

DEVIN STARK
MATCHLESS

IT WAS STILL HOT as hell when the stampede ground lights punched on, filling the dusty basin with an electric light that muscled out the sun's glow. In half an hour the sun would sink behind Mount Alex Graham, a shallow pimple of a hill west of Williams Lake. August in these parts meant that the hay and the dust and the pollution from a town too poor to worry about the ozone just hung on the air, turning the evening pipe-bowl orange.

Mike Hitchson tilted his hat, the bone-white straw hat that all the other riders wore, and released a comet of chewing tobacco. It landed in the dirt three feet inside the back pens where the bulls were grunting, shitting and kicking up more dust.

His buddy Jay put another wad of chew in his lip. The two of them had made it past the second day's elimination and were a pair of just ten bull riders to make the Short Go, a final round where they would test their mettle against the best bulls for a chance to win a few grand.

"Which do you think you'll draw?" Mike asked as he wiped his chin. Like most of the riders his sleeve was tobacco-stained from forearm to cuff.

"You get what you get." Jay stood, arms crossed. It was true that you had no real choice in the matter, but that didn't stop the boys from wishing.

Through a pair of shades three feet thick a blind man could tell these two weren't brothers. Mike had Cedar Secwepemc skin like his mother in the riding season, fading to a paternal oak in winter. He stood a weak five-nine, thick in the middle with arms like rolling pins. Jay hunched at well over six feet, with shoulders like a crucifix. His busted nose stood like an accent among the swathes of freckles smeared under his eyes and across his brow.

Mike's father always said that both boys had too much teeth—not a good thing for a pair of lads wanting to make a bit of change riding the back of a bull.

"Yesterday's was decent. Got a few good fades outta him," Mike said. He toed some manure back into the pens and continued. "The muley

on the first day was garbage though. I couldn't do dick with him. Thought I was gonna snap a spur tryin' to get that fucker to kick."

A smile from Jay. "Shit, I just try to hang on."

"Right, just hanging on is what's got ya here."

Jay's smile faded and he spit onto one of the bulls walking by. "Draw better than me and Grange, you might take this thing." He glanced over to the north side of the grounds where the mountain race was underway. "Fuckin' circus."

They both turned their attention back to the bull pens, content without words while daylight faded to black.

"Remember those beasts your dad used to ride? Those bulls were bred to be mean. They didn't just jump around like most of these heifers. They wanted to hear bones grindin'. Fuck, half of them looked carnivorous."

Mike knew that his father, Dale, would be having drinks with his old riding buddies somewhere on a truck tailgate among the horse trailers and the motorhomes on the other side of the back pens. Back there was the closest thing to the Wild West you could get.

Jay shifted down the fence to get a better view of the other bulls they might be riding that night.

Mike followed.

"If you find your nuts before the Short Go this would be a good one. Its name's Brushfire or some shit like that." Jay nodded at a brindie bull the size of an SUV that was slamming its horns into the fence, chipping off bits of paint. "Look at its face. Mad as fuck, like the ones your dad used to ride." Jay whistled and shook the fence.

"Yeah, sure," Mike eyed the beast. He hated how Jay thought his dad walked on goddamn water. "It looks—

Mike was cut off by a crash in the pens a couple of stalls over. Another bull had rammed the fence and someone was hollering.

"Hey Mike, you can take that lazy sack of shit there. I'll take this one."

Mike and Jay walked around to the end of the pens, close to the horse trailers and the cluster of trucks inside the track. He still hadn't spotted his dad, but Dale would be in there.

There was another clatter of horns against fence and Mike saw that it was Granger, another rider and a favourite to take the whole thing. He was aiming kicks at a Charbray bull, whipping it up into a frenzy.

“Oh, this is a good one, boys. I think I’ll have a little chat with Gary and perhaps he can just happen to draw this sucker for me.”

“What the fuck are you doing, Granger?”

“This is one of yours, isn’t it?”

It was. Mike’s father had taken to raising rodeo bulls after he retired and had a gift for it. Mike rushed forward and shoved Granger from the fence.

“Git the fuck off me!” Granger growled at Mike. “Touch me again and I’ll stomp you into the fuckin’ ground.” He moved toward the pen again and raised his boot to throw another kick at the raging bull.

