

Prologue

The funeral hall was large, dry and almost felt dusty, though there was no hint of the offending material anywhere. It was the feel of Colorado. Anna had only been here a day, and her skin was already protesting, feeling papery after the humidity of home. It was quiet too, beyond the quiet of the mourners. The thin air didn't carry sound as well, and though her parents never noticed, Anna always did. Anna loved Colorado, loved the time she got to spend with Grandma and her horses. And now it was all gone.

The tears did come then. Finally. The loss started sinking in. She would never spend another summer on the ranch, never race her Grandma through the pastures on the backs of her sturdy Arabians. Tears burned hot tracks down Anna's cheeks as she gave into her sorrow. Anna was the only one in the family besides her Grandma who loved horses. She was the one that had browbeat Anna's parents into paying for riding lessons, and insisted that Anna come out every summer since she was old enough to fly alone.

Her father's voice, coming from the opposite end of the pew, caught her attention.

"What the hell are we going to do with all those horses?" he grumbled.

He was standing close to a particularly large, and pungent flower arrangement that made Anna hope her Grandma's spirit wasn't present to see such a travesty. She edged closer.

"I guess we can take them to the sale. Someone said there is an auction barn close," Mom replied.

Those words stopped Anna's tears and a cold anger spread through her. How dare they?

"That might be best," Dad agreed.

Anna ground her teeth.

"Just a second," Anna whispered and stomped over to her parents. "You can't!"

They blinked, twin expressions of surprise on their faces.

"We can't what?" Mom finally said.

“You can’t take Grandma’s horses to the sale. Who knows who will buy them?”

“Honey, I know you love those beasts but what are we going to do with them?”

Anna’s mind raced as she tried to come up with a solution. “Is there a will?”

Mom shifted around uncomfortably. “Yes, but it doesn’t make provision for the horses.”

Anna could almost tell her Mom was lying, though Anna had no idea why she would.

“Fine, then we need to find buyers, not take them to a sale.”

Dad sighed. “Honey, how are we supposed to do that? We need to get home. It could take all summer to sell them.”

All summer, the words echoed in Anna’s mind.

They didn’t have all summer, but she did.

“I can do it,” Anna heard her voice say. She don’t know where the courage to utter the words came from, but they surprised her even though she’d spoken them.

Mom looked at Dad, and Dad looked at Mom, then they both looked at Anna. She tried not to shrink away from their combined gazes.

“We’ll talk about it,” Dad finally said.

Anna nodded, taking a deep breath. That was enough for now. At the very least it delayed their decision to take the horses to the sale barn.

And then Anna really realized what she’d said. How the hell was *she* going to sell twenty head of horses? She was only sixteen.

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Chapter 1

Anna watched the dust cloud from her parents' rental disperse as it vanished into the distance. She wiped the sweat from her brow and shifted her feet, the crunch of gravel under her tennis shoes a loud intrusion into the silence. It was a hot, still day. The baby blue sky was cloudless and the sun beat down, harsh after the air-conditioned house.

She turned her back on the driveway and looked out over the pasture, almost expecting to hear her grandma's voice calling to her from the barn even though she'd been dead for over a week now. Anna could almost hear the ghost of a little girl giggle, small feet pounding on the hard packed dirt towards the large, elegant building. Anna fought back tears and walked slowly to the barn. Grandma Sherrie never met Anna and her family in the house. She was always in the barn, or just riding up on one of her horses. That had always annoyed Anna's mom. "Why can't she meet us in the house like a civilized person," her mother had always complained, though Anna could never figure out what the problem was. There was nothing wrong with the barn.

Though she was thirsty, and very hot, Anna wasn't ready to go back inside yet. Her parents had stocked the fridge and spent the morning with Anna checking to be sure everything inside was ready and that Sherrie's old farm truck would run. Anna wasn't supposed to drive unless she had to, but they wanted to make sure she could get to town if necessary. Sherrie's property was secluded and town was not within walking distance, though Anna suspected she could ride there without too many problems.

Anna paused by the fence, leaning against it and idly digging at the peeling paint. Several of the horses frolicked in the pasture despite the heat, running, almost as if they were playing tag. A few were out of sight over the hill though most were grazing on the lush grass. It had been a good spring, and all the pastures were green.

One of the horses whinnied breaking the still silence. She smiled. It brought back so many memories of this place that she almost couldn't keep up with them. Anna pushed them aside and climbed over the wooden fence, ignoring the gate. It was a tradition.

Anna hurried into the cooler shade of the barn, enjoying the slight breeze that the wide barn aisle coaxed out of the hot day. It was a wide barn with stalls on both sides and a hayloft that was mostly left to storage. One of the barn cats saw her and scampered down the aisle, rubbing on her leg.

“Hey kitty,” Anna said bending to scratch the tabby. “Are you hungry?”

The cat meowed, as if answering, and Anna laughed.

“Alright. Let’s see what we can find.”

The gray tabby followed Anna past the rows of stalls to the grain room. She tried not to let memories depress her as she opened the door and inhaled the sweet dusty sent of the room. She flicked on the light and was surprised to see several of the other barn cats already in there, sitting by their bowl. Anna was instantly mobbed by the hungry cats as they twisted around her legs, purring encouragingly.

