



2017 First Place

## Queen of the Hill *Carmen Peone*

My nerves tingle once we reach the Omak Stampede grounds in northeast Washington. Sweat beads down my back, my shirt sticking to my skin. August heat in desert country can fry an egg on a rock. I wave the bottom of my shirt with one hand and grip the door handle with the other. We creep into the paddock and claim an empty spot, thankful to find a space riverside.

I glance at my name in the program before getting out of the truck—*Charnaye Toulou - jockey. Rooster - owner, Craig Stuart.* My stomach twists. Today I sit in third place.

I lean against Craig's Dodge 4X4, overlooking the Okanogan River. Today, neither its smell nor sparkle offer peace as I stare across at the 225-foot drop. Generations of Native Americans have barreled down this hill, proving their warrior status. Will I be able to prove myself as an eighteen-year-old warrior fresh out of high school? I have two days.

After unloading my horse, I grab a brush and start in on him with short, harsh strokes. Body shaking, I drag in a deep breath. *Calm down!* I'm living my dream, after all. One of the few women to race down "The Hill" during the World Famous Suicide Race. Our tribal men have been taking part in this rite of passage for centuries. *It's my turn.*

I lean back against the trailer and catch my breath. What am I doing? *Calm down!* I throw the brush in the tack room, lean face first into the trailer, and pray. I pray for strength and protection, this being one of the most dangerous horse races in the nation. I pray for calm. I stroke Rooster's nose in apology. "Sorry, boy. My nerves are getting to me." I lead him over for the vet check. After a thorough examination, the vet gives me a thumbs up. I walk him back and offer him a drink. I check the tack, combing every centimeter for tattered or weak spots in the leather.

"Get outta here for a while," Craig says. "Go walk off your nerves."

I jump at my cousin's voice. So does Rooster.

"I've been watching you. You're a mess."

I agree and march off to the gate that leads to the vendors. I wander around, combing through booths outside the stampede arena. My mind mulls over the threats I've received the last couple months while training at my aunt and uncle's ranch here in Omak. How he found me there is beyond me. We'd kept it quiet. It's clear someone doesn't want me here.

I spot Old Lady Sherman and grunt. She's protested women racing the last few years. I slink over, pretending I don't see her. She reaches for a bag. I snatch it first. She glares at me, then forms a judgmental grin.

She searches my face. "You're going through with this, I see."

I nod, handing her the bag. "Yes, ma'am. I am."

"Well, you certainly don't care about your safety now, do ya?" She slithers to the other end of the tent. Aww, a perfect candidate to pen threats and leave them in my aunt's mailbox.

I run a finger along the vendor's bling-covered table and walk off. When making my way to the next



booth, a red-haired man bumps into me.

"No one wants you to race. Go home." Hagan Hurst scrutinizes every inch of me with a look of disgust.

"Get away from me!" I shove him backward.

"You won't finish. They'll make sure of it."

I push past him, recalling all the times in high school he'd bullied me because I was Native American. Raised on the Colville Reservation, the closest school was fifteen miles north in Republic—off the rez. Most of the whites left me alone. All but Hagan and his wanna-be posse. Not one of those cowards made a move on their own. Still don't.

My best friend, Jill Lamore, shouts my name, waving at me. I swear Creator knows just what I need and when. We greet with a hug.

"Was that who I think it was?" Jill says, eyes wide.

"Yep. Still a jerk." I watch a bird circle overhead. "I can't let these haters get to me."

"You never have."

We amble over to a booth covered with colorful summer dresses. Jill picks through a stand and holds one up, brows arched.

I wrinkle my nose. "I saw Old Lady Sherman a minute ago." I cross my arms, fighting the urge to puke.

"No way!"

"She was her usual rude self." I croak out a chuckle. "Still wants me to pull out."

We rake over a few other booths before weaving our way back to the paddock. Craig has my horse ready for the Calcutta auction. I lead him over and watch him strut like a rooster. I eyeball the winner's saddle and coat on the stage. I see myself wearing that Pendleton jacket with the white spotted Indian horse embroidered on it, about to walk through the glass door into womanhood. Only thing is, they'll have to change "King of the Hill" to "Queen."

