



PHOTO: JONATHAN EVANS

# A Song for Toughy

By Margaret Evans

Anita and her friends couldn't wait to go for their annual summer camping holiday. This year they were going to Horse Hair Ranch, one of their favourite places. Anita, her cousin Meridy, and their friends Jill and Sandie were all going with their families so it would be a big camping party with family and friends.

It took hours for the families to get organized hooking up trucks to horse trailers and boats, and loading the ponies, bikes, hiking and camping gear, and coolers full of food. By the time they were ready to roll from Anita's house, Pete Poole, their neighbour, said that watching them go to camp for a week was like watching the deployment of the Canadian military. When they finally pulled out of the driveway, Dad yelled "Forward March!" and everyone cheered.

It was a four hour drive to Horse Hair

Ranch, a huge working cattle ranch. Emily and Patrick Maguire were the fourth generation of Maguires to own the heritage ranch where they raised Hereford cattle and Quarter Horses. Several years ago they had expanded the ranch to offer tourists holiday packages that included camping, riding lessons, trail riding, fishing, hiking, biking, and, in the fall, guided hunting. They hosted biking and riding competitions and even had a fishing derby. It was the perfect place for a family holiday.

"You get Penny settled," said Mom to Anita as soon as they arrived. "We'll have supper at five and I need your help setting up tables."

"No worries," grinned Anita. "Penny remembers this place. She'll settle fast once I've bedded her down and given her some hay."

The girls spent an hour settling their ponies and organizing their tack and tool boxes. There were eight other holiday riders in the barn.

"Hi girls!" Emily Maguire's familiar voice welcomed them warmly. "I'm so glad you're back!"

"Us too," grinned Anita. "I can't wait to ride!"

"Your clinic schedule is on the notice board in the tack room," smiled Mrs. Maguire. "All the riding trails are open and there are maps in the rack. You've got some great new riding companions."

"I can't wait to meet them," grinned Meridy.

"There's one little girl you'll enjoy," added Mrs. Maguire. "Kym and her pony Toughy."

"Toughy?" grinned Sandie. "That name must have a story to it."

"She'll tell you!" Mrs. Maguire laughed. "She hasn't had a lot of riding experience so I'm sure she'll appreciate help from you girls."

The girls settled their ponies, then looked for Kym. They heard her before they saw her, singing to the pretty bay Welsh pony she was brushing down. They introduced themselves to the slight, freckle-faced girl with a long blonde ponytail. They were instantly friends. Kym introduced Toughy who they learned had been accidentally stepped on by her dam when she was only a few days old; but young Toughy had been no worse for wear, with only a hoof-shaped cut on her leg as proof of the incident. Her breeders had decided she was one tough little filly, and named her accordingly.

"She's five now. You can still see the



mark on her leg there,” said Kym, pointing at a scar just above Toughy’s left fetlock.

Anita thought Toughy was gorgeous, even with the scar. Besides, she was a Welsh Pony, and Penny of course was a Welsh Mountain Pony.

“How’s she doing with training?” Sandie asked.

“Well... okay. Sort of,” Kym shrugged as a shadow crossed her face. She hadn’t had Toughy long and the pony had come with the difficult problems of being balky and running off. Kym’s mom, Brandie, was sure Kym could handle Toughy but there were times when Kym was doubtful. It didn’t help that her brother Brad constantly teased her about wimping out.

The girls saw what Kym meant in the next morning’s flatwork clinic. Kym led Toughy from the barn, checked her girth, mounted, and they quietly walked into the arena. In the lesson were the four girls, Jody on a big Percheron cross, and Kym. Soon they were all moving around the arena at a steady working trot.

“Come into the centre!” called Cyndie Toews, their instructor, who used to teach at Blue Meadows Equestrian Centre where the girls had their regular lessons. Anita thought it was perfect that Cyndie was teaching at Horse Hair for the summer. She spent five minutes talking to them about the morning’s goals – forward movement, obedience, and building on exercises for suppleness and balance. Anita knew Penny would be good but kept her natural excitement in check.

Each of them took turns riding a 20-metre circle on both reins. But when it was Kym’s turn Toughy suddenly balked and stopped, refusing to go forward.

“Legs on, Kym,” called Cyndie encouragingly. “Don’t let Toughy think that she can pick when to stop and go.”

Kym squeezed hard and gave her pony a light tap with the stick. Toughy sidestepped, tossed her head impatiently, and finally moved forward. Lots of praise reinforced Kym’s confidence as they continued the clinic.

