

HORSE FEVER

Bonnie Bryant

Bantam



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MEET
THE SADDLE CLUB

Horse lover **CAROLE ...**
Practical joker **STEVIE ...**
Straight-A **LISA ...**

- #1 HORSE CRAZY
- #2 HORSE SHY
- #3 HORSE SENSE
- #4 HORSE POWER
- #5 TRAIL MATES
- #6 DUDE RANCH
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- #19 STAR RIDER
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- #22 FOX HUNT
- #23 HORSE TROUBLE
- #24 GHOST RIDER
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- #33 HIGH HORSE
- #34 HAY FEVER
- #35 HORSE TALE
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#37 STAGE COACH
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#45 STABLE GROOM
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#52 RIDING CLASS
#53 HORSE-SITTERS
#54 GOLD MEDAL RIDER
#55 GOLD MEDAL HORSE
#56 CUTTING HORSE
#57 TIGHT REIN
#58 WILD HORSES
#59 PHANTOM HORSE
#60 HOBBYHORSE
#61 BROKEN HORSE
#62 HORSE BLUES
#63 STABLE HEARTS
#64 HORSE CAPADES
#65 SILVER STIRRUPS
#66 SADDLE SORE
#67 SUMMER HORSE
#68 SUMMER RIDER
#69 ENDURANCE RIDE
#70 HORSE RACE
#71 HORSE TALK
#72 HOLIDAY HORSE
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#84 SCHOOLING HORSE
#85 HORSE FEVER

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#2 THE SECRET OF THE STALLION
#3 WESTERN STAR
#4 DREAM HORSE
#5 BEFORE THEY RODE HORSES
#6 NIGHTMARE
#7 CHRISTMAS TREASURE

THE END OF THE SADDLE CLUB?

Lisa and Stevie each knew what the other was thinking. They ought to have gone to Pin Hollow. Stevie spoke first. “Uh, I better hang up. My mom will be home soon, and I’ll be in big trouble if she thinks I watched TV all day.”

“I have to go, too,” Lisa said. “But, hey,” she added, remembering her new role as Stevie’s coach, “I’ll see you tomorrow, bright and early!”

After putting the phone down, Lisa stared up at her picture of The Saddle Club and the horses. Horse-crazy? she thought. They sure weren’t acting it. Willing to help each other out in any situation? While Carole was helping out, the two of them were sitting at home. “But we always help out!” Lisa wailed. “Why can’t someone else help out for a while?” The picture didn’t answer. It just stared back at her accusingly. How long would she and Stevie go, she seemed to ask, breaking both rules of The Saddle Club?

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THE SADDLE CLUB



HORSE FEVER



BONNIE BRYANT



A SKYLARK BOOK
NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

HORSE FEVER

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Excerpt from Pine Hollow #1: The Long Ride

About the Author

DIMLY, FROM FAR away, Stevie Lake heard a noise. A loud noise. A loud, insistent, blaring noise that might have been an alarm clock. Her alarm clock. It *might* have been. She couldn't be sure, of course. It was probably better to ignore it. *Who knows? Maybe it'll go away.* She rolled over in bed and clamped a pillow to her head. Unfortunately the blare seemed to get louder. Then another noise was added to it. It was the sound of yelling: boys' yelling.

"Stevie! Stevie, wake up!"

"Stevie, we're late!"

"Stevie, get up! You overslept!"

A hand on her arm jarred Stevie out of her half sleep. Blinking and rubbing her eyes, she struggled to sit up. What she saw was not her idea of a pleasant awakening: Her three brothers, Chad, Michael, and Alex, were standing beside her bed. "Stevie!" Alex cried, his voice desperate. "We've gotta hurry! We all overslept and we're late for school!"

"You mean we—"

"The car pool left without us!" Chad interrupted.

"Mom says we've gotta walk!" Michael cried.

Instantly Stevie's mood changed from mild annoyance to utter panic. She had been late for school three times already—one more and she'd have to stay after. She sprang from her bed. "I'll meet you downstairs in two minutes!" she yelled, shooing the boys out.

"All right, but hurry!" Alex urged again.

Thank God for brothers, Stevie thought, running to the closet. Now that she was awake she dimly remembered hitting the Snooze button—ten or eleven times.

Stevie threw open her closet doors. A gargantuan pile of dirty clothes spilled out—jeans, turtlenecks, socks, underwear, skirts, and blouses. She riffled through the mostly empty hangers in desperation. "My kingdom for some clean clothes!" she cried, charging out into the hall. If by some miracle she could find something in the dryer, she swore she would never ever play a trick on her brothers again, never turn up her nose at broccoli—

"Watch where you're going, Steph—!"

"Aaahhh!"

