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opening extract from

Mustang Mountain: Fire Horse

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published by

Egmont Childrens Books

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Chapter 1

SILVER

'Silver, don't chew in my ear,' Meg laughed, reaching out to stroke a soft, velvety nose. Her eyes followed a pale silver colt, so light he seemed pure white, as he took a few steps down the mountain to graze.

Meg O'Donnell and her two friends, Alison Chant and Becky Sandersen, had come up to the mountain meadow that morning to collect the

horses and bring them back to the Mustang Mountain Ranch. But the sun had been so hot, and the horses grazing so peacefully, the three girls had flung themselves down in the meadow to wait until the horses had eaten their fill.

Meg sat up. The clear blue sky above her was streaked with grey. The breeze brought a faint smell of smoke. 'The fire must be getting worse.' Meg poked her friend Becky. 'Can't you smell the smoke?'

'Mmm – it's far away, nothin' to worry about. We get wildfires almost every year out here in the Rockies,' Becky said with her slight western drawl. 'I guess you don't have them back east where you come from.'

Becky lay sprawled among the wildflowers, her arms and legs flung out. She wore a faded denim shirt and blue jeans, well-worn cowboy boots and a western belt. With her honey-blonde hair and golden skin, she looked as much a part of this mountainside as the



flowers and the horses, Meg thought.

Her cousin Alison was so different! Meg grinned down at the girl on her other side. Alison managed to look like a girl from New York City, even here, in this remote mountain wilderness. Her white shirt was tucked neatly into her designer jeans. Her boots shone. It was hard to believe she and Becky were first cousins!

Alison could be selfish and snobbish, while Becky could be stubborn as a stuck drawer. In the past three weeks of being in each other's constant company, they often fought, nose to nose, hands on hips, two tall thirteen-year-olds with nothing much in common. Meg was shorter than either of them and sometimes she felt like the filling in a cousin sandwich.

But it was all worth it, thought Meg. She was spending the whole summer as the guest of Becky's family, on a real wilderness ranch, in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta.

Here, at Mustang Mountain Ranch, riding was

an adventure. They rode across mountain meadows, splashed through rivers, threaded their way along high mountain trails. The ranch horses were trained for wilderness patrol, and they were strong and sure-footed. Meg had learned more in one week of riding here, than in nine months of lessons back in the suburb of New York where she lived.

Best of all, the ranch had given her the chance to get to know and love one special horse – the white yearling called Silver. The other girls took horses for granted. Becky had lived on ranches all her life, Alison had her own horse, a champion dressage horse named Duchess. And here, as if by magic, Meg had Silver.

His full name was Silver Bullet, and he wasn't a sturdy mountain horse like the rest. In a way, thought Meg, he's as out of place here as I am, a stranger. She and Silver arrived at the same time, during a freak spring snowstorm when the small plane that was carrying him to a training stable



in California made a forced landing near the ranch. Meg had helped to get Silver out of the plane, but not before he badly injured a tendon in his right foreleg.

Meg nudged Alison's arm. 'Don't you think Silver looks better?' she asked.

Alison sat up in one smooth motion, and raised a dark eyebrow at the white yearling. 'He's coming along,' she said in her quick, offhand way.

Silver's millionaire owner wanted the colt put down, but Meg had begged for a chance to try to heal his leg. She'd won a stay of execution. The owner, Oscar Douglas, was coming back at the end of July to check on his injury and make a final decision.

Three weeks from now.

The rangy white colt had wandered further down the meadow and Meg felt a familiar twist of love and fear as she watched him limp towards her.

'Just don't get your hopes too high.' Alison shook her head.

'I can't help it,' groaned Meg. She knew Alison was right. Silver was bred to be a champion jumper – a show horse. Unless his leg completely healed, he would never compete at the international level. Even worse, the crash had made Silver jumpy and fearful, afraid of loading ramps, small enclosed spaces and loud noises. That made it impossible to load him into a horse trailer.

Meg had been counting on the good mountain air, gentle daily exercise and the company of other horses to heal the colt's body and mind.

She nudged Alison again. 'But look how he's settling down. He and Windy are like real friends.' Meg pointed to where Silver was grazing close beside Windy, a three-year-old chestnut mare that belonged to Becky's mother. It was comical to see the sturdy little mare with the tall, gangling colt. When Windy pricked up her ears



and lifted her head, Silver did too. When she moved to a new patch of grass, he followed.

There was just that little limp left. Everybody told her, 'Wait and see. He's coming along.' That wasn't good enough, Meg thought, tugging on her long brown ponytail. Usually she was content to sit back and let things happen, to watch and listen and let other people take the lead. But not now! There were only three weeks left. She had to think of some way to make that limp go away before Silver's owner came back. She had to save his life.

Chapter 2

Something Wrong!

'Mom says Silver still has a long way to go.' Becky had been listening to their conversation and now she sat up to watch Silver graze. Her mother, Laurie Sandersen, was a licensed farrier, who shoed the ranch horses and looked after their feet.

Becky put her warm, suntanned hand on Meg's slender arm. She liked this shy, quiet girl



from the east, even if she was totally nuts about horses. Meg had saved her sanity this summer. Until she and Alison arrived, Becky thought she'd go crazy being moved to this mountain wilderness ranch, so far from her friends, from a town, or even a paved road. Alison was a stuck up pain-in-the-behind, but Meg made up for it. She had a sense of humour and a warm heart which at this moment was totally wrapped up with saving Silver.

Becky worried about that.

