

## CHAPTER TWO



1 Two miles away at the neighboring horse farm, twelve-year-old Laura  
2 groaned and clutched the bedcovers as she dreamed. Her knees dug into  
3 the sides of a galloping stallion. Its mane whipped in the torrent of wind.  
4 "Whoa," she begged with no effect on the raging animal.

5 The pounding thunder in her ears was the hoof beats of the red goliath.  
6 The beast leaped a gorge and landed amid slippery, loose shale. Rocks  
7 rattled as they scattered and plunged into great darkness below. The horse  
8 galloped down a narrow ledge mirroring the turns of the gorge. Ahead the  
9 ledge disappeared, but the horse surged forward. It gathered itself and  
10 sprung with a leopard's grace off the rocky cliff. Far below, great sharp  
11 stones and boulders jutted like spikes waiting to impale her. Laura's grip on  
12 the stallion's mane slipped, and she lurched off the horse. As the fire-red  
13 stallion landed on an outcropped ledge and disappeared into a cave, Laura  
14 tumbled through the air toward her doom. Her mouth opened in a scream,  
15 wrenching her soul awake.

16 She bolted upright in her bed, still screaming. Quick sharp breaths  
17 punctuated her bursts of fear. Fear of falling. Fear no one would come to  
18 save her. Fear of the dangerous, red, mysterious horse that carried her  
19 away in the night.

20 Clamping her hands over her mouth to stop screaming, she sucked in as  
21 much air as she could. As she held her breath, shiny spots flickered in her

22 eyes, and she drifted toward blacking out. Soft as a kitten, Laura mewed,  
23 “Mama! I need you.”

24 No footsteps rushed to comfort her. The grand house endured in silence  
25 while her heart pounded.

26 Dazed, she sat cross-legged on her bed and stared at the herd of Morgan  
27 mares grazing in the Bermuda grass. Their foals stretched out asleep  
28 nearby. All was right in their world.

29 Though she knew better, she hoped her mother was still in her bedroom.  
30 The polished stone floor chilled her feet as she hurried down the quiet hall.  
31 Mother’s duvet cover laid tossed back and her big bed empty. She would  
32 already be in the barn. No need to bother looking for Father. He would have  
33 been long gone—off to attend to some business or other. Or just off to get  
34 a newspaper, but always gone.



35  
36 Mary lifted her orange juice glass and propped her elbows on the smooth  
37 oak table. The morning sun warmed the huge kitchen as it filtered through  
38 yellow curtains splashed with itsy-bitsy white daisies with yellow centers.  
39 The five-foot-tall, full-figured housekeeper sprinkled the breadboard with a  
40 flour dust cloud. Kneading the sweet bread was a full-body workout for her.

41 “Mrs. Tate? I so miss Papa. He’ll be home soon, right?”

42 Mrs. Tate wiped flour from her thick hands onto her apron. “After your  
43 school lessons, I should think.” She cupped Mary’s face and kissed her  
44 cheek before sidling back to the breadboard.

45 “He has a surprise for me. Will it be delivered today or is he bringing it  
46 with him?”

47 "You'll not trick me into telling you anything. I know your ways." She  
48 punched down the dough and sprinkled it with more flour. "Your sweetness  
49 is a disguise for a devious mind," Mrs. Tate teased.

50 Mary plopped her hands on her chest, threw her head back, and held her  
51 mouth open as if she had been stabbed. "My feelings are crushed. Anyway,  
52 I'm sure Papa found me a new book for my collection."

53 "You already have more books about horses than any library."

54 "My favorites I read over and over again. The pages are falling out of The  
55 Crooked Colt." Mary plucked an apple from a copper bowl and dropped it  
56 into her lap. "Unless? Wouldn't it be amazing if Papa brought me a horse of  
57 my own? I'll bet that's his surprise. He really went to Florida to pick out a  
58 horse for me." She looked expectantly at Mrs. Tate for a sign that she had  
59 guessed correctly.