In her haste to get to the laundry room, Stevie ran smack-dab into her mother. Mrs. Lake put a settling hand on her daughter's shoulder. "What's your hurry, dear?"

"Oh, Mom, I'm in major trouble!" Stevie began. "I'm late for school and I can't find anything to wear and—" In the middle of her breathless explanation, Stevie noticed something. Her mother was wearing a bathrobe. Stevie hardly ever saw her mother in a bathrobe. Mrs. Lake was always up and dressed before the rest of the family. She left for work when her children left for school. The only time she hung out in her bathrobe was on .

"*Saturday!*" Stevie screamed, a horrible realization dawning on her.

"Yes, dear, I know it's Saturday," Mrs. Lake began, "and we're going to make cookies— But Stevie was already halfway down the stairs.

"You're dead meat!" she shrieked.

Chad, Michael, and Alex ran for cover in the basement. “Barricade the door!” Chad yelled.

Stevie stopped short as the door closed in her face. “You’re just lucky I didn’t start on the way to school!” she growled. “You’re dead as it is, but if I had walked to Fenton, you’d be even deader!”

On the other side of the door, Stevie’s brothers howled with laughter. “As if you could walk to school!” came Alex’s muffled voice. “It would take you so long the day would be over!”

Stevie’s eyes narrowed. There were some offenses that could not go unpunished. As she looked around for a suitable chair to use as a battering ram, her father appeared in the hallway. “*Pssst!* Come on!” he urged. “I got a dozen doughnuts and you can have first dibs!”

Stevie hesitated, watching her father disappear into the kitchen. She was trapped, caught between her desire to murder her twin, Alex, on the spot, and her desire to eat all the honey-dipped doughnuts and leave only the jelly ones for her brothers. Chad and Michael were as obnoxious as ever, but *Alex* ... Lately Alex was even more insufferable. Ever since he had taken up track and basketball at Fenton, he was constantly going on about what great shape he was in. “You call that a sport!” he would say about horseback riding, Stevie’s athletic activity. *It isn’t fair*, Stevie thought grumpily. *Riding gets no respect, fitness-wise. Everyone thinks you just sit there ...*

“Riding!” Stevie clapped a hand to her mouth, remembering. That was why her alarm had been set in the first place. She had a lesson that morning—a dressage lesson and the first lesson since Christmas. Warning of future vengeance on her siblings, she ran back up the stairs. Halfway up, though, she felt her energy sag. In her bedroom she sat down on the bed, fighting off the temptation to curl up under the covers. For some reason, she felt more like eating doughnuts, going back to sleep, making cookies with her mom—any and all of the above—than having a riding lesson. She dragged herself up and went over to the massive laundry pile. It was no surprise that each pair of jeans was filthier than the last, and that her sole pair of breeches was even worse. Riding all the time generated a *lot* of dirty clothes, and Mrs. Lake was adamant about her children doing their own laundry. With a sigh Stevie picked up the least offensive pair and went to the bathroom to sponge off the stains. *Maybe*, she thought grimly, *this is what they mean by waking up on the wrong side of the bed*. It sure felt like it, anyway. She was tired before the day had even started!

LISA ATWOOD HAD her nose in a book. She could hear her mother honking in the driveway, but she ignored it. If she could just get to the end of chapter three ... The horn sounded again, more insistent this time. With a loud, long-suffering sigh, Lisa slapped shut *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She grabbed her gloves off the side table and ran for the car. “Coming, Mom!”

Riding over to Pine Hollow, Lisa gave in to her bad mood. Here it was, Christmas vacation and she had more homework than ever. Lately the teachers seemed to view vacation as an excuse to heap on more work. It made it so that even homework she normally would have enjoyed, like reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, became a chore.

And naturally, just when Lisa was feeling swamped at school, her mother started piling on the tasks at home. “... and you need to get a haircut,” Mrs. Atwood was saying. “You also need to exchange the dress Aunt Meg and Uncle Bob gave you. And have you written your thank-you notes yet?”

“No,” Lisa muttered grumpily. Only *her* mother would ask a question like that so soon after the holiday!

“But you’ll start them today?” Mrs. Atwood prompted.

“Yes, Mom,” Lisa said wearily.

“Good,” said her mother, looking pleased. “Don’t forget Mrs. Chambers. She gave you the needlepoint kit.”

Lisa let out a loud sigh. The winter before, she had learned embroidery to please her mother. This year her mother’s friend Mrs. Chambers had given her a needlepoint kit. Wouldn’t the arts and crafts never end?

“What’s wrong, dear? I thought you liked needlepoint. And this pattern is so cute, right with your alley with the horse heads and the blue ribbons. Celeste was so nice to pick it out specially for you.”

Lisa did have to admit she liked the pattern. And she was pretty good at needlepoint. But right now it just felt like another chore.

