

CHAPTER ELEVEN



1 With Jewel back in her traces, Laura guided her toward Mary's farm.

2 "I forgot!" Mary twisted toward her. "You never told me what happened
3 with your mother."

4 "I was so excited about your news, I forgot too. And it's like if I don't say
5 it out loud, maybe the bubble won't pop."

6 "What happened?"

7 "My mother actually waited for me in the breakfast room this morning.
8 At first, I thought I was in big trouble. But she smiled, got a plate, and sat
9 down with me. That never happens. She is always—*always*—off doing her
10 own stuff."

11 "What did she say?"

12 "That she's been watching me fight for Illusion, and she couldn't be more
13 proud of me." Jewel's hooves click-clacked on the road. "She said she
14 realized she's been missing out by making other things more important than
15 me." Laura paused for several trot strides. "She asked me to forgive her for
16 not being the mother she should have been and to let her make it up to
17 me."

18 "Wow. That's deep."

19 "She wants to take me shopping and to lunch at a fancy place.
20 Somewhere the two of us can talk, she said."

21 "Is this really your mother? Amazing."

22 Laura's smile reflected her new joy, and her eyes glistened. Mary enjoyed
23 both the breeze in their faces and the rhythm of the hoof beats. As Laura's
24 barn disappeared from sight, wood snapped under them. They looked at
25 each other with grimaces and wide eyes.

26 "Now what?"

27 The splintering sound mushroomed into a loud crack. The buggy wheel
28 on Laura's side skidded a few feet before the buggy lurched lower. The girls
29 grabbed for the railing as the cart tipped, and Jewel's head shot up as she
30 jolted to a stop.

31 Gripping the bar, Laura bent over the side to examine the wheel. "Oh
32 no."

33 "What happened?"

34 "The wheel is completely wrecked."

35 "I'm in so much trouble." Mary groaned. "Mr. Gregory will tell Papa I
36 wasn't home, and Papa will know I've been riding in the cart." Mary covered
37 her face with her hands and sputtered like an errant balloon. "What if Papa
38 decides to punish me by not helping Illusion?"

39 "He would never do that." Laura's mouth wore an exaggerated frown.
40 "Would he?"

41 Mary squished up her face as if she'd eaten sour candy and nodded.

42 "What can we do? All that's left of the wheel spokes is splinters, and the
43 rim collapsed."

44 Mary leaned across Laura and looked over the edge. "Doom." She popped
45 back up. She twisted side to side positive a brilliant idea was on its way.
46 "We need a plan. We can't walk home," she said, stating the obvious.

47 "I can't push you in your wheelchair all the way home either. We need to
48 teach Jewel to pull your chair like a buggy."

49 Mary shook her head no. "I think that would work out worse than your
50 last clever plan. We should pray someone will come along and help us."
51 Mary brought her palms together and bowed her head.

52 The girls sat in the tilted buggy with the busted wheel, peered down the
53 long empty road, and waited.

54 "Your prayer is not working."

55 Mary threw her hands up.

56 "Your prayer about my dream worked though."

57 "It did? I'm cranked about that."

58 "I've been praying every night like you told me. And I've not had even
59 one bad dream."

60 Mary smiled and hugged her friend. "No more bad dreams! That makes
61 me happy." Mary heaved a sigh. "We can't sit here and bake in the sun all
62 day. We better come up with something."

63 "I'll unhook Jewel and ride her to my farm to see if the groom is back."
64 Laura jumped down and started unbuckling the harness traces. "Wouldn't
65 he have passed us on the road?"

66 "Ahh. Yes. That's a no-go."

67 "I need to go home. Wish we had put the saddle in the buggy. What if we
68 ride double to my farm? I can do it."

69 "Bareback?" Laura's eyes grew into huge round orbs.

70 "No way. And you think my wheelbarrow plan was bad?"

71 "I am sure I can do it. My balance is good. Jewel can just walk."

72 "Says the one covered in dirt from falling off. That's like the worst idea—
73 ever."

74 "It's my idea and my decision. Should I ride in front or behind you?" Mary
75 asked.

76 "I need to have the reins." Laura's brow wrinkled. "Can you climb on
77 behind me without pulling me off?"

78 "Umm..." Mary eyed the horse and nodded. "Leave the harness on, so I'll
79 have something to pull on."

80 Laura flipped the long lines up over the horse's back and stripped away
81 the breast collar, traces, and crupper. "I'll have to sit right behind the rein
82 terrets—that's not much room for two. A lot of horses would buck us off
83 with you sitting on her loins, but she earned the name Crown Jewel." Jewel
84 tossed her head and started to pull toward home. "No, you don't. I know
85 what you're thinking. Every time I brag on you, you start something." Laura
86 swung up on her back.

87 "Crown Jewel already dropped me once today, so bucking wouldn't
88 surprise me."

89 "That wasn't her fault! You should have put your straps on." Laura
90 repositioned the horse close to the buggy.

