. I think it's why Dad burned the barn so fast after you left."

Inside the box were papers. Jimmy and Freya's letters,

saved from the short time after she left, before the MacAfees intercepted all mail. But there was something else.

It was a contract. A simple, two-page legal document, dated three days after Freya was sent to Chicago. It was signed by Robert MacAfee and James Doyle. Supposedly.

It was a severance agreement. Ans a bribe.

Robert MacAfee had paid Jimmy Doyle twenty thousand dollars—a fortune to a nineteen-year-old—to leave the state, to sign an agreement promising he would never contact Freya again, and to disappear entirely.

The final clause was the dagger: Doyle will inform Freya MacAfee that he has chosen to end the relationship.

"Dad came to me, Jimmy," Caleb explained, his voice hollow. "He showed me the paper. Said you took the money and ran. He said you chose money over her. He said you weren't worth saving, not for Freya."

Jimmy stared at the document, the blood draining from his face. "I've never seen this in my life. I never signed any contract. I left with seventy dollars and a worn-out truck. This is a forgery. Has Freya seen this?"

Caleb pointed to the signature. "I know that now. Look

closer. It's an identical signature to the one you provided for the work permit at that construction site you had that summer. Dad must have faked it. He engineered your departure and then invented the evidence - the false story behind the false document - that would keep you away."

Robert MacAfee hadn't just separated them; he had planted the lie that guaranteed they would hate each other.

Or so he'd hoped.

Part V: The Moral of the Story

Armed with the truth, Jimmy and Freya met one last time on the scarred ground of the barn's foundation. The truth of the forgery had shattered the last twenty years of their bitterness. They had not betrayed each other; they had both been victims of the same, cold manipulation.

"They didn't feel my pain either, Jimmy," Freya whispered, holding the forgery. "But it didn't stop them and they didn't want you to feel mine either. They only wanted to make sure neither of us had an unblemished, true memory of the other; and instead, to make us doubt each other."

"And it worked," Jimmy said, his eyes filled with a fresh, sharp sorrow. "I thought you'd forgotten me the second you saw Harrison Miller. And, all the time, you thought I sold our love for a pile of cash."

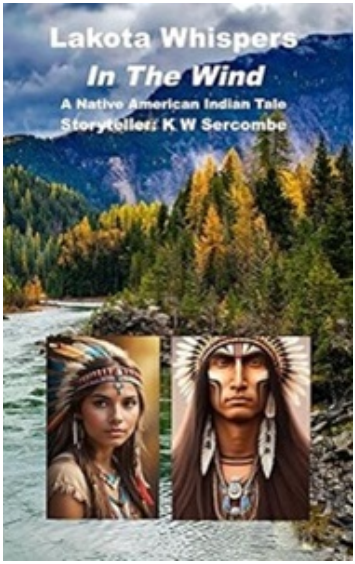
The love they thought was solid as a rock had been split, not by its own fault lines, but by a malicious wedge driven by fear and control.

They stood, two adults who had paid a horrific price for their parents' interference. They were now married to other people, had children, and responsibilities that were now

immovable factors in their lives.

The moral of this story is very plain. Always listen to your heart, as hard as it may be. But in this case: too late.

“We let them win, Freya,” Jimmy said, the confession was difficult to admit, and heavy to bear. He blamed himself. “We didn’t stand our ground. We let the false fears and doubting step in. We should have known. We should have fought.”



“We were too young to know how to fight a war like that, Jimmy,” she countered. “We thought sacrifice was love. It wasn’t. It was surrender.”

They shared a long, painful kiss—a kiss of reunion, but also of regret, and of final goodbye. Holding each other again felt like yesterday, a sudden, blinding flare of the two hearts that had once been aflame. But the fire could not be rebuilt on burned ground, plus, a voice of reason stepped in

“I have children now, Jimmy. And I won’t make them the collateral damage of a broken dream,” Freya said, pulling back, her strength renewed by the reality of their situation. “You have a wife, and a good life, whilst I have to stay and fix the mess here. Not the foundation, I can’t mend that, but at least I can try to live the life I promised to Harrison.”

“And I have to go rebuild my bridges, Freya,” he agreed, swallowing the huge, bitter lump in his throat. “But this time, I’m building them on a foundation of truth.”

He left two days later. He finished the project remotely, briefing a hand-picked team of local tradesmen and monitoring their progress through conference calls, never stepping back onto the Miller property.

Freya, now armed with the truth, returned to the big farmhouse. She confronted her parents, not with fury, but with the cold, quiet evidence of the forgery. She exposed their cruelty, forcing them to reckon with the destruction they had wrought. The MacAfee dynasty, built on control, began to crumble from the inside. She and Harrison began the slow, painful process of separating, a marriage ending not in anger, but in the sad realisation that neither of them was truly free from the past, and the deception it had held secret for so many years. Freya felt it to be a kind of cleansing.

Jimmy, too, confessed his past to his wife, Sarah. He didn't ask for a divorce; he asked for forgiveness for the ghost he had kept in his heart. Sarah, understanding and pragmatic, accepted that the man she married was standing on the ashes of a tragic, manipulated history, and the truth, though painful, had now set him free to fully be her husband.

Freya and Jimmy did not get together again. Their love had survived, not as a future to be shared, but as a pure, bright flame preserved by the act of its own burning. Twenty years before. The tragedy became the foundation of their future strength—the resolve to never again let fear or external pressure dictate their path to happiness.

The barn was gone. But Jimmy and Freya, two broken people who had finally found the truth after twenty years, were, at last, whole again and ready to build their separate

lives, solid as a rock not on the soft clay of rural Missouri.

They had to, otherwise all they would have left would be a broken dream, like a barn they might simply have watched as it burned down with no sense that it had ever existed.

That said, some embers never cool…

~ *** ~

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