

CHAPTER NINE



1 The next day, Papa came into the library to tell Mary goodbye.

2 "Papa. Did you hear the news from Helsinki, Finland about the equestrian
3 team?"

4 "Why would that be on my radar? No."

5 "The first woman to ever compete in Olympic Dressage won silver."

6 "That would please your mama no end. She wished she could compete at
7 that level."

8 "Was Mama really good? I wish I could have seen her ride. And she could
9 have taught me."

10 "Yes, in a perfect world." Papa looked out the window in a fixed stare.

11 "The lady who won silver was disabled from polio. Silver, Papa!"

12 Papa's attention snapped back to her. "She's a grown woman and can
13 make risky decisions if she wants to, but I have a responsibility to do what's
14 best for you." His finger pointed at her. "I know what you're thinking. Hear
15 me loud and clear. No way will I allow you to ride." He moved directly in
16 front of her. "You understand me?"

17 Mary dropped her gaze to her hands clasped together in her lap, bit her
18 lip, and nodded.

19 "If we understand each other then, I'll be home in time to take you to
20 Laura's farm, so we can be there when the vet comes to reassess Illusion.
21 I have a few quick things I need to do in town today."

22 "And then we can schedule the surgery, and everything will be perfect."
23 Mary crossed her arms on her chest, sat straight in her chair, and stared at
24 Papa.

25 "I think cautious optimism would be more realistic."

26 She sat tall and dared to look Papa in the eye. "You'll not discourage me,
27 Papa. We have the money for the surgery now, and we need to get it done
28 right away."

29 "When I talked to the veterinarian, he was not very encouraging about
30 the surgery's outcome."

31 "Well," she huffed. "My prayers count more than his opinions."

32 Papa's lips fluttered as he exhaled. "What am I to do with you?"

33 "Papa, I've hunted everywhere for Mama's carved horse. Do you know
34 where she is?"

35 "Let it go, Mary. Put the broken behind you. Be grateful and look to the
36 possibilities." He kissed the top of her head and left.

37 *He knew all along.* She watched him go. When her attention returned to
38 the present, she pulled some of her horse books from one of the boxes still
39 stacked along the wall. As she shelved them, she waited for time to pass.
40 She opened the *Complete Equine Veterinarian Handbook* she'd gotten from
41 Miss Dann at the Hunt Library. Running her finger down the table of
42 contents, she found a chapter called, "Deformities Of The Hoof And Leg".
43 Almost two hours of reading later, she folded the book closed. It sounded

44 grim. There could be no more delay. Illusion was getting worse and had to
45 get treatment now.

46 What was keeping Papa? As she spun the wheels on her chair to hurry to
47 the porch, he eased out of the car. "I was afraid you'd be late, and we would
48 miss the vet."

49 "Mary, do I let you down so much you have reason to doubt me?"

50 She shook her head, rubbed her thumb in the palm of her hand, and
51 muttered, "No, Papa. I'm sorry." Mary put her hands together over her
52 heart. "Even if I can never ride her, something in here will die if we can't
53 save Illusion."

54 "If the worst comes to pass with Illusion, it's still a bump in life's road.
55 No more. You hurt, you pray, you heal, and you move on."

56 "Are you healed?"

57 "Healing is a process. I had an important job." He dropped on a knee in
58 front of her and swallowed her hands in his. "I had to take care of you, and
59 that gave me purpose and got me through."

60 Mary leaned on his shoulder and hugged him. "I love you, Papa."



61

62 Mary and Papa rode to Laura's farm without talking. She never diverted
63 her eyes from the road. The veterinarian's truck was parked in front of the
64 barn, and Laura waited next to it. Laura hurried to them. "I'm so glad you're
65 here."

66 "What's going on? How's she doing?" Mary asked as Papa unloaded her
67 chair.

68 Laura bit her lip, shook her head, and looked back at the barn as Laura's
69 mother and the veterinarian disappeared into the barn.

70 "Hurry, Papa." Mary tilted forward and strained to help propel her chair
71 till they were flying down the barn alleyway.

72 The veterinarian, Laura's father and mother, and Mr. Todd stood looking
73 into the stall at Illusion. As Mary, Laura, and Papa joined them, Laura's
74 father motioned for Mr. Todd to bring the filly out into the alleyway. The
75 foal pulled against the halter so hard she almost sat on her haunches.
76 Shaking her head, she planted three feet, held one dainty hoof high, and
77 refused to budge. Laura's father popped the foal's rump with a quirt, and
78 she jumped onto the concrete. Her head lunged all the way down to her
79 hoof and snapped back up. One hopping step and then two.

