

HORSE WHISPERS

Bonnie Bryant

Bantam



A SPECIAL BOND

All at once the mare pulled free. Her eyes rolling wildly, she reared, then shied away.

“Grab her!” Frank called.

Stevie lunged for the lead shank but missed.

“No! Let me,” Carole ordered. Instinct took over. She walked slowly toward the mare. She breathed in and out, in and out, willing the mare to sense the calming rhythm. She whispered nonsense words. Everyone watched as the mare stopped and listened to Carole. Carole inched closer. She reached out and stroked the mare’s shoulder. Then she unclipped the lead line. She put it into her pocket. She knew she wouldn’t need it. The mare followed Carole into the barn.

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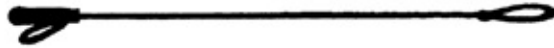
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THE SADDLE CLUB



HORSE
WHISPERS



BONNIE BRYANT



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

HORSE WHISPERS

A Bantam Skylark Book / February 1998

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For information address: Bantam Books.

eISBN: 978-0-307-82575-9

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada.

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I would like to express my special thanks

*to Caitlin Macy for her help
in the writing of this book.*

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“WAKE UP, SLEEPYHEADS! Time to get up!” a voice called.

Stevie Lake stirred in her sleeping bag and cocked one eye open. “What time is it?” she croaked.

“Five of seven,” murmured Lisa Atwood, half-asleep in the upper bunk.

“Ouch!” Carole Hanson said across the bunkhouse room. “That’s uncivilized!”

The girls were used to getting up early for school, but this was vacation! They had arrived at the Bar None Ranch in Colorado very late the night before. Instead of going straight to bed, they had gone straight to the barn to visit their favorite horses.

“That’s the one and only drawback to spending February break at a working ranch,” Stevie groaned. “I can’t get the sleep my growing body needs.”

“You miss the eight hours, huh?” said Lisa, beginning to wake up in spite of herself.

“Eight?” Stevie scoffed. “Are you kidding? More like fifteen! We’re talking the nine-to-noon schedule! I mean, if I wake up before—”

She was interrupted by a loud knock on the door. “Time to get up!” The voice paused. “*Breakfast is ready!*”

“Breakfast!” Stevie exclaimed, letting her previous thought go unfinished. “That’s more like it!” In thirty seconds she was out of bed and yanking jeans and a sweater on over her long underwear. She flung the bunkhouse door open. “Wait up, Kate! I’m right behind you!” she yelled. She took off across the snow after the girls’ friend and hostess at the ranch, Kate Devine.

Lisa and Carole sat up in bed and laughed. “I guess Stevie remembered the big plus about staying at the Bar None—the one that counterbalances the early hours,” Lisa said.

“The food!” Carole guessed.

“Yup. Shall we?” said Lisa. “My stomach’s growling.”

“Mine too,” Carole answered. Gritting her teeth, she sprang from bed into the frigid air of the bunkhouse, and Lisa followed suit.

It made Carole happy to hear Lisa sounding enthusiastic about eating. Unlike Stevie, who basically lived to eat, Lisa had more complicated feelings about food. Not so long ago, she had a bout with near anorexia that had scared all three of the girls. Luckily Carole and Stevie had been able to help Lisa weather the problem. *The Saddle Club comes through again*, Carole thought, tying her long dark hair back in a ponytail.

The unique thing about the girls’ friendship was that they weren’t *just* friends, they were also members of a club called The Saddle Club, which they had started but which now included honorary out-of-town members such as Kate Devine. The club took its name from the girls’ love of horses. But there was another important rule for joining: Members had to be willing to help each other out in any situation, whether that situation was a parental conflict, a boy problem, or something more serious.

“Come on, spacey! Quit zoning out, zip up that jacket, and we’re outta here!” Lisa said.

Carole grinned. The other thing about The Saddle Club was that they all knew each other so well it was scary. Lisa was known for being a perfectionist, Stevie for her practical jokes, and Carole for spacing out about everything except horses. “Guilty as charged,” she murmured, tailing Lisa out the door.

