

CHAPTER SIX



1 Peach juice dripped from Mary's fingers as the fuzzy skin dropped into a
2 bowl. Mrs. Tate skimmed the piecrust skillfully from the wooden board and
3 into the pie pan.

4 Mary asked, "Have you seen my Morgan mare carving? The one that was
5 my mama's."

6 "No. You had it in the library right after it broke, but I haven't seen it
7 since. I'm sorry I didn't have any ideas on fixing it. I know how special that
8 horse is to you and I'll keep an eye out for it. It has to be around here
9 somewhere."

10 "So strange. Papa must have taken it. But, if he found it, he would've
11 been angry with me, and he would've said something." She laid down the
12 paring knife she'd used to skin peaches. "It's a mystery," she said, wiping
13 peach drips on a towel. "Mrs. Tate? If you needed a lotta *lotta* money fast,
14 how would you get it?"

15 "Ask for a loan, I guess." Mrs. Tate slid chopped fruit into a bowl.

16 Mary pilfered a slice. "Would you give me a loan?"

17 Mrs. Tate tilted her full chin down and looked over her glasses at Mary as
18 she tossed peaches in sugar. "Is this about that horse? Not a chance."

19 Mary grinned and snagged another peach piece before it slipped into the
20 crust.

21 "Oh, of course, it is."

22 "If a loan is out, what do you think about my selling homemade cookies?"

23 Mrs. Tate smirked. "You'd have to sell a lot of cookies."

24 "I could set up a booth and sell them at the fair next week."

25 "And who are you expecting will bake all these cookies for you? Pray tell?"

26 "I will! I have to." Mary tilted her head and turned on the charm. "You're
27 the best cookie baker ever. If you help me, the cookies will sell in a blink."

28 Mrs. Tate rolled her eyes and slid the pie into a hot oven. "I see Miss
29 Laura coming down the road. She has a new horse pulling her buggy today."

30 "Treasure is busy being a big brother." Mary spun her chair and headed
31 to the porch to watch them power trot up the road. The horse's front hooves
32 flicked as if a performer was waving to an adoring crowd.

33 "I brought someone to meet you," Laura called as she halted the white
34 mare. The horse lowered her regal head and tilted one curved ear back
35 toward Laura.

36 "She's a beauty. Her mane is gorgeous, and her tail almost drags on the
37 ground."

38 "She won Best Of Show four years in a row in her younger days. Her
39 name is Crown Jewel. My mother used to show her in equitation and
40 pleasure driving classes." Laura jumped from the buggy. "Mr. Todd decided
41 to give her a year off from raising a foal. I've been riding her to make sure
42 she's not forgotten her manners and she'll be perfect for you."

43 "For me? What are you doing?" Mary gawked as Laura unhooked Jewel
44 from the buggy.

45 "I have another surprise for you. I didn't get to tell you last night since
46 all we talked about was Illusion."

47 Mary bubbled with smiles. "I love good surprises."

48 "While you were gone, I went to the Hunt Library. It's downstairs in the
49 same building as my school. Miss Dann, she's the librarian, loves horses
50 too." Laura reached out and touched Mary as she shared her brilliant idea.
51 "You should meet her. She helped me research your new miracle cure. Tell
52 me where this is crazy—okay?" Laura spread her fingers, held her hands
53 high, and her body swayed with emphasis. "Muscles need to move to get
54 stronger. If you can't walk, it's hard to strengthen them—am I right?"

55 Mary nodded.

56 Laura smiled and giggled. "Anyway, Miss Dann found an article in a horse
57 magazine from The Netherlands about therapeutic riding. Wouldn't that just
58 be perfect for you? I rode Jewel in the round pen with my eyes closed to
59 experiment. I listened to my body. Muscles all over tightened and relaxed
60 to keep me balanced."

61 "How clever! I so love it."

62 "I dug an old Western saddle we used to start colts out of a storeroom,
63 and Mr. Joe put on straps to hold you in the saddle."

64 "I'm so flipped." Mary's mouth drooped open.

65 "At dinner last night, my father said your papa was leaving town, so I
66 knew we would be in the clear to try it out today. Mr. Joe told me he would
67 help us." Laura looked around and lowered her voice. "Your papa said no
68 buggy rides. He never said anything about riding in a saddle."

