

# CHAPTER ONE



*In the year 1952*

1       “Maybe today?” Twelve-year-old Mary gripped the arm of her wheelchair  
2 with one hand and the bedrail with the other. Her weight balanced on the  
3 edge of the bed, and she inched forward onto her feet. Her legs trembled  
4 and buckled. As her knees slammed onto the wood floor, she grabbed  
5 desperately for the dresser, but snatched instead the crocheted covering.  
6 When it ripped away from the dresser top, her favorite carved horse sailed  
7 across the room, careening into the wall. One of the Morgan mare’s legs  
8 and its ornately carved black tail snapped off as it ricocheted under the bed.

9       Ignoring the pain in her knees, she lifted the bed skirt. The rest of the  
10 disfigured horse lay out of her reach. Already sprawled across the floor, she  
11 scooted to retrieve the severed pieces and cradled them in her hands. “I  
12 have to hide you.”

13       Papa would be so angry if he saw Mama’s horse was broken. Heavy  
14 footsteps rushed toward her.

15       “Lame and worthless. Just like me.” She slipped the broken horse into  
16 her skirt pocket. She struggled and strained to pull herself up off the floor,  
17 but collapsed as Papa burst into her room.

18       “What happened? I heard a commotion... Mary?” He dropped to his knee  
19 beside her. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

20       “I lost my balance when I tried to stand. I’m fine.”

21 "Let's get you off the floor, shall we?" He lifted and placed her on the bed.  
22 "I think it would be best to call the doctor."

23 "I'm fine!" Mary said a little louder than she intended. "The hot rock  
24 therapy didn't help."

25 Papa sat on the bed and took her hand. "Don't give up. We'll find a  
26 therapy, my Mary. We'll never stop trying." He patted her hand. "You sure  
27 you're all right? Maybe you should lie down."

28 "I said I'm fine." But she looked out the window instead of into his eyes.  
29 She would never be all right. "Can you take me outside now?"

30 "If you're sure. Let's get you out in some fresh air." He dropped a paper-  
31 wrapped bundle of carrot pieces in her lap.

32 Mary tucked her long dark hair behind her ears. Gathering her sketchpad  
33 and pencils to her chest, she drew a deep breath and nodded.

34 In a practiced motion, he slung her blanket over his shoulder and scooped  
35 her from the bed.

36 "I want to believe I'll walk someday, but sometimes, I just can't." She  
37 tossed him a hint of a smile. He carried her through the colonial house, past  
38 the white porch pillars, and across the field. He was so strong it made her  
39 feel safe. He was certainly the most handsome papa in all the world.

40 The white oak had not leafed yet, so he placed her blanket in the shade  
41 of the pines out of the warm Texas sun. Mary smoothed her skirt and spread  
42 her art materials. "You were right about throwing carrots over the fence to  
43 bring the mares closer." She retrieved an art pencil hidden in the folds of  
44 her blanket. "Look. Here they come." She pointed with her pencil. "They  
45 see me and gallop like crazy to get here. The foals buck and kick the whole  
46 way. Our new neighbors are so lucky. I'd like to have a pasture full of  
47 Morgan horses."

48 "At least you get to enjoy them. I have to go now." He kissed the top of  
49 her head. "Have a nice day. Mr. Joe is working in the gardens, so when  
50 you're ready to go back to the house, holler for him."

51 "Will you be gone long?"

52 His face tensed, and his dark eyebrows pulled together. He looked over  
53 the meadow, frowning. "Only a few days this time."

54 "I wish you didn't always have to go. I miss you so much."

55 "I know it's hard on you. If it makes you feel any better, I don't like  
56 leaving you either. But I have business in New Orleans, and then I'm going  
57 to Destin, Florida. A doctor there thinks he can help you."

58 Her temper flared, and she slashed a big ugly squiggle across the  
59 sketchpad. "Not another one, Papa! You thought the medicine man would  
60 be the miracle cure. He danced and chanted and kept me in a dumb teepee  
61 for two days. Magic smoke. And for what?"

62 "Well... it wasn't one of my better ideas."

63 "I thought Mrs. Tate was going to faint when you told her where we'd  
64 been. She walked around the house all day shaking her feather duster and  
65 muttering 'pagan gods', something about never taking another day off, and  
66 praying real loud to God asking him to forgive you."

67 "Glad I missed that, but I'm not giving up. I'll consider any opportunity  
68 to heal you." He straightened his vest and tucked his thumbs in its little  
69 pockets. "If this technique can offer us hope, we have to try. The clinic  
70 would float you in emerald-colored seawater. Then they'd take you to the  
71 'Fountain Of Youth'."

72 Her shoulders slumped with an exhale. "I don't need to get any younger.  
73 I need to walk."

74 "And walk you shall. That is just the name given to the spring by the  
75 explorer who discovered it." He patted her hand. "Sketch me several poses  
76 of the filly beside the dappled gray mare while I'm gone. What is it about  
77 her that always draws my eye?"

78 "She's special! I sketch her the most. The other foals will scatter, but she  
79 seems to want to be with me. If she was on this side of the fence, I think  
80 she'd be in my lap." Mary flipped to a clean paper. "It's her eyes. Our souls  
81 connect when our eyes meet. Don't you think they look like dark chocolate?"  
82 Mary warmed at the thought. "She is my favorite. What a character. She  
83 hides behind her mama sometimes and plays hide and seek with me." A  
84 frown wiped the smile off her face. "I think there might be something wrong.  
85 She limps sometimes."

86 Papa checked his watch and frowned. "Hum, that can't be good. Say,  
87 when I get home, I will have a little something special I ordered for you.  
88 Don't ask me what it is and ruin the surprise."

89 "No fair! Is it a book on the Lipizzaners?"

90 "You're a bad guesser."

91 "Whatever it is, I'll love it."

92 Papa grinned, tossed a piece of chocolate in her lap, and left.

93 "Thanks!" She waved and sailed a few carrot offerings over the fence to  
94 the gathered herd. They rushed to grab the bribe. With ears flattened, the  
95 horses jostled, shoved, and charged at one another to gobble the carrots.  
96 When the treats were gone, the mares went back to grazing. As the foals  
97 cavorted in circles around their dams, Mary inhaled the delight of being in  
98 their company. To draw a foal, she took a snapshot with her mind and  
99 sketched it in a great flurry. After capturing the likeness, she fussed with  
100 the details and the shading. A twine-wrapped portfolio she kept in her  
101 library bulged with sketches. Each sketch was a secret wish to ride, wild  
102 and free, someday.

103 She imagined herself cantering across a meadow polka-dotted with pink  
104 flowers. Her hair streamed behind her. Her arms held wide as if to soar. Her  
105 dream horse moved in response to her thoughts. A smile lifted and softened  
106 her face.

107 Mary shifted her useless legs to balance the sketchpad better. "It's not  
108 just a dream." The filly cocked her feminine head to the side and peered at  
109 the curiosity in the grass. Mary stared back, hoping the filly would hold the  
110 pose long enough for her to soak in every detail. The dark graphite pencil  
111 seemed to flow on its own, and soon the rough outline of the curious baby  
112 splashed across the paper.

113 "I will sketch you every minute until Papa comes home with my surprise.  
114 It might be—could be—a horse."