91 "Let's stop talking about it and get going." Mary lifted her foot over
92 Jewel's back and slid onto the horse behind Laura. She grinned. "I've
93 always, always wanted to ride with no saddle."

94 "I'm not taking the bridle off, no matter what you think."

95 Wrapping her arms around Laura, Mary held tight to the back band of the
96 harness. "It won't take us long to get me home like this. And no one will
97 know."

98 "We're going to have to leave your wheelchair here on the buggy. Have
99 you figured out how to explain why you don't have it?"

100 "I didn't think of that. I'll have to ask Mr. Joe to carry me to the house
101 and come get my chair. He's going to come undone. I'm doomed."

102 "You better come up with a good story about why you're so dirty too."

103 "I'll think of something. It'll come to me."



104

105 As the girls came around the last bend in the road, a black car turned
106 into the farm. "That's Papa! Why is he home so early?"

107 The girls rode the rest of the way in silence. As they approached the front
108 porch, Mr. Gregory rose from the rocker.

109 Mary kept her voice low. "It's been nice to know you, Laura. I think I'll
110 never see you again. Kiss Illusion goodbye for me."

111 "Goodbye, Mary. I'll miss you."

112 Papa blasted out the front door. He strode to the horse and hauled Mary
113 from its back. "In the name of God, what are you thinking?" His clean white
114 shirt now looked like a young artist finger painted it with grime. As he
115 carried her to the porch, she peered over his shoulder at Laura. Laura gave
116 a tiny wave, quietly cued Jewel to turn around, and headed home.

117 Papa plopped Mary in a rocker. Bending at the waist, he leaned toward
118 her with his hands on his knees and started to speak, but nothing came out.
119 He wagged his finger in her face, spun away, and kicked a flower basket off

120 the porch. It careened through the air, and zinnia stems scattered across
121 the porch and the grass. Mr. Gregory stood like an awkward boy, mangling
122 his hat in his hands, until he abruptly bounded down the steps and left.
123 Papa slammed his hat on his knee repeatedly as he paced the length of the
124 porch.

125 Mrs. Tate peeked out from behind the curtains. Mr. Joe inched away to a
126 garden section behind the house.

127 Papa muttered, sputtered, and grunted.

128 "I'm sorry. Let me explain," Mary said.

129 He spun and pointed his finger at her again. "Be. Quiet. I'm not ready to
130 hear anything from you."

131 His shoes crushed zinnia petals into powder. "I expressly forbid you to
132 ride in the buggy. What possessed you to imagine it was all right for you to
133 ride on a horse?" He stomped and ranted. "I'm astonished you would
134 disobey me like this and risk your life to-boot." He thundered the length of
135 the porch. "To think, I was going to help you with that foal. I can see now
136 what a terrible idea that was."

137 "Papa."

138 "You were one of the girls in the buggy the neighbor told me about the
139 day the big truck crashed. I should have realized it was you and Laura. I
140 trusted you. I never imagined... I won't make that mistake again. You will
141 go nowhere without a chaperone from here on out." His voice softened.
142 "You are all I have left in this world." Then boomed again. "I'm horrified to
143 find out what a disobedient child you have become."

144 "Papa! I have something important to tell you."

145 "I've tried to be both mother and father to you." His face flushed and his
146 voice roared. "I've spoiled you. Rules are to be obeyed." Poking his finger
147 in her face again, he steamed. "Some things need to change around here.

148 It's time you went to a girls' boarding school." He pivoted away from her
149 and stomped a stinkbug, which had the misfortune to be in the wrong place
150 at the wrong time.

151 Mary pushed down on the arms of the chair. As she rose, she reached for
152 the railing. "Papa!"

153 "Your mama would be mortified by your behavior. I've failed her." As he
154 continued to rage, he whirled to face Mary. His jaw dropped open wide, and
155 he stammered, "Ma-Ma-Mary. You're standing."

156 She sank into the chair. "That's what I wanted to tell you. Since the trip
157 to Florida, I've been getting stronger. While we were gone, Laura got a book
158 from Miss Dann about equine rehabilitation therapy. She had an old saddle
159 fitted for me with straps and everything."

160 "You've been riding behind my back all this time! How could you do such
161 a thing? I never would have believed you could be capable of such deceit."

162 "I'm sorry. You know you would never have allowed it. I tried to tell you
163 yesterday morning in the library. But look at me. The aquatic therapy got
164 me going, and now I'm getting stronger every day. The book Laura got had
165 strength building and balance exercises on horseback." Mary hung her head
166 and tapped her toes together. "I didn't want to get your hopes up. You've
167 done so much to help me get well. And I'm sure now. I'm getting better,
168 and it started at the ocean."

169 When she looked up, Papa's face softened. He sank into the chair opposite
170 her, put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands.