I catch a glimpse of Hagan glaring at me. It weighs me down like a dose of bad medicine. I push him out of my mind and circle Rooster around.

Bids come in. They climb higher. When the auctioneer says, "Sold," it's at three-thousand dollars. My head spins. I search the crowd for whoever took the bid. A middle-aged man dressed in snakeskin cowboy boots and a black Stetson hands a thick envelope to the cashier. He tips his hat at me. Winning half of that money would help with Dad's medical costs. Rooster continues to strut as we walk away, calm as an eagle floating on a soft breeze. The next horse to Calcutta pulls away from his jockey, spins around, and careens into Rooster. Rooster kicks him. The horse jerks out of his rider's grip and runs off, splitting the crowd.

My little brother, Chase, meets me at the gate and grabs the lead rope. Craig let him sleep in after staying up late to enjoy the carnival. I needed him here to help, but Craig overrode my request. Since he's in charge as my trainer and horse owner, I had to back down.

"Have a nice sleep?" My tone tells me I'm taking my fear out on my brother. All the help he's been over the last month, he doesn't deserve my snarky attitude.

"Yep." He strokes Rooster. "Thanks for letting me go."

I wave him forward. "Thank Craig. I was ready with a water gun to your face." I laugh. "But really, I appreciate all you've done."

Chase stares at me, open mouthed.

I bump his shoulder with mine. "Just want you to know."

He blushes.

We wrap Rooster's legs with cotton and vet wrap then offer him one last drink. He sniffs the bucket and kicks the trailer.

"Aww, as nervous as his owner."

I twirl around to see Uncle Buck, his arms stretched out for a hug, a wide smile across his face. I breathe in his Stetson cologne, hoping his strength will give me courage. He rubs my arms. "Go walk off your nerves."

"I already did."

Craig sets a chair out for him as Chase hands him a bottle of water.

We saddle Rooster and paint the number seven on his rump with a Crafty Dab Window Writer. I slip my safety vest on and pull the fabric neon seven over my head, wiggling it down my vest. Chase walks Rooster around the paddock while I tighten my laces and slap on my helmet. I see my horse eyeballing the other horses as if to size them up and warn them he's the king. Horses whinny, tossing their heads. It feels like an invisible lightening storm hovers over the paddock.

I follow the other jockeys into the arena for introductions. Jill has friends rallied, signs with my name in bold, black letters bobbing in

the air. It looks like most of Republic has shown up to support me. I bite my lip. Jill catches my attention and leans forward, shouts louder, leading the chant, "Queen of the Hill." I fight to keep my composure.

After exiting the arena, we ride alongside a sea of people to our right. This being day three of four, I instinctively search for my folks in the crowd, knowing they won't make it until the final race tomorrow. I sink in the saddle and force

my mind to envision me and Rooster charging down the hill, pushing through the river, up the dike, and in to the arena. It takes seconds to complete, but I have a feeling it will seem much longer. I need to stick in the center of the saddle. Lean into the current. Hold on tight. Breathe. Because the river's high, I'm sure Rooster will catapult us into the water. I finger the saddle horn. Chills spike the hair on my neck.

Before I know it, we're to the bridge. Tribal TOSHA cars block oncoming traffic. The click of horseshoes on pavement resounds through the evening air, carrying the sound on the wings of the breeze. It lodges in my throat. I hate riding on pavement. Without pads on, the horses' shoes are slick. The slap of braids on my back makes me wish I'd tied them together to help anchor them down. Once off the bridge I find relief in the daylight. It will be dark soon. Hard to see when we crown the top and surge downhill.

We turn left, down Dewberry Avenue, and past houses. Some are empty, some have old folks waving at us. We make our way to the dirt lot that serves as the staging area. I dismount, walk through the gate, and head straight to the hill's lip. A Tribal Park's boat is in the water to the right, as is a Jet Ski. They circle in the water like ravens spiraling down for a dead carcass.

