

Moon Shadow

CHRIS PLATT



One



A shrill whinny pierced the quiet of the northern Nevada desert, startling a flock of blue scrub jays into flight. Thirteen-year-old Callie McLean smiled as the pesky birds rose from the sea of gray-green sagebrush, their *ha-ha-ha* caws making a horrible racket.

The mustangs had to be close by.

Callie pushed her straight, sandy-brown hair behind her ears and lowered herself to the ground, crawling on her belly over the top of the rock outcropping. She felt the abrasive rub of sand where her shirt had come untucked. She frowned. Her mother was going to have a fit when she saw the mess she'd made of her new hand-sewn blouse.

Quickly dismissing that thought, Callie edged further onto the rocks that rose fifty feet above the scene unfolding on the valley floor below. She shielded her eyes from the glare of the early-morning sun and watched as a young bay stallion trumpeted his cry once more, pawing at the ground and shaking his head. The bachelor stallion's brown coat and black mane and tail glistened in the sun as he sent out his challenge.

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A hundred yards away stood the golden buckskin stallion with the black mane and tail. Callie had named him Cloud Dancer when she first discovered the herd. The little palomino mare she called Moonbeam was close by his side. This was her dream horse. She'd fallen in love with the mare three years ago, when Moonbeam had only been a yearling.

When the little yellow mare turned to the side, she exposed her rounded belly. Callie smiled broadly. Moonbeam was in foal! Her favorite mustang was going to have a baby!

Callie's attention was drawn back to the danger at hand when Cloud Dancer gave a great snort of warning, then spun on his hind legs and rounded up his band of mares and foals. His jet-black mane and tail flowed on the breeze as he circled the herd, nipping at their flanks. Callie knew he was driving them to a safe spot away from the bachelor stallion, but not so far away that yet another stallion could steal his harem while he was doing battle with this competitor.

When Cloud Dancer's mares were out of danger, he turned and answered the young upstart's challenge, giving his own battle cry as he ran to meet the bay.

Callie gasped. The older stud raced toward the other horse and slid to a stop twenty feet from the determined bay. The buckskin pawed the ground as he bowed his neck and flexed his muscles in a display ritual meant to show his dominance. He was giving the younger, less-experienced stallion a chance to back down and run away.

But the bay seemed full of himself, unwilling to accept defeat in advance. He arched his neck until his mane bristled, then pawed at the sand, inviting the larger horse's challenge.

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Callie quickly scanned the horizon, spotting the small group of bachelor mustangs to which this insolent bay belonged. They stood several hundred yards away with their ears pricked, waiting for the outcome of the fight.

She smiled. The young male horses were not yet old enough, or strong enough, to fight for mares of their own. They'd been kicked out of their own herds by their sires when they were roughly two years of age. Being herd animals, they banded together for safety and companionship, spending their time playing stallion games of mock battle. They practiced for the day when they'd be strong enough to fight for a herd of their own.

If their brave herd-mate won this battle, they might be able to steal a mare or two from him before he made off with his new harem. If he lost, they would go back to their usual routine of grazing and playing, until they themselves would be ready to challenge the leader of another herd. Only the strongest stallions could command a herd of their own. That was Nature's way of insuring their survival.

Callie waited to see what the stallions would do. Harvey Smith, the old mustanger who worked at the Antelope Springs mustang pens, had been telling her wild horse stories for as long as she could remember. He'd be impressed that today she'd have her own mustang tale to tell.

A loud snort focused Callie's attention on the posturing stallions. The bay was at least two hundred pounds lighter than Cloud Dancer, and he lacked the muscle development of the seasoned stud. If the young horse had any sense, Callie thought, he would hightail it back to the bachelor herd before the buckskin turned him into a noontime snack for the vultures.

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The thought sent a chill down Callie's spine. She prayed that the younger mustang would bow out, but it was obvious from the strong stance the bay took in the sand that he was set on earning a band of mares for himself. He gave a belligerent shake of his head and snorted his impatience.

A loud battle cry burst from Cloud Dancer as he rushed to meet the young upstart. He rose on his hind legs and pawed at the bay. The smaller horse met the challenge, flailing his front hooves and baring his teeth.

In an incredible show of speed and agility, Cloud Dancer turned in midair, planted his forelegs, and launched a powerful kick at the bay's exposed belly.

Callie winced as the loud thud echoed off the canyon walls. The young horse snorted in fear and toppled over backwards. Before he could gain his feet, the older stallion came at him with hooves and teeth and grabbed the challenger by the mane, shaking him like a piece of sagebrush in a windstorm.

The young bay gained a foothold in the sand and attempted to stand, but the older stallion turned and blasted him with another kick from his powerful hindquarters. The younger horse was sent sprawling back to the ground.