Mike stepped off his back foot and heaved a punch that sailed just past Granger’s nose, a nose used to getting punches thrown at it. Word around town was that his old man would take to the bottle and then sharpen his knuckles on that nose.

Without anything to stop his fist, Mike stumbled forward and grabbed onto the fence just as Granger brought a spur down and raked it remorselessly across Mike’s left calf. He yelled and dropped to one knee. The spur had ripped through the denim and bit hard into his flesh. Mike could feel blood, warm and wet, start to trickle towards the lip of his boot.

A shadow fell over Mike and he could see Granger’s fist, a brick made of dirt and bone and calluses, dropping down to pound him into the ground. Just as promised.

As Mike braced for the beat down, all six-and-a-half feet of Jay uncoiled, laying Granger out in the dirt to gasp into the wood chips and the shit.

“Whoa! What in Christ’s name are you boys doing?” Dale, a rolled cigarette clenched in his yellowed teeth, grabbed Jay by the collar and pulled him back.

“Get up, Mikey, and wipe the shit off your jeans.” The look he gave his son was not one of concern.

Granger got to his knees.

“Pathetic, the bunch of ya. Now get cleaned up. Gary’s drawin’ soon and you dumb bastards somehow made it into the Short Go.”

“Mister Hitchson, I—” Granger was cut short.

“I saw what you were doing, Granger, you little shit. And unless you’re unlucky enough to be on its back, you touch my bull again I’ll shoot your legs out from under you and run you down with my Dodge.” The cigarette had died at the end of his lips and he flicked it into the dirt. “That scum dad of yours will thank me, too.”

Mike grabbed up the fence, careful not to put his hands anywhere near the bull, and stood up. The blood had made it down into the heel of his boot. It made a squeak as his foot rubbed against the soft leather.

“Now get outta here. And if you done any damage to Matchless here, I’ll skin ya.” Dale strode with his bow-legged gait to the fence and stepped up onto the first rail, dangerously close to the agitated beast.

Fifteen years earlier, at the Calgary stampede, Dale rode his last bull. It was a jet black muley named Storm Runner from Five Aces ranch out of Vanderhoof. Mike was just a young buck at the time, four and a half, but sharp as a tack and with a near religious veneration for his old man.

They called Dale “Matchless.” There wasn’t a bull out there that could throw him, and he was the favourite to take the pot. There were only sixteen riders in the Short Go and only a few of them had a shot at taking him. After he drew Storm Runner the show was all but done, assuming he could make the eight, but eight seconds is a long time when you’re riding a metric tonne of angry beef.

While Dale was in the hospital Mike’s gramps kicked the bucket, leaving the ranch, humble as it was, to Dale. The men continued raising beef cattle, heading out to join the other ranches at fall roundup. They would make enough to eat and drink—too much of the latter.

A few years after that Mike’s mom passed too. Mike was amazed how the breast cancer ravaged his mother and his father at the same rate. His mother’s Secwepemc skin waned into burnt ash, while his father’s face reddened, blood vessels swelling on his nose and across his cheeks. A short bout of chemo stripped his mother of her chestnut hair and most of her muscle. She would try to smile at Mike, but tears would stream down her face if she looked at him too long.

Mike watched his old man, cooing and trying to calm the bull. He wondered what Dale would have done if he hadn’t suggested to him that he try breeding rodeo bulls. Would they still be out on the ranch, dirty from a day’s work and silent over dinner?

“Mikey, they’re calling the draw.” Jay was on his way over to the chutes with the other Short Go riders, waving their hands to the audience as each name was called, paired with that of a bull.

Will Coupland will be riding Error of Man out of the Stillwater Ranch.

Up on the deck above the bucking chutes, Mike could sense that Jay was nervous. Mike got nervous, but only at the last second, lowering down onto the beast's back. He'd been riding since his dad started raising bulls.

Sean Smith will be riding Martha's Grenade out of the Stewart Brothers Cattle Company from all the way down in Vancouver.

A couple of cowboys leaning on the fence erupted in laughter, patting one another on the back while a woman in the stands behind them frowned.

Jay Balfour will be riding Brushfire out of Fraser River Ranch.