A handful of men on horses standby in the river to the left. Spectators behind them cool off in the water. Family and friends of the jockeys line the south end of the dike. From the bank under my feet, it's another 500

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feet to the arena. My gaze drops down the hill, over to the pine tree, up to the sky, willing my body to unwind. *Breathe*. I pray for courage. For a single moment I'm calm. When I turn to the jockeys lining up, my body trembles again. The pit in my stomach grows and hardens.

It's the last night race, as tomorrow's will be late afternoon. In the background, kids pop balloons as they walk by the staging area. Horses bolt forward, rearing as their jockeys try and rein them back. One rider falls off and his horse speeds down the hill. The jockey swears, sprinting after the kids. Some of the bystanders hold him back. There's a lot of shouting. I keep my distance. Circle Rooster. *Stupid kids*. I'd like a go at them.

It takes a bit, but once everyone is somewhat settled, we wait for the pistol's blast. I'm in the middle, a straight shot to the pine tree which is the shortest distance to the other side of the river. I whisper to Rooster, assuring him we can make it down alive. The gun fires and we bound down the dimly-lit hill, darkness enveloping us for the first few seconds. I sit straight, grasping the back of my saddle for balance.

I quickly take the lead as we plummet into the water, yelling, whipping, kicking. No one will swipe the lead from me. I won't let them. A rider wearing a black and orange ribbon shirt comes into view from my left. I swat at him as if I could reach. He cackles, shouting something I can't quite hear, but know the meaning. I spur Rooster on, kicking like a crazy woman. He pushes forward, stretching his neck, nose out. He digs up the dike and into the arena. That same jockey's horse pounds the dirt beside me.

We bolt past the poles and I circle right.

The announcer screams, "It's Charnaye Toulou. She's done it. This win moves her into the second place position. If she can hold the lead and win tomorrow, she'll take it all. She'll be the first woman to win the World Famous Suici-i-i-ide Race. Ladies and gentlemen, Charnaye Toulou, the first woman to take the lead."

The crowd is on their feet, arms pumping. A sea of cowboy hats wave in the air.

I circle Rooster down to a walk. A jockey rides over from across the arena, pointing at me. "I'll get you next time."

Chase races toward me, not paying attention to the other horses. I sit in my stirrups, waving and shouting for him to stop. He keeps coming, oblivious to the danger. I dismount and yell, "Did you hear me?"

He lifts his hand to high five me. I slap it harder than I should. It doesn't faze him. He leads Rooster away, pumping a fist in the air and making a high-pitched whooping sound. Aunt Jamison appears as Chase moves to the left. She walks me to the gate. Although my breathing slows down, my body shakes.

Uncle waits at the gate. "I knew you could do it." He puts an arm around me and escorts me back to the trailer.

"Once I had the lead, I couldn't give it away. I've never spurred Rooster that hard before."

"Now you know what you need to do tomorrow."

I nod. My muscles feel tense and knotted. Pain shoots up from the back of my stiff neck. I reach back and rub the knots. When we get back to the trailer, I sit in front of Aunt Jamison and she massages the kinks out.

A flicker of doubt creeps in and hovers around me. The voice surrounds me. It laughs, taunting me. *You can't do this. You're a girl. You are not good enough. It takes more than a talented horse. It's not your rite. You. Will. Lose.*

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The following morning, I rush around, choke down a banana and a few bites of toast, and load Rooster. We make our way to the stampede grounds, the heat already an all-time high at midmorning.

I unload Rooster and find myself staring at the hill. He nudges me. I stroke his forehead and stand a moment longer. Once I have him tied to the trailer, I fill a bucket with water, hands shaking the entire time. I try and choke down nausea with sips of water and Tums. It doesn't work. I pluck a brush out of a bucket and run it down his back. He cocks a leg. I use slow, even strokes, wishing I'd done this on day one, back during qualifications.

*You can't win. It's over!*

I stop brushing. I pray for wisdom and strength.

*Go home. You shouldn't be here.*

"I am here." I massage Rooster's shoulders with my fingertips. "I'm staying."

*You're going to get hurt.*

I squeeze my eyes shut. "I won't get hurt. Creator's protecting me."