A few minutes later the two had joined Stevie, Kate, and the rest of the Bar None crew for breakfast. Meals were served in the main house’s dining room on long tables. Because of the time of year, there were only a few hardy guests at the ranch, so everyone could fit at one table. Kate introduced The Saddle Club to two older couples, who nodded politely.

“Boy oh boy, that coffee smells good,” said Stevie, sniffing the air appreciatively. “I can hardly wait.”

Kate looked at her skeptically. “Since when do you drink coffee?”

“Oh, I don’t *drink* it!” said Stevie. “I just—well, I *smell* it and it ... it whets my appetite.”

“As if the Lake appetite needed whetting!” Lisa protested.

At that moment Mrs. Devine emerged from the kitchen with a huge bowl of steaming hot cereal. “You might want to go easy on the oatmeal,” she warned, “because this is only the beginning.”

Undeterred, Stevie ladled herself a large portion, covered it with granola and raisins, and smothered the whole thing with cream.

Kate stood up and whispered something in her mother’s ear.

“Yes, you may have the leftover apple pies for breakfast, too. I’m warming them now,” replied Mrs. Devine.

“Pie? For breakfast? Why didn’t you say so?” Stevie wailed. “I would have left out the raisins!”

For the next hour, Mrs. Devine shuttled back and forth between kitchen and dining room, refusing the girls’ offers of help. After the oatmeal came scrambled eggs, Canadian bacon, corn muffins with homemade preserves, and the promised apple pies.

When they were stuffed and groaning, The Saddle Club agreed that, as usual, Kate’s mother had outdone herself.

Even Lisa had managed to eat a full meal. Forking a last bite, she sighed and said, “If only I could cook like this.”

“You *are* the best cook in the world, Mom,” Kate said.

Stevie opened her mouth to add her vote but stopped. “I was about to agree, but I just realized I can’t. No offense, but as a good daughter I have to say that *my* mother is the best cook in the world ... Phyllis.”

In Willow Creek the girls called each other’s parents “Mrs. Lake” and “Mr. Atwood.” But Phyllis and Frank had a firm rule at the Bar None: first names only. It made for a more casual atmosphere. Sometimes, though, it seemed strange, like right then when Stevie had hesitated before saying “Phyllis.”

Kate and Stevie sparred teasingly for a couple of minutes, and Lisa chimed in to the debate. Then Lisa noticed that Carole wasn’t saying anything. She felt a pang of remorse. Carole’s mother had died a few years earlier. Maybe she felt left out. “Say, Carole?” she murmured.

To her relief, Carole looked up, utterly lost in thought. Then she smiled. “Oh, gosh, was I spacing again? I was thinking about Starlight’s dressage test a few weeks ago. He really carried his corners.”

Phyllis Devine and the girls laughed.

“What did I miss?” Carole asked sheepishly.

“We were debating over who the best cook in the world is,” Lisa said.

“That’s easy,” said Carole. “My dad—but only when I help him.”

“I’ll bet you’re a big help to him, the way Kate is to me,” said Phyllis.

“I try to be. At first I didn’t know anything, but now I can get around in the kitchen. After my mom died, we sort of learned together,” Carole explained.

“Boy, I wish I could get around in the kitchen,” Lisa muttered.

“You could learn,” Phyllis responded. “Anyone can learn to cook, Lisa.”

“Thanks,” Lisa said without much enthusiasm. “But the problem is that I have to learn about five days.”

“Why? Are you having a dinner party?” Stevie teased.

To her surprise, Lisa nodded.

“You are?”

“Yup. Well, not exactly a dinner party, but I have to cook a family meal over break.”

“Why? Has your mom decided you should become a French chef?” Carole guessed. Mrs. Atwood was known for making Lisa learn “domestic skills” such as needlepoint and flower arranging.

