



As if conjuring my dream, the earth shook. My throat closed, and I knew I should run, or duck, or roll—any one of the things I’d been taught since elementary school to do during an earthquake. But I stood rooted, watching the horses gallop up from the creek that bordered the redwood forest—their hooves striking the cracked ground as they flew, their tails raised high, their necks extended, their ears flattened against their heads, desperate to keep up with their herd mates. A cloud of dust rose above the ranch, choking me. I wiped at the grit in my eyes with the heel of my hand.

Then everything settled. The ground. The horses. The dust. The thunderous noise.

And even though I’d been born and raised in earthquake country, and this was not unusual—typical even—from somewhere deep within me, like the tectonic plates colliding beneath the soles of my feet, something shifted and two opposing forces clashed. Courage and fear, logic and absurdity, certainty and fantasy—tearing at me from the inside.

I stood, balancing on the tenuous ground, my helplessness startling me, and I had a sudden urge to taste and smell every bit of our patch of earth. I wanted to touch all the horses, run my hand along the white fence, and pick a few blades of grass, just so the smell would linger on my fingers.

“Come on, Brynn. We don’t have all day!” Dad held Jett, my jumper, by a leather lead shank. Pulling a cloth out, the one that

always stayed tucked into the waist of his worn jeans, he wiped Jett's face, muttering under his breath. Probably cussing out Derek, our groom and my longtime best friend, for missing a spot.

I hurried over, my hand trembling as if the earth still shook. "Did you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

My pulse pounded in my ears. "The earthquake."

"Must've been a small one." Dad stood back, narrowing his eyes as he assessed Jett, then wiped a speck of dust off of Jett's chest.

The restless herd snorted, their nostrils flaring, their hooves pawing at the dry ground, circling at the gate like they always do when they want to come in. "They must have. They galloped all the way up from the valley."

Dad glanced at the horses. "Nothing we can do about it now." He wiped at the sweat trickling down the back of his neck into the crease of his dusty collar. "Gimme fog over this damned heat any day."

I scanned the barn and house to make sure everything stood as it should. "Should we worry about a larger one?"

"Nah. It was probably nothing. Let's just get them loaded."

I hesitated, but grabbed Jett's lead shank. The task of trailering horses made my stomach clench. It was my least favorite thing in the world: large horses weren't meant to go into small boxes. But we'd owned Jett since he was a foal in utero and he would be fine. He was always fine. I led Jett up the rubber-matted ramp into the three-horse slant-load trailer.

"One of four more shows this season," Dad said.

"Yeah," I said. We were heading to one of the biggest competitions on the West Coast—the Queen Elizabeth II Cup at Spruce Meadows in Calgary. Dad stood behind me, ignoring the long whip that leaned against the trailer. Jett, having ridden in trailers hundreds of times, mostly traveling to shows for competitions, knew we were headed off to another; his tail up, nickering, excited to be loaded, as if to tell me his fearless spirit thirsted for victory.

“Victory by Heart,” I said Jett’s show name aloud, rubbing the white star on his forehead with my thumb. White hairs mixed with black.

Jett sighed against my cheek.

Dad stood at the bottom of the ramp. “You’re not breaking your word on me now, are you? You’re going to all of them?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“I said I would.” I closed my eyes, praying Dad couldn’t read my thoughts. I’d done the unforgivable—chosen vet school over following in Dad’s footsteps of becoming a hunter-jumper trainer—but I was still expected to do everything as if I wasn’t twenty-three, a grown woman going into my fourth year of vet school, my last, and toughest, year. And even though I’d spent every day this summer on the ranch, riding horses, teaching lessons, grooming horses, mucking stalls—all to help Dad—it didn’t make a difference. It still wasn’t enough. It was never enough.

I laid my forehead against Jett’s. *He* understood me.

“Well, I need to make sure you’re still on board. Being a hunter-jumper trainer is where your future’s at—it’s where his future’s at,” he said, and gave Jett a rough pat on his rear.

I jerked my head up. “God, Dad. We’ve gone over this a million times. Being a vet is where my future’s at.”

“We can talk about it later. Once we’ve hit the road.” Dad turned from me, the conversation over.

