

# Josh

KAREN NOLEN

WE TURNED ONTO A HILLY, rugged dirt road lined with cypress trees, and followed a group of trucks and cars headed toward the main house. As we bounced along I gradually could piece together how large the estate really was. The top of each hill exposed a different part of the farm: first a house, then a rolling pasture, then another house or a barn. By the third hilltop, I could see a clearing where long buildings stood; the area where the horses were quartered; two barns, weathered to a coarse gray with rusted tin roofs. At the foot of the hill, we turned onto another bumpy dirt road that would take us there. I glanced over at Eric. Hot sticky air whipped through the truck, kicking his muddy red hair around like a wildfire. I was glad I thought to wear mine in a ponytail, though once in a while a couple of blond strands would pull away and I'd have to tuck them behind my ear to keep them at bay.

The stalls were numbered one through twenty, ten on each side, and they opened to the outside. "What number are we?" I asked. They were the first words spoken between us since we left the farm, over an hour ago.

"What do you care?" He looked straight ahead, not really expecting an answer. I went back to my window, not about to give him one. He had been acting this way all morning, which is exactly why I hadn't spoken until now. He was mad at me because his father made him transport Josh all the way up here — while we still didn't have anyone to ride him — when he would rather be hanging out with *Brennn-duh!* Her name made my skin crawl! Anyway, I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of knowing he got under my

skin, again. Instead, I went back to my window, clenching my jaw, trying not to lean over and grab the wheel, and force him off the road — into a tree!

We pulled into the parking area and he jumped out, immediately unloading Josh and escorting him toward the barns, leaving the saddle and the rest of the tack for me. I lowered the tailgate, hung the bridle and lead ropes around my neck, and dragged the saddle toward me. Leaning over, I pulled it onto my back, shifted its weight, and then started up the hill toward the stalls. The equipment was heavy and my shirt was quickly soaked with my own sweat. Bent over like that, it was hard to see where Eric had gone; I still didn't know the number of our stall, and I couldn't see him anywhere.

The place was buzzing with horses and trucks and people with little dogs dressed like their owners. A man with the nametag "Cowboy" pointed me in the right direction and I headed up hill toward the second barn. Country music blared from the back of an SUV and I could smell steaks or hamburgers; the SUV people were grilling out. Drink stands sold sodas and snacks, priced way too high. It was like being at a carnival. This was supposed to have been my first event.

When I finally reached the stall, I dropped the saddle and tack at Eric's feet, plopped down on a bail of hay and fanned myself with my hand. A slight breeze gave some relief to the heat as it pushed around the musky odor of manure and hay.

"Oh, no you don't — get up and start getting him ready," he ordered.

"But I'm not riding him," I argued, not intending to sound so whiney.

"Then after you get him ready, you'd better find somebody to ride him."

"Why don't you ride him?" I braced myself; I knew the words would anger him that much more but couldn't stop them from coming out.

"He's your horse, your responsibility. Besides, your mom is going to sell him if you keep this up."

"Keep what up? Did she tell you that?"

Eric let out a sigh and turned and headed downhill. "I'm going to get a soda."

Josh stomped his feet and swished his tail at a fly. He huffed and tried to crane his long neck toward me to see if I had something good to give him, but the rope he was on was too short and wouldn't let him get very far away from

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the wall. I reached into my pocket and took out the small apple I had been saving for myself and held it out to him. The coarse hairs surrounding his nose tickled a little as they roamed over my palm; until he was sure he had the whole thing in his mouth. Thick foam gathered around his lips while he worked his jaws, grinding the apple into sauce. I grabbed a thick brush and started getting him ready.

I hadn't ridden him for over two months. It had been about nine weeks since I had fallen, and I hadn't had the nerve to get back on him. I had gotten him about three months before. He had been rescued by the humane society; his last owners had underfed him. And as if starving him wasn't enough, there were thick shiny scars where stitches were healing over. They had been beating him too. When we got him, his ribs stuck out so much you could put half of your hand between them, and he wouldn't willingly come to anyone — even if you had a bucket full of feed, or an apple or carrot. And he was so shy; if you raised your hands above his head to put on his bridle, he would bolt in the opposite direction. I didn't know what to do with him at first; I had never owned a dog, much less a horse.

