

## CHAPTER THREE



1 Morning rain showers ruined Mary's plans to sketch the foals, so she  
2 curled on the porch swing with a horse book. Papa came outside and settled  
3 beside her. She looked past him into the drizzle.

4 "The weather will clear up after lunch. I've asked Joe to move a chair  
5 under the tree, so you will be able to sketch later and not sit in the wet  
6 grass. Mr. Gregory's not feeling well today and isn't coming for your school  
7 lessons."

8 Her eyes brightened. "We can spend the day together. We could go to  
9 the soda shop."

10 "Not today. I have too much to do before we leave for Florida."

11 Her face slumped. "Papa!" Mary blinked a tear away. "I could go with  
12 you?"

13 He stood and buttoned his camel-colored, tailored vest. "Not this time.  
14 Perhaps your new friend can come again. I don't want you going out in her  
15 buggy though. Anything could happen. You're much too delicate to be flung  
16 about in a carriage."

17 "But..."

18 "Those are my rules. I'll see you at dinner." He kissed her cheek and  
19 wiped away a tear with his finger. "No tears. We don't always get what we  
20 want in life, and we don't cry about it." Tenting a newspaper over his neat  
21 brown hair, he leaned into the rain and dashed to the car.

22 Her disappointment raced after him. "Come back, Papa. Please listen..."  
23 She stared after the car long after it disappeared.

24 When the sun popped out, her heart still gripped the gloom, so she went  
25 looking for comfort in her library. Soon she transformed into the book  
26 character who could run and ride. At her command waited a white mare.  
27 She would weave flowers and ribbons in the pony's thick, silky mane. People  
28 spoke of them with awe. They were loved and known far and wide for the  
29 gift-wrapped books they delivered to children on remote homesteads.

30 A clip-clop rhythm returned Mary to reality. "Laura!" She shut her book  
31 and placed it on the shelf.

32 As Mary reached the porch, Laura halted Treasure by the hitching rail.  
33 Waving at Mary, she snapped a line to his necktie strap and wrapped it a  
34 few times around the cedar railing. Laura peered about to make sure no  
35 one would overhear them. "How'd it go with your papa?"

36 "He never suspected a thing. And yours?"

37 "My story didn't impress them at all. I could have been telling them about  
38 the weather. It's easy to put stuff over on them when they don't pay much  
39 attention." Laura smiled, but her eyes looked sad.

40 "You don't mean that."

41 "Yes. Yes, I do. My father is always gone on business. Mother checks the  
42 barns first thing every morning. She rides, but not with me. She says she  
43 has to concentrate on her equitation. Like she needs another blue ribbon."  
44 Laura puckered as if she had a mouth of lemon juice and crossed her eyes.

45 "After that, she's gone. She does lunch with the society ladies or volunteers  
46 in the hospital. You get the idea."

47 "She sounds important."

48 "Oh, she is. So important. She only remembers me because she needs  
49 me to show in the juvenile classes."

50 "I'm sure it's not like that. At least you have a mother."

51 "Not really. You brave enough to ride along while I exercise Treasure?"  
52 Laura asked.

53 "Didn't he get enough exercise yesterday?"

54 "Yes! But I couldn't exactly tell the trainer that."

55 "I guess not." Mary pointed to the swing. "Papa said I couldn't. Can you  
56 sit with me for a while?"

57 "Our parents are the exact opposite." Laura plopped onto the swing.  
58 "Your papa controls everything, and mine ignores me." One baby blue and  
59 one outrageous blue sock edged over Laura's boot tops. "I have to get  
60 things ready for the show this Saturday. Did you ask your papa if he would  
61 bring you?"

62 "He's taking me to Florida, for another therapy that won't work."

63 Laura pumped her fist. "Never give up! Your papa's not giving up."

64 "There's no use. I've been to all kinds of crazy places, and the things I've  
65 had to try are too stupid. Like putting hot rocks on my back."

66 "That does sound a little crazy." Laura grimaced.

67 "He treats me like I'm going to break. I can't talk him out of anything  
68 he's set his mind on. And he thinks I have a stubborn streak." Mary frowned.  
69 "Let's go inside. I want to show you my sketches of your foals."

70 "I'd love to see your art. I wish I could draw. The horses I draw look like  
71 belching sea dragons."

72 "Come on." Mary rolled into the library and spread her sketches across  
73 her school desk.

74 Laura leafed through them. "These are good—really, really good."

75 "The foals are my favorite."

76 "I could show your art to my father. I bet he would put a few sketches in  
77 our sale catalog."

78 "How can you sell the babies?"

79 "It's the way it is. I've gotten used to it. I fall in love with each new foal  
80 crop every spring."

81 Mary slipped the ribbon off a separate stack of sketches and fanned them  
82 out. "Look at these. Don't you think this is the sweetest baby of them all?  
83 I've named her Illusion because she is so much more than a pretty, red  
84 bay."