Over the next few days of riding the local trails, enjoying lessons, and with the girls’ constant encouragement, Kym built on her strengths and kept her willful pony in line. Her mother was delighted and urged her to advance more quickly. But Anita and the girls cautioned Kym to keep building the basics slowly. They knew from experience how important it was for Toughy to be obedient before overfacing her with greater challenges.

While the girls rode, Matt, Sean, and Brad went on biking trips and the parents



hiked or went out on the lake. Every evening they all shared a barbecue supper and Brandie, Kym, and Brad quickly became friends at the nightly campfire.

“Let’s ride the high trail tomorrow,” suggested Anita to her friends. “We haven’t done it yet. Mrs. Maguire said it’s really easy just following the map. There’s an old mountain cabin at the lookout where we can have lunch.”

“Come with us?” Meridy asked Kym.

“Love to!” Kym grinned. “I hope Toughy will behave herself.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine with the four of us.”

“Take the ride slowly,” cautioned Mom later as Anita packed a lunch for the next day’s ride. “Toughy might be unpredictable. What’s Plan B?”

Anita bit her lip, then grinned. “Stick to Plan A. Plan your ride and ride your plan. Here’s a copy of the map, Mom.”

“Make sure everyone’s got a copy,” stressed Mom. “And make sure Kym can read it.”

Mom’s words troubled Anita the next day as they set out for the day’s ride. Mrs. Maguire told them that some of the ranch hands were doing range checks in the high country. Matt, Sean, and Brad were off on a day’s bike tour and the Moms and Dads were hiking the valley.

It was a picture perfect day. Raptors circled high in a cloudless blue sky. It was comfortably hot and the light breeze kept the flies away. Along the trail they glimpsed breathtaking views of the ranchland that rolled away from the uplands in a sweeping valley. In the valley’s centre was Horse Lake, a ribbon of water frequented by cattle, wildlife, and the local residents.

Anita checked the map. They were a

half hour’s ride from the old cabin built by cowboys when the first family of Maguires started the ranch over 100 years ago. It was still used by ranch hands as a stopover. Then Anita glanced back and noticed that Kym wasn’t with them.

“Where’s Kym?”

“She was right behind me,” said Sandie.

Anita stared beyond Sandie at the empty trail. They slowed their ponies, listening intently.

“D’you think Toughy acted up again?” Jill frowned, clearly worried.

“Kym would’ve called,” said Meridy.

“But we wouldn’t have heard her.”

“Let’s go back.” Sandie turned Fanny around and urged her down the trail.

They arrived at the fork where they had taken the switchback that led to the cabin. The other trail followed through the trees toward high country and alpine meadows. They picked up signs of fresh hoof prints. Guessing they were Toughy’s, they set off down the path only to be confronted by another intersecting trail marked as the bike route.

“Anita!”

The muffled sound of Matt’s cry urged them to push their ponies into a canter. Ahead, Matt, Sean, and Brad clutched their bikes in a state of panic.

“Toughy bolted!” Matt’s face was worried as he stared toward the huge ramparts of the high mountains. “Kym’s somewhere out there...”

“Where?”

“We dunno! Toughy shot by so fast. Kym sure looked scared.”

“We need help,” said Anita, her voice firm as she struggled to control rising fear. The trails ahead entered steep, open terrain, where a wrong step could end in a horrible fall. Sandie whipped out her cell phone.

“Aren’t we out of range?” Meridy asked.

“We’re high enough for a faint signal,” said Sandie as she dialed the ranch, then frowned. “But the ringing keeps breaking up.”

Anita looked at her map, an idea forming. The bike route followed a shorter trail to the cabin they’d been aiming for. “Matt – you, Brad, and Sean ride to the cabin. If any of the cowboys are there, tell them what happened. They’ve got radios to call the ranch.”

“What if no one’s there?”

“Then pin a note to the door, and go straight back to the ranch house for help,” she said as she watched them hesitate. She rapidly unbuckled her saddlebag and pulled out some paper and pencil. “Here.”

“What’re you going to do?” asked Mat.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 56

Anita stared ahead at the forbidding terrain. "We're going to look..."

"We've all got maps," added Jill. "Let's coordinate this so everyone knows where everyone's going."

"But we won't split up," cautioned Sandie. "If we can't stay in touch with each other, no one's going to know who finds Kym."

"We'll fan out and stay in whistle-range," said Anita. "I gave Kym my extra whistle when we were saddling up."