171 A tear flowed down his cheek, and she reached for his arm. He scooped
172 her into a bear hug. "Thank you, God! Thank you." Tilting his head, he
173 searched her eyes. "I should have figured you would try riding after you
174 told me about the disabled woman who medaled in the Olympics. I should
175 have seen it coming." He smiled as he peppered her with questions. "How
176 long can you stand? Can you walk? How could you keep this from me?"

177 "You know I had to keep it a secret. You would've never allowed me to
178 ride. You wouldn't even let me ride in the buggy. I can't walk yet, but I can
179 stand for about a half a minute." She hugged him around the neck. "Papa,
180 I have something important to ask you."

181 "Is it about boarding school? I was furious with you, but I can't send you
182 away."

183 "I know. You'd miss me too much. It's more important than that." Mary
184 cupped her hands over his ear and whispered, "It's the most important thing
185 ever."

186 "Did I just witness the miracle I've been praying for? You stood up for
187 the first time in eight years. You can ask me anything."

188 "The therapy in Florida helped me so much." She took in a deep breath
189 for bravery. "I've been reading about aquatic therapy for horses. I know it
190 will help Illusion." Mary paused to see how he reacted before she rushed
191 on. "I want Illusion to have the surgery for her club foot, and then take her
192 to Florida and swim her in the ocean. It's the best chance she has. And I'm
193 sorry for riding in the buggy after you told me not to."

194 He eased her into the chair. Drawing in a deep breath, he said in a low,
195 quiet voice, "You were wrong to do that. It's important I can trust you." He
196 took hold of both her hands. "I talked to the veterinarian today, which is
197 why I came home early."

198 She bit her lip at hearing the serious in his tone. "Is it more bad news?"
199 Her face twisted with anguish.

200 He reached for tissues and handed them to her. "He agrees with you
201 about doing the club foot surgery, and he said Illusion does have a massive
202 abscess or infection in her hoof. Because of the severity, the vet
203 recommended a procedure where he drills into her hoof to allow the abscess
204 to drain."

205 Mary sniffled but waited for him to finish.

206 "He's scheduled both surgeries for first thing in the morning."

207 Mary's fingers interlaced, crushing her tissue, and a thumbnail mashed
208 into the other hand. Her mouth felt like dry cotton when she tried to speak.
209 "Will it hurt her? Will she be... all right?"

210 "He said of all the hoof ailments horses get, an abscess is the most
211 treatable. He expects a full recovery if we do the proper rehabilitation after
212 the drainage surgery."

213 Sitting up straighter, Mary asked, "Well, of course, we will. Won't we,
214 Papa?"

215 "The protocol for the abscess is antibiotics and saltwater soaks."

216 Mary's hands flew to cover her gaping mouth.

217 "Saltwater?"

218 "I know what you're thinking, but she doesn't need to go to Florida for an
219 abscess. She can soak in a bucket of Epson Salts in her rubber-mat-lined
220 stall."

221 Tears welled up again in Mary's eyes. "I'm sure if she could swim in the
222 ocean it would strengthen her legs after the surgery and heal her abscess
223 too. Evelyn could help us. Dr. Krane loves horses. He wouldn't mind at all."

224 Papa got up and paced the porch once more. "Two surgeries on a *horse*,
225 and now you want to take her to a beach resort."

226 "I promised Illusion we'd give her a chance to live," Mary pleaded. "What
227 would Mama do?"

228 He stood gazing out over the porch railing covered with violet flower
229 vines. Flipping his cap at a bee challenging his ownership of the porch, he

230 turned to Mary. "One thing for sure, I'm taking you to Florida to continue
231 your aquatic therapy as soon as I can arrange it."

232 "We can't go without Illusion." Her eyes pleaded.

233 Papa appealed to the heavens with one raised arm and a shake of his
234 pointed finger. "Do you see what I have to deal with?"

235 "Mama would want us to take Illusion."

236 The curtain fluttered, catching his eye, and a red-eyed, tear-stained Mrs.
237 Tate nodded yes to Papa.

238 "Guess I'm outmaneuvered and outnumbered." He frowned at his soiled
239 shirt and brushed futilely at the dirt for several long moments. Finally, a
240 soft sigh escaped his lips. "We should make plans to transport Illusion to
241 Florida then."

242 A cheer erupted from behind the rosebushes.

243 Papa gasped. "You too, Joe?"

244 Mary beamed and hugged herself. "She'll need a special horse trailer with
245 a sling to support her after her surgery. I'll ask Laura if we can take Treasure
246 with us to keep Illusion company."

247 "You know, a little legal issue still needs to be resolved."

248 "Legal issue?" Mary grimaced in her immediate alarm.

249 "We don't own her."

250 Mary's eyes grew huge. "But Laura said..."

251 "I know. No matter what Laura said, it needs to be finalized. You want
252 her forever, right?"

253 Mary smiled triumphantly and burst into song. Her arms waved to
254 punctuate her heart's melody. Looking hopefully at Papa, she asked, "Can
255 we go buy her now? We have to tell Illusion and Laura the news."