I had a sudden urge to yell after him, but I clipped the trailer tie to Jett’s halter, adjusted the hay net, then flipped the latch to the stall divider in frustration. Whatever Dad had to say wouldn’t make a difference. I would have loved to be a trainer like him, but I didn’t have what it took, and school was a much safer bet as far as careers went. I was tired of my dad’s constant financial struggles, and tired of the idea of being chained to them.

Our ranch, Redwood Grove Stables, extended over thirty acres of beautiful hills and valleys, down toward a large redwood forest

and open space beyond. Situated in Nicasio Valley, it was about forty-five minutes north of San Francisco, and a short drive from the coast. Well, short if I drove. I always sped along the back roads, loving the exhilaration as my little hatchback hugged the curves, taking her to her limits. Mom would have a heart attack if she knew I rounded some of those corners at close to sixty miles per hour. Dad? He'd taught me how to drive like hell on wheels.

I glanced toward our home and wondered whether Mom would come say goodbye. She'd taken on a third part-time job at a retirement community in Santa Rosa, working the night shift. She had a couple more hours before her shift at the Village, a home for the mentally disabled. She also wrote for the local newspaper, a job closer to her real passion: writing a novel, the one she'd been fiddling with for years.

But we still had to load the other two horses.

"Derek! Do you have Sera?" I called, but Derek was nowhere to be seen. "Derek?" He should have been here by now. I walked toward the barn.

Just then, Derek came around the corner, his black curls barely visible above Seraphim's withers. As they neared, Seraphim held her head high, looking around, the soft skin above her eyes pinched in worry. She flung her head up and down, but Derek kept a tight hold on her lead. I could see why Dad had purchased her on his last buying trip to Europe. He'd bought her for Corinne, our best client, as an investment. Corinne owned four of the twelve horses we had in training.

At seven years old, Seraphim was not only stunning, but proving herself to be a contender for future Grand Prix competitions. Her liver chestnut coat gleamed in the morning sun like polished bronze. Her dark mane, short and glossy, fell to the right as if styled. Her sleek muscles rippled over her shoulders and hindquarters as she strutted toward us, lifting each front leg high, painstakingly, like an American Saddlebred.

I had to stifle a laugh. “She doesn’t like those, does she?” I nodded at the large pillow wraps.

“God, almighty.” Derek shook his head. “Did you feel that earthquake? Man, that’s all I needed while trying to get this one out of her stall. She might have talent, but she’s got something loose up there . . .” His eyebrows arched over his sunglasses as he circled his finger at the side of his head and mouthed *loco*.

Dad joined us, checking his watch. “C’mon, you two. Let’s get this show on the road. We were supposed to be out of here an hour ago.”

I lifted an eyebrow at Derek and he hid a smile. According to Dad, we were always slacking.

Forty-five minutes later, Derek, hair pasted to his forehead, grabbed the bucket of grain again, shaking it in front of Seraphim as he walked, clucking and urging her forward while I waved the long whip behind her. We still hadn’t been able to load her.

“The hauler who dropped her off last month said she was a bitch to load,” Derek said through clenched teeth.

“You actually fell for that? You can’t listen to Freddy,” Dad said. “He’s said that about every horse he’s dropped off over the last fifteen years: this one’s crazy, that one’s wild. Let’s just give it another go.”

I cracked the whip harder than I meant, the sound splitting the air around us like a thunderclap. Seraphim exploded up the ramp. Dad jumped to grab the stall divider, leaning his body weight against her rear. It only took a moment of Seraphim’s hesitation for Dad to latch the stall divider in place. “There you are, mare. There you are,” Dad talked more kindly to horses than he ever did to people.

I exhaled.

Seraphim stomped and then calmed, staring out the window between nervous grabs of hay.

“What a freakin’ DQ.” Derek blew air on the rope burns on his hands. Dressage Queen. Even dressage riders frequently called themselves that.

Dad took off his hat and fanned himself with it. “High maintenance, like her owner, but with a year of decent training she should be worth four times what Corinne paid. A steal at fifty grand, if you ask me.” He chuckled. “Should be a hell of a ride at Spruce, too.” Of course he’d love the challenge of showing her. He lived for this.