“You could finish it and give it to one of your friends for her birthday,” Mrs. Atwood persisted.

“That’s a good idea,” Lisa said to satisfy her mother. It would certainly be an unusual gift. Stevie or Carole would never be caught dead doing needlepoint!

“Now what about the haircut? When should I make your appointment? I hope Charles can fit you in before school starts. Of course,” Mrs. Atwood added pointedly, “it would be easier if you didn’t spend every waking moment at Pine Hollow ...”

Lisa was too tired to argue with her mother’s favorite complaint. The truth was, Lisa knew how much easier her life would have been if she hadn’t been totally horse-crazy. She would have had more time for homework, more time for school activities, more time to relax, even to And relaxing, as Lisa had learned the hard way, was an important “activity” for an overachiever like herself.

“I’ll tell you what,” Mrs. Atwood remarked. “I have an appointment today. It’s my weekly wash and style. Why don’t you take it, dear? I can skip a week; my hair ought to hold out all right. I could pick you up right after your lesson, on my way back from the supermarket. How does that sound?” Lisa’s mother looked expectantly at her.

Lisa opened her mouth to protest, but then she stopped. Normally she and her two best friends, Stevie Lake and Carole Hanson, hung out at Pine Hollow after their lessons. They would clean tack, fuss over their horses, and help out with whatever work needed to be done around the barn. Today, the first Saturday after Christmas, there would be lots of work. The instructor and the owner of the stables, Max Regnery, probably had a list of chores a mile long. Or if he didn’t, his mother, Mrs. Reg, would. Mrs. Reg could always find things for the girls to do. For some reason the thought annoyed Lisa that morning. *Maybe*, she thought defensively, *I just don’t feel like cleaning tack today*. For a moment she allowed herself to visualize her other option: sitting in a salon chair having her hair washed. Soaking in the ambience at Cosmo Cuts. Flipping through the teen magazines her mother never let her buy. The picture brought a smile to her lips. She could get the special conditioning treatment, the cut and style, the blow-dry ...

Lisa never skimped, not on anything, especially not on anything to do with horses. If she had, she wouldn’t have been a member of The Saddle Club, the group she, Stevie, and Carole

had started. Still, her friends would understand if she had to leave early just this once. “A right, Mom,” she said before she had time to feel guilty, “that sounds good.”

* * *

CAROLE HANSON WAS the first member of The Saddle Club to arrive at Pine Hollow. She almost always was. Even though all three girls were horse-crazy—being horse-crazy and being willing to help one another out were the two requirements of the club—Carole was a bit crazier. She was passionate about horses. Per her request, her father had dropped her off a full hour before the lesson was to begin.

After giving her horse, Starlight, a good grooming, Carole headed to the tack room to get the gelding’s saddle and bridle, whistling on the way. She had an entire day to spend at the barn, and she couldn’t wait to saddle up. She was going to give Starlight a nice long warm-up to get the kinks out before their dressage lesson. Starlight had been given a few days off over Christmas, and Carole knew he would have some extra energy. If she didn’t work it out before the lesson, he would be skittish in front of Max. Carole always knew when the gelding was going to act up. She knew his faults to a tee—which wasn’t surprising, since she had trained him. It was part of what made them such great partners.

The tack room was empty and quiet. Carole was about to load up with tack when something caught her eye. It was the new edition of *Horseman’s Weekly*. She sat down on the tack trunk to take a quick peek. She liked to thumb through the paper. First she would skim the horse show results to see if she recognized any names. Then she would read “Pony Club News.” Finally she would take the horseman’s quiz at the back.

This week’s issue was pretty slim, though. It was January, so there weren’t many competitions to cover. Ditto “Pony Club News.” And the quiz was too easy. As if, Carole thought indignantly, there was anyone out there who didn’t know that the walk had four beats; the trot, two; and the canter, three. *Please!* Idly Carole scanned the “Hunt Club News” and the advertisements. She didn’t usually bother with the ads. She wasn’t looking for a horse, after all. But they could be interesting to read. It was fun to imagine what kind of person would be looking for what kind of horse.

“‘Ten-point-two Shetland,’ ” Carole read aloud, “ ‘goes English and Western, drives, Pony Clubs.’ ” That was an easy call. A pony like that would go to a little boy or girl looking for their first horse—bought by a parent who put safety first. The ad below the Shetland was completely different: “ ‘Superbly talented four-year-old jumper,’ ” Carole read. That was a horse that would probably go to a professional—somebody like Max, Carole mused, a rider who wanted a horse that could be trained to win, then resold at a profit.

Curious now, Carole read on. There was an Arabian that sounded like a nice trail horse; an Appaloosa that had won at barrel racing; a seasoned hunter; an unbroken yearling colt. They all really seemed to be a horse for every kind of rider under the sun. That was what made horse shopping so fascinating, Carole thought. You could never get to know all of them. The types were endless.