“Don’t you guys have mice to kill?”

She filled their water and food bowls and the meowing and purring fell silent as the cats dug into their meal. She doubted that they were as hungry as they were acting, but she was happy to feed them. She gave out a few more scratches, checked to make sure the cat door was still unlocked then left the feed room. Grandma always fed the cats in there because she wanted to keep the mice out of the grain.

Most of her cats were transients that had decided to stay and there had been many litters of kittens born in her unused stalls. As long as the cats were friendly towards people, they were allowed to stay.

Movement caught her eye and Anna jumped, startled by the figure that darkened the far end of the barn aisle. She took a deep breath and tried to calm her racing heart as she recognized one of her Grandma’s horses. Anna wasn’t used to being out here on her own.

“You scared me,” she said to the horse, heading over to say hi.

To Anna’s mild surprise, the horse nickered back. It almost sounded apologetic.

“Well, it’s ok. It’s just very quiet out here.”

The horse nodded its head up and down.

Anna stopped walking and tilted her head slightly, surprised at the horse’s response. It must have been scratching its neck on the bars.

The horse was backlit by the sun, so it was hard to see which one it was, though Anna knew all twenty of her Grandma’s horses by name. She thought this one might be Sabaska, her Grandma’s favorite trail horse.

“Hey girl,” Anna said once she was closer, and sure who it was. “Whatcha doing up here?”

Sabaska nickered and Anna gave her a good face scratching, paying particular attention to the spot right behind her ears and under her chin. Sabaska flicked her ears forward when Anna was done, almost seeming to smile with her pleasant expression. Anna grinned and scratched the white star on her forehead. She was a smaller bay horse, only about fourteen hands with two white socks in the back that made her look like she was wearing sneakers.

The horse bumped Anna’s pocket and gave her a hopeful expression. Anna laughed.

“Sorry girl, I don’t have anything for you right now. I’ll make sure I do next time.”

Sabaska nodded her head again, the motion very human-like. Anna shook her head to dispel that thought. Sabaska wasn’t nodding her head because she agreed with Anna, it was just something horses did now and again.

“I need to get some work done,” she said to the horse. “Go play. Maybe we can go for a ride later.”

Sabaska’s ears, already forward seemed to perk up and her head raised a little in excitement.

“Right.”

Anna gave her one last scratch before turning away. She started by inspecting the stalls. Anna already knew all the doors would open freely and that the varnish that coated the wooden boards would be fresh. Grandma put a fresh coat of varnish on every fall without fail, and Sherrie hadn’t been dead

that long. Anna stifled that thought and tried to lose herself in her inspection.

Most of the stalls were empty. It was summer and Sherrie didn't keep them bedded except in the coldest parts of the winter. She felt that horses did best when they were out in a pasture being horses and Anna couldn't argue with her. All twenty of them were very healthy.

The barn had thirty stalls, fifteen on each side with pipe metal runs that opened out into two dirt lots that surrounded 3 sides of the barn. Sherrie had her pastures divided into two, that way she could rest one and let the horses graze in the other. Anna didn't know how many acres Sherrie actually had, but it was a pretty large number. Sherrie brought the horses up to the dirt lot at night and fed them in their stalls, so some of the stalls weren't clean but it wouldn't take long to make them that way.

Each stall had rubber stall mats on the ground that made cleaning and bedding them a lot easier. Anna actually remembered when the floors had been dirt and she preferred the mats. All of the automatic waterers in the stalls that were in use had water in them, though they needed to be cleaned. It was going to take her all day just to put the barn back in shape, but then, she really didn't have to do it all at once.

She'd start with the water, then clean. Then she had to inventory the tack room. She wasn't in charge of selling tack, but she did want to know what was in there.

Her Grandma had a lot of tack.

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Ghosts chased Anna throughout the day, memories of past visits bringing tears to her eyes at odd moments. One picture on the mantel was particularly hard. It was of Anna when she was seven dressed up for career day at school. Anna picked up the picture and stared at it, remembering calling Sherrie for advice on what to dress up as.

"Well, what do you want to be?" she had asked.

“You Grandma!”

“You want to be old and wrinkled?”

“No silly. I want to have a lot of horses and ride all the time,” Anna giggled.

Anna remembered her Grandma getting very quiet for a while before asking if she wanted to be a doctor.

Anna also remembered strong disapproval from her parents, though she hadn’t understood why. She still didn’t.

She had ended up going as a doctor, probably because her Grandma had mentioned it in the conversation.

Anna put the picture back on the mantel and rubbed at her eyes. *How had a simple car accident killed her Grandma?* It just didn’t make any sense.

She turned away from the pictures of her family arrayed across the fireplace and sank onto the couch, fighting a wave of sadness that threatened to take away all of her motivation. She leaned back, letting the squishy couch swallow her while she tried not to cry.

After a while Anna’s stomach growled loud enough to distract her from her sorrow. She sighed and forced herself to get up and get food.

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