While Derek went to get Cervantes, the last of the three horses, I pulled my ponytail tighter, then took a long drink of water from the hose. I leaned forward, letting water pour over the top of my hair and the back of my neck. I turned the hose off and leaned against the outside of the cedar barn, giving our trailer a once-over. It had seen better days, with spider webs of scratches and dents marring the aluminum exterior. It would be dwarfed at Spruce Meadows by the ones other trainers had, but I was used to that. As a slant load, each horse was loaded on a forty-five-degree angle, one after the next. Dad said horses rode better that way. “Easier for them to balance on those spindly legs.”

We could have bought a new trailer this year, but Dad had invested in Cervantes instead. For him, each new horse meant a renewed excitement that this would be *the one*. The one to go to the highest level—the World Cup, maybe even the Olympics. Cervantes, a young gelding he’d found in Europe when shopping for Corinne, was his newest project.

Cervantes gave us no trouble, walking into the trailer without hesitation.

“Are all the supplies in?” I asked, walking toward the side of the trailer.

“In the side compartment, where they always go,” Derek said, placing his arm around me. And even though he was barely five six, he was still taller than me. With his broad shoulders, he was like a teddy bear. A big, huggable one.

“What about the Ace?” I asked.

“All in.” He tightened his arm around my shoulders. “You wearing your polyester panties or something, B?”

“Whatever.” I gave his shoulder a playful punch, then I smoothed my hand over my forehead, consciously relaxing the furrows. “Too bad you can’t come,” I said to him, careful not to let Dad hear. Derek dreamed of going to Spruce Meadows, of becoming a trainer, though he’d never tell Dad that.

“No biggie. Someone’s gotta take care of things back here. Besides, Bill would probably throw a fit if I went for that long.” Bill was Derek’s boyfriend.

I gave him a quick hug. “I promise to post updates.” Turning toward the cab of the truck, I went over my checklist. But before I finished, the familiar scent of white musk filled the air.

“Have you forgotten something?” Mom’s voice came from around the side of the trailer. Her dark blonde hair, several shades darker than mine, didn’t have a wisp out of place—every strand pulled back into a tight chignon. She looked like a teenager, lost in the starchiness of her uniform.

She held out a paper bag. “I had hoped to pack more of a lunch for you, but forgot it was already Saturday.” The shadows under her eyes seemed deeper and darker than they had last week.

“Mom, you made it!” I leaned in to embrace her. My mouth watered at the smell of sandwiches.

“I bet you two didn’t even bother to grab breakfast.” She ran her hand down the back of my hair, touching her nose to mine.

She was right, of course.

Dad came over and took the bag. “We’ll sure make good use of these, huh, partner?” He winked at me.

Mom picked at a flake of shavings clinging to the front of his shirt. “Luke, I’m sorry I can’t go.” She studied her white running shoes. I knew Dad had hoped she would change her mind and come watch us compete. But how could she? Not only was she working three jobs to help support Redwood Grove Stables’ up-and-down income, but she’d always been afraid of the horses. Of Dad and I competing. I peered down at the brick pavers, reminded of how important it was

to her for me to finish vet school. For me to have an income outside of show jumping. And I wanted nothing more than to see her happy.

“It is what it is.” Dad turned her away from Derek and me. “I have a good feeling. I know I’ll win, and then we can head up to that place Julia told us about last month. Mendocino, was it?” He tilted her chin up with his finger.

Mom nodded, avoiding his gaze.

Seraphim whinnied and gave a sharp kick, rocking the trailer.

“We better get on the road to settle them,” Dad said, his lips brushing hers. Mom pulled him closer.

“Please stay.”

“Amelia. Let’s not go over this again. This is what I do.”

Mom’s hand clung to his shirt. I felt for her. I really did. She didn’t understand horses and was terrified something would happen to Dad and me, constantly reminding us of Christopher Reeve. She’d grown up on the East Coast, their families socializing in the same circles. They had been good friends, and she’d been there—had seen his accident happen. She wouldn’t allow Dad to tell her that that had been a freak accident. That Christopher had been an amateur competing in a cross-country event—a much different sport than show jumping.

“All right, Brynn. Time to go,” Dad ushered me toward the truck, his forehead even more creased than before. “Derek, call me with any questions.” Dad placed his hands on Derek’s shoulders. “I trust you’ll take care of things, son.”

“Yessir.” Derek clicked the heels of his paddock boots and saluted.

We were almost to the truck when Mom caught up to us. “Luke!”

Dad turned back.

Mom reached her arm out to him, then let it drop. “Go show them how it’s done.”