85 "You're not going to believe this—what a quirk." Laura's fingers tapped  
86 her chest. "I was there when she was born. After she got past the wobbly  
87 leg stage, she walked pressed against her dam. She looked like a mirrored  
88 reflection or an illusion. I named her Life's Illusion." Laura bent over the  
89 sketches, picking out one of the filly with her dam's tail cascading across  
90 the foal's face.

91 "We've named her the same thing? That's a sign, don't you think?"

92 "If you say so. She has a nice face, and her conformation's good. She  
93 isn't a little dolly like the dappled gray. Even though she's not my favorite,  
94 it's still a shame about her leg." Laura shook her head and frowned. "I used  
95 to show her dam. After she won High Point Champion, she was more  
96 valuable as a—"

97 "What do you mean, 'it's a shame about her leg'?" Mary scrunched her  
98 forehead as she leaned into Laura's face.

99 "Poor thing was born with a club foot. The barn manager decided to watch  
100 her for a few months to see if it would correct itself, but it's not looking  
101 good."

102 "I noticed she limped sometimes. I didn't see anything wrong with her  
103 legs."

104 "The veterinarian told us the misalignment of her hoof was the reason for  
105 her lameness."

106 In her own head, Mary sprang to her feet. "What will you do to help her?"

107 "There is nothing to be done. She will be put down when the vet comes  
108 for his next scheduled visit."

109 "You're going to kill her?"

110 "Not me! I don't have any say in it."

111 "How can you let that happen?" Mary sat ramrod straight.

112 Laura tapped the toe of her boot on the table leg. "You don't know  
113 anything about managing a horse farm. You can't learn that from books."  
114 She dropped the sketches onto the table. "My father told me to stay out of  
115 the business. He said it was the barn manager's decision, and he knows  
116 what's best."

117 "I'll buy her. I'll ask Papa for money, and I'll buy her."

118 "You can't. They won't sell her, because Father said she would reflect  
119 badly on the farm's breeding program and ruin our reputation."

120 "Killing her would be worse for your reputation."

121 Laura put her hands on her hips. "This is not my fault! And there's nothing  
122 I can do about it. If that's the way you're going to be, I'm leaving now and  
123 never coming here again."

124 As Laura twisted away, Mary reached out and caught her new friend by  
125 the sleeve. "Wait. I'm so sorry." Her fingers clung to Laura's riding coat.  
126 "Maybe we can come up with something."

127 "I told you, there isn't anything I can do." Laura tugged her sleeve from  
128 Mary's grasp.

129 "Weren't you just telling me to never give up?" Mary swung her arm to  
130 mimic Laura's earlier gesture. "You can't give up on Illusion. We both named  
131 her the same thing! We should work together to save her. Can you take me  
132 to talk to your barn manager?"

133 "Won't your papa be mad?"

134 "Only if he finds out. I have to do this."



135

136 Mary looked everywhere at once as Laura drove up to a red barn with a  
137 black metal horse mounted over the door. "Your farm looks like Lexington  
138 Equine Park! It's all so beautiful—like a painting."

139 "My father says buyers expect it. Will you be okay alone with Treasure  
140 while I go find Mr. Todd? I could tie him to the rail."

141 "After yesterday, there's nothing he can do to scare me. No problem."

142 "That wasn't his fault. I'll hurry."

143 In a few minutes, Laura returned. "He's coming."

144 Mr. Todd strode out of the barn. His straight, white teeth gleamed. Mary  
145 hadn't pictured him with a pleasant smile.

146 "I thought he'd look evil."

147 Laura flashed a puzzled look and shook her head. "Mr. Todd is great. He  
148 loves the horses. He gets up in the middle of the night with the mares when  
149 they foal. He bottle-fed one orphan colt for two months. In the first week,  
150 that's every two hours."

151 "But he can get rid of a foal because it's lame."

152 "It's not like he wants to. He says he has to do what's right." Laura quickly  
153 glanced at Mr. Todd and whispered to Mary. "Shh, he'll hear you."

154 "Hello, young lady. It's nice to see another girl Laura's age in the area.  
155 Laura said you have some questions about the foals."

156 "Yes, sir. Thank you. I wanted to ask you about the little red bay filly,  
157 Illusion. What can be done for her leg?"

158 "She's a sad case. What needs to be done is not worth doing. She needs  
159 an expensive surgery, and there's no guarantee of the results."

160 "Isn't her life worth as much as any other?"

161 He stuck one foot in the wheel spokes and leaned on the buggy rail.  
162 "She'd likely never walk normally. If she were in the wild, she would be the  
163 first foal picked off by the wolves."

164 "She's not in the wild." Mary shook her head at him. Why didn't he get  
165 that?

166 "No, but nature sometimes knows best. We could never sell or show her.  
167 We couldn't breed her and chance having foals with leg deformities. There's  
168 nothing to be done, I'm afraid."

169 "Isn't it okay for her to live even if she's not perfect? I think she deserves  
170 a chance."