“Hardly. In fact, cooking is the one thing she doesn’t make me do—or even *let* me do. My mom’s so perfect in the kitchen that she doesn’t let me near the stove. No, this is for school. I have to cook the meal, take pictures of it, and write a report including all my recipes,” Lisa explained with a sigh.

“Gosh, by the sound of your voice, I’d guess you had to catalog your stamp collection. But cooking’s fun!” Phyllis said encouragingly.

“Maybe when it’s *for* fun. But half of my home ec final grade is going to be based on this one meal,” Lisa said, “and I can’t even boil an egg!”

“Fiddlesticks,” replied Phyllis.

“No, it’s true! I tried and almost torched my teacher’s hair!” Lisa wailed.

“Now, that sounds like a good idea,” Stevie put in.

“Don’t laugh! I’m getting a B-minus!” Lisa said. But then she started laughing, too. Another major difference between Lisa and Stevie was that while Stevie scraped by in school and prayed every day for a natural disaster to close the place for good, Lisa loved her classes and got straight As—at least, she usually did.

“Excuse me,” said one of the female guests from the end of the table. “I couldn’t help overhearing the conversation. I didn’t know they even *offered* home economics at school anymore.”

Lisa nodded unhappily. “In Willow Creek, Virginia, they *require* it,” she said. “We have to take a semester each of home ec and shop. Only now home ec is called Nutrition and Household Management, and shop is called Advanced Woodworking. Boy, do I wish I were back sawing boards!”

“It’s not fair,” Stevie declared. “Public schools have all the fun! I would kill to take shop and home ec! But no, Fenton thinks every last class has to be an ‘enriching academic experience.’ ”

At home in Willow Creek, Carole and Lisa attended the local public school, and Stevie went

to a private day school, Fenton Hall.

“So you’re saying you’d *like* to learn how to cook, Stevie?” Phyllis inquired.

“And how!” said Stevie. “I can make spaghetti and cookies and pancakes and stuff, but real food is over my head. Gosh, if I could make pies like these, I could feed myself all day long. She sighed blissfully at the thought.

“All right, that’s a good enough reason. And Lisa, you *have* to learn,” said Phyllis. “So why don’t I teach both of you this week? There’s no better place to learn than the Bar None kitchen. Heck, I’ve even taught cowboys how to cook!”

“Say, Mom,” Kate piped up. “Couldn’t Lisa make her big meal for the Bar None family? It doesn’t have to be *your* family, does it, Lisa?”

Lisa shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. The only rule is that I have to cook for at least four people.” She laughed. “And I don’t think that would be a problem here.” The Bar None was known for its massive gatherings at mealtimes. The Devines often invited neighbors and employees to join in the festivities with their guests.

“Do you mean it?” Stevie asked. “You’d really teach us how to cook?”

“Of course I mean it! We’ll start this afternoon.”

“That would be great. I don’t want to ask my mom because I know we’ll get into a huge fight,” Lisa said. This had already happened once. There was no way Lisa was going to deal with it again.

“And I don’t want to ask *my* mom because my stupid brothers will make fun of everything I make and then they’ll eat it all!” said Stevie.

At the other end of the table, the guests laughed. “Typical boys!” said a gray-haired woman, standing up to leave. “My brothers were exactly the same.”

“Are you off for the day, Brenda?” Phyllis asked.

“Yes, we’re going to head out,” said the woman. All four of the guests thanked their hosts for the breakfast and excused themselves.

“Let me know if you need anything,” Phyllis urged.

“I can’t think of a thing,” one of the husbands replied. “We’re off to snowshoe right now and we’re going to eat lunch in town, so we probably won’t see you till dinner.” With a nod to the girls, the foursome left the dining room.

When they had gone, Phyllis poured herself another cup of coffee and sat back in her chair. “Gosh, I love old guests. The McHughs and the Martins have been coming here since we bought the place. I feel like they’re almost family. They’ve been with us through thick and thin. And now they’ll get to share a real *family* dinner with us.” Then she added, looking at Lisa, “As long as you’re game.”

Lisa gulped. “I—I’m game. If you think I can do it.”