“Carole, you here yet?”

Stevie’s voice startled Carole out of her reverie. “I’m in the tack room!” she called.

A moment later Stevie burst in. “Belle’s a mess,” she announced. “She looks like she’s been rolling in mud for three straight days.” Belle was Stevie’s horse, a Saddlebred-Arabian cross.

“I hate to say it,” Carole joked, “but she probably has been.”

“I know, I know—the pastures are muddy swamps from all the rain,” Stevie said, flopping down beside Carole. She peered over Carole’s shoulder. “What’s this? Oh, cool! The new *Horseman’s Weekly*. Are you looking for a new horse?”

“Of course not!” Carole retorted. “I was just looking at the ads for fun!”

Stevie gave her friend a strange look. “I was just kidding, Carole,” she said.

“OH—RIGHT,” SAID Carole, embarrassed.

“Maybe I should trade Belle in,” Stevie joked, “and get a horse that doesn’t like mud!”

Now Carole laughed for real. Everyone knew that such a horse didn’t exist. “Let me see ... who would you buy?” she asked. “The ‘superbly talented four-year-old?’ ”

“Nah—too green.” Stevie leaned over the newspaper, reading. “Hmmm ... How about this one: ‘sixteen-point-two hand, eight-year-old Dutch warmblood. Experienced, high-level dressage horse. Big, floating trot—’ ”

Carole leaned in, too. “Wait, where’s that one? I didn’t see it before.”

Stevie pointed to the ad. “Sounds pretty nice, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Carole, surprised that she had missed it.

“Especially for today’s dressage lesson,” Stevie added. “I love dressage, but I’m sick of it. The Saddlebred in Belle may love the ring, but the Arabian in her wants to be out on the trail. And lately the Arabian is winning!”

“Now, Stevie,” said Carole, assuming a teacherly tone, “flatwork is good for you. Walking, trotting, cantering, figure eights, bending, lengthening and shortening the stride—those are the fundamentals of all equitation. Until one masters—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stevie interrupted, a touch crossly. “I know dressage is good for you. But today I’d just rather ... go on a trail ride, okay?” With that she rose, picked up her saddle and slung Belle’s bridle over her shoulder. Sometimes Carole’s enthusiasm for everything she did with horses got the tiniest bit annoying. Carole would never have understood about wanting to stay home and sleep in. She would never have wanted to make cookies instead of going to the barn. She just didn’t think like that. Starlight was her whole life.

“Do you want to come tack up with me?” Stevie asked, softening her tone.

“In a sec,” Carole replied. “I—uh—I’ll be there in a sec.”

After Stevie had gone, Carole picked up *Horseman’s Weekly* again. She started to skim the ad columns for the warmblood’s ad.

“Hi, Carole!” called a voice. This time it was Lisa, stopping by to get Prancer’s tack. Hastily Carole closed the newspaper as Lisa stepped through the door.

“Are you going to enter the contest?” Lisa inquired.

“What contest?” said Carole, confused.

“Oh, well, I see you’re reading *Horseman’s Weekly*. They’re sponsoring their annual writing contest. Here, let me see.”

Carole handed the newspaper to Lisa, who thumbed the pages till she found the ad she was looking for. “See? “ ‘Annual short story contest ... This year’s topic: Write a story or the first chapter of a novel about a horse and rider facing a turning point ... word limit: fifteen hundred ...’ Well, you can read it for yourself.”

“Are you entering?” asked Carole. It sounded perfect for Lisa.

“I don’t know. I’m so busy.... I can’t really think of anything to write about, either. But you should enter, Carole.”

“You think so?”

Lisa shrugged. “Why not? It won’t take that much work, and the prize is usually a new saddle.” She folded the newspaper in half and laid it on a trunk. “Ready?”

“Ah ... yeah,” said Carole, eyeing the paper.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Is that yours? I thought it was the Pine Hollow copy.”

“It is,” said Carole, embarrassed again. “It is. I was just ... reading it.”

DRESSAGE. SOME PEOPLE pronounced it *dressage*. Some people said *dressage*. Either way, the goal was the same: to get the horse and rider moving in harmony. The horse was supposed to be supple, balanced, and attentive to its rider’s commands. The rider was supposed to be tall in the saddle, quiet, focused. Then why, Lisa wondered, did it feel as if every time Prancer went up, she went down? Why did Prancer stiffen through the corners as if she might tip over? Why did Lisa’s outside leg feel weak and her inside leg feel numb? Why couldn’t they look like the horses and riders in the textbooks on dressage? Every time Lisa passed the mirrors on the long side of the indoor ring, she cringed. She sneaked a glance at the rest of the class to see how her peers were faring.

