

# 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.