

CHAPTER FOUR



1 A long black car waited outside the house early the next morning.

2 “I can’t leave.” Mary’s arms locked across her chest.

3 “Yes, you have to. I tried to catch them before they left for the horse
4 show. There is nothing more we can do right now.”

5 “We could go to the horse show.”

6 “We have an appointment that was difficult to arrange with a well-
7 respected, prominent physician. We are going.” Papa cradled Mary and
8 carried her to the car as she wept on his shoulder. “Your healing is my
9 overriding concern.”

10 Mary raised her head to look him in the eye. “If she dies...”

11 “Tell you what, after we arrive in Florida, I could call and talk to Laura’s
12 father. They should be home from the show by then.”

13 Mary sniffled and wiped her nose. “Oh, Papa, would you really? You’re
14 the best.”

15 “Don’t get your hopes up. Since the farm manager thinks treatment for
16 the foal isn’t likely to help, I don’t want to throw money away on it. They
17 know more about these things than we do. I’m afraid I could spend a fortune
18 and the horse would never be anything more than a pasture ornament—at

19 best." He slid her onto the back seat of the car and leaned to look directly
20 into her eyes. "Have you considered you could put the horse through all
21 sorts of treatments and surgery, and it might stay lame and be in
22 tremendous pain?"

23 Mary covered her ears with her hands and shook her head.



24

25 "You promised, Papa! You promised you would call about Illusion when
26 we got here."

27 "It is considered rude to call people before the sun comes up. It will have
28 to wait until we get back to the hotel tonight."

29 Papa carried her across the beach toward two white tents near the
30 shoreline. The roar of the ocean and the screech of a seagull greeted them.
31 In the distance, a flock of pelicans flew in a V formation toward the morning
32 sun.

33 "The water, Papa! It's the color of emeralds."

34 "It is indeed. The sand on this coast is quartz that washed down from the
35 Appalachian Mountains."

36 "If any water can cure me, this is it."

37 "This is a special place. Some say it is a place of miracles."

38 Mary whispered into Papa's ear. "He doesn't look like a doctor today.
39 Shorts and a floppy hat?"

40 "What do you expect the man to wear on the beach? A white coat?" He
41 shifted her in his arms.

42 "That would be funny."

43 Papa greeted the clinic doctor. "Thank you for arranging all this for my
44 Mary."

45 Dr. Krane placed his reading glasses on his medical journal and rose from
46 his beach chair in the tent's shade. "Glad you found the right beach. I've
47 been looking forward to getting started on your therapy, Mary. Clinically,
48 I've every reason to believe this treatment will restore you to health." He
49 gestured to a tanned young woman in a bathing suit and shorts. "Evelyn
50 will be with you in the tidal pool."

51 Mary frowned at the chair apparatus placed in the ocean a few yards from
52 shore. The white tent awning fluttered in the quiet breeze. "You're putting
53 me way out there? I can't swim!"

54 "You will wear a life jacket, and it's safe, I assure you," Dr. Krane said.

55 Her fingers clamped onto the fabric of Papa's shirt. She didn't feel at all
56 assured.

57 Papa walked in step with the doctor to the shoreline.

58 "We utilize the physical properties of water buoyancy and resistance. The
59 buoyancy reduces stress and counteracts gravity while the resistance allows
60 for strengthening the muscles you need to walk again." The doctor patted
61 her knee.

62 Papa waded out into the water and eased her into the therapy chair.

63 Evelyn got right to work. "Tense and tighten both legs as much as you
64 can and hold it to the count of three. Let's do five repetitions."

65 Mary swirled her hands in the cool water, trying to catch bubbles in the
66 surf. "I feel light enough to float."

67 "Yes, saltwater gives you a lift." Evelyn kneaded, stretched, and pulled
68 each muscle group. "Feel this sand." She reached under the water and lifted
69 a handful of sand and poured the creamy granules into Mary's hand.

70 "Like soft powder."

71 Evelyn nodded as she grasped an ankle and supported Mary's knee,
72 moving it as if to pedal a bicycle. A rush of water cascaded over Mary,
73 dragging along a piece of seaweed with a tiny crab clinging to the plant.

74 Mary scooped up the seaweed. "I can almost see through this crab. He's
75 very cute."

76 "Many people keep them in aquariums to clean the tank."

77 "Not my kind of pet. I'm going to train horses someday."

78 Evelyn switched sides on Mary. "I'm glad you have high expectations for
79 the therapy." Evelyn bicycled Mary's other leg.

80 Mary clenched her fists as she tightened her leg muscles. "It's got to
81 work. A foal at home needs me. She could die if I don't come up with
82 something—soon."