Stevie and Carole didn’t seem to be doing much better. Belle was tossing her head—a sign of protest and impatience, not harmony. Starlight was prancing along. He looked as if his legs were overflowing with energy. Every so often he would shy at an imaginary ghost. Simon Atherton, on Barq, looked stiff and heavy-handed. The Arab was walking at a graveyard pace, leaning on the reins. Andrea Barry, riding her horse, Doc, had a pained, irritated expression on her face. After a moment Lisa guessed why: The girl’s boots looked brand new. They were probably a Christmas present she was breaking in—and if they were as tight as they looked, they were pinching her hard, making it impossible to use her legs properly. Finally Lisa focused on Veronica diAngelo. To Lisa’s annoyance, the snobbish girl looked relaxed and confident. Danny, Veronica’s top-dollar show horse, was walking happily along with a spring in his step. Veronica’s tanned face told the story: The diAngelos had taken one of their deluxe vacations, leaving stable hand Red O’Malley to exercise Danny. Whenever the diAngelos were away they paid extra to have the expensive horse exercised. Red was an excellent rider, so Veronica always came home to a well-schooled horse.

“Not bad, Veronica,” called Max from the center of the ring. “You’ve got him walking nicely on the bit.”

“He means, ‘Not bad, *Red*,’ ” grumbled Stevie as Belle caught up to Prancer.

Lisa flashed a grin at her friend. At least with The Saddle Club, she thought, you always saw the lighter side of things.

“All right, everyone pick up a trot—a sitting trot,” Max commanded.

Lisa saw Stevie grimace. Rising or posting to the trot was much easier. Sitting could be jarring and uncomfortable.

“Could it get any worse?” Stevie muttered, shortening her reins. “I’m sore already, from the warm-up.”

“At least we’re not riding without stirrups,” Lisa whispered.

As if he had heard her, Max looked right at the two of them and said, “No, wait a minute. First everyone drop his or her stirrups. *Then* pick up a sitting trot.”

Lisa and Stevie groaned in unison before doing what they’d been told.

Across the ring Carole murmured, “Darn! Darn, darn, darn!” This just wasn’t her day. She had been so busy reading *Horseman’s Weekly* that she had completely forgotten about giving Starlight a prelesson warm-up. Now he was paying her back by spooking at every shadow and speck of dirt. Steeling herself, Carole took her feet out of the stirrups, which she crossed over Starlight’s neck. Sure enough, the minute she picked up a trot, he got faster and faster, as if to say, “I hate dressage! When can we jump?”

“Have you been longeing him, Carole?” Max called.

Carole had no choice but to shake her head. “I—I haven’t had time,” she said, though she knew it was a lame excuse.

“Make time, Carole,” Max said sternly. “You know how fit he is. You’ve got to take the edge off.”

Carole said nothing, only nodded. The sole response she could have made was: “I know! I know!” As she rounded the corner of the ring near the stalls, Starlight plunged forward and gave a small buck. All at once Carole was fed up. Outwardly she remained calm; she was far too good a horsewoman to take out her frustration on her horse. She straightened him out and brought him back to a steady trot. But inwardly she wished she were mounted on a horse who *liked* these drills, who liked dressage, who didn’t need eight jumps in front of him to get down to work ...

“Lisa, your seat belongs in the saddle, not on Prancer’s neck. Simon, tighten your reins—they’re flopping all over the place. Stevie—*Stevie!*” Max sounded irate. “Did you hear me say *drop your stirrups?*”

“Yes,” came Stevie’s faint reply.

“*Then why are your feet in yours?*” Max demanded.

“Because my legs are killing me!” exclaimed Stevie, to the delight of the rest of the class.

“After five minutes?” Max asked doubtfully.

“Yes! Belle’s trot is so bouncy! Couldn’t we canter?”

“Blame your own fitness, Stevie, not your horse’s gait.”

“But Max,” Stevie pleaded, “five minutes on her is like ... half an hour on another horse!”

“Well, then, I suppose half an hour is like three hours. You can let me know if I’m right at the end of the lesson,” Max added, a glint in his eye. As Stevie moaned, Max dragged a few trotting poles into place and laid them on the ground. “All right. Starting with Simon, assume jumping position, turn down the center line, and trot over the poles.”

AT THE END of the lesson, Max summoned the riders into the center of the ring. “There now, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“I’ll never walk again,” Stevie muttered.

“Any questions?”

Simon Atherton put up a hand.

“Yes?”

“Why did we use trotting poles in a dressage lesson?” Simon asked. “I thought they were for warming up before jumping.”

“Good question. Who can answer it?”

Several hands were raised.

“They’re good for lengthening and shortening stride,” Andrea said.

“Right. Who else?”

“They make the horses pick up their feet?” Lisa guessed.