60 "You're dreaming. I wish you were fascinated with flowers or birds.  
61 Horses are much too dangerous for a young girl in your condition."

62 "I don't know how or when, but I know I'm not always going to be stuck  
63 in this chair. I'm going to ride horses someday, and I'm going to train them  
64 too."

65 Mrs. Tate's brow wrinkled. "Scoot along now to your lesson." She waved  
66 her finger in the direction of the hall. "Mr. Gregory is waiting."

67 Mary rolled her chair away from the table and pushed the wheels over  
68 the wooden plank flooring. "When I can walk, I won't have to spend the day  
69 with someone who smells like a stale cigar. I'll go to a real school and have  
70 friends."

71 "Oh, Mary, my dear, I pray that over you every day."

72 "He's not listening to you." Mary's gaze followed the pink stripes of her  
73 cotton skirt all the way down to her limp toes.



74

75 Mary breezed through her cursive penmanship exercises. "I'm finished."

76 Mr. Gregory glanced up from his book. "Ready for history?" His wire  
77 spectacles sat on a bump of a shelf on his nose.

78 "Yes. You were going to tell me more about war horses in medieval  
79 times."

80 "How do you always smooth talk me into teaching you something about  
81 horses? Life is about more than horses, little Miss Mary."

82 "Horses are everything in history. They are our companions and our  
83 transportation. We need their strength for work and their courage to go into  
84 battle." She thrust her arm high as if she were carrying a regiment's color  
85 banner.

86 Mr. Gregory put his bony hand up. "Enough, I'm convinced. As I recall,  
87 when we left off I was explaining the knight's armor. The knight's body  
88 would be completely covered with plates of iron held in place with  
89 buckles...."

90 Mary's eyes fluttered and slipped shut as she tried to imagine the mighty  
91 charger and a knight, maybe with a red plume on his helmet, galloping at  
92 the enemy. Hot steam blowing from the massive charger's nostrils. "I think  
93 my imagination is a little too good, Mr. Gregory. I hear hoof beats."

94 "Well then, you have whisked me away in your dream, because I hear  
95 hoof beats as well."

96 Mary's eyes flew open. "A horse! It's Papa with my surprise!" She pushed  
97 the wheels on her chair as fast as she could down the long dark hallway to  
98 the front door. She fumbled with frustration until she managed to spring  
99 the heavy wooden door open enough to eek her chair onto the porch. Mary

100 rolled to a stop and oozed a disappointed sigh. It was a horse all right, but  
101 it wasn't Papa with a horse for her.

102 A bay horse pulled a two-wheel buggy down the road. Its black mane and  
103 tail rippled in the wind. The horse's knees snapped sharply to its chest, and  
104 its hooves flipped debris up from the road. Specks of white foam splattered  
105 from the nervous horse's mouth as its head tossed. A girl sat tall and proud  
106 on the cushioned seat of the lacquered black buggy. She flicked the buggy  
107 whip on the horse's rump when the horse balked going past a flowerbed.  
108 As they approached the front of the house, the girl told the horse "whoa".

109 Joe left his gardening, hurried to the horse's head, and held him still while  
110 the girl sprung from the buggy. She nodded to Joe. "I'm here to say hello."

111 "Very good," he said, smiling. "Will your horse stand tied or should I put  
112 him in the barn?" The gelding rubbed his head on Joe's blue plaid shirt,  
113 slobbering down the front.

114 "Treasure's fine here. Thank you." Her black boots wore a new layer of  
115 dust, barely dimming the shine. "Hello, I'm Laura," she called as she strode  
116 up the stairs. "My family owns the farm next to yours."

117 "I'm Mary."

118 "I've seen you sitting by the fence. My parents said I should come over  
119 and say 'hello'."

120 "Yes, I sketch the horses." Laura perched on the bench swing near Mary,  
121 and they stared at each other not sure what to say next.