As the boys raced off, Sandie studied the ground. It was hard, dry, and gravelly. She frantically tried to remember the

profoundly silent. The trail began to drop to a lower elevation and Sandie could see some skid lines. She stopped, dismounted, and examined a small section of the trail where it was shaded and damp. There was a clear hoof print in the soil.

"We're on track!" Sandie's voice was confident as she remounted Fanny.

Anita looked around, growing increasingly anxious as they moved into unfamiliar territory not marked on the map as an equestrian trail for tourists. She knew they could retrace their steps but only if they found Kym in time and if she wasn't hurt.

"Shhh!" Jill's voice hissed behind her.

They all froze and listened. Faintly below them, they thought they heard a high pitched whistle.

"Kym!" They screamed in chorus.

The whistle sounded a tiny bit louder. They urged their ponies further down the trail. Rounding the bend, the trail widened into a narrow bench of grass where Toughy was greedily grazing, with reins over her head and saddle lopsided. She threw up her head with a welcome whinny as the girls jumped off their ponies, walked up to her quietly, and Sandie grabbed her reins.

"Kym!" Anita yelled. "We've found Toughy! Where are you?"

A strong whistle called up to them. Kym was lying on a steep grassy slope just below the trail. In seconds they had secured their ponies and were by her side.

"Something scared her," whispered Kym. "I couldn't stop. She almost went over the edge but I sang to her to slow down." Kym started to sob. "My back hurts."

"Help's coming," soothed Anita. "Don't move."

From the grassy bank Sandie, who was still holding Toughy, called down to them. "There's a rider coming!"

"Stay with Kym," said Anita to Jill and Meridy. "I'll ride back to intercept."

In seconds she had vaulted onto Penny and was cantering back along the trail, slowing just enough to round the bends. Right then, two range hands trotted into view. She was sure, later, that the entire mountain heard her sigh with relief. She recognized Clint and Abe, who had been intercepted by the boys and had picked up the girls' track at the trail

link. Anita explained what had happened, then Abe raced ahead as Clint made emergency contact with ranch headquarters on a satellite phone.

Three hours later, Kym had been lifted out by rescue helicopter to the local hospital where she was diagnosed with a severely bruised tailbone and strained ligaments. By some miracle, she hadn't broken any bones, but she had plenty of scrapes and cuts.

The ride home had been uneventful as they walked down the trail with Sandie leading Toughy. The mare hadn't been hurt at all. With Kym safe, Anita and her friends slowly grasped the significance of her accident. The "what-ifs" haunted them. What if they hadn't realized until later that Kym was missing? What if they hadn't met up with the boys? What if she hadn't been found or if Toughy had tripped and stumbled down the slope with Kym?

They rode quietly into the campground to the cheers of other campers who had heard what had happened. Everyone was relieved that Kym was going to be okay.

"Toughy needs more obedience work," said Matt as they all sat at the supper table, exhausted. He reached for a hamburger and an extra scoop of salad.

"She was doing good all the way up the trail," said Meridy, trying not to sound defensive.

"Trouble is you can't train for the unexpected spook," replied Anita. "Kym had no room to circle or turn her around. It could have been a bird flutter, a bee sting, a scent, anything. She had to slow her by any means she could and that's really hard at a flat run on a twisting trail. She couldn't risk pulling her up too hard and having her lose balance and fall over."

"It could've been so much worse..." Jill's thoughts trailed off.

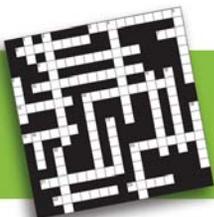
Later, as they watered the ponies and settled them for the night, Anita spent extra time with Toughy. She was so young and eager but so high strung with a stubborn streak. Without thinking, Anita quietly hummed Kym's little tune. Toughy paused, looked at her for a moment, and then nuzzled Anita's face with her soft nose. Anita smiled and gave her a hug. Maybe, she wondered, Toughy was saved by a song. 



track-reading skills her dad had taught her. He was a very experienced back-country rider and had taken Sandie on many trips. She didn't have his trained eye but knew what to look for. Then she saw some gravel and small stones that had been disturbed and were darker in colour than the surrounding ones. She knelt and looked down the trail at a thin dark line of disturbed surface.

"Kym might have gone this way," she said, swinging onto Fanny's back.

The girls followed anxiously as Sandie focused on the dark track in the trail that kept just below the tree line. No one spoke. They listened intently for any sound of Toughy or of Kym whistling her distress. But the high mountains were



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