“I know you can. Especially with Stevie as your helper. How about you, Carole, do you want to lend a helping hand?” Phyllis asked.

Stevie and Lisa glanced at their friend. From the doubtful expression on Carole’s face, they knew she was thinking one thing and one thing only: Time spent in the kitchen was time away from the barn.

“You know what? I’d rather surprise Carole with our concoctions,” Stevie said hurriedly. “She can be the taste tester.”

Carole shot Stevie a thankful glance.

“That’s an even better idea. Besides,” Phyllis continued, her eyes twinkling to show she understood, “I wouldn’t want to rob my husband of *all* his help in the barn.”

“Speaking of Frank, where is he hiding this morning?” Carole asked. She was surprised the head of the Bar None hadn’t turned up for breakfast with them. Frank was as big a fan of his wife’s cooking as The Saddle Club was, and with all the outdoor work he did, his appetite rivaled Stevie’s.

“Dad’s out at the barn,” Kate replied. “He got a new load of horses in this morning dawn. He and John and the other guys have been settling them in since then.”

Carole’s eyes lit up at the words a *new load of horses*. Lisa’s eyes lit up at the name *John*. Both had to fight off an instinct to charge outside the way Stevie had at the mention of breakfast. The two of them started to talk at once.

“Where did the horses—”

“Did John say—”

They stopped, looked at each other, and burst out laughing.

Kate smiled knowingly. “Carole, the horses are from a dealer in Wyoming. He’s done business with Dad before. There are five new ones, mares and geldings, all broken to saddle. Lisa, John has asked me ten times when you guys were arriving. He can’t wait to see you.”

The Saddle Club laughed some more. Even without hearing their questions, Kate had known how to answer.

Carole was so excited by the news of the horses that she automatically stood up and began to clear the breakfast dishes. Meanwhile she talked a mile a minute. “Five? Wow. Do you know anything about their breeding? How old are they? What colors? Do they go English or Western or just Western?” Laughing, Kate and Stevie helped her clear.

Phyllis tried to protest. “Girls, there’ll be plenty of time to help out! Why don’t you relax. This is your first day. I can get these.”

But the girls insisted. Laden with plates, they trooped off to the kitchen.

Lisa sat for one last minute at the table. She stared out the window at the snowbanks and gave a little sigh. John Brightstar was the son of the Devines’ head wrangler. His heritage was Native American and his looks, Lisa thought with a pang, were tall, dark, and handsome. During the course of The Saddle Club’s many visits to the ranch, Lisa had gotten to know him very well. They were friends, but they were something more than friends, too. Lisa was excited that John couldn’t wait to see her. She couldn’t wait to see him, either.

AFTER HELPING PHYLLIS load the oversize ranch dishwasher, The Saddle Club hurried back to the bunkhouse to change. It was very important to wear appropriate clothing in the barn. Looks didn't matter, but safety did, and most important was a pair of hard-soled shoes. Stevie always wore her ancient cowboy boots. Carole wore lace-up paddock boots. And Lisa switched between the English jodhpur boots her mother had bought her and the rubbersole leather-topped duck boots she preferred.

Kate came along to talk with the girls while they threw off their sneakers and dug around in their suitcases for barn shoes and extra sweaters.

"Do you remember if there was a gray in the new herd?" Lisa inquired.

Kate scrunched her face up. "You know, I think there might have been. I was half-asleep, so I didn't get the best look, but there's definitely one light-colored horse. I can't remember if it's a gray or a roan."

"I hope it's a gray! That's my favorite color," Lisa said.

The other three girls groaned.

"But grays are so hard to keep clean!" Stevie said.

"Yeah, their hocks are permanently manure-stained," Kate added. As the girls knew, the term *gray* included horses that ranged in color from true gray to white. But even a horse that looked white was referred to as gray.

"I don't care," Lisa insisted. "It's still my favorite color."

"Why, Lisa? Is it because of Pepper?" Carole asked.