Some days I would go out, into his pen, and just walk around. I didn't call him or try to get him to come to me. I just wanted him to know I wasn't going to hurt him. Eventually, he started following me, but he'd stay way behind, and if I stopped walking he would stop, too. Not long after I finally got a bridle on him, he let me put a saddle on him. I found out he had been a racehorse before his last owners had bought him at an auction. We didn't have a track to run him on, so I set up a couple of barrels in his pasture and we slowly began working our way around them. After a while, we flew around them like lightening. One day, after we rounded the second barrel and were headed back toward the first, he just kept going. He was running so fast he grunted each time his front feet hit the ground; the impact was loud and thunderous, like a team of horses instead of just one. As we were reaching the end of the pen I began to pull back on the reins, but he didn't slow down. And before I knew it we were in the air, over, and on the other side of the fence.

For weeks after that, we were both addicted. We jumped anything and everything. Then one Saturday morning we were running on a trail through the woods when we came up to a ditch. I thought Josh would jump over it,

just like he had jumped everything else, but as soon as he got to it he turned. I had been ready and braced for the jump, but when he turned I lost my balance and started to slip off his side. My foot got caught in the stirrup and I lost the reins, but hung on to the saddle; he was still running. I lost my grip from all of the bouncing around, and he dragged me for about twenty feet; knocking the air out of my lungs, before my boot came off and set me free. The whole time I had my eyes shut and was praying for it to end. After I finally caught my breath, I laid there in shock and cried for a long time. And when I could stand, I walked home; Josh had kept running until he reached his pen. Eric was the only person there when I got back and I made him promise not to tell anyone, especially my mom. He kept his promise, but not without giving me a lot of grief; he's been around horses his whole life and he doesn't understand that I can't get back on him. Not yet, anyway.

Just as I was finishing dressing Josh, Cowboy showed up. "You must be Jessica," he said, shoving a large calloused hand at me. My arm looked like a noodle under the force of his handshake and he chuckled. "I see you found your horse. My, he's a big one." He patted Josh on his rump as he walked around to inspect him. A cigar hung loosely from his teeth, the ones he had left; and he had sort of a spicy, old cigar and leather smell about him. He ran a hand over the scars on his side and shook his head. "Oh, you've done a real good job with him, Missy."

"Excuse me?" I was confused. I was sure I would have remembered meeting *him* before.

"He looks good, real good. His stitches have healed real nice." He ran his hand over the scars again.

"How do you know who he is?" We had gotten Josh from Eric's father, a local veterinarian; I couldn't imagine how this man knew him.

"I was the first vet to see him; I put those stitches in him."

"Really, I thought Dr. Cottingham rescued him?"

"No ma'am," he smiled at me and adjusted his hat. "Dr. Cottingham got him from me. He said he knew about a young girl that stopped by his farm everyday after school. Said she would save the fruit from her lunch and feed it to his horses then lie and tell her mother she ate it all."

I blushed, embarrassed at how hearing him tell it made me sound childish,

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much younger than sixteen years old. I stood there staring back and forth, between him and Josh. Before I could gather my thoughts enough to ask any more questions, he shoved a couple of pieces of paper at me and began explaining, “The top one there’s your number, you gonna need to tack it on the back of your shirt; the other’s a map of the trail. Most people get here early enough to run the course at least once but you, and a couple others I’ve got to find, won’t get that chance. There’s water on the last jump, but as you probably know, Josh here don’t like water.”

“What?” As soon as he said it, I realized why Josh had turned at the ditch that morning. I plopped down on the hay bail, playing the accident over in my head.

“You okay?” Cowboy asked, a little confused by my behavior. My hands were cold and clammy. “I’m fine,” I smiled at him. “I was just thinking about what you said about the water.”

“Well, don’t you worry about that. Just go around it.”

“Won’t that disqualify me?”

“No, but you’ll rack up a couple of faults. The paper explains it all. I’ve got to go now — good luck!” He grinned widely and waved goodbye before turning around and heading for his next stop. I looked down at the papers he had given me. A large, red five was printed on the first one and it had two safety pins stuck through the top corners. The second page was the map with course instructions.