*He's busy. He doesn't care. He doesn't have time for you.*

A hand rests on my shoulder. A gentle touch. It's familiar.

"Spirit of doubt and fear be gone. Creator, fill my daughter with your peace. Give her strength. Wisdom. I pray, Creator, You protect her. She's here to honor you. The woman you created her to be. In the traditions you have allowed our people to have." My mom's voice sounds like an angel, her breath on my neck. The peace she asks for bathes me. I lean into her. Let her embrace me.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"You have everything you need. Just believe, Char. Trust."

For the first time in months, confidence shines in her eyes. She smiles, her face soft and young-looking. Then she runs a finger down my cheek. "Win or lose, you're always my daughter."

Mom picks a brush from the bucket and helps make Rooster's coat shine. When it's time for the Calcutta auction, she leaves to meet Dad and Sshapa, my grandfather. I walk

Rooster to the roped-off section and circle him, searching for my father's wheelchair.

The bidding begins.

I'm surprised when I see Sshapa's hands rise and fall to the auctioneer's call. Others bid against my grandfather. The dollar amount rises. My stomach roils with each call of the auctioneer. Sshapa wins the bid at four thousand dollars.

In their cheap, straw cowboy hats, Mom and Dad look like a couple of little kids who've just won a carnival prize. Sshapa struts over, black felt cowboy hat, Wrangler jeans with the front legs creased, black boots shined, and hands the keeper of the funds a wad of cash. All three of them wear the white shirts Jill made. Across the backs in bold, black letters announce "Team Toulou."

Chase meets me at the gate. "Nice load of bills Grandfather has, huh?"

"No kidding! Where did it come from?" I hand him the lead rope.

"I guess Auntie and Mom have been bragging pretty heavy on you. They've scoured the rez, and donations from Republic and all four districts have poured in. If you win, Dad will have a hefty wad of cash for medical bills. No one else wants a cut of it."

I swallow back a lump in my throat, thinking about the day a loaded logging truck slammed into his Chevy 4X4 two years ago, paralyzing him from the waist down. "No way!"

Back at the horse trailer, I riffle through the bucket and pull out a cotton roll and lime green vet wrap. I glance around for Craig and don't see him, so I toss them to Chase.

Footsteps tap down the floor of the horse trailer. It wobbles. I catch a glimpse of long blond hair cascading out of a brown baseball cap through the trailer windows. "Hey!"

Chase sprints to the front of the trailer, I dodge Rooster and slink behind it. When I round the corner, I catch Chase pinning a girl with a baseball cap low over her eyes against the trailer with his forearm to her throat. In her hand is a folded slip of lined paper. She glares at me with snaky, blue eyes.

"What's this?" I pluck the paper out of her hands and unfold it. "Last day. Last ride for you. Ever!" I crumple up the paper and throw it at her. "You? Why, Carla? What did I ever do to you?"

"What's going on?" Craig picks up the note and reads it. He turns to the girl. "Who are you? Did you write this?"

"She's from Republic. Hagan's girlfriend—" I raise a hand to slap her, but Craig grabs me by the wrist and pulls my arm down. "Have you been the one sending these?" I step closer.

Craig puts an arm in front of me. "How many have there been?"

"This is the tenth."

"Ten?" Craig shakes the letter in her face. "How? Why?"

Carla turns to me and laughs. "I knew you hated Hagan, so I made it look like he wrote them. His idiot friends were more than willing to help me get them to you. As for sending the letters to your aunts, all I had to do was contact your mom and tell her I wanted to mail over some support money and I had the address."

"How did you get the letters in the tack room?" I say.

"I paid some low-life jockey."

I sneer at her. "Why'd you send them?"

"Why?" Carla's lip curls. "All this girl warrior crap around school last year. You have no idea what it means to work hard. All your free Indian money." She grunts. "You claim some rite of passage that you

don't have to work for. Have no idea what it means to earn something."

I glance at Craig, shaking my head. "You have no freakin' idea how hard I've trained for this. What it means to our family. What we've been through the last couple of years. What the money is for."