Lisa nodded, surprised that Carole had guessed so quickly. "That's right. Pepper is one of the best horses I've ever ridden. He taught me so much when I was a beginner. Now that he's gone, I guess I'm always looking for his replacement. Or not even his replacement—that would be impossible—but just another horse that would remind me of him. Since he was gray, I like grays the best."

Pepper, a dappled gray, had been a tried-and-true school horse at Pine Hollow, the girls' stable back home. As a beginner, Lisa had ridden Pepper often. The two had formed a special partnership. When Pepper was retired, Lisa had written a prizewinning essay about why he was such a great horse. A few months later, Pepper had had to be put down. But his memory lived on in the hearts of all the riders he had helped to train.

"A gray's fine for out West," Stevie said, trying to tame her dark blond hair into a ponytail. "where you don't have to scrub your horse spotless every other week for Pony Club competitions and shows. But back East, give me a nice dark bay or a liver chestnut any day. It's like my mom's theory on carpet: Never buy white or light pink, 'cause every stain shows. Get blue so you can relax."

"Sorry, Stevie, but I don't think there were any blue horses on the van this morning," Kate joked.

"There is such a thing as a blue roan, you know," Lisa pointed out, laughing.

“Right, but they only look blue because of black hairs running through the white. The other roans, bay roans and strawberry roans, like Berry, are more common,” Carole said. Berry was the horse Carole usually rode out West. Her own horse, Starlight, was a bay, as was Stevie’s horse, Belle.

The girls laughed.

“What?” Carole asked. Then she grinned sheepishly. “Oh. I’m sounding like a textbook again, aren’t I?”

“Yes, but that’s okay,” Stevie said. “As long as you sound like a horsemanship textbook, I won’t complain. But just *mention* algebra equations and I’m outta here!”

Carole giggled. “I’ll try to keep my lectures limited to the subject of the equine.”

Kate had been musing quietly as they talked. Now she spoke up tentatively. “It’s funny how that works, isn’t it?”

“How what works?” asked Lisa.

“Well, how for a lot of riders, there’s one horse that was really special to them. And even if you ride a ton of other horses—better horses, more talented horses—that one horse stays with you. He always has a special place in your heart.”

“Is yours one of your show horses?” Lisa asked. Once Kate had been a major junior rider on the top-level show circuit. She had owned and ridden several winners.

Kate shook her head. “Nope. I mean, I *loved* the hunters and equitation horses I had, even if not one of them. I still do, in fact. But I was thinking of the first pony I owned. She was a funny-looking buckskin named Black-Eyed Susan. I had her for eight months before I outgrew her. We sold her to a neighbor, and even after I got Butterscotch, my next horse, who was worth a lot more, I used to be jealous of the little girl next door because she got to ride Suzy. I don’t know, something about our personalities clicked. And it’s true, whenever I see a buckskin, I get kind of wistful.” Kate stopped and cleared her throat. “Luckily, you don’t see too many buckskins.”

“What is buckskin? I’m not sure I know,” said Lisa.

“It’s a funny color,” Kate answered. “Light chestnut with a black mane and tail. A lot of buckskins have a black stripe along their spine, too. Suzy did, anyway.”

“That sounds cool!” Lisa responded. One of the best things about hanging out with The Saddle Club—and its extended family—was that she never stopped learning. Kate, Stevie, and Carole had all been riding practically since they were born. Lisa had come to the sport later. She had caught up fast and could hold her own in the saddle, but there were still things she didn’t know. That was why horses were so amazing. Even Carole agreed that you could never learn it all.

Dressed and ready, the girls headed out to the stable. On their way they saw a tall figure approaching them at a jog. Lisa recognized him at once.

“Hi, everyone!” John Brightstar called. His face was ruddy from exertion.

“Hey!” they all said.

“Hi, John,” Lisa added quietly.

John and Lisa didn’t give each other big hugs or anything like that. Both of them were very private people who didn’t like to make a display of their friendship. But John gave Lisa a special look that made her spine tingle.