Jay pumped his fist quick and then raised his hand to the crowd, holding his hat, exposing his broken nose and red hair.

He put his hat back on and grabbed Mike by the shoulders. "I could take it from you, bud." He let out a loud yip and the older cowboys smiled.

Mike looked around for his father, finally spotting Dale making his way down the stairs from the announcer's booth. He looked timeworn, grabbing onto the railing and forcing a smile every second step. His last ride had broken him and the docs hadn't put everything back together quite right.

"Jay! Try not putting us to sleep when you're riding that fuckin' sofa, eh?" Granger kicked the chute rails and laughed.

"What a piece of shit. Ignore him, Jay." Mike's upper calf was still throbbing from where Granger had raked it with his spur. "The only bulls that are even close to yours are Space Invader and my dad's Charbray." Mike's boot was starting to get sticky inside, rubbing his heel into one hell of a blister.

While they were talking, two more riders had been announced: Ted Laudrum was riding Nightcap, a medium-sized bull, black with swirls of chocolate across its back and shoulders; Eddy Cope was riding Blunderbuss, a jet Brahman mix with a four-litre hump on its back the size of Eddy's head.

Mike and Jay looked up to see Granger's crooked grin fade as they called his name and the bull that he had drawn.

Adam Granger will be riding Space Invader out of the Chilcotin Triple Hawk Ranch. That bull can kick, folks! Look for a good ride from Adam Granger, one of five local boys who made it into the Short Go tonight.

"Goddammit!" Granger kicked the fence and turned to face Jay and Mike. "If you get that fuckin' Charbray, Mike, I'm gonna squeeze that ugly little pale head of yours until shit pours out your ears."

"The fuckin' chops on that guy. I'm glad my dad beat that outta me," Jay muttered just loud enough for Mike to hear.

Resentment followed Granger to the back pens as the crowd started applauding Chad Ottis. Chad was older than the rest of them, but it was his first time in a Short Go.

Mike leaned over the rails and hailed one of the rodeo clowns, a thickset native ranch hand nicknamed Ducky, whose face was decorated with the pink, black and white of an *Auguste*. “Eh, Ducky.”

Ducky looked up.

“What did Chad get?”

Ducky’s smile flattened. “You got your head in your ass? Your dad must’ve pulled some shit ’cause your boy Chad there got Rusty Mountain High over from Harvest Moon.”

Jay hooted and slapped Mike on the back. The slap stung and Mike pitched forward, steadying himself on the rails. Everything went a little fuzzy.

You’re in for a treat tonight, folks. As Lady Luck would have it, our last rider, Mike Hitchson, another one of our local boys, has drawn the never-before-ridden bull from his father’s own award-winning ranch. Ladies and gentlemen, Mike Hitchson will be riding Matchless out of the Cedar Ranch!

Mike looked up to see his dad smirking from the stands. Most of the old boys seemed to approve, while a few were shaking their heads, confused as to whether Dale’s ride would give the kid a crack at winning or send him to an early grave.

The next half hour saw the beginning of the leaderboard shuffle; riders who could hold on for the eight seconds would see their names rocket to the top of the scoreboard, giving them a brief hope that they might take the pot.

Will Coupland started the Short Go on Error of Man. He was almost bucked when Error changed directions and started to spin away into his hand, but he made the eight and put some numbers up on the board.

The crowd roared harder when Martha’s Grenade faded on Sean, moving backwards and bucking, launching him high into the fluorescent floodlights. His body, legs festooned with tassel-lined chaps, tumbled through the air stiff and quick, meeting the dry mulch with a snap. Ducky ran to his aid and Gus, the barrel man, distracted Martha’s Grenade long enough for Ducky to usher Sean over the rails and into the hands of a half dozen cowboys. The crowd applauded when Sean gave a wave, letting them know that most of the damage was to his pride.

Mike was hunched over the middle chute helping Jay down onto Brushfire. With his hand tucked under Jay's arm, offering balance, Mike could feel the brutal rigor of adrenaline.

"Relax, buddy. Just breathe and concentrate on where you want Brushfire to go."

Dale appeared, leaning in to put a hand on Mike's shoulder. "C'mon Jay. Make this sucker dance and my son won't be able to touch ya."