83 "I'm sorry. I know what they do to your heart."

84 "My papa says my mama took me for rides...." Her voice softened as the
85 waves curled and rolled to the shore. "I wish I could remember it."

86 "My father worked as a groom at a racehorse ranch. Those young
87 racehorses were always hurting themselves. I got to ride them to the beach
88 and swim them in the ocean." She grasped Mary's heels in the palms of her
89 hands and pedaled. "To think a twelve-hundred-pound free spirit would
90 allow me to ride on its back." Evelyn stopped to consider it. "Everything is
91 more beautiful viewed between the ears of a horse." A wistful look flushed
92 her face. "My dream is to work with horses."

93 "That's my dream too. I want to believe it could happen for me. But it
94 gets so discouraging to try to walk, and I can't. Evelyn, my legs are getting
95 tired."

96 "That means the muscles are trying. Dr. Krane will want to take you to
97 the Ponce De Leon pool tomorrow."

98 Mary peeked across the beach at Papa, stretched out nearby in a lounge
99 chair, basking in the sun. "Papa said it's the 'Fountain of Youth', so why do
100 I need that?"

101 "There is something mystical, magical, and special about the water. You
102 wait. It is like no pool you have ever been in."

103 "If it's good for me..." Mary's voice trailed off. "Then Illusion needs it too."



104

105 The hotel desk clerk handed Papa a note with their room key. He read it
106 and handed it to Mary. "It's me—Laura. Call me NOW. I have to talk to you
107 NOW." She crumpled the note in her hands. "Papa, something's wrong. We
108 have to call."

109 "I can see that," he said.

110 Mary's fingers fidgeted with the note as Papa placed the call and handed
111 the phone to Mary. "Is Laura there?" She looked anxiously at Papa. "Did
112 she leave me a message? This is Mary." Her eyes caught Papa's, and she
113 shook her head no. "Did she say anything about Illusion? When will she be
114 home?" Mary listened and handed the phone back to Papa. "We just missed
115 them. The family went to visit her Aunt Claire. The housekeeper thinks they
116 will be home in a few days. Why would Laura leave Illusion, unless they
117 already put her down?"



118

119 Mary's first words the next morning were "Papa, please try to call the
120 farm manager. I have to know what's going on."

121 Papa glanced at his watch. He dialed, and they listened to the phone ring
122 and ring some more at Laura's house. Mary clamped onto his arm as he
123 tried to hang up. "Please let it ring until someone, anyone answers.
124 Somebody has to be there."

125 "We are due at the spring soon. It's likely the housekeeper got a few days
126 off since the family is away, so it's not much use calling an empty house.
127 We are going to have to sort this out when we can get home."

128 Following Dr. Krane and Evelyn, Papa carried Mary down a narrow path
129 through the woods. An owl glided to a branch overhead and hooted as if
130 perturbed to be awakened. Red birds and wrens flitted and chirped. The
131 place radiated a mix of busyness and complete peace.

132 Mary pulled a strand of Spanish moss from a branch. "I thought the water
133 would be the same as at the beach, but it's clear instead of that pretty
134 green."

135 Papa nodded. "I have every hope this place will do wonders for you." He
136 shifted her weight. "Aw, my sweet Mary, you are getting heavy. I wish I'd
137 let Evelyn take you on her fancy, big-wheeled cart."

138 Mary rested her head on his shoulder and didn't speak.

139 Several steps later, he asked, "Where did you go just now?"

140 "I was praying about Illusion and me. A mighty God can heal us both."

141 "He's not a vending machine. Put in a prayer and out pops a blessing."
142 Papa shifted her weight. "If it worked that way, your mama would be with
143 ... Sometimes we have to let go of what we hold dear."

144 "Mrs. Tate said God doesn't give us everything we ask for, but he has a
145 good reason."

146 "She is a wise woman. We can't understand many things this side of
147 heaven."

148 "I wish you'd tell me more about Mama."

149 "And you have a right to know, but it's still so hard, even after all these
150 years, to talk about her."

151 "Is Mama in heaven?"

152 "Any other alternative is infinitely more painful to consider."

153 "Like there is no heaven?" Dr. Krane turned to check on them. Mary
154 waved. He and Evelyn disappeared down the trail. Papa eased Mary onto a
155 smooth rock bench along the path and sat beside her. "She believed there
156 is a heaven." His eyes scanned the sky. "I would sit by her bed and hold
157 her hand. She would gaze at something behind me and seemed to be
158 listening to someone I couldn't see. Her face looked radiant, even joyful.
159 On that last day, I held her in my arms as I felt her spirit leave her body
160 quietly behind. Yes, I believe your mama is in heaven." He leaned forward
161 with his elbows on his legs, bowed his head, and studied the dirt under his
162 feet.