“Ye-es, okay: They make the horses pay attention and move more alertly,” said Ma

“Anyone else? Carole?”

Carole looked up from Starlight’s mane. “What? Sorry?” Brooding over her and Starlight’s poor performance, she had missed the question.

Max repeated it. “Give us a very basic answer.”

“Hmmm ... I guess they would make the lesson more interesting?” Carole ventured.

“That’s right. It’s very important to vary your schooling routine,” Max explained. “You shouldn’t just get on every day, walk, trot, canter, two cross rails, that’s that. Horses are like people: They get bored if they do the same thing over and over, just the way you would. I’m mentioning it now because it’s more of a problem in winter than in summer. In winter you’re riding indoors more, taking fewer trail rides, going to fewer competitions. Horses can get barn fever, which can make them cranky and stubborn. By throwing in a few surprises, like trotting poles in a dressage lesson, you can liven things up.”

“Is that what torturing your students does?” Stevie moaned. “Livens things up?”

“What? By riding without stirrups?” Max grinned. “No, that *toughens* things up—namely your legs and seat. I can’t have Pine Hollow turning into a bunch of couch potatoes just because it’s January!”

“Couch potatoes!” Stevie wailed. “I feel more like *mashed* potatoes!”

“Well, Stevie, you’ll have plenty of time to recover. First of all, I want everyone to take tomorrow off. It’s Sunday. Give yourselves a rest. And secondly, I have an announcement to make: This will be your last lesson for two weeks.” Max paused, looking slightly sheepish at the murmurs that followed. “No, I’m not going off to hunt in Ireland or teach clinics in England or judge an international Pony Club competition. I won’t be anywhere near horses for two weeks. I’m, uh, going on vacation.”

There was a spontaneous burst of applause from the group. Like many horse people, Max Regnery *never* went on vacation—except to take a busman’s holiday.

“Who talked you into it, Max?” Lisa inquired, though she had a pretty good idea of the answer.

“Deborah,” Max replied, as Lisa had thought he would. “Naturally.”

“Do you need a baby-sitter?” Stevie asked.

Max smiled. “No, but thanks for asking. We’re taking Maxi with us. We’re going up to Vermont to visit Deborah’s parents. The Hales would never speak to us again if we left the granddaughter with a sitter.”

Maxi was the Regnerys’ baby girl. The Saddle Club had been there when she was born, and they had taken her on her first horseback ride. Sometimes they felt like Maxi’s aunts.

“But,” Max continued, “getting back to the two weeks I’ll be away, I expect you all to work very hard. Your next lesson will be the Saturday after next.” He paused and seemed to be thinking. The Saddle Club waited nervously. The words *work very hard* followed by a silence could mean only one thing: Max was devising a scheme to *ensure* that they worked very hard. A moment later he spoke up again. “I want you all to work very hard,” he repeated. “So what doesn’t everyone plan on *demonstrating* what he or she has worked on? Instead of your usual lesson, I’ll expect a performance of sorts from each of you. It will be a little test to see ho

you do without supervision.”

Stevie, Lisa, and Carole exchanged glances. They weren't fooled for a minute by that word *little*. Max would expect real progress.

“Max?” Veronica said. “I'm afraid my performance will have to be on the slopes. You see,” she added with a giggle, “I'm going skiing out West for the next ten days.”

“I thought you already went on vacation!” Stevie blurted out indignantly.

Veronica smiled sweetly. “I already went on vacation to the *Caribbean*. I haven't taken my ski holiday yet.”

“Yes, well, you'll have to do the best you can, Veronica,” Max said shortly.

“All right, Max, I'll try my hardest,” she promised.

“Is Red going to be in charge?” Carole inquired, ignoring the gagging noises Stevie was directing at Veronica.

“Yes—Red and my mother. Stevie,” Max asked, “is something the matter?”

“Oh, no, Max. I was just wishing Veronica a great trip.” The change in Stevie's expression from disgust to innocence was so fast that Carole and Lisa had trouble keeping straight faces.

“You have a great trip, too, Max,” Stevie added.

“Thanks,” Max said dryly. “I will.”

AFTER THE LESSON, Lisa untacked in a hurry. She gave Prancer the barest brushing. There was no time to put polish on the mare's hooves, practice braiding her forelock, or go for that extra shine with the stable rag. She was barely going to make her hair appointment as it was. "Sorry, Prancer," she murmured. "I promise I'll make it up to you." She closed the door to Prancer's stall and latched it.

"Want to help me sweep the tack room?" Carole asked as the girls hung up their saddles and bridles.

"Uh, I can't today, Carole," Lisa said. "My mom's waiting. I have to get a haircut."

"Oh. Okay," said Carole.

"Where? Cosmo Cuts?" Stevie asked.