'I've been around horses all my life, Meg,' she said. 'Sometimes it's kinder just to put them down, if they're really hurt. Silver will probably never be a good jumper, and he's not built right for a mountain patrol horse, or a cow pony.'

'You don't even like horses,' muttered Meg. 'How can you talk about putting Silver down – he's just started to live. What if they put us down if we hurt our leg, or broke an arm?'

'It's different,' Becky said. She reached for her

white stetson and pushed her thick blonde hair back under its wide brim. 'I can't explain why, but it is.' It was true she didn't particularly like horses. As a child of four she had been bucked off a horse and the memory of murderous hooves and bared teeth had haunted her dreams ever since.

It was only this summer, riding with Alison and Meg, that Becky had started to take any pleasure in riding and started to trust horses. Still, she knew from growing up on a ranch that a horse was a working animal and when its useful days were over its life was usually over too.

'Even wild horses can't survive sick or wounded,' she told Meg. 'They get picked off by predators if they can't keep up with the herd. And a ranch horse costs a lot to feed and look after. We don't usually keep them if they're no good for anything.'

Meg swallowed her protest. She owed everything to Becky and her parents. They'd



agreed to board Silver on the ranch and treat him for free. But they just didn't understand. Meg yanked her ponytail tighter, as if it would help her to think. According to Silver's owner, if Silver couldn't compete internationally, then he'd have to be destroyed. But if Silver continued to get stronger, maybe somehow she could get the money to take him back east. Maybe Mr Douglas would just give Silver to her. Meg couldn't even confide this dream to Becky and Alison. She knew it sounded crazy – her family wasn't rich, like Alison's.

Alison had been gazing down at the ranch in the valley. She stood up suddenly, shielding her dark eyes from the sun with one hand, watching a tall figure leading a horse into a round pen. 'There's Jesse.' She turned to the others. 'Let's go and ask him what he thinks about Silver's progress.'

'Hey! You're just lookin' for an excuse to go talk to Jesse.' Becky's grin lit up her teasing

brown eyes. 'What would Jesse know about Silver? He's just a dumb cowboy – isn't that what you called him when you first arrived?'

'Jesse's not dumb.' Alison's eyes never left the figure in the pen below. 'He knows everything there is to know about horses. What's wrong with asking him?'

'What's wrong is that you have a big crush on that cowboy, but he's way too old for you,' Becky shot back. 'You're thirteen. And he already has a girlfriend. Remember?'

Alison flushed with quick anger. 'I wish you'd stop using those infantile terms, like girlfriend and crush,' she said. 'It makes you sound like such a backwoods hick.'

She tossed her head and strode off down the slope, her back straight, but her knees almost shaking. Sometimes Becky made her so furious! It didn't help that she was right about Jesse.

Who could have guessed, thought Alison, when her miserable mother shipped her off to



visit her cousin as if she was some package to be put in storage for the summer, that she would find someone like Jesse out here? It was true that she was not impressed when she first met Jesse – he was so awkward and tongue-tied at the airport – but now every time she saw his tall, lean figure or he grinned at her with those dark blue eyes, she got this weird shivery feeling. Around Jesse, she couldn't keep up the bored, aloof pose she'd been working on for years.

Behind her, Becky shoved her hat down a little harder. 'I hate my cousin Alison sometimes,' she said, gathering up the lead rope she'd flung on the grass beside her. 'Sorry, I know she's your friend.'

Meg felt the familiar squished sensation of being in the middle. She knew how hurt Becky must be by Alison calling her a hick. Becky was sensitive about living so far away from other kids, out of touch with all the latest fashions and music and expressions.

'You were pretty harsh about Jesse,' she said. 'Alison doesn't always take criticism that well. She has it tough at home – her mom is such a perfectionist.'

Meg wished the two cousins wouldn't fight. It was tough being in the middle and seeing both sides.

Right now, she could imagine how miserable Alison must feel about Jesse. It was hopeless, but Alison couldn't stop liking him. That's how I feel about Silver, Meg realised. I know Becky and Alison are trying to talk some sense into me, but I just can't hear them.

She sat and watched Becky walk towards the horses. When Becky moved, it was with the easy grace of someone who had spent her whole life in the outdoors. Meg would have given anything to be like her. Becky clipped the lead rope to Windy's halter and started down the meadow. There was no need to put Silver on a lead. As soon as Windy moved off towards the ranch, he

followed, as if attached by an invisible cord.

Meg saw him pause to take another mouthful of grass and then take a few running steps to catch up to Windy. The limp was still there.

Suddenly she saw Becky freeze in her tracks. 'Something's wrong!' she shouted back to Meg and then seemed to regain her balance and start to run, hurtling down the hill towards the ranch, with Windy trotting behind her.

Meg sprang to her feet. The wild fire must have spread! was the first thought in her head. Then she saw figures running in the ranch yard below, and suddenly it was like watching a speeded-up video – Jesse vaulted over the gate of the round pen – figures appeared from other ranch buildings, streaming towards the barn door. Then a tall man sprinted from the barn to the ranch house.

'That's Dad!' Becky shouted again. 'Something's happened at the ranch!'

Meg flung herself down the hill, not caring if

she looked graceful or not. She caught up to Becky at the bridge over the creek. Alison came running to meet them on the other side, her dark eyes frightened.

'Your dad's gone for the radio phone to call for help,' Alison gasped. 'There's been an accident in the barn.'

Becky's suntanned face went white. 'Mom was in there, shoeing horses.' She thrust Windy's rope into Alison's hand. 'Shut Windy and Silver in the big corral. I've got to get in there.' She raced towards the barn.