"You get everything free. I work for what we have!" Carla tries to shoulder past us.

Chase slams her into the trailer, hands pressed against her face. "You freakin'—"

"Chase!" Craig pulls him off Carla.

"Really?" I stare at her, open mouthed. I almost feel sorry for her—typical jealous rich girl. "You get everything handed to you by your parents. What do you ever work for?"

Craig grabs her by the arm. "I'll deal with her, you guys get ready."

"Freakin' witch!" Chase says.

"Forget it. Let's go." I grab his arm and shove him toward the back end of the trailer. Craig hauls Carla out the gate.

With trembling fingers, I wrap to the hum of the paddock. Chase wraps the left legs, I take the right. When done I stand and admire his work. I'm about to comment on how well he's done when a jockey stalks up to us.

"Give up yet?"

I stare at him for a long moment. "You the one who delivered the notes?"

His sneer sweeps my body. "I'm gonna make sure you don't finish." He turns on his heels like some kind of Army soldier and marches off.

"You touch her, I'll kill you!" Chase starts after him, but I stand in his way. Push him backward.

"Leave it alone! We got work to do."

Chase glares at me until his breathing slows. "He touches you, he's dead."

"Fair enough, little brother." I hand my sixteen-year-old bodyguard a bottle of water. "Let's get this bad boy saddled."

Because we're behind schedule, I'm rushed to get Rooster ready. I have to hop on without warming him up and hightail it into the arena

**"You have no freakin' idea how hard I've trained for this. What it means to our family. What we've been through the last couple of years. What the money is for."**



for introductions. Once our arena parade is finished, we follow the outrider like a shepherd leading his sheep to slaughter. I struggle to find calm even though we've found Carla to be the one behind the threats. Soon someone will be crowned "King of the Hill." Or perhaps queen.

I ride in silence until the deliverer of threats comes along beside me. He rides to my left, leans in close enough for me to hear his words. "You won't make it through the water." He lets loose a string of cuss words through brown, crooked teeth.

I stare at him, stone-faced. *Protect me, Creator.* It's all I got.

"I'm taking you out."

I pray until his ugly threats roll away. Carla must have paid him to intimidate me. I sink into the saddle and rock with Rooster's sway. Pin my gaze on the jockey's number two in front of me. Listen to the clicks of horseshoe on pavement. *Breathe. Relax. Focus.*

*Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap.*

"Your brother isn't here to help you. I'll get him, too." He swears some more.

*Give me peace.* I let my mind drift to every inch of the course. *Breathe. Relax. Focus.*

"Turn back." His voice is deep. Scratchy.

I swallow. *Keep us safe.* Stiffen. Tremble as if a lightning bolt has struck me. Rooster prances.

"You're weak."

We turn down Dewberry Avenue. The jockey pulls back and circles around. I catch a glimpse of his black and orange ribbon shirt. *You're weak...*

Bile rises and burns my throat. I swallow and pray as we ride the last leg. *I'm strong.* Before we reach the gate I dismount. With unsteady legs I walk Rooster to the edge of the hill and kneel, searching the crowd for white shirts. Team Toulou. Not seeing any, I spit what remaining saliva I have in the dirt. It's not even enough to create a slight puff. They may have migrated to the stands. I'm sure Dad is down there somewhere with binoculars. He might be watching me. I stay a moment longer just in case. I check the clip on my helmet, making sure it's tight. My tongue feels like it could curl up and wither away. The sour smell of male sweat sickens me. I brace against a wave of dizziness.

I stare at the pine tree. Talk to Rooster. Tell him I trust him. Remind him he's the king. And I'm his queen. I lead him closer to the starting line and hoist myself into the saddle, circle Rooster a few times, release stray thoughts, and focus on how he feels. His ears. *Know my surroundings.* I study each rider.

He glares at me.