163 Mary reached out and rested her hand on his arm. Was that dark spot in
164 the dirt a tear?

165 The birds chirped and flitted about. The sun filtered through the treetops,
166 casting shadows across the path. Life went on around them.

167 "If they put Illusion to sleep, will she go to heaven? Would she be with
168 Mama?"

169 He turned his head to look at her and then back down to the dirt. With a
170 sigh, he said, "Now, you are taxing my theological understanding as well as
171 my patience. How did we get on such heavy topics?"

172 "Because I can't stop thinking." She pressed against him. "Would you call
173 the farm again, please? If we could only talk to Mr. Todd. I'm sure he knows
174 what's wrong. I can't stop thinking about what they might be doing to
175 Illusion while I'm here bathing in magical pools praying for a miracle."



176

177 Evelyn helped Mary into the pool and supported her as she floated in the
178 clear spring. "Come in the water too, Papa," Mary called. "It feels amazing.
179 It's silky."

180 Papa stopped talking to Dr. Krane. "Maybe tomorrow. Relax and soak."
181 He slumped on a nearby bench. He tilted his chin upward and sideways,
182 popping and stretching his neck.

183 As she fingered the ferns along the bank, Mary thought she had never
184 seen him look so tired and discouraged.

185 Evelyn eased her to sit on a submerged, flat rock next to a cypress tree,
186 disturbing the privacy of an iridescent skink. It darted sideways around the
187 tree. Warm water covered Mary's shoulders. Reaching to pool bottom,
188 Evelyn lifted a piece of light green algae from the sandy floor and handed it
189 to Mary.

190 "It feels feather soft. It tickles even. What an interesting place. I can see
191 why people come here."

192 "Billions of gallons of mineral-rich water flow from this spring every day.
193 You'll feel different when you get out. Your skin will be silky soft, and maybe
194 you'll notice other changes too."

195 "I'd like it to be different, but my life is in a wheelchair, and that's just
196 how it is. Except now, it's about Illusion too." Mary skimmed her fingers on
197 the water's surface in the reflection of the weeping willow. "If it's not already
198 too late. Such a beautiful, sweet foal. How could they...?"

199 Evelyn splashed a water bug away without commenting. She shifted
200 behind Mary. "Do your best to kick your feet."

201 Mary drifted lightly, her body supported by Evelyn. "Nothing's
202 happening."

203 "That's okay. Don't expect too much at first. Let your legs relax
204 completely and drift to the bottom. The life jacket will hold you, and I want
205 you to put your feet on the sand and see if you can push up."

206 As Mary squished her toes in the spring's sand floor, tiny air bubbles burst
207 through. "I think my toes can wiggle better or maybe I just want it so
208 much." The sand puffed like powdered sugar under her feet. "I feel my leg
209 muscles! I'm so light in the water my legs are sort of holding me up. They're
210 holding me up, Papa!" Mary screeched. "My legs. My legs are trying to
211 work!"

212 His head snapped up. Eyes wide, he sprang from his seat. Dr. Krane
213 jumped to his feet. Papa raced to the water's edge and, without pulling off
214 even his shirt, leapt into the spring water. He plowed through, splashing
215 spray everywhere as he scrambled to her. "Really, Mary? Your muscles are
216 working?" He snatched her up and squeezed. "The miracle I've waited for!"
217 he bellowed as he twirled her around and around.

218 "You're making me dizzy!" Mary laughed, holding tight to his neck. "It's
219 working!"

220 He bounced her up and down in the water, making waves in the quiet
221 spring. When he finally stilled, he held her tight. "I'm so grateful." A hush
222 occupied the space around them.

223 A small school of black fish darted about as he floated her to the bank.
224 She fluttered her fingers to lure them. "I feel my dreams starting to come
225 true. I'm going to ride."

226 "Wouldn't that be amazing? But give it time," Evelyn cautioned.

227 The soft water glided off Mary's skin as Papa lifted her from the spring.
228 "My skin feels tingly. Look, the drops of water slide off in a sheet. I don't
229 feel wet at all, and I'm warm all over. This is what Illusion needs."

230 "That would be a sight. A horse in the spring." Evelyn shook her head.
231 "But people do bring horses to the ocean beach for water therapy from all
232 around."

233 "Papa, did you hear that? People bring their horses to this amazing water
234 for healing. Wouldn't that be fun?"

235 "Not from Texas they don't."