Lisa nodded. "It was the only time Charles could fit me in."

"Sure, I'll bet. You just want to get out of sweeping the tack room," Stevie teased.

"That's not true!" Lisa said hotly. "I always help out!"

Stevie looked at her friend, her eyebrows raised. "Jeez, what is it today? Nobody can take a joke!"

"Oh," said Lisa, embarrassed. "Sorry. Anyway, I guess I'll—I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"Monday, you mean," Carole corrected her. "We have tomorrow off."

"That's right!" Lisa exclaimed. Embarrassed for a second time, she realized how enthusiastic she sounded. "I mean, you know, that's, uh, right."

"Enjoy the pampering," Stevie murmured after her.

Lisa hurried out to the driveway. Her mother's gray sedan was waiting. As Lisa slid into the passenger side she heard someone call, "Bye, Lisa!" She craned her neck to see who it was. Veronica diAngelo was getting into the next car over—a chauffeured white Mercedes. "Leaving early, huh, Lisa?" Veronica said pointedly.

Annoyed, Lisa nodded. "Yeah. Haircut," she said, giving a brief wave as they drove off. It was one thing to have Carole and Stevie know she had left right after the lesson. It was another to be caught by Veronica.

"Wasn't that that nice diAngelo girl?" asked Mrs. Atwood. "I do wish you would invite her to sleep over sometime, Lisa. Her family is so well connected..."

STEVIE KNEW AN opportunity when she saw one. She sank down onto a tack trunk, yanked off her boots, and wiggled her toes. "Phew, what a lesson. I'm exhausted," she said. She eyed Carole narrowly. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Carole said. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know.... I was just thinking that, you know, I've got some laundry to do at home. And with Lisa gone, we're going to be a lot less efficient. So maybe we ought to, or say ..."

"Skip the barn work entirely?" Carole guessed, her black eyes sparkling.

Stevie grinned. Unlike Lisa, Stevie didn't mind being accused of ducking out on stable

chores. It was a well-known fact that Stevie despised barn work. She didn't really *hate* it, but work was work. And no work was the best work. She would have ducked out every day she could! "Now, Carole, I know what you're thinking, but—"

Carole was about to argue Stevie into staying when she caught sight of the *Horseman's Weekly* crushed under her friend's right ankle. A curious instinct seemed to take over. She heard herself saying, in a falsely bright voice, "Hey, we don't have to hang out every single day. It's vacation! We should enjoy ourselves."

Surprised, Stevie sat up. "Now you're talking!" she said. "So you'll head out with me?"

"Oh, no," Carole replied. "I can't. I've got to work with Starlight and organize my tack trunk and put my brushes in order and—"

"All right, all right, you're making me feel guilty!" Stevie protested.

"Don't," said Carole. "I mean, I want to stay awhile, but you do what you need to do."

Disconcerted, Stevie put her boots back on. She'd been all ready to bargain with Carole, but Carole was letting her off the hook completely.

"All right—well, bye," Stevie said when she was ready.

"Bye! Have fun!" Carole said.

"Thanks," Stevie said flatly. For the second time that day she found herself face-to-face with Carole's constant and total devotion to Starlight. And for the second time she found it annoying. Couldn't Carole ever think of anything else?

On the way out Stevie passed Belle's stall. She paused to say good-bye. She told herself she was just as devoted to Belle, but in a different way. "If you were a human, you wouldn't want to clean tack, either," she rationalized, rubbing the mare's forehead. "Would you, you Southern Belle?"

"Whoops, I better skedaddle!" she said, hearing Mrs. Reg coming down the aisle. Before the older woman could catch her idle, Stevie had jogged out of the barn and down the driveway. But after fifty yards she was forced to slow to a walk—actually more like a pained shuffle. Hobbling home, she chewed on a thumbnail. Could it be true what Alex had said about her level of physical fitness? "Ha!" she said aloud. "Let him try riding without stirrups!"

WHENEVER CAROLE ATE a piece of cake, she ate the cake first and saved the frosting for last. It was a habit she'd had for as long as she could remember. Sometimes it applied to other things like what she did that day: As soon as Stevie left, Carole snatched up *Horseman's Weekly* and turned right to the advertisements. But before letting herself study the ad Stevie had noticed, she reread some of the others. Then, making sure she was still alone, she slowly savored the "frosting."

16.2 hand, 8-year-old Dutch warmblood. Experienced, high-level dressage horse. Big, floating trot, excellent extensions. Imported from Holland three years ago. Has won major dressage competitions, both locally and nationally. King's Ransom is ready to go all the way with the right rider.