I avert my gaze. It's the same zoo. Horses rear and bump into each other, jockeys trying to hold them back. Eyes wild, they seem to want this more than we do. Rooster's coat shines from sweat. He prances, nosing the bit. The official draws for positions. I have the number eight space. The deliverer draws nine. I swallow hard. He comes alongside me, ranting obscenities. His horse side runs, jamming into us. I beat him off. Rooster rears, front legs striking the searing air. I'm tossed to the side of the saddle. Shaken and weary, I ride it out. We all manage to stay in a crooked line behind the guy with the start gun. He slides it out of the holster and pulls the trigger. Rooster thrusts forward and in a few seconds, we are midway down the hill.

We surge into the river, water slapping my face and blurring my vision. I need to trust Rooster. Someone's whip strikes my arm, back, and head. I flinch, keeping my eyes forward, guessing it's

him. There is the gentle sway as we swim across the swift current. After shaking the water out of my eyes, the pine tree flashes into view then disappears behind a curtain of water droplets. Someone's hand grabs my shirt, pulling me sideways.

With narrow eyes and twisted face, he shouts, "You're finished!"

I clutch the saddle horn with one hand and beat him off with my crop in the other. My sleeve tears from my shirt. I reach back and spank Rooster. The rein slips from my grip as Rooster's hooves touch the riverbed. He lunges forward, forcing my belly into the saddle horn. A wild animal-like scream escapes my throat as fear turns to rage.

An image of my father in his wheelchair, eyes cast down, scrapes across my mind. *Keep going.* I reach for the rein, but it's too far forward, near his ears. *I can't.* With one bounce of his step, it's between his ears. I snap my arm forward, fingers out. It's too far away. My tormentor bumps his horse into mine as we soar out of the water. The rein flicks back and I'm able to wrap my fingers around it. Rooster gains speed, passing riders. I'm clear of the deliverer, but sandwiched between two other jockeys. They squeeze their horses against my legs. I kick and spank, hitting the jockey to my right. He slaps back with his crop and yells profanities at me.

Dust floats into my eyes. I squeeze them shut. Tears stream. I wipe them away, clearing my vision. I catch a glimpse of riders in the first and second position racing up the dike. I have only a few seconds to make my move. I don't see a way around them. What I do see in my mind is an image of Sshapa smiling, holding a picture of Stimteema, my grandmother, and the horse she rode off the original hill in Keller years ago. Proud eyes stare through the glass picture frame, telling me there is a way. Asking me to trust Creator to clear a path. This rite of passage flowed through her veins. It now flows through mine.

I see a crack of daylight between the two front runners and kick and spank and scream. Rooster surges forward, passing one. Then the other.

We turn the corner into the arena. I rub elbows with someone. I don't know who because my eyes are squeezed shut. I scream and kick and spank some more. Lean forward, rein arm extended, head down. I'm still hollering when we cross between the poles. I have no idea how close we are. The crowd is deafening. I open my eyes and circle left, examining the other jockey's expressions. Some smile at me while others glare, jaws clenched. Was it enough to claim the title?

I search the sea of white, locating my parents. I watch them jump up and down, hugging one another, cheering. A glimpse of Sshapa comes into view. He sits in the front row, hands covering his face. My eyes dart from jockey to jockey as they struggle to spiral their horses to a walk. They prance instead, noses high in the air. Rooster follows suit. The announcer hollers and chatters like when American Pharaoh won the Triple Crown. I can't make out what he's saying. I strain to listen, motioning for the crowd to hush. They get louder.

A jockey rides by, hand high. I slap it. Then another. And another. And then I hear it. I spin Rooster around and face the announcer. He points and nods at me, a wide smile spread across his face, and screeches my name and "Queen of the Hill" in the same sentence. Shock buzzes down my arms. This must be how Victor Espinoza felt. Numb. Excited. Honored. I scan the stands. A sea of white shouts "Queen of the Hill" over and over and over...

The grass dance, in which Rooster's register name is implied, purifies the earth for the rest of the dancers to come. His name brings honor, helping pave the way, not simply for celebrations, but for a girl's journey into womanhood. So they too can fulfill their dreams into the circle of life, leaving a legacy for future generations.

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With a degree in abnormal psychology, CARMEN PEONE never considered writing, until she and her husband moved to the Colville Indian reservation. She fell in love with her husband's culture and decided to write fiction and include his tribe.