80 The foal was in such terrible pain Mary could feel it in her own bones.
81 "Stop!" she blurted. "Stop! You're hurting her."

82 The veterinarian turned to Mary. His thick tanned skin hardened his face,
83 but his eyes smiled and gentled his mouth lines. "I have to see how she's
84 walking, and I can't give her anything to mask the pain until I'm finished
85 with my exam. I'm sure it hurts you to watch this. Perhaps it would be best
86 if you waited outside."

87 "No, sir, I'm sorry. I understand. I so hate that she's hurting."

88 "I hate it too, and I won't let her hurt any longer than absolutely
89 necessary." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "We may have to make a
90 hard, grown-up decision today."

91 A silent scream echoed in Mary's head. She covered her ears with the
92 heels of her hands and pressed to block out the toxic news.

93 The veterinarian's attention returned to Illusion as he ran both hands
94 down her front leg. "The curvature of her leg doesn't seem any worse than
95 the first time I saw her. But her leg is markedly more swollen, and I detect

96 a little heat in her hoof." He lifted her tiny hoof and tapped the bottom of it
97 with a small mallet. "Hum," he said as he walked away. "I'm going after a
98 hoof tester from my truck."

99 Mary and Laura reached for each other's hand and held tightly.

100 "She's so much worse. I hate what I'm thinking," Laura said.

101 "I know what you're thinking. You think we have to do the best thing for
102 her no matter how much it hurts us." Mary squeezed Laura's hand. "And
103 you might be right. She's in agony." Both girls kept their eyes riveted on
104 the foal. Mary let go of Laura and reached both hands toward Illusion. The
105 horse's nose extended, reaching toward her. "Will you forgive me, Illusion?
106 I don't know what else to do."

107 "What a shame. A horse with such kind eyes and yet so much spirit and
108 spunk. She would have been a great friend for you," Laura said.

109 "I don't know if I can say goodbye." Mary ran her fingers through
110 Illusion's forelock. Pulling the ribbon from her own ponytail, she tied a little
111 pink bow between the filly's ears.

112 The veterinarian returned, lifted the hoof again, and squeezed it with a
113 metal, pincer-like tool. Illusion squealed, jerked her hoof away, scrambled
114 to get free, and fell to the concrete. The girls gasped in unison.

115 "I'm going to be sick." Mary spun her chair around and raced away as
116 fast as she could toward the fresh air. Laura hesitated and then chased after
117 her. Once outside, the girls burst into tears. Mary's chest heaved, and her
118 stomach knotted.

119 Laura covered her face with both hands and dropped to her knees in the
120 grass. "This can't be happening."

121 When the men came outside, both girls turned away. Mary's stomach
122 ached from sobbing.

123 "Mary," Papa said. "Listen to me. We have an important decision to
124 make."

125 "I know. I hate it, but yes. We can't let her hurt anymore." Mary's lips
126 wrinkled in a pout. "Do what you have to do."

127 "Mary, you don't understand. The veterinarian thinks there is a possibility
128 the reason for Illusion's increase in pain is she might have an abscess in
129 her hoof."

130 Mary sniffled and stopped crying. "That's not so bad."

131 Laura looked up and came nearer.

132 Papa hovered over her. "The vet says it's possible she stepped on
133 something sharp and developed a pocket of infection in her hoof. He said,
134 in her case, the best way to confirm an abscess is to do tests at the Texas
135 Equine Hospital. Even if she does have an abscess causing the extreme
136 pain, she still has the issue of the clubfoot. It's hard to separate one problem
137 from another."

138 "Are you saying even if we do the tests and she has an abscess, it still
139 might not make any difference to her?" Mary asked.

140 "Yes, I'm afraid so. We might be prolonging her suffering."

141 Mary grasped Laura's hand. "We should pray."

142 Laura nodded. They bowed their heads, and Papa watched with his cap
143 in his hand.

144 As the veterinarian walked to his truck with Laura's father, he asked the
145 girls, "Do you have any questions for me?"

146 Mary's and Laura's eyes met and held. Laura shook her head.

147 "I have to see Illusion." Mary lifted her chin as she turned to ask her
148 papa. "Can I have a few minutes alone with her?"

149 He nodded. Fearing the veterinarian would try to change her mind, Mary
150 rushed off to Illusion's stall.

151 Mr. Todd stepped out of the stall, leaving the door open for Mary. He
152 scooped the calico barn cat out of her way. The filly stood on three legs with
153 the hoof of her right front balanced on the toe. As the pain medication took
154 effect, the foal's head and neck drifted lower.