69 "And I thought I was sneaky and devious. You're a great friend for me. I
70 could learn things from you."

71 "You're calling me bad names. I thought you liked me." Laura laughed as
72 she lowered the cart poles to the ground. "Mr. Joe has the saddle in your
73 barn. I'll take Jewel out there and get her tacked up."



74

75 As Joe lifted Mary from her chair, his hat fell in her lap. He put her
76 immediately down in the chair to scoop the hat and slip it over his baldness.
77 Then he carried her to where Laura waited with Jewel.

78 "You really did this for me, Mr. Joe?"

79 "When Laura came to me with her plan, I liked the idea." Joe stepped up
80 on a mounting block with Mary in his arms and set her in the saddle.

81 Mary clutched the saddle horn. "I'm on a horse!" she squealed. The horse
82 tensed and turned her head to look at the eruption of glee coming from the
83 saddle.

84 "Easy, Jewel. Easy." Laura stroked the alarmed horse's neck. "Really,
85 Mary, you should know better. Jewel is super calm. She's even been in a
86 parade following a marching band, but your screeching is scaring her."

87 "I'm sorry, Jewel. If you only knew how incredible you are." Mary rubbed
88 the mare's neck softly. "I'm riding! I'm riding the most beautiful horse I've
89 ever seen."

90 Joe smiled as he buckled straps across her thighs, across her calf right
91 below her knee, and around her ankles. Several long gray curly hairs coiled
92 in his bushy eyebrows. They arched in an upside-down V when he asked,
93 "Does that feel secure?"

94 Mary nodded. "This is so amazing. I'm in a chair that walks."

95 A grinning Laura held the mare steady. "Someday, we will ride together.
96 Can you picture us cantering across the field?"

97 "I dream of it. Someday, I will ride Illusion over the clouds and to the
98 stars." Mary tightened her grip on the saddle horn as Laura led Jewel
99 forward a few steps. Joe walked by her side with one hand holding her leg
100 protectively.

101 "Think of it," Mary marveled, "I have four good legs to walk with. What a
102 fantastic day. Makes me want to sing."

103 "You know you sing off key, right?"

104 Mary shrugged. "I sing a joyful noise." Jewel twitched a fly off her
105 shoulder. "I understand now what you mean about my muscles moving to
106 keep me balanced in the saddle. Riding is going to make me strong."

107 "We're golden—unless your papa finds out."

108 Mr. Joe reached to the horse's bridle and stopped Jewel short. "What do
109 you mean? Didn't you tell me you had her papa's permission when you
110 brought me the saddle to modify?"

111 "Well, not exactly. He never said she couldn't."

112 "You're getting off this horse this minute, Miss Mary. I have to tell your
113 papa. I could lose my job over this."

114 "I'm okay, Mr. Joe. I can do this. Please don't tell Papa. It's not fair for
115 you to lose your job because of me."

116 Joe scowled and unstrapped Mary none too gently.

117 "I'll explain all this to Papa as soon as I can show him how good it is for
118 me. I promise."

119 Pulling her from the saddle, he placed her into the wheelchair and
120 stomped away.

121 "That's rotten." Laura planted one hand on her hip and kicked the dirt.
122 "What're we going to do now?"

123 "We're not giving up. When you pull the saddle, toss it in your buggy and
124 take it home with you."



125

126 The next morning, Mary sensed Laura's excitement as she rushed to the
127 porch where Mary waited. "It was on the radio broadcast last night! I was
128 glued," Laura gushed breathlessly.

129 "What?"

130 "Lis Hartel won silver in dressage for Denmark in the Olympics! Silver.
131 She beat out all the top men in the world, except one!" Laura caught her
132 breath. "As if that wasn't amazing enough. The whole world found out at
133 the medal ceremony Mrs. Hartel is disabled from polio." Laura grabbed the
134 handles on the wheelchair and leaned right into Mary's face. "She... can't...
135 use her lower legs to ride—at all! Her doctors told her it was too dangerous
136 to ride a horse. She showed them." Laura swung her fist up and over her
137 shoulder. "She's radioactive and my hero."

