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Snow Melts in Spring

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ONE

RED LIGHTS FLASHED LIKE FIRE IN THE MURKY SHADOWS OF THE night. Mattie Evans slid from the seat of her truck and made her way to the accident scene, tuned to the shrill, intermittent static of the emergency radios.

What a way to start this early Sunday morning, not even a week into the new year. *Lord, give me strength.*

As she neared, the crushed sedan came into view. A ghostly chill crept up her spine. She noted the shattered glass, a trail of blood. Paramedics worked to pull the driver from the car and transferred the motionless boy to a stretcher.

At the sight of the victim's marred face, Mattie pressed her hand to her mouth. Another body lay covered on the ground.

"Thanks for getting here so quickly, Doc." The county sheriff met her on the dirt road, and Mattie forced herself to regain control. "Got ourselves a bad one. Two drunk teens hit a horse with their car. One's dead, the other . . . well, it don't look good. As for the horse, I doubt you can save him."

With his flashlight, he cleared a path through the dense fog, and Mattie followed to the edge of the road where her patient lay. Blood stained the gravel.

“They probably didn’t even see the animal until it was too late,” he said. “Don’t know why the horse was on the road—must have a fence down.” He shined a beam into the dark pasture. “Likely spooked and jumped toward the vehicle, then smashed into the windshield. Still breathing, though.”

Mattie knelt for a closer inspection. Someone had tried to stop the massive bleeding with towels, to no avail. She stroked the horse’s neck, and the gelding raised his head. The white of his eye showed pure terror, dilated from shock.

“He’s lost a lot of blood.” The sheriff drew the light over the animal’s body.

Mattie took a deep breath and reached into her bag for a syringe. Once she had the horse sedated, she removed the towels to examine him. Her heart sank at the extent of the damage.

The impact of the windshield had lacerated his right shoulder, withers, and limb. Corneal rupture of the right eye and massive skull fractures. A quick check of his mouth revealed his old age. She noted the paleness of his gums.

At times like this, she hated her job. Such hopelessness. Angered by the senseless destruction, she fought back tears, her teeth clenched as the horse lay wheezing his every breath. Despite her oath to save animals, Mattie knew the horse would require extensive treatments, and even then, his chances for a full recovery were slim.

“He’s in a lot of pain.” The nagging worry from her recent loss caused her to doubt her abilities. “There’s no reason to make him suffer. I recommend putting him down.”

“Can’t do that, Mattie,” a gruff voice answered close by.

Her gaze jolted to see her friend John McCray slumped over his cane. “Didn’t you just get out of the hospital? You shouldn’t be out on a night like this.”

“That’s my fault.” Another man stepped from the darkness, and Mattie acknowledged John’s hired hand, Jake. “When I heard the

car horn blaring and realized what had happened, I called the ambulance. Figured the boss would want to be here.”

“This is Gil’s horse.” John gripped her shoulder. “You have to save him.”

Mattie had heard stories about Gilbert McCray from her older sisters, though John hardly spoke of his son. Some said he could have been a professional team roper, but he’d left it all to become a football hero in California. A stupid move, as far as she was concerned. Why would anyone give up being a cowboy for a football career?

She shook her head. “I don’t know if I can.” She studied the horse’s wounds again, then glanced up at John McCray. Mattie recognized the look of regret, the kind that left people empty. She also acknowledged the uncomfortable tightening in her stomach. If she tried to save the horse and he died, could her business or her heart handle another fatality?



THE TEAM MANAGER FOR THE SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS OPENED THE door to the trainer’s room, and the musty stench of sweat crept in and mingled with the odor of medicine and bandages. “Gil, your dad’s calling on your cell. I figured you’d want to take it.” His booming voice broke through the racket of the locker room next door as he tossed the phone to Gil.

Gilbert McCray slid off the table and apologized to the attendant taping his ankle. He checked the caller ID and couldn’t imagine why his dad would be calling just hours before a playoff game—unless it was an emergency.