122 Mary finally said, "We kinda look alike. You could be my sister."

123 Laura raised her nose a bit. "I'm twelve. How old are you?"

124 "I'm twelve too."

125 "Your hair is longer than mine, but the color's the same." Laura peered  
126 into Mary's eyes. "Dark brown. Like mine."

127 "I'm glad you're here. Since I can't go to school, I've not made any  
128 friends."

129 "I have friends at school. None of them live way out here." Laura gestured  
130 over the fields as if she was giving a grand tour.

131 Mary rearranged her skirt to cover her mismatched socks and leaned  
132 toward Laura. "Your horse... is... amazing. His knees tuck all the way up to  
133 his chest."

134 "He's my carriage show horse. We just got home from the Spring Classic,  
135 so he's still in his weighted shoes. They help him exaggerate his leg action."

136 "Do they make his legs hurt?"

137 "I've wondered about that. Father says he has to wear them if we want  
138 to win." Laura pushed with her toes and made the bench swing. One pink  
139 and one purple sock peeked over the top of her tall boots.

140 "If everybody took those heavy shoes off their horses' hooves, they could  
141 be judged on their natural action."

142 "True. But that's not the way life is in the show ring. Come meet him."

143 Mary avoided the offer. "Maybe we should team up and get the rules  
144 changed so they can't use those shoes." She squinted into the sun. "He  
145 looks regal, like he could pull the carriage of Princess Anne."

146 "I love—love—to drive him. It's like the wind rushes through me and  
147 blasts away all my worries."

148 "Your life looks pretty perfect from where I'm sitting." Mary's eyes  
149 widened with a question. "I have a collection of horse books. Want to see  
150 my library?"

151 "I guess." Laura stood, and Mary rolled the chair past her. "You're  
152 crippled?" Laura's hand flew to cover her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry to be rude.  
153 How did I not notice your wheelchair?"

154 "That's okay. I'm glad you didn't notice at first. Papa says I will walk  
155 someday."

156 "What happened? Were you born like that?"

157 "No. I got a virus that attacked my muscles when I was four."

158 "Well, you can't give it to anybody else can you?" Laura took a tiny step  
159 backward.

160 "No. You're safe." Not meaning to, Mary glared at Laura. Nudging open  
161 the screen door, she wheeled along the wide hallway to a carved-wooden  
162 door with Laura right behind her. Mary paused at the door. "You ready for  
163 this?"

164 Laura shrugged, but smiled politely. The door swung smoothly open,  
165 revealing a cozy space with tall wooden bookcases, a carved desk, and one  
166 lounge chair covered in soft pink fabric.

167 "Tada, my horse library."

168 "Wow." Laura's mouth hung open as she turned to take it all in. "Are they  
169 all horse books?"

170 Mary laughed. "Do girls read other kinds of books?"

171 "No, I guess not."

172 Mary lifted a black book from a shelf and placed it before Laura. "This is  
173 my most favorite book, *Black Beauty*. I'm related to the author, and I'm  
174 even named after her mother. Anna died a few months after it was  
175 published. See, it was signed by her mother, Mary Sewell." Mary pointed to  
176 the inscription on the title page. "Did you know Anna Sewell was lame?"

177 "No. What happened to her?"

178 "She fell when she was fourteen, and after that, she couldn't walk." Mary  
179 gently closed the book. "She couldn't ride, but she drove a carriage until  
180 she became bedridden."

181 Laura extended her hand and traced the picture of the horse on the cover.  
182 "I've always wanted to read *Black Beauty*."

183 "Since you are my new best friend, you can borrow it." Mary reached for  
184 her art portfolio.

185 Laura hugged *Black Beauty* to her chest. "Since you are my new best  
186 friend, let me take you on a buggy ride."

187 The artwork forgotten, Mary grinned. "That's a Cloud 9. Let's go." She  
188 stopped short and added, "We'd have to be back before my papa comes  
189 home. He thinks everything fun is too dangerous."