Jay turned and grinned through gritted teeth.

"Good. Now it's just like every other time. Ducky'll take care of you once ya hit the dirt." Dale turned to Mike. "Now let go of him and we'll see what this heifer can do."

Mike, Dale and everyone else took a step back as the gate man pulled the nylon rope, swinging open the gate and letting the duo out into the ring.

Ten feet out of the gate Brushfire dug his hooves into the dirt, churning the earth and turning in tighter circles away from Jay's riding hand. Jay was keeping it together until around the four-second mark, when Brushfire tightened his circles even more and Jay started to slip to the side.

"Jesus. The kid's going down in the well." Dale was tracking every turn, every kick Brushfire was throwing as Jay sank lower into the vortex the bull was crafting.

"Lean back!" Mike shouted as the six-second mark ticked by and Jay's shoulders dipped below Brushfire's bucking hind quarters.

At seven seconds Jay was in the dirt, obscured by dust.

With the barrel man behind him screaming at Brushfire and waving handkerchiefs, Ducky had skirted around trying to reach the downed cowboy.

Gus had the loudest voice Mike had ever heard. From the barrel he let out a short bark that pierced through everything: the screams from the crowd, the cowboys perched on the chutes, even Jay's own desperate cries. Brushfire lifted his head, upsetting the impenetrable circle he'd made and giving Ducky just enough time to dart in, grab Jay and drag him over to the fence where Granger was straddling the top rail, arm extended.

As Jay scrambled to his feet Granger reached down and hauled him over the fence and out of the ring.

Mike rushed around to where Jay was propped up against one of the blue barrels from an earlier race. "You alright?"

Jay nodded. On the other side of the fence Brushfire's attention had shifted to Ducky as the clown directed him towards the exit chute that led to the back pens.

"Your boy here got confused. Couldn't figure out whether you ride on top of the bull or under it. How was the view from under there?" Granger aimed a soft kick at Jay's boots. "Ain't no sofa, though." Granger turned and headed back to the chutes, climbing up to congratulate Ducky and heckle Ted, who was getting ready to straddle Nightcap.

That was a close one, folks. We've been told that Jay Balfour is alright. Let's thank Theo "Ducky" Barns and Gus Braefoot, our brave rodeo clowns. They're the rodeo's true heroes, ladies and gentlemen.

In the centre of the ring Gus bobbed down into his barrel and came up with a police badge, then ran over and pinned it on Ducky's polka-dot suspenders. The children in the crowd howled as Ducky pretended that the badge had pricked him.

In the twenty minutes leading to Granger's ride both Ted and Eddy lasted the eight, propelling Ted to first; Eddy had slapped the hump on the back of his bull and been disqualified.

Jay was up and walking about, chatting with Dale as Mike went to gather his stuff and bring it up to the landing alongside the chutes.

Matchless was already in chute three, quiet despite Rusty Mountain High pawing at the sides of his enclosure and all the cowboys talking to Granger, who was hovering over the black-and-white Space Invader. The long tassels on Granger's chaps occasionally brushed the bull, already jumpy with the flank strap cinched tight to persuade him to buck more with its hind legs.

Mike didn't like to talk before he rode. He would don his spurs, buckle on his chaps—clean-edged because his dad thought that tassels were for pussies—and zip up his flak jacket with his left hand clad in a thick hide glove. Then he would clear an area and try to envision the twists and turns and fades and bucks. He would flick his heels in, imagining that he was directing the bull's movements with a brush of his spurs. He would spin in circles, eyes closed, with his bull rope in hand, grinding a thumb of Greek pitch rosin into the woven grip, ensuring that when the time came his hand wouldn't slip.

What a ride! came a bellow from over the loudspeaker as Mike bent down and touched his calf. Most of the blood had crusted to his jeans, but his heel was still slick inside his boot.

“You ready?” Dale had been watching him from the chute landing the whole time. “Grange got some pretty good buck. Score’ll be high, but nothin’ that my boy there won’t try to pull on ya.” He glanced over his shoulder towards chute three.

Out in the ring Granger was waving his hat and joking with the clowns, who had already escorted Space Invader to the exit chute and were hamming it up for the kids. The judges gave Granger a score that put him atop the leaderboard.