138 "Mine too."

139 "You haven't heard all of it yet. The man who won gold. Wow. I want to
140 marry him." Laura slapped her hands on her cheeks and swooned. "He
141 dismounted from his horse, rushed to her, and carried her to the podium to
142 accept her medal."

143 "You're making me cry."

144 "I know. I flood every time I think about it. I wish we could've been there.
145 Think what it means, Mary. If she can ride and win silver, what would stop
146 you?"

147 "Papa." Claspng her hands behind her head, Mary closed her elbows over
148 her face. "Papa would stop me."

149 "You need to tell him about Mrs. Hartel. Then, I bet, he would come up
150 with the idea of your riding all on his own. When does your papa come
151 home?"

152 "I'm not sure. He calls me every night he's away, so I'll ask tonight. He's
153 usually gone four or five days at a time."

154 "Then we have plenty of time to try out my saddle idea. Mr. Joe won't
155 even know what we're up to, so he can't get in trouble with your papa."
156 Laura winked. "I have a hunch you might like to visit Illusion today, so let's
157 get. We need to come up with a plan to save her."

158 Mary moaned. "Every day I cross off the calendar without coming up with
159 an idea, we are closer to..." Her voice choked off. "Mrs. Tate is helping me
160 make and freeze cookie dough so we can bake cookies right before the fair,
161 but I've done the math. It's never going to be enough. Not even close."

162 "My father reminded me, we have a deadline, and he won't let it go. He
163 said it's not right to let the foal hurt." Laura gritted her teeth. "I hate it
164 when he's right."

165 Mr. Joe walked from the garden, lifted Mary, and set her in Laura's buggy.
166 Then he hung her wheelchair on hooks in the back. With a couple of quick
167 knots to keep it secured, Mary was all set.

168 "Thank you, Mr. Joe," said Mary.

169 He nodded, but left them without a word.

170 Laura edged closer and nudged Mary with her elbow. "He's still mad at
171 us for riding without permission, isn't he?"

172 "I'd say. He'll never speak to me again if he finds out Papa told me not
173 to ride in the buggy. But how else could I see Illusion?"

174 "Is he going to tell on us?"

175 "He started to tell Papa yesterday. But the phone rang, and Papa left on
176 his trip right after."

177 "I'm sorry I let it slip. Stuff just jumps out of my mouth sometimes."

178 "We got to work on a different plan." Mary pinched her bottom lip with
179 her fingers.

180 Laura tilted her head and tapped her mouth with a finger. "Our farm
181 manager could lift you up on Jewel. Mr. Todd wouldn't know we don't have
182 permission. Maybe I won't mess it up this time. I talk too much, but I can't
183 seem to help it."

184 "You are kind of chatty, but that's one of the things I like about you."

185 "What's the other thing?" asked Laura.

186 "What makes you my most favorite friend is your socks never match—
187 just like mine."

188 Laura pinched Mary's skirt and lifted it off her boots to uncover one hot
189 pink and one apple green sock. "Nice." She smiled. "At least mine are in the
190 same color family. For an artist, you're really bad at matching colors."

191 "Life doesn't match, why should socks?" Mary crossed her arms.
192 "Anyway, we should figure out a way to get me in the saddle on our own."

193 "What if I bring Jewel alongside the buggy? Could you slide over and get
194 in the saddle?"

195 "I use my arms to move between chairs all the time. I can do it." Mary
196 snapped her fingers.

197 "Great. You can ride to the foal paddock to see Illusion." Laura unhooked
198 the harness and saddled Jewel. She cued the horse to sidepass next to the
199 buggy. Stepping Jewel forward and back again, she worked to position the
200 mare close to the seat of the cart. Mary grasped her leg and hoisted her
201 foot over the saddle seat. Pushing down with her hands to lift her body, she

202 slid closer to the horse. With Laura holding the horse still, Mary eased into
203 the saddle and secured the straps. "We did it!" Mary rubbed Jewel's neck.
204 "Good girl."

205 "That wasn't so bad." Laura sighed her relief.

206 "I think we have it figured out. I'd like to use the reins today and guide
207 her myself."