190 "At least he notices."

cloud 9 is a name colloquially  
given to the state of euphoria



191

192 Treasure's muscles rippled, and his black tail flew as the buggy clattered  
193 down the road.

194 "How long have you had Treasure?"

195 "He was born at our farm. He's six. He's great fun in the show ring. When  
196 he hears the music, he comes alive. If he had fingers, he'd be snapping 'em  
197 with the beat." Laura tapped him lightly. "See? Like that. The more the  
198 crowd claps for him the higher he lifts his head and knees. He's a born  
199 showoff."

200 "I've never been to a horse show. Maybe my papa can bring me to your  
201 next show." Mary clutched the buggy rail as the wheel hit a rut.

202 "There is another this weekend. You have to come."



203 "Oooh, I'd love to. I bet you win, don't you?"

204 "He always comes home with a ribbon." Laura clucked to Treasure. She  
205 turned to Mary with mischief in her eyes. "Want to drive?"

206 "Oh, can I? Anna Sewell drove a team. I can do it. I'm sure I can."

207 Laura positioned the reins in Mary's hands. "Cluck to make Treasure go  
208 forward and say 'whoa' to stop."

209 Mary said, "Pull on one rein to turn as if his bit of steel was in my own  
210 mouth."

211 "That's right! How'd you know that?" Laura asked.

212 "My library is the best. I'm reading a book now about riding without a  
213 saddle or a bridle." The reins jiggled in her fingers with the trot rhythm.

214 "No way!"

215 "The techniques in my book are from Australia, but I've heard the  
216 American Indians had secret ways with horses too."

217 "Australia. We should go there." Laura's eyes widened, and she nodded.  
218 "Let's do it."

219 "If Papa finds a miracle cure there, we'll be on the next boat." Mary  
220 laughed.

221 "Maybe I'll find a miracle cure for you someday. I want to be a doctor."

222 "You wouldn't have time for horses."

223 "I'll always have time for horses. I want to compete in Olympic dressage."

224 "Ladies can't ride in the Olympics." Mary flashed a puzzled look.

225 "They can now! Lis Hartel with her horse, Jubilee, has been selected for  
226 the Denmark Equestrian Olympic Team."

227 In the distance, a huge white truck rumbled toward them. A dust storm  
228 billowed in its wake. Laura snatched the reins from Mary and drew Treasure  
229 to a halt. "What's a truck that big doing on our road?"

230 "He must be lost."

231 Laura held the horse firmly. "He must be crazy to go so fast. Can't he see  
232 us?"

233 Treasure stiffened. The horse pulled against the reins and jiggled in place.

234 "Whoa, boy. Whoa," Laura pleaded.

235 "What are we going to do?" Mary's voice shrilled an octave higher. She  
236 scanned the fence lines looking for a gate they could escape through.

237 The nearby cows lifted their heads to stare. When one cow bolted away,  
238 the herd followed with a collective bellow. Treasure twisted in the traces.  
239 Laura steadied him. The horse backed into the cart, angling it farther into  
240 the middle of the road. Laura snapped the reins sharply on his rump. He  
241 shook his head and pushed backward. She popped his rump with the buggy  
242 whip, but she may as well have been using a feather duster as much  
243 attention as he paid to it.

244 "We've got to get out of the way!" Mary gripped the side of the buggy  
245 with one hand and squeezed Laura's arm with the other.

246 "We don't have room to turn the rig around. We couldn't outrace a truck,  
247 anyway!"

248 The truck roared toward them. When it hit a rut, it swerved into the grass  
249 and almost swiped the fence before bouncing back onto the dirt road.

250 "We have to do something." Mary jerked on Laura's sleeve.

