

OUTLAW GIRLS



EMILY GALE & NOVA WEETMAN



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5

Queenie

One of the worst things about being on my uncle's farm is the wi-fi. There are two spots on the hill where I can sometimes get a signal and check in with Emmie and see what the others are up to. Otherwise I'm relying on the wi-fi in the house, and that's patchy too. So far, I've missed out on breaking into school and stealing three basketballs, Mack dressing up as Santa and stealing presents from the local fire brigade, and an all-nighter down at the lake which ended in Jackson doing a nude run.

I know there are other things I've missed but nobody is bothering to keep me up to date anymore. It's like they've all forgotten me. And I've only been here a week.

Mack hasn't responded to any of my text messages. Emmie does sometimes when she isn't working in her aunt's op shop, and Hugo is quiet since the tractor

incident. The police never did find out about Jackson. He just slunk away in the night and left Mack, me and Emmie to take the blame.

At least I have my own room at the farm. It's tiny and hot as anything but it's mine. The farmhouse is nothing special but it's bigger than most of the houses in Shepparton. The only air conditioner is in the lounge room, but I don't always want to chat to Harry, or Tina, so I mostly avoid it.

'Ruby?' Tina says as I attempt to slink past without being caught.

'Mmm,' I say.

'Can you please clean the bathroom?'

'Mmm,' I say, reaching the kitchen and heading for the pantry.

'Your mum said you're happy to help with the housework. You know, because I'm enormous,' she says, pulling herself up from the couch and wobbling towards me. She's all belly on legs. Apparently, the fact that she's pregnant means she can make me do a hundred jobs a day and Harry never steps in to save me.

'Just heading out for a ride, Auntie Tina,' I say, knowing how much she hates me calling her Auntie.

She gives me a look and I snatch two muesli bars and shove them into the pocket of my jeans.

'You haven't had breakfast,' she says.

‘Muesli bars are breakfast. Oats, nuts, seeds, all the good things,’ I say, offering up my most impressive smile as I head through the kitchen.

‘Ruby, you can’t just treat this place like it’s a hotel,’ she says.

‘Yeah, I know,’ I say, pushing open the back door, hoping she’s too pregnant to waddle after me. I’ll probably hear about the bathroom tonight from Harry.

The heat hits me as I leave the shade of the wide veranda surrounding the house. It’s early but it’s already warm and I’ll have to take it easy on Queenie. The horses are in the top paddock because Harry moved them up last night. He rotates where he keeps them because the grass is sketchy this year. Not enough rain.

He has ten horses. Four chestnuts, one black, one brown, two greys, a cream horse and Queenie. She’s a bay. Beautiful patches of dark colour down her legs and face. Harry’s had her for years. Bought her off one of the old blokes in town when she was a foal. Harry’s the one who taught me to ride. Before he met Tina and stopped being fun.

I duck into the shed and grab Queenie’s saddle and bridle, balancing the saddle across my arm. The shed smells like hay and the leather rub that Harry made me work into all the equipment over the weekend. By the time I reach the wooden railing, Queenie has trotted

over. She's ready. I stand on the top rung and call to her, and she patiently lines up for me so I can saddle her up, slip the bit into her mouth and fasten the buckle under her jaw. I jump down into the paddock and press my face against hers. She dips down so we are almost eye to eye.

Her coat needs a brush, but I'll do it when we get back.

'Not too long today, Rubes,' calls Harry as he walks across the paddock towards us.

'Just an hour.'

'Is that an hour like yesterday? Felt more like five.' He lifts his Akubra on his head and rubs the hair from his face. I'm always surprised by how much he looks like Mum. Same brown hair. Same warm smile. Same eyes when they look at you and know you're lying.

'Promise,' I tell him, eager to go.

I wedge my foot into the stirrup and swing up and into the saddle. I remember the day I learned to do this without help. Until then, Harry had to give me a leg-up.

'Got sunscreen on?' he says, rubbing his calloused hand along Queenie's muzzle.

'Always.'

He rolls his eyes, and I can't help but smile a little. At least he doesn't tell me to put a helmet on. He knows I'll just take it off as soon as I'm over the ridge.

I make a clicking sound and Queenie swings around.