Mike stood beside Dale, silent as Chad lowered himself down onto Rusty Mountain High. They were both studying Matchless.

Groans from the crowd and loud curses from Chad snapped both father and son from their thoughts. He had fallen almost immediately out of the gate.

“Looks like you’re up, son.” Dale nodded towards Matchless, still and quiet in the bucking chute.

Mike adjusted his glove and grabbed the rail above the bull. He could feel vibrations running up through the metal. Matchless’ hind quarters were shaking like they were trying to dislodge a fly.

Dale leaned in. “Mikey, he’ll explode on ya. Watch for that fade going into a spin.” Mike could see his father fumbling with a smoke in his pocket. “Then he’ll take you sky high if ya give him a little prick. Judges’ll like it.”

Mike stood still, perched on the rail, ready to swing down onto the bull. His name was echoing all around him, bouncing off the night sky and back into the stampede grounds like a desert moth.

Mike didn’t like that his father might have rigged the draw. As Dale reached over and patted the Cedar Ranch logo on his flak jacket, he wished again that he’d drawn another bull. He swung his leg around and slowly lowered himself onto Matchless. As soon as ass hit hide the energy bottled up in the bull shot through Mike and he tensed up. The cowboys adjusted the bull rope and flank strap.

There was an unease among the cowboys. This bull was unknown. It looked as though it had been hewn from marble and was as calm as death. Matchless breathed out and kicked the back of the chute as the flank strap was notched tighter. The movement put some of the cowboys at ease, while others refused to look anywhere but at their feet.

Mike shifted and stretched the bull rope over his riding hand as tight as he could get it. Everyone backed off except for the gate man.

Mike raised his free arm, nodded his head, and the world burst from black-and-white into high-definition colour, stretched and severed into second-long eternities.

One.

The fluorescent yellow rope tautened; the gate swung open and Matchless detonated.

Every tendon in Mike's arm screamed as he was ripped from the chute and out into the parched open air of the riding ring. Bodies in the stands blurred. Mike's eyes were locked onto the back of Matchless' neck, straining to detect the slightest twitch that might betray the bull's next move.

A dozen paces out Matchless began his thousand-pound ballet.

Two.

Matchless pitched his head forward and Mike reacted. Fade and spin.

The bull rope creaked as the Greek rosin did its job and kept the fibres cemented to Mike's leather glove. The bull pitched forward and Mike shifted his legs up and his head back. His right foot grabbed hold of Matchless' shoulder with a spur, forcing the beast to dive prematurely into a spin. Mike's mood shifted and he thanked his old man. The shift had moved him into perfect position to hold on for a spin away from his hand.

Mike understood why Dale had been smiling after he came down from the announcer's box. Matchless was bred for him. The animal was a gift.

Mike kept pressure on his right spur as Matchless' head followed his tail in a tight spin that the judges would relish. Dust coated the scene like a sepia filter.

Mike ground his teeth, revelling in the brutality. His clenched jaw kept his teeth from snapping shut and taking off the end his tongue. He'd seen that happen at one of his dad's competitions; it looked like the cowboy had spit out a bloody thumb.

Three.

Matchless picked up speed. Earth became aerosol. His lungs burned and for a heartbeat his concentration wavered.

Matchless spun harder.

Four.

Mike's left boot slipped and started to pull away from his foot. The boot hit the dirt and his calf became a blood-soaked paintbrush on Matchless' white hide. It could have been the scent of blood, or a shift in how tightly

Mike's thighs were clenching the bull's back, but in that moment Matchless stopped and faded again.

Five.

Harmony between the pair was crumbling. The fade was followed by a violent switch of direction that threw Mike off balance. Matchless was now turning hard into Mike's riding hand so quickly that his spittle was hitting his hind quarters before it had a chance to fall to the ground.

Mike was trying desperately to block everything else out and concentrate on the Charbray's thick white hide.

Six.

Faster and faster the beast turned. Like Jay, Mike started to slide into the well. The rosin held fast, but rope and rider were beginning to slip, edging towards the earth. The bull, on the other hand, kept going faster, adding the occasional buck to bring the crowd to its feet.

Seven.

