

## CHAPTER FIVE



1       The days flashed and dragged at the same time. After many hours at the  
2 beach and the spring, Mary reserved the evenings for worrying about  
3 Illusion. The constant rereading of Laura's note kept Mary on the edge of  
4 panic. On the long trip home, Papa went over the exercise treatment plan  
5 Mary must continue on her own. She tried to listen, but couldn't  
6 concentrate.

7       The sleek black car rumbled when they turned into the farm driveway.  
8 "I'm glad to be home. I've missed Illusion so much." Mary searched the  
9 herd of horses for her. "I see her dam. Where is she?" She couldn't breathe.

10       Papa peered out the window. "She wouldn't be too far from her mother."

11       "She's gone! I don't see her anywhere. Illusion's mother is there by the  
12 oak tree. Look how far away she is from the other mares. Something is  
13 wrong." She started shaking.

14       He reached for her hand. "Don't panic. The foal's out there somewhere.  
15 She's probably hiding behind a tree." "She's not there! All the other foals  
16 are there, but Illusion's gone. I knew it. I'll never see her again, and I didn't  
17 even get to say goodbye."

18       Papa carried her to the porch and helped the driver bring their bags to  
19 the house. She stared at the pasture. Her body sat rigid even as tears  
20 drenched her face. She glared at Papa when he passed.

21 "I know what you're thinking, but you shouldn't assume the worst.  
22 Doesn't everything usually work out better than you could ever imagine?"  
23 His eyes searched for agreement in hers.

24 "I can't stand not knowing. I'm sure they decided there was no hope for  
25 Illusion. If only I could have talked to them before they..."

26 "Let me pay the limo driver, and I'll bring our car around and take you to  
27 the horse farm."



28

29 As they drove onto the Morgan horse farm, Mary peered out the window.  
30 Laura came running to meet the car. "Mary, you're home already."

31 "Is she dead?"

32 "I wanted to be there when you got home so I could tell you myself."

33 "She's dead," Mary wailed. "I knew it."

34 Laura touched Mary's arm. "She's fine."

35 "I knew it was too late. It's just too horrible." Mary's voice cracked as her  
36 throat tightened. She snapped her chin up to look at Laura. "You said she's  
37 fine? You mean it?"

38 "We tried to call you back, but you'd checked out of the hotel by the time  
39 we got home from my Aunt Claire's."

40 "How'd you do it? You are amazing!"

41 "I begged my father to give her to me, to us. Come see her for yourself."

42 Papa lifted Mary from the car, placed her in the wheelchair, and went to  
43 the main house. Laura pushed the chair to the barn.

44 Mary twisted in the seat to see Laura. "He was set against it. The message  
45 you left at the hotel—I was sure she was dead. How did you convince him?"

46 "I'm sorry I scared you. I had great news, not bad. I made a lot of  
47 promises to Father, but I'm wondering if my mother might have talked to  
48 him about it. He kept looking over at her while we talked, but she never  
49 said a word. He was almost too easy to convince." Laura pushed faster. "He  
50 won't pay for the surgery, but he said if we raise the money we can do it.  
51 He told Mr. Todd to prepare the oversized foaling stall with the thick mats.  
52 She's in it now, and he took special care of her while I was gone."

53 "You are my most clever friend."

54 Out of breath, Laura dragged open the heavy wooden door to the stall  
55 and gave a grand gesture toward Illusion. "There she is."

56 Mary rolled her chair into the doorway. Illusion cocked her head, stepped  
57 forward, and sniffed the chair. Sucking back, the filly snorted. Mary reached  
58 toward the foal and cooed. "Hello there. You know me." Illusion tipped her  
59 head and flicked her ears. "I'm so relieved to see you. I was afraid I'd lost  
60 you forever." Her fingertips stroked the velvety plush muzzle. The filly  
61 leaned into Mary's touch. Her fingers rested on the side of Illusion's face,  
62 rubbing in little circles. "I'm going to fight for you with everything I've got."  
63 The foal moved her nose in front of Mary's nose and sniffed softly.

64 Mary blew air back at the filly. "You like me. She likes me!" Mary smiled  
65 at Laura and pushed her fingers deeper into the filly's coat. "Why did you  
66 wean her? Wouldn't it have been better to keep her mother with her?"

67 "It's time to wean all the foals. They're old enough now to eat grass and  
68 grain."

69 Illusion rolled back her upper lip, and the girls laughed out loud.

70 Laura continued, "Mr. Todd has a transport company coming first thing  
71 in the morning to take all the broodmares to their summer pasture at our

72 other farm in Navasota. I wanted to make it as easy on Illusion as I could,  
73 so I got special permission to wean her first." Laura slipped behind the foal  
74 and scratched her little rump at the base of her tail. "Illusion followed her  
75 mama into the stall. Then I distracted the foal with some carrot horse  
76 cookies in the feeder, so I could slip her dam out. I tied the mare outside  
77 the stall. Every hour or so, I moved her a little farther away. Illusion took  
78 it like a trooper. Treasure is acting like her big dopey brother. He nickers to  
79 her whenever she calls for her mother."

80 "Couldn't you keep her with another foal?"

81 "She needs to be kept quiet, and a playmate would want to roughhouse.  
82 She's got Treasure nearby, and he adores her. Mother said I don't have to  
83 take him to any shows until Illusion can be turned out with the other foals  
84 again. Father wasn't happy about it at first. But Mother told him she has  
85 another horse she wants me to show this season, so it worked out."

86 "It does sound like your mother's on our side. Thank you for giving up  
87 showing Treasure to help Illusion. You're the best friend." Mary's voice  
88 quivered.

89 "There is one thing I haven't told you... and it's bad."

90 Mary held her breath.

91 "My father gave her to us with a big catch. He said this goes against his  
92 better judgment. But he'll give her another six weeks. If she doesn't get  
93 better or we can't raise the money for the surgery, then he'll have her put  
94 down."

95 "Six weeks!" A boulder rolled onto Mary's chest. "I don't have any money.  
96 Do you?"

97 "Not enough to matter. I talked to the vet." Laura blew a big puff of air  
98 from her mouth. "And you don't want to know."

99       Mary sighed, "My papa said this whole thing was a crazy scheme. What  
100 are we going to do?"

101       "I don't know." Laura shrugged and combed her fingers through Illusion's  
102 fluffy tail. "I thought you might've been working on a few ideas while you  
103 were gone."

104       "Well, I haven't come up with anything—yet."