‘Open the gate for us, Harry?’ I call out. Saves me climbing off and fiddling around with the chain.

As soon as we’re out of the paddock, I press my heels lightly into Queenie’s sides, and she breaks into a trot. She understands me.

Passing the fallen gum tree, I squeeze again and sit down into the saddle and she glides into a canter, her hooves dancing across the hard, dry ground. Harry calls out but I can’t hear his words, so I just give him a wave as Queenie jumps a fallen branch and we head for the hills. We’re still cantering as we climb up towards the bush. My hair is blowing behind me, and I hold the reins loose in one hand.

As much as I would never admit it to my friends, I feel free. Freer than I ever feel in town when I’m trying to impress Mack or look out for Emmie. And definitely freer than I feel when Mum is nagging me about being better and when I’m sitting in class trying to work out what I’ll do with the rest of my life.

Out here, up on the rise where the trees soar and the bush is thick, Queenie and I slow to a trot and pick our path into the forest, where nobody can find us. And it’s like it always is when I ride her. She knows how to dodge the low branches, so I don’t get smacked in the head. And how to find our way back home when it is time.

The clearing is coming up. It's like the footy oval on the road out of town. Just a big stretch of dry grass. It's my favourite place to ride because here we can gallop. Queenie dodges a rock and I slide to the side in the saddle. Then I lean forward and make a sort of clucking sound. She doesn't need any more encouragement. We take off, racing across the wild mountaintop. I can feel the thunder of Queenie's hooves on the ground as she gallops for the clump of bush on the other side of the clearing. She knows where she's going. We always head for it, and I know she'll pull up just short of the first gum.

Queenie jumps the small smattering of flat rocks as she always does, and I lean into her neck. My hair flies loose because my helmet is back at the farm. I hate wearing it. I like the wind rushing at me as we ride into it.

As we near the trees a girl steps out of the scrub. Queenie rears up, and I grab at the saddle.

'Whoa!' I call out, grabbing a fistful of mane so that I don't slide from the saddle. 'It's okay. It's okay!'

Queenie slams her front hooves back onto the ground, just near where the girl is standing. Instead of jumping back out of the way, the girl holds her hand out to Queenie. She's about my height but her dark hair is longer and even less neatly brushed than mine. And

she's wearing a lot of clothes for a summer day. All frills and flouncy layers with the longest skirt I've seen. She must be boiling.

'I've lost my horse,' she says.

'I haven't seen it,' I tell her.

'He's black with a star on his nose. You really haven't seen him?'

'Nope, sorry.'

I swing down out of the saddle so that I can see if she's okay. She doesn't seem to be. She seems confused as well as overdressed.

'Maybe you're thirsty?' I say, holding out Tina's fancy mint-green filtered tea thermos that I stole and filled with lemonade.

'That's a strange-looking flask.'

'Um, yeah, it's my auntie's. She likes city things,' I say, unscrewing the top. 'It's cold. You can have some if you like.'

She looks at me strangely. Now that we're up close, I think maybe she's a little older than me.

'I must find my horse,' she says, sounding like some actor from one of the shows Mum watches.

She doesn't take the thermos, but instead looks me up and down.

'Why are you dressed like that?' She gestures to my jeans with the scrappy ends and my faded purple T-shirt

that I would never let my friends see me in.

‘I didn’t expect to see anyone out here,’ I say, sounding a little defensive. But then I remember that I’m not the one dressed in something my long-lost ancestors would have worn.

‘But why are you dressed like *that*? You must be so hot!’

She smooths her hands down the flouncy skirt. Maybe I’ve offended her.

‘Maybe you should come with me? To my uncle’s. He can ring around. See if anyone’s seen your horse,’ I say because I don’t know what else to do and Mum is always telling me to help those who seem lost.

‘You can hop up behind me and we can ride Queenie down the mountain,’ I say.

‘I need my horse,’ she says, sounding even more confused.

‘Yes. I’m going to get help. Come on,’ I say. I put my foot into the stirrup and swing up onto the saddle. I reach my hand down and take my foot out of the stirrup for her to use it.

She looks up at me and she seems lost and scared, but then she reaches out and grabs my hand and in a second is up behind me, leaning close.