Callie's stomach did a flip. "Please, stay down," she whispered as she watched the bay colt struggle to rise. She'd heard about stallion fights from old Harvey and the cowboys who worked the pens. If the bay remained on the ground, the old buckskin might let him live. But the arrogant youth staggered to his feet and bared his teeth once more.

Callie groaned. The bay had blown his chance to walk away with some of his pride—and his hide—intact. He had chosen to

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fight to the death. The young mustang hadn't yet figured out that he was too small and weak to win a fight against this superior horse.

Callie thought about springing from her hiding place and waving her arms in an attempt to break up the fight, but she knew from listening to the hands at the mustang pens that it wouldn't be a good idea. The wild stallion might see her as just another challenger, and treat her the same way he did the bay.

After all her years of living in the high desert and studying the wild firsthand, Callie knew better than to get in the way of Mother Nature. Out here it was survival of the fittest. The stronger stallion would win this fight and earn his right to sire next year's crop of foals. The weak stallions died, or limped off to gather their strength and try again later. Those were the rules, and it wasn't her place to break them. It might be difficult to watch a horse be killed or maimed in a fight, but if a lesser stallion was allowed to breed, it would create a weaker crop of foals. Only the strongest could survive out here in the wild.

Callie sucked in her breath when Cloud Dancer rose on his hind legs once again. He dove at the smaller horse, sinking his teeth into his shoulder and ripping a large chunk of his hide. The bay screamed in agony as the next kick sent him tumbling into the sand. He lay on the ground, his sweat-slicked coat glistening in the sun. His rib cage rose and fell with each labored breath.

Callie watched the old stud circle the young horse, snorting with gusto as he pranced and tossed his head, daring the weaker horse to rise again.

The smell of dust mixed with sage floated up to assault

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Callie's nostrils. She pinched her nose to stop a sneeze that might startle the old stallion and cause him to attack the younger horse again.

In the distance, Cloud Dancer's mares and the bachelor herd stood at opposite sides of the valley, heads raised. They were awaiting the outcome.

Callie gripped the edge of the outcropping, ignoring the pain in her fingers as the rough rocks bit into her flesh. She knew this was the way of the wild, but she hated to see a beautiful animal die such a brutal death. She hoped that the bay stallion would remain in his prone position. If he rose, Cloud Dancer would surely kill him.

The grunts and ragged breathing of the exhausted horse floated up from below. Callie let out a sigh of relief as the younger mustang twitched and lifted his head to nicker at his conqueror before lowering his muzzle back to the sand in complete surrender.

The buckskin did a victory dance, bowing his neck and prancing around the defeated youngster before trumpeting a call to the mares. With a toss of his head, he turned and raced toward them. Moonbeam was the first to greet the victorious stallion. The golden palomino stepped forward and touched noses with her mate. The other mares accepted him into the fold with anxious nickers. Then the herd turned as a unit and sprinted over the next ridge.

Callie rose to her feet, keeping her eye on the still form of the vanquished bay as she made her way down the hillside, clutching the bitterbrush for support. The sand and rocks rolled beneath her boots as she quickly descended to the bottom.

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With her heart in her throat, she quietly covered the distance between her and the young mustang. As she drew closer, her palms began to sweat. She knew better than to get this close to a wild horse. It didn't matter that the little bay had just been defeated in battle and was seriously injured. He might still be strong enough to hurt a human—especially a young girl. If Harvey or her parents knew she was doing this, she'd be grounded for life.

The bay mustang lay in the clearing. Blood ran down his foam-flecked coat; his sides heaved from exertion. Callie stopped thirty yards from him, glad to see that he was still breathing. She was surprised that she was able to venture so close. As loud as her heart was beating, she was sure he'd be able to hear it.

She wished there was something she could do to help the wounded stallion, but she didn't dare try to touch him. Wild horses often struck out in defense. One blow of a powerful hoof could break bones, or even kill.

“Come on, boy, you can make it,” Callie crooned. “You're young and healthy. This isn't your day to die.” She kept her voice low as she edged several feet closer.

The mustang lifted his head and snorted. Callie took a few more steps and the horse bolted to his feet, blowing a warning snort as he hobbled back to his herd on unsteady legs. After several rounds of greetings and an inspection by the bravest bachelor of the bunch, they wandered off in the opposite direction, distancing themselves from the reigning buckskin's herd.

Callie brushed her dirty hands on her jeans as she watched them go. Soon it would be someone else's turn to challenge the

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leader. The band of bachelors would gather their courage, and another young stud would fight for the coveted position of leader of Cloud Dancer's band.

She shielded her eyes and peered through the settling dust kicked up by the horses. The bachelor herd disappeared over the hill, and there was nothing left but silence. She glanced at her watch. Her friend Billie was coming to visit at ten o'clock.

Callie picked up the old, pieced-together mountain bike she had stashed in the bitterbrush and pedaled toward home. She couldn't wait to share her story with Billie. Especially the part about seeing her dream horse, Moonbeam.