

RIDING CHANCE

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CHAPTER ONE

SEE, THE FLOW'S THE THING. You know, we all got our swagger when we're on the block. Don't take no stuff from the fellas, profiling for the ladies. Well, same thing when I'm up on that horse. I got my moves and my horse got hers. It's the flow that first grabbed me.

It sure wasn't what I expected. After what happened, me and my boy Foster were just trying to keep it all together. Especially me. I was messed up—confused pretty bad—but I couldn't tell anybody. Not Foster, not my family, nobody.

“Mr. Butler.” The social worker folded her hands on her desk and leaned toward Pops. “Our prevention program has your son's name written all over it.” I didn't know what she was trying to prevent. My mom had already died and, after that, it felt like I was living in a tunnel. Even when I was outside on a sunny day, everything still felt dark.

Pops sighed real deep and shook his head. “Everything used to be fine,” he said. It must have been hard for him to

hear what all I'd been doing—skipping school, hanging out with knuckleheads. He'd had to take time off from work for this. "Maybe this will help him get back on track."

I squeezed my eyes shut and swallowed hard. They didn't know the half of it. They didn't know that I was there when that old man got mugged, when Lay-Lay took his forty bucks. Foster was smart enough to back away from that, but not me. *Troy, Lay-Lay's bad news, man.* That's exactly what Foster said. Maybe I didn't listen 'cause I was still feeling like I was underwater. You know how when you're in the big swimming pool at the Y? Holding your breath, you can't hear everything that's going on around you. That's how I was feeling.

"Well," the social worker said, "in light of the iPhones incident—"

"We didn't steal them," I broke in, "we were just holding them . . ." I was still trying to figure out how we got punished for what Lay-Lay did, but nobody wanted to hear it.

The social worker held up her hand. "We're in agreement with the police, Mr. Butler. Troy and his friend Foster would benefit from our program."

I guess that was the cops' way of saying we weren't hardcore or nothing, so they sent us to talk to this lady about working with horses in the park. My first thought was, what's that got to do with me? I didn't know nothing about horses, didn't wanna know nothing about horses, and didn't nobody I know play with horses.

“Sounds like a good idea,” said Pops. “Troy’s been under a lot of stress lately.”

I almost laughed. Stress. Is that what it’s called when you lose the person you love the most? I didn’t know what to say, but when I looked over at Pops, I didn’t see any brightness in his eyes. He was still struggling, too. How could I say no to messing around with some horses?

Pops didn’t have much to say on the ride home. Used to be he’d put on some jazz and try to explain the music to me. But right then, he was quiet. Totally quiet, like our house was most of the time. I couldn’t stand everything being so dark and hushed, so I went over to Foster’s crib.

I liked hanging out over there ’cause his mom had made their place funky, not like our house. There were candles and incense in the living room, and Foster had a parachute attached to the ceiling of his bedroom. Felt like we were sitting in a tent or something. It was our clubhouse.

“Aw, man, I don’t believe you,” I said, looking over his shoulder. “You’re looking up horses?”

“I’ve never seen one up close.” My boy always did his research. He shifted his body to the right to hide his computer screen from me. “Listen to this. A horse is a plant-eating animal . . .”

“Horses don’t eat meat?” I leaned over to his left side and saw this mad picture of an all-black horse running on a beach. Foam from the ocean waves was bubbling around the horse’s

feet, and its hair was flowing straight back from its long neck. “Other than the beach thing, looks like me on the ball court,” I said, nudging his shoulder.

“You wish,” he said, waving me off.

Foster lets me talk a lot of trash. He knows it’s just my way of dealing with everything. He got into trouble because of me but he never threw that in my face. Now he was looking up stuff so it’d look like we knew something when we got there. “What’s that game the social worker was talking about?” he asked. He was working his way through more pictures. “Some sport you can play if you’re good on a horse?”

“Polo,” I said. “I thought it was just a designer shirt.”

“Here it is.” Foster clicked through a few websites. “Polo: a high-speed game played on horseback.” He pushed his chair away from his desk so I could see a picture of a guy dressed all fly on a horse and holding a long stick. “Looks stupid if you ask me.”

“Man, this whole thing is stupid,” I said. I threw myself down on Foster’s beanbag and looked up at his parachute. Felt like I’d been thrown out of an airplane without one. Lay-Lay set us up. There was no question about that. I squeezed my eyes shut for a few seconds; sometimes that helped me to not feel so confused. “Well, at least we’ll be out in the park.”

“Working for free,” Foster added.

“We can just fake it,” I said. “Nobody will know the difference.”