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Overhead the PA system rang out, “Riders one through five, riders one through five, please meet at the trail entrance.” I looked around for Eric and saw him, down hill a little ways, talking to Cowboy, shaking his hand and patting him on the back. Fine, if he didn’t want to help, I didn’t need any. I grabbed Josh’s reins and pulled him out of the stall and we headed up hill. According to the map the trail entrance wasn’t far. Ahead, riders one through four were making their way up, as well, on top of their horses.

At the opening of the trail everyone was waiting on us and when we finally reached them one of the three judges began reviewing the course structure: A mile long, the first quarter of it through the woods. The rest was an open stretch. A bell will chime once the person in front of you makes it to the half

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way point, that is the queue for the next person to start. When she was finished she asked if I needed help with my number. I said I did, so she pinned it onto the back of my shirt.

“Do you need a lift up?” the same judge asked. I looked around at the others and figured I must look pretty out of place. I shook my head no and faced Josh. Putting my foot into the stirrup, I grabbed the front and back of the saddle and hoisted myself up; I had forgotten how much I could see from up here. I looked down the hill for Eric but I was too far away; I wouldn’t be able to make him out from here.

A bell sounded and the first rider was off. We could hear him long after he left our sight, hooves pounding. My heart began to jump and my palms became sweaty again. What am I doing up here? The next bell rang. Overhead one of the judges was giving information about each horse to the spectators that lined the trail. Josh was moving around nervously so I was pulled back on the reins trying to keep him still. This was not helping me keep calm at all. The next bell rang. I was beginning to wonder if I had made a huge mistake. I hadn’t ridden Josh in so long. He seemed so jumpy; maybe he wasn’t ready either. The next bell rang. I was stuck; the next bell would be for me. I looked down hill wondering how pathetic I would look walking him back to the stables. Josh continued to dance as my mind raced. He isn’t ready. I’m not ready. There’s the bell.

Josh lunged forward, almost leaving me sitting on the ground. I didn’t have time to react. He whipped through the trees, his hooves pounding like bass drums, the rhythm raising my curiosity. When we reached the open trail, he thrust forward, picking up his pace, the wind gusting past my ears. I could see people on the side of the trail yelling and waving, but I couldn’t hear anything they were saying, we were going so fast. The first jump appeared on the other side of a hill and Josh took it with energetic grace as I braced for the worst, but I was only tossed forward a little when his feet finally reached the ground. I looked back. He had clipped the top rail with one of his back hooves; it hit the ground with a ringing thud. We took the next turn in the course and before we headed back up hill Josh took the second jump with the same effortlessness as the first, with no faults; the jump was intact. Down another slope the jump with the water waited. The rails were higher than the first two.

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Hindsight told me I needed to turn him away, but the rhythm of his hooves and the whipping wind fed my adrenaline. This, and our rhythmic, paralleled breathing, was all I could hear; my ears had shut out every other sound. As we reached the jump I held on to the reins – and the saddle. When Josh’s front feet splashed the water, my grip tightened. I was sure he would stop, and then I felt a jolt from his hind legs as they pushed off. We were airborne. We both held our breath; the silence was deafening. When his front feet finally made contact with the ground a loud grunt escaped both of us as we exhaled. He had cleared the jump, with no faults. I leaned over the saddle and squeezed his long neck, unable to remember what I had been afraid of.

Fifteen other horses had followed us. Some made better time, others fewer faults, but by the end of the day we had placed eleventh. Not too bad.

Eric and I were packing up when I noticed Cowboy, just down hill from us; getting into a truck that was old and badly dented on every fender, and the paint didn’t match anywhere on it.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

“That guy down there getting in that truck. For a veterinarian he sure drives a hunk of junk!”

Eric began to laugh, “He’s not a vet.”

“What? Yes he is, I saw you talking to him earlier — and he knows your dad!”

“He’s not a vet,” he repeated, grinning.

“Wha-?” It took me a second but I finally understood. He tricked me! “You could have gotten me killed.” I threw the brush I was holding at him but he dodged it gracefully, still smiling at me.

On the road, headed home, he asked. “You want to go riding in the morning?”

“What about Brenda?” I asked trying to sound unconcerned, not leaving my window.

“Don’t you mean Bren-duh?” he laughed.

I blushed, and laughed too. Then I returned to the window, trying to concentrate on the landscape. But I stared at his reflection instead.