

RODEO

princess



M.G. HIGGINS

Chapter 1

Freddie tosses his head. Prances. I know he'd like to go full out. I pat his neck. "Not now, boy. Barrel drills tomorrow. I promise."

Today, it's endurance. Building his stamina. The goal is Evans Lake. Thirty miles round trip.

The wind picks up behind me. Goes right through my fleece jacket. I twist in the saddle. Dark clouds are building. Another storm? It's late April. This Montana winter is lasting forever. I squeeze my legs. Urge Freddie to a brisk walk. His hooves splatter through muddy snowmelt.

We get to Rattlesnake Hill. It borders the McNair ranch. I could go around it. But I pull Freddie to a stop. Take a moment to decide. Realize the decision was made when I came this way in the first place.

I turn his head toward the narrow cattle trail. I don't have to ask. He takes it at a trot. Zigzags to the top. He's so loyal. Such a willing accomplice. We get to the peak. He's breathing hard. So am I. But not from exertion.

Below us lies the McNair ranch. Two-story log cabin mansion. Stable bigger than our double-wide trailer. Covered riding arena. Fenced and cross-fenced pastures. About fifty quarter horses that I can see. Someone is lunging a palomino in an outdoor arena. Too far away to tell exactly who it is. Too short and thin for Mr. McNair. Probably one of his hands. Or a new trainer. They're always hiring new trainers. The ones raved about in horse magazines.

I'm about to pull Freddie around when I see movement. Under the roof of the covered arena. Horse's legs. Red boots. A smooth canter. Could be Amy McNair. Or her mom. Or one of Amy's friends. She's quickly out of sight again. I could wait for another glance. Decide against it. I'm not that desperate.

I click my tongue. Freddie scurries down the hill. We're soon back on the trail. To hell with taking it easy. I loosen the reins. Give him his head. The wind whips my face. We sprint a good ways. I slow him down. Ask myself if that glimpse of my former life was worth it. I don't feel any better for it. So, no. It wasn't.

We get to Evans Lake. The clouds are almost overhead now. Dark. Stormy. Snow in them, for sure. The temperature has dropped several more degrees. Damn. I could have sworn it was spring this morning. I should have checked the weather report. It was stupid of me not to.

I turn Freddie. Fifteen miles to home. I don't want to

push him. But I have to. I'm not dressed for snow. He willingly speeds up. He wants to get to his oat bucket as much as I want him there.

Bits of falling ice prick my face. Then thick, wet flakes. I urge Freddie to a gallop.

Halfway home and it's a full-on blizzard. Can't see more than a few feet ahead. I tug the reins. Just as I do, Freddie trips. Goes down on a knee. I barely stay in the saddle. Right away he's up again. Walking. I should stop him. Check his legs. But he's not limping. And I'm really cold. Too cold. I didn't even think to bring gloves.

I pull my hat down tight. Wrap the reins around the saddle horn. Slip my hands under my arms to keep them warm. Let Freddie use his instincts. Guide us home.

I can just make out our stable's blue roof. I'm shivering. My teeth are chattering. I slide off. Lead Freddie inside. Quickly take off his saddle and bridle. Make sure he has water and hay. I'll have to brush him later. I need to get inside. Need to get warm.

We never heat the double-wide more than sixty-five degrees to save money. But the kitchen feels blessedly warm compared to outside. I rush to my bedroom. Change out of my wet clothes. Throw on a jacket. Wrap a blanket around my shoulders. I'm still shivering. Back in the kitchen I make a pot of coffee. Sit at the table. Hunch my shoulders. Clasp the hot mug between my palms.

The house is empty. Is it possible my dad and brothers are out looking for me? No. I left early this morning. None of them was up yet. I didn't leave a note. They wouldn't have known where I was.

I look out the window. The snow has stopped. I should get back to the stable. Take care of Freddie and the other horses. But the cold has seeped deep into my bones. I feel frozen. Like I'll never move again.

The door bangs open. Dad barges in. Followed by my two older brothers. They wipe their muddy boots on the mat. Toss their coats onto the hooks near the door. They fill the kitchen.

"Where were you off to this morning?" Dad asks.

"Gave Freddie a ride," I answer.

He grabs a beer from the fridge. "Did you get stuck in that storm?"

"Yeah."

"That came out of nowhere. You okay?"

"Just cold. Where were you?" I ask.

"In town."

My brothers grab beers too. "Hey, what's for dinner?" Toby asks me.

I glance at the clock. Can't believe it's five already. "I don't know." I shrug the blanket off my shoulders. Nothing warms me up like the male members of my family. They're better than a furnace.

“Soon, okay?” Seth says. “We’re going out again.”

They disappear down the hall. I set my coffee cup on the table. Stare at it a second longer. Pull myself up. Search through cupboards. Find canned stew in the pantry. Heat it on the stove. Peel a few carrots. Toss a box of crackers on the counter. Dinner is fixed in ten minutes. They’re done eating it ten minutes later.

Toby and Seth stride to the back door.

“You’re leaving *now*?” I say. “What about Mom?”

They glance at each other. Shrug their shoulders. Seth says, “Tell her hi for us.”

“Tell her yourself! You can’t wait a few minutes?” Then I see Dad is joining them. “You too?” I say.

“We’re going to the basketball game. Garth’s son is playing. Saw him in town. Promised we’d go. Cheer for his kid.” He runs his hand over his bald head. “Tell her ... I miss her. Okay?”

They’re out the door. The kitchen is empty again. The temperature drops a few degrees.