Carole looked up. She could almost see the horse's "big, floating trot." The phrase *the right rider* sent a shiver down her spine. What exactly did it mean? Did it mean an Olympic-level dressage rider? Or maybe a young rider with a lot of potential? Carole read the ad once more. Warmbloods, as she knew, were wonderful horses. Bigger and steadier than Thoroughbreds, they were bred for dressage and eventing, whereas Thoroughbreds were bred

for racing. Originally from Europe, many types of warmbloods were now bred in the United States. Still, a horse that was imported had a certain allure, almost as if it were more authentic. It was one of Carole's wildest dreams to be able to import a horse of her own. As she pictured herself in Holland or Germany, touring the national studs, the door opened and a woman came in.

"So you've got the *Horseman's Weekly*," she said.

Carole looked up. "Yeah, I was just reading about the annual writing contest," she lied, wondering, as she did so, why she would bother to fib to a stranger. "Did you want the paper?"

"I'll have a look at the ads, if you don't mind. But go ahead, tear out the page for the contest."

"That's okay. I'll—I'll just copy down the rules later." Hastily Carole handed over the paper.

"Thanks. I'm Pat Naughton, by the way," said the woman, extending a hand.

Carole shook it. "Carole—"

"Oh, I know who you are, Carole."

"You do?" said Carole. On closer look she thought she recognized the woman as well.

"Of course. You own Starlight. You and he are one of the top junior teams at Pine Hollow. You've won everything—Pony Club, dressage, eventing, jumping—"

"Mostly jumping," Carole broke in, flattered and flustered at the same time. "Jumping is our favorite and it's what we're best at."

Pat Naughton beamed. "I'll say. I've watched you two in lessons. Starlight's fantastic over fences."

"He's a great natural jumper—" Carole began.

"Who had a great trainer," Pat finished for her. "But you sure are lucky. If I had a horse even half as perfect as Starlight, I wouldn't have to spend my days scouring the ads." She tapped the newspaper. "Anything good this week?"

"What are you looking for?" Carole inquired politely.

"That's what I keep asking myself!" said Pat. "May I?" She sat down beside Carole. "You see, I haven't owned a horse since I was your age. I just got back into riding a year ago, when my daughter started kindergarten. I used to show. I rode hunters, jumpers, equitation—you name it. But this dressage stuff is pretty new to me."

Carole nodded understandingly. "I'll bet you were doing dressage before without even knowing it."

"Really?" said Pat. "All this 'on the bit' stuff?"

Carole laughed. "Sure. All that means is that the horse is moving forward from the leg and accepting rather than resisting the bit."

Pat looked impressed. "Wow."

Feeling shy, Carole averted her eyes. She was used to grown-ups being surprised at the information that would come popping out of her mouth, making her sound much older than she was. "It—It sounds like you want a good all-around horse," she suggested, looking up again. "And probably something ... experienced?"

"Definitely!" Pat exclaimed. "I've got a daughter at home. I don't need a green horse to raise at the same time."

Slowly, with a few knowledgeable questions, Carole managed to piece together an idea of what Pat wanted in her new horse. Horse shopping was not a precise science. A rider could not expect to go out and find her dream horse, especially since a lot of the ads would exaggerate the pluses and downplay the horse's faults. But it was good to at least have an idea of which characteristics—age, experience, and breed, for example—were most important. Some riders had little idiosyncrasies, like a favorite color, but Pat's requirements were fairly straightforward. Besides experience, she needed a large horse because she was tall. Because of her daughter, she wanted something quiet-tempered. "It doesn't seem as if it would be that hard," Pat confessed, "but I've been looking for over a month with no luck."

"Let's take a look," suggested Carole, her enthusiasm for the project mounting. "You never know. This could be your lucky week."

Together she and Pat pored over the advertisements. Pat had a pencil, and whenever she saw something she liked, she marked it. Pretty soon Carole had Pat's system figured out: a star meant "sounds great," a circle meant "worth looking into," and a squiggle meant "probably not but might as well give them a call." The "seasoned hunter" got a star. The "superbly talented four-year-old" got a squiggle. Then Pat poised her pencil above the Dutch warmblood. Carole felt her stomach turn with apprehension.

"Gosh, this warmblood sounds like a beauty," Pat remarked.

"He sure does," Carole said quietly.

Pat chewed the end of her pencil. "Hmmm ... 'Imported,' it says. 'King's Ransom' ... *Costs king's ransom, I'll bet!*"

"Gosh, I never thought of price," Carole admitted, her face falling.

"Heck, why should you? You're not looking yourself," said Pat.

"Oh, I know," Carole said hastily. "I mean—I never thought of price for you."

"Don't worry," Pat joked. "My husband will think plenty." Her eyes scanned the page. "No price listed on the warmblood. Naturally. They never put the price when they're asking for a bundle. Well, we'll give it a circle, anyway."

Carole didn't stop to analyze why, but she was glad—glad that the warmblood got a circle instead of a star.

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