251 "You're right. I need to lead him off to the side. Take the reins," Laura  
252 yelled as she leaped from the buggy and ran to Treasure's head. Treasure

253 reared with Laura hanging on to his bridle, lifting her high into the air. She  
254 tossed about like a rag tied to a clothesline.

255 Brakes screeched, and smoke poured from under the truck as its wheels  
256 locked and it skidded toward them.

257 Treasure squealed in terror, twisted, and bolted. He dragged Laura off  
258 her feet, and she fell to the ground. Mary screamed and sawed on the reins  
259 as Treasure lost all reason. He raced headlong toward a small open space  
260 between the back of the truck and the fence. The horse could fit, but the  
261 buggy would never make it through.

262 At that moment, the truck veered from the road. It plowed through the  
263 fence and bounced into the pasture. An ancient oak tree in its path cracked  
264 and split as the truck rammed it. The hood popped up, and steam spewed  
265 six feet high. Blue sparks from the engine shot skyward.

266 Laura rolled over on the road and sat up as she knocked tiny, embedded  
267 pebbles from her arm. Treasure streaked away with Mary bobbing in the  
268 cart. Mary stopped screaming and commanded "whoa, whoa". She bumped  
269 the rein nearest the fence in a steady rhythm. The horse finally dropped out  
270 of his gallop into a jerky trot. Where the grassy shoulder of the road  
271 widened, she pulled one rein as hard as she could and hauled the runaway  
272 rig around.

273 As they neared Laura, she lunged and grabbed for Treasure's bridle. He  
274 snorted and stomped. "Whoa." Laura talked to him as she rubbed his neck.  
275 "You're okay now."

276 Mary's eyes widened at the mangled truck cab. "Think the driver's dead?"

277 "Should I go look?" Laura didn't sound convinced.

278 "No, you can't. It might blow up." "Fire!" Laura pointed to the truck. She  
279 ran to the buggy and leapt in before Treasure could run her down again.

280 The truck door creaked and swung open. A young man fell from the seat  
281 and hit the ground. He struggled, hauled himself to his feet, and staggered  
282 away from the truck. He hobbled a step and dropped again to the ground.

283 "He can't walk." Mary gasped as flames shot from under the engine.

284 Laura snapped the reins, and Treasure popped into a strong trot. "We  
285 can't leave him there. It's going to blow up." Laura raced the buggy to him  
286 as he hauled himself to his feet again. "Get in quick," she yelled.

287 Mary tugged on his arm and held tight to the man's shirt.

288 With him dangling from the buggy with one leg up over the side, they  
289 bounced across the rough pasture. "Go. Get us out of here!"

290 At the road, Laura slowed the horse. The man dropped from the buggy  
291 and clung to a fence board. "My gas pedal stuck. I couldn't stop."

292 A car slid to a stop. Laura's neighbor jumped out with a red fire  
293 extinguisher and yelled at the girls. "Get away from here—now!" He ran  
294 past the truck driver and plastered white foam across the engine. Laura  
295 cued Treasure, and he exploded into a power trot.

296 After putting the disaster far behind them, Laura drew the horse to an  
297 abrupt halt. "So scary."

298 "You're shaking." Mary wrapped her arms around Laura, and they clung  
299 to each other.

300 "That was as bad as my dream."

301 "You dreamed a truck would hit us?"

302 "No, it's not like that. I dream I'm riding a huge, red, raging horse, and  
303 I fall off into an abyss," said Laura.

304 "What's an abyss?"

305 "It's a horrible place. It's where the devil waits." Laura shivered and  
306 rubbed goose bumps off her arms. "The horse won't stop. It runs like it's  
307 insane. It jumps off a ledge to nowhere, and I fall toward rocky spikes. I'm  
308 screaming and I wake up."

309 "If I had a dream like that, I'd move out of my head." Mary echoed a  
310 shiver. "Want me to pray for you? Mrs. Tate prays for me all the time, so I  
311 know how to do it."

312 "I guess, but I don't see how it can help."