208 Laura's brow wrinkled. "What if she trots?"

209 "I'll do a one-rein stop. Don't worry. I got this."

210 "I can't believe you even know what a one-rein stop is. I'll walk beside
211 you, just in case."

212 Mary clucked to Jewel, and the mare walked on. "I'm riding. I'm really,
213 really, really riding a horse all by myself!" She squealed. The high-pitched
214 shriek startled the steady old mare, and she jumped forward. Mary grabbed
215 for the saddle horn as her head snapped backward.

216 "Mary, you've got to stop doing that." Laura reached for the reins to
217 steady the horse.

218 "Guess I shouldn't screech like a pterodactyl. I'm sorry. I got so excited
219 I forgot."

220 "Not unless you want to fly like one." Laura giggled. "You push even
221 Jewel's limits. She does have a horse brain after all."

222 "Tell me how Illusion's doing."

223 "She stands around all day. She never plays like the other foals. When
224 she takes a step, her head bobs down like she could drop to her knees.
225 Come see for yourself." Laura pointed to the outside paddock.

226 The foal stood in the shade, holding one front leg bent and slightly off the
227 ground. When she nickered, her nostrils fluttered. "She likes me!"
228 exclaimed Mary.

229 "Sorry to burst your bubble, but she's talking to Jewel."

230 "Someday, she'll nicker only for me." Mary eased Jewel to the fence and
231 leaned as far as she dared toward Illusion, but she could barely reach her
232 muzzle. "She feels like the cashmere sweater Papa and I gave Mrs. Tate for
233 Christmas." The filly lipped Mary's fingers, making a smacking noise.

234 Laura scratched the filly at the base of her tail. "That makes her smile."

235 "So what can we do to raise the money to fix Illusion?"

236 "You got me. It hurts me to watch her. My father's right. If we can't fix
237 her soon, we have to put her out of her misery."

238 "How could I ever say goodbye? I can't think about that." Mary's jaw
239 tightened. She kept Jewel walking along the rail in the arena while she
240 concentrated on trying to convince one of her legs to move back a little and
241 press into the horse's side. Neither leg cooperated. When she looked up
242 again, Laura had squeezed through the paddock fence with Illusion. She
243 rubbed the filly's neck and watched Mary.

244 "If I didn't know you hadn't been riding," Laura called, "I would have said
245 you've been taking lessons for years. Your contact with the reins is soft and
246 sweet."

247 "Thanks. I've been reading about horses and how to ride since—my
248 library! That's it, Laura. I could sell my library!" Mary took a deep breath
249 and held it for a minute. New energy sparked in her. "Several of my books
250 are collector items. A couple are vintage and cost a lot of money. Some are
251 signed by the author."

252 Laura's mouth sprang open. "I love the idea, and I hate it too. That would
253 hurt."

254 "Not as much as watching Illusion die."

255 "For sure, nothing would hurt as much as that. We could sell them at the
256 fair booth with the cookies. And I have a bunch of books we could sell too."

257 Mary squeaked. "We have a plan!"

258 Laura threw her arms around Illusion's neck, and the filly shook her head
259 so hard she flung Laura off. "Guess she's not into cuddling." Laura laughed.

260 "I see what you mean about her limping. She is hurting." As the foal
261 hobbled a step, Mary said, "Give her withers a good scratch for me."

262 Laura scratched the foal with all her fingers until the little horse tilted her
263 head and flapped her upper lip. "It's nice to make her happy, even if it's
264 only for a little while."

265 Mary smiled, watching them. "She's too adorable. We have to find a way
266 to save her."

267 "We better finish up with your riding before anyone sees us."

268 "Right. Then let's get me home, so I can make a list of my books and
269 think on how much to charge for them."

270 "I have an idea!" Laura squeezed through the fence and planted herself
271 in front of Mary. "Why didn't I think of that before? It's perfect."

272 "What's perfect?"

273 "Your sketches." She threw her hands up. "They are so good. I bet lots
274 of people would buy them."

275 "You think they're good enough to sell?"

276 "Well, yeah. It's like you dust the drawing with the horse's soul."

277 Mary stroked Jewel's mane. "I'll try anything. But nobody is going to pay
278 real money for art by me."