171 He stepped away from the cart. Removing his cap, he combed his fingers  
172 through his hair and snapped it back onto his head. "As I said, it's  
173 expensive. Even if she survived the surgery, the recovery is long and  
174 complicated."

175 "But it might work?"

176 "For one thing, we don't have the manpower to devote to one horse that  
177 will likely never amount to anything. It doesn't make financial sense for the  
178 farm. I've been raising foals a long time and in my experience, the surgery  
179 probably wouldn't work. I know that's not what you want to hear. I have to  
180 make hard decisions sometimes." He touched his cap and tipped his head  
181 to the girls. "I understand your concern. It wasn't an easy decision for me.  
182 Now I have work to do. Nice visiting with you, ladies."

183 As he walked away, Mary made a grumpy face to his back. "It's not right.  
184 He can't have Illusion killed. We can squeeze her through the fence, and  
185 she can hide on our farm."

186 "Keep thinkin'. That plan won't work."

187 "I have to convince my papa to buy her, and you have to convince your  
188 father to sell her. Deal?"

189 Laura shook her head. "I'm telling you, it'll never work. I know my father.  
190 He won't budge."



191

192 Mary intertwined all her fingers and rubbed the heels of her hands  
193 together until they burned red. She had to be careful to tell her papa about  
194 the filly without revealing she had ridden in Laura's buggy.

195 Mrs. Tate pressed the door open. "Want to come inside, dear, before the  
196 mosquitoes find you?"



197 "No, thank you. I have to talk to Papa, and he should be home soon."

198 "I'm keeping your dinner in the oven. Oh, he's turning onto the farm road  
199 now."

200 As he walked to the porch, Mary smiled big. "I love you, Papa."

201 "That's nice to hear." He kissed the top of her head and sat across from  
202 her. "You look like you are about to explode with exciting news, so let it  
203 out."

204 "Laura came today. We talked about the red bay filly. They named her  
205 Illusion too. Don't you think that's from God?"

206 "Not sure what you mean, but it's certainly a coincidence."

207 "Mrs. Tate calls things like that a God-incidence."

208 "Is that what has you all excited?"

209 "Yes, I think God wants us to buy Illusion."

210 Papa scratched his head and pondered the reality sitting before him. "I  
211 know you love watching and sketching the foals, but it is quite another thing  
212 to own one. Horses are not kittens or puppies."

213 "So she would never be able to sit in my lap. She could still be my best  
214 friend. I think she was meant for me. You know I already love her."

215 "As do I, but she has a happy home, and we get all the benefits of  
216 enjoying her without the expense. Not to mention the trouble." Papa patted  
217 her on the knee. "We better go in to dinner." He held open the door for  
218 Mary, but she didn't budge.

219 "That's just it, Papa! She doesn't have a happy home at all." Her voice  
220 grew shrill. "They are going to murder her."

221 "What?"

222 "Laura said Illusion was born with a crooked leg. They can't use her as a  
223 broodmare, and she doesn't have enough flash to show her. When the vet  
224 comes again, he is going to put her down! Please, Papa, we have to do  
225 something. We can't let them kill her." She reached out, grabbed his shirt,  
226 and gave it a little tug.

227 "They are knowledgeable horse people. They must be doing the best thing  
228 for everyone."

229 "They act like she is worthless. You don't want her because she's lame.  
230 I'm lame too, in case you haven't noticed. Should something be allowed to  
231 live only if it's perfect? Do you think I should be killed?"

232 "Mary, that is absurd." With one finger, he pointed into the house, telling  
233 her to go ahead of him.

234 Mary still didn't budge. "They could fix her!" she pleaded. "There's a  
235 surgery."

236 Papa took in a deep breath, but she didn't let him squeeze a word in. "It  
237 costs money," she said. "And that won't..."

238 He raised his hand and stopped her right there. "The farm has to consider  
239 the cost."

240 "Does a crooked leg make her worthless? Am I worth the same as her—  
241 nothing?"

242 "You are out of bounds, young lady."

243 "Is she too much trouble? Am I too much trouble too?"

244 Papa inclined toward her and pointed his finger in her face. "I've never in  
245 twelve years spanked you, but I'm about to if you say one more word."

246 Mary wheeled her chair past Papa, who still held the door open, nearly  
247 squashing his toes. She rolled down the hall toward her bedroom as fast as  
248 she could.

249       An hour later, Papa found her face down on her bed where she had flung  
250 herself. Tears wet her soft pink pillow. “You should come have some  
251 dinner.” He slid his hand onto her shoulder. “I’ll think about it while we are  
252 gone. Maybe—only maybe—I might go talk to Laura’s parents when we  
253 come home from Florida.”

254       “She’ll be dead by then.” Mary’s eyes felt puffy. “You have to go now,  
255 before it’s too late for Illusion. I’m begging you, Papa. Before it’s too late  
256 for me.”