313 "Let's try it." Mary brought her hands together, closed her eyes, and  
314 bowed her head.

315 Laura dropped her chin and rested her shoulder against Mary as she  
316 prayed.

317 "God? Please protect Laura from her bad dream. Amen."

318 "That's it?"

319 "He's busy. If I keep it short, I'm sure he's still listening when I'm done.  
320 Now, you need to pray the same thing every night before you go to sleep."

321 Laura looked over at Mary, but didn't say what she was obviously  
322 thinking—it would never work. She turned her glazed-over eyes back to the  
323 road and sat there as though she couldn't muster the strength to drive on.  
324 Then she broke the stillness with a huge, lip-fluttering sigh.

325 Mary answered with a sputtering sigh of her own. "If my papa finds out  
326 what happened... When you tell your parents, please don't make it too big  
327 of a deal."

328 "Why tell them at all?" Laura lifted the reins and cued Treasure to walk  
329 on.

330 "Because it's the right thing. Besides the neighbor saw us."

331 "I could say a truck scared Treasure, but we handled it."

332 "Yes. That's perfect. It's even the truth," Mary agreed. "If my papa knew  
333 what really happened, he would slap me into a nice, safe boarding school  
334 with a nun rapping my knuckles."

335 "My parents would say 'that's nice, dear' if they even noticed I was  
336 talking." Laura clucked to Treasure, and the horse perked into a flashy trot.

337 "Papa can't find out." Mary stuck out her bottom lip and frowned.



338

339 When they trotted up the road to the house, Mary's eyes locked onto her  
340 papa waiting on the porch. "Uh-oh. I hope he's not angry" As she waved to  
341 him, she said "look happy" under her breath. "He never lets me do anything  
342 fun. And slightly dangerous—like sledding, forget about it." Lifting her voice,  
343 she shouted, "Look at me, Papa! Isn't this the best ever?" She flashed her  
344 biggest, happiest smile.

345 As he lifted her from the buggy, she introduced him to Laura. He looked  
346 Laura and her rig up and down and smiled. "Very glad you came to see  
347 Mary. Not many girls out here."

348 Still traumatized from the truck scare, Laura managed a shy smile.

349 "You come again, anytime." He turned and carried Mary to the house.

350 "Thank you, Laura." Mary peered over his shoulder. She held a finger in  
351 front of her pursed lips in a silent "shh" reminding Laura to keep their secret.  
352 "Come again soon," she called.

353 "You look a little flushed. Is everything all right? I think the buggy ride  
354 might have been too much for you?"

355 "It was an adventure I will never forget. I had so much fun! Laura's a  
356 great driver."

357 Papa whispered in Mary's ear. "Do you want to see your surprise?"

358 "Oh yes!"

359 "Close your eyes." He carried her into her library. "Open."

360 On the bookshelf sat a pair of crystal horse heads with pink color swirled  
361 in the solid glass. Not quite what she had hoped for, but she knew someday  
362 it would be a real horse—for sure. "Pink horse bookends. I've never seen  
363 anything so fine." She laid her head on his shoulder.

364 "Always the best for you, my Mary. All the way from Venice, Italy." He  
365 squeezed her. "My trip to Florida was everything I hoped it would be. I think  
366 the treatment is a good possibility, and I want to get you started as soon  
367 as possible." He settled her in the chair. "How's that sound? We leave on  
368 Saturday."

369 "So soon? Please, no, Papa." She moved her chair back away from him.  
370 "I finally make a friend, and I have to leave?" Her hands poised on the  
371 wheels, ready to make her chair fly away.

372 "It's all arranged."

373 "Laura invited me to come watch her at the horse show."

374 "I know you'd love that, but it has to be another time. We're going to  
375 Florida."

376 Her hands flopped into her lap. "None of the therapies work, Papa." Her  
377 chin sank to her chest. "Please don't make me go right now."