155 With the calico tucked in one arm, Mr. Todd extended a miniature brush
156 to Mary. Her eyes held his as she took it from his hand. It occurred to her,
157 she was wrong about Mr. Todd. She eased her chair into the stall and
158 stroked the filly's neck with the soft brush. Her fingers reached for and
159 entwined in Illusion's thin, baby mane. Her forehead rested against the
160 filly's face. "We would have been amazing together, but how cruel it would
161 be to let you hurt because I need you so much." With both their eyes closed,
162 Mary hummed to the foal as tears flowed down her cheeks and wet Illusion's
163 face. "No matter what happens, I will always, always love you. Don't be
164 afraid. Mrs. Tate said God himself would take care of you." Mary sniffled.
165 "Please forgive me."



166

167 The next morning Papa pushed the door open to the library. Mary's hands
168 were limp in her lap as she sat motionless by the window. Not a breath of
169 air stirred—as if the whole world waited for the results of Illusion's tests.

170 "Let me guess what occupies your mind this morning."

171 "You know," Mary whispered.

172 "We should hear from the equine hospital today."

173 Mary nodded, but continued to stare vacantly out the window.

174 "Want me to return the vet book to Charlotte?"

175 "Charlotte?"

176 "Miss Dann."

177 "No. No, thank you. Laura will take it to school and return it." Mary
178 straightened her back. "You could never love anyone else like you loved
179 Mama, right?"

180 "Of course not. That's an odd question from you."

181 "It's been a little odd around here."

182 "Do you want me to take you out to your spot so you can sketch today?"
183 Papa encouraged her.

184 Mary held back a little secret. "No," she said. "Laura is coming to cheer
185 me up, and she's going to help me put the books back on the shelves."

186 "Is there something else?" Frowning, Papa took a step closer. "What are
187 you not telling me? Withholding something is the same as lying."

188 "Nothing," she lied, turning to look at him. "Nothing at all." It was wrong,
189 completely wrong, this should happen today of all days. How could she have
190 something good to share when she expected the worst news about Illusion?
191 She couldn't tell Papa until she was sure anyway.

192 "You keep doing the strength exercises, and I will see when we can return
193 to Destin." He kissed her cheek. "I'm off." The front door shut behind him.

194 Turning to the window, she sighed. "Hurry, Laura? I can hardly wait to
195 show you." Spinning her chair, she wheeled herself to the kitchen to find
196 Mrs. Tate.

197 "French toast. My favorite. You love me."

198 "Yes, actually, I do. As vexing as you can be, I love you dearly." Mrs.
199 Tate smiled and wiggled her nose like a bunny.

200 As a bite of French toast melted in her mouth, Mary cut the rest into small
201 pieces to make it last.

202 "Mr. Gregory called. He has to travel to Canaan this morning. He said to
203 tell you, he'll still come for your tutoring today."

204 "I'll go to Laura's then. She should be here soon anyway. I'll be back in
205 time for lessons." Mary watched Mrs. Tate's face to see if she knew yet
206 riding in the buggy was forbidden.

207 "Why isn't Laura in school?"

208 "She's been on spring break this week. She gets off early every afternoon
209 anyway because she has a job on her family farm." Mary breathed a huge
210 sigh of relief it wasn't the buggy ride on Mrs. Tate's mind.

211 "Mrs. Tate, with all this happening with Illusion, I've been thinking." She
212 bit her lip and looked into Mrs. Tate's eyes. "I told Illusion what you said
213 about God taking care of her and all, but death is like, you know, it's all
214 over. I'm scared for Illusion."

215 Mrs. Tate balanced a wooden spoon on the glass mixing bowl and gazed
216 out the kitchen window. "I think dying is like being born in the first place.
217 Before you were born, you were in a comfortable, safe place." She folded
218 the chocolate batter a couple times with the spoon. "You didn't know
219 anything about what it would be like when you were born into the world.
220 Look how it turned out."

221 "You're right, this world is amazing. Lying in the water at the beach, I
222 had a lot of time to just look at stuff. The details on the birds. The shells on
223 the beach."

224 "God is an artist. He created this place for us as a picture of an even more
225 glorious heaven."

226 "I don't want Illusion to leave me."

227 "Our life here is but a wisp." She wagged the spoon at her. "Make sure
228 you enjoy the gift."

229 Mary reached into the bowl with a teaspoon and snagged some batter.
230 Turning the spoon upside down, she smoothed it across her tongue.

231 Mrs. Tate rapped the bowl with the spoon and waved it at Mary. "Brownies
232 are for later, not breakfast."

233 "You're the one who said 'enjoy the gift'." Mary giggled. "I hear hoof
234 beats. Must be Laura. Gotta go." Mary stopped in the doorway. "Thanks,
235 Mrs. Tate. I never thought of dying like being born into a better place."