The game changed again. As Mike descended deeper into the well, Matchless gave a buck that, rather than ejecting his rider and ending the dance, gave Mike just enough lift to rein himself in, and once again he was atop the bull. The rope had loosened slightly, and his arm was straining with exertion. He would have to dig deep for the finale.

Matchless broke the spin and lunged forward in a straight line.

Eight.

Mike was ready for it. With one boot, one spur left, he dangled his right leg and dragged the tines along the bull's belly. This was an old trick of his father's. Done right the bull would vault into the air, turn its belly to the stars and sunfish.

Using his remaining strength to tighten his grip, Mike braced to get airborne. His shoulders sank, bringing his free hand in line with his hat as Matchless drove hard upwards into the night.

As the eight-second horn called out, rider and beast were above the earth, frozen in a windblown tapestry.

Nine.

The earth rushed to meet them as Mike and Matchless returned to the dirt. Mike loosened his grip and pitched forward his right leg to dismount, but as his leg passed over the bull's hump, Matchless faded again, propelling his rider forward.

Hanging by his arm on Matchless' left side, Mike was done with the ride, but the Greek rosin held the thick weave looped around his hand.

Gus hollered and Ducky rushed in just as Mike's bloody, bootless foot dragged along the dirt.

Ten.

Matchless snapped around, undeterred by the air horn or the clowns calling and waving at his side. Eight seconds meant nothing to him. He planted a hoof, turned and plucked Mike's arm from its socket.

The crowd thundered as Mike frantically grabbed for the tangled rope with his free hand. Matchless went into a spin and Mike struggled to stand as Matchless bucked over and over.

Eleven.

Mike was passing out. His legs dragged stiff on the ground, kicking to avoid the four jackhammers plunging all around him. Each time one of Matchless' hooves hit the ground, a shower of fetid dirt would rain down over the brim of Mike's straw cowboy hat. In his last moment of consciousness he heard a loud crack and saw a flash of bright colours.

Twelve.

The crowd fell silent. Cowboys flooded the ring. Someone slashed at the rope with a knife as the bull opened its side to them with the limp body of Dale's boy rag-dolled beneath it.

The rodeo clown was hauled off by some of the old boys after taking one in the head when he got too close to the beast. The other clown was still hollering, his voice quieter outside his barrel.

With a final jerk the boy's glove pulled away from the Greek rosin, and the cowboys formed a wall in front of him, his arm twisted at an unnatural angle, his hand like pulp, his chest rising and falling below the flak jacket with its red cedar tree emblazoned on the breast.

It was hours later that Mike tried to open his eyes, managing only one. He could see doctors in masks and scrubs and a nurse with last night's crimson caught in the cracks of her lips looking at him with incredulity. They didn't understand what he and his father and Jay knew. Even Granger, with all his attitude and bullshit, understood what the ride is about. It is always about embracing fear.

One of the nurses shooed away a man who looked like Dale, but older, much older. Mike tried to raise his left hand to acknowledge his old man, but was prevented by restraints and a hideous pain that caused him to vomit down his chin and cheek. What he could see of his hand was wrapped in gauze and soaked through with blood.

“Who?” was all Mike could muster. A nurse gently wiped his face. He stared at the sea of clear and red jellyfish bags emptying their contents under his skin. He tried to remember what had happened.

So much dust. A forest of boots and denim. Flashing lights from the onsite medics. The white-hot pain from Matchless’ hooves, surfacing and then retreating. Jay’s half-moon nose. Dale, knees in the dirt, with a cigarette chewed at one end and pouring oak-coloured hairs from the other. Ducky, lying still under the electric stadium light.

“Alright, kid. You’re gonna have another little sleep now. That animal made a bit of a mess of things, but we should be able to patch you up like new.”

“Ducky?”

“Theo’s been in here before and he’ll be in here again. Not to worry, just had his bell rung is all. Seems you boys are hard to kill.” Williams Lake doctors had a way of giving you the truth in a soft, gruff way. Mike liked that about them.

And as everything turned to soup and the light receded once more, Mike dug deep and found an image of the scoreboard high above the chutes and defiant against the inkiness that swallowed Mount Alex Graham. Pleased at what he saw, Mike surrendered to sleep.