Chapter 2

I wash the dishes. Start the computer. Open Skype. Mom calls every Saturday. As close to six as she can. But plans don't always go the way you want. Not in the military. Not a million miles away in Afghanistan.

I know that's one reason the rest of my family bailed. Sometimes we wait forever. Then the connection is bad. Or there's nothing to say. That, and Garth will treat everyone to drinks at the 77 Bar after the game.

It's about six fifteen when the call comes in. Early morning halfway around the world. There she is. In her desert camo uniform. Kind face. Dark hair flattened by headphones. She smiles. "Hi, Jade."

"Hi, Mom." I push back tears. Know the army would tell us if something bad happened. But it's always such a relief to see her. Hear her voice.

"How are you?" she asks.

"I'm good. How are you?"

"Not too bad. Tired."

“When are you coming home?” I feel like such a little kid when I say it.

“Nothing’s changed. Still looks like September. Where are the boys?”

“Basketball game.”

“Basketball? Since when?” She looks annoyed.

“I don’t know. Something about Garth’s kid. Seth says hi. Dad says he misses you.”

She rolls her eyes.

“We had a blizzard today,” I say. “Freddie and I got caught in it.”

“Honey, are you okay?” She looks worried. Mom would have come looking for me. If she’d been here. She also would have been up before I left. Cooked me breakfast. Reminded me to check the weather. Take my gloves. Wear a heavier jacket.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Freddie got us home.”

“Good. Give him a pat for me. How’s school?”

I shrug.

“Jade,” she says. “I know the rodeo’s coming up. But you can’t ignore your schoolwork.”

“It would help if I didn’t have so much work around here. If Seth and Toby would lift a finger to help.”

She sighs.

“Can’t you say something to them?”

“We’ve talked about this,” she says. “I’m not there.

You're the woman of the house. If something has to give, it's the horses. Have you been going to church?"

I don't answer.

"Go tomorrow," she says. "How's Mike?"

"Fine."

She smiles. "Good." She looks over her shoulder. "I have to go, honey. Take care of yourself. Give my love to the boys. I expect to see them next week."

"I'll tell them."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

I kiss my fingers. Press them to the screen. She does the same. A final smile. And she's gone. I'm left with the same sense I always have. That she ended the call sooner than she needed to.

I turn off the computer. Throw on my field coat. Go to the stable. Feed the horses. Brush Freddie. Wipe the fur that's still wet. I rub my hand down his left foreleg. I think it's the one that buckled earlier. It feels fine. I feel his right leg.

No. Oh no.

His ankle is hot to the touch. Swollen.

No, no, no.

I lean my forehead against his shoulder. Go back in the house. Call Doc Dot. Leave a message for her to call me.



I long ago lost the belief that church has the answers to

everything. But I go the next morning. It's important to Mom. And I'm thinking a prayer for Freddie couldn't hurt.

My dad and brothers aren't up when I leave. They came home pretty late. They're out late most Fridays and Saturdays now. Mom was our anchor. Now they're slowly floating away.

I sit next to my friend Lily and her family. Pastor Nichols preaches from the Bible. About how God forgives people. But forgiveness only applies to certain people. And I'm not one of them. I worship along with everyone else anyway. As if all of this applies to me. In case it does, I ask God to heal Freddie.

After the service, Lily and I lean against her SUV in the parking lot. Wait for her parents. I tell her about Freddie.

"You're kidding me," she says. "You've trained him since he was born."

"I never should have gone out yesterday."

"You didn't know there'd be a freak storm."

I shrug.

"So what are you going to do about the barrel race?"

"I have to cancel. I don't have another horse ready."

"Jade!" People stare at Lily as they walk to their cars. "You can't," she says more softly. "You're the best."

"I don't have a choice."

"I wish I had a horse to loan you. What about Amy?"

"A McNair horse?" I laugh. "No way."

“I know you guys aren’t friends anymore. But this is an emergency. Without you, there’s no competition. I bet even Amy would agree with that.”

“Maybe Freddie’s leg isn’t that bad,” I say.



Veterinarian Dorothy Miller, Doc Dot, arrives that afternoon. She tells me Freddie has a sprain. “Keep him isolated,” she says. “It will heal on its own. No riding. And certainly no barrel racing. Not until I give the okay.” She leaves me with care instructions.

I walk back to the house. Hold back tears. I’m glad it wasn’t any worse than a sprain. But I was hoping it was nothing. That maybe God heard me. Thought me worthy of a miracle.

I wanted to win this race. I came in second last year. Missed first to Amy McNair by a tenth of a second. I’m a better rider now. I’ve been training every chance I get. Every bit of spare time.

And Freddie was coming along. He’s fast. Smart. Powerful. Good instincts. Everything you want in a barrel racer. We could have done it. Winning the Wyatt annual rodeo would have set me up for going to the next level.

I think about Lily’s suggestion. About borrowing one of Amy’s horses. She always has at least three ready to go. Depending on the type of race. The weather. Her mood. The horses’ moods. The color of her outfit. She told me

once her horses are worth fifty to one hundred grand each. Freddie cost practically nothing. We bred my mare Misty to another neighbor's quarter horse. I've done all the training.

There are too many reasons why using one of Amy's horses is a bad idea. So I push the thought out of my head.

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"Stay out of my life. Or I'll tell." That was over three years ago. The last time I talked to Amy McNair. One of the prettiest girls in school. She's horse crazy. And an amazing barrel racer. But I'm going to win at the annual rodeo. Beat her. It's all I've got. Even my boyfriend's parents don't accept me. Mainly because of my brothers. They aren't exactly upstanding citizens. People think I'm the same as them. If only they knew.

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