He flipped the phone open. “Hey, Dad, what’s up?”

A raspy cough sounded on the other end. “I have some bad news for you, Son.”

Gil stepped into the hallway for better reception. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s Dusty,” his dad said. “He was in an accident early this morning. I hated to call you, but they’re not sure if he’s going to make it. I thought you should know.”

Gil frowned at the mention of his chestnut gelding. “What happened?”

“He was hit by a car. Got through the fence and must have been on the edge of the road. Too foggy. The driver didn’t see him.”

Dusty. Gil swallowed the emotion threatening to clog his throat as the memories whooshed back. He and the horse had been a team. Gil trained Dusty from a colt, learned some great techniques on his back, and won plenty of high school championships with him. The old boy was dying? Though he hadn’t ridden the horse for two years, the news caught him off guard.

“Is he in much pain? If we need to, I’ll hire the best vet in the country. Fly him in.” The familiar catch in his voice reminded him of his boyhood when he’d asked for simple favors, believing his dad could do anything.

“We’ve already got the best, Son. I just thought you should be prepared.”

After he said good-bye, Gil slammed his fist against the wall. A burning sensation shot through his shoulder to his palm. He’d give anything to see Dusty one last time. Unfortunately, two hours from now, he had a date with destiny, an appointment at Lambeau Field. If his team won the Division Championship against the Green Bay Packers, they’d be one game closer to the Super Bowl. If they lost, this would be the last game of Gil’s career. Funny, he was about to retire from a game he loved, and his old friend was retiring from the game of life.



GIL WAITED ON THE SIDELINE WHILE THE DEFENSE PLAYED THE FIELD. In all his years as quarterback, he’d never experienced the chaotic feelings tumbling over him this first half. Two decades ago, he’d left

everything for the game of football. Rodeo. His dad. With no regrets. Or maybe he'd never allowed himself that luxury until now.

He stared out at the field and watched as one of their linebackers intercepted Green Bay's pass.

Offense's turn.

The lights glared down as Gil blocked the roar of the spectators from his mind. Silence. His offensive line crowded around, waiting for his call.

"Go on two." His breath turned into a puff of vapor in the brisk night air. Gil walked to the line of scrimmage, adrenaline pumping.

"Down, set, hut, hut ..."

The ball snapped into his hand. He dropped from the line of scrimmage and looked for his primary receiver. Covered. The defense had his running backs blocked as well.

No clear path—either throw or run.

No time for debate.

He tucked the pigskin into his arm and faked a sweep, rolling over the first lineman coming his way. His legs careened him up and over the defense as they'd done a hundred times before, and he flew down the field like a horse after a steer let out of the chute. A cornerback charged him from the side. Gil slid to the ground.

"First down," the referee called out.

Gil saw the official's signal and should have been thrilled. Instead, he stole a glance at the hostile Packer crowd and caught sight of a man who looked like his father. His breath stilled.

Impossible. His dad didn't attend his games. He didn't care enough to.

"Do you even see what's happening out here?" Johnson jammed his fists into Gil's padded shoulders. "It's like you're in another world."

Gil stared up at the lights.

Concentrate. Keep your mind in the game.

He went to set up another formation and listened for the radio signal in his helmet. Receiving his coach's instructions, Gil pitched his hands into the huddle, felt the determination of his teammates as the heat rose off their bodies. He refused to let them down. "This time we'll go for a 40/50 sprint draw. On one."

He moved into position behind his center.

"Red, blue, 40–50, set hut."

The ball swept up into his hands. Gil sensed a blitz and passed to his wide receiver. Missed. Incomplete.

He tried again. This time when Gil got the ball, he maneuvered it to feel the roughened leather of the seam and pedaled back. He snaked to the left to hand off to Johnson, his halfback. The ball barely left his hand when three defensive linemen dropped him to the ground.

Everything went black.