“I came to show you guys where the new horses are corralled. I figured you’d want to see

hi to them,” said John. He turned and fell into step beside Lisa.

“We were just talking about colors of horses, John,” Kate said. “We all seem to have a favorite.”

John nodded. “Most horsepeople do. Of course, we all know bright chestnut is the best,” he said, pretending to be serious. His own horse, Tex, was a chestnut.

“Naturally,” Lisa said, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Hey!” said John. He elbowed her playfully in response. “You know, in the old days they used to think that a horse’s color had an effect on his personality.”

Stevie raised her eyebrows. “But it does!” she exclaimed, indignant.

“You really believe that, Stevie?” Lisa asked. “You really believe the way a horse acts is related to his color?”

“Of course!” said Stevie. “You can’t tell me that Stewball would be Stewball if he hadn’t been born with a splashy pinto coat.”

That was a tough point to deny. Stewball was one of the ranch horses. He was kooky and sometimes seemed half crazy. But he was also an expert cattle horse, the best on the Bar. None at roping and herding. The main reason he was so good at his job was that he was totally stubborn, with a mind of his own. Not surprisingly, he and Stevie had hit it off from day one. Now she always rode him when The Saddle Club visited.

“It is hard to imagine Stewball any other color,” Lisa admitted. “I mean, I just can’t see him as a bay or a chestnut.”

“See?” Stevie said. “Color’s got everything to do with it.”

John looked doubtful. “What do you think of all this nonsense, Carole?” he asked.

“Yeah, Carole,” Kate urged. A lot of times the group deferred to Carole on matters of horsemanship. She was not only an excellent rider, she had also read everything available on the subject of horses. And she had a real horsewoman’s common sense and intuition.

At the sound of her name, Carole snapped to attention. “I’m sorry, Kate, what did you say?” she asked.

The girls and John turned as a group to look at her. Her voice sounded odd—choked up.

“Um, I was just wondering what you thought about, you know, whether a horse’s color means anything,” Kate said gently.

“Oh. Yes,” Carole said slowly. “I think maybe it does. I know that’s not very scientific, but ...” Her voice trailed off as she stared at the ground. Abruptly she looked up again. “I hope one of the horses is black—Cobalt black.”

“I like black, too,” John responded. “It’s such a majestic color. I think every kid dreams of having a Black Beauty of his own...” He chattered away, unaware that Lisa’s and Stevie’s minds were racing.

Before either of them could say anything, the group had neared the holding pen where the new horses were corralled.

“Look at that chestnut!” Kate cried. “He’s cute, huh?”

“Oh, there’s the gray!” Lisa pointed. “I call dibs! And look at the markings on that bay. For white stockings!”

“Gosh, that Appaloosa is fat! What do you think they’ve been feeding him?” Stevie asked.

Reaching the fence, the five of them pulled themselves up onto the lower rail. With their extra height they could lean over the fence and get a better look at the newcomers.

“The Appy’s a mare,” said Kate. “And I think my dad said she’s been sitting around for a couple of years not doing a thing.”

“We’ll have to get her back into training, then,” Stevie said. “Diet and exercise, huh, baby?” She leaned farther over the fence and extended a hand, trying to coax the mare close. “Here, girl, come say hi.”

In response the mare swished her tail lazily. Except for that and flicking an ear, she didn’t move. Stevie laughed. “So much for my powers of persuasion! One word from me and she stays right where she is. I wish I had some treats—a carrot or something. Carole, you try,” she urged. Often Carole could get a horse to come to her when the others failed.

“Sure, Stevie.” Carole clucked through her teeth. “Here, pretty girl, come on. We want to say hi, girl. That’s right, mosey on over. We want to be your—” Mid-sentence, Carole stopped. She stared straight ahead, all thoughts of the Appaloosa forgotten. Her throat felt dry. She closed her eyes and reopened them. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. It was as if her dreams had materialized before her. At the other side of the corral, not twenty feet away, was a tall black mare. She was standing slightly apart from the rest of the herd. Her nose was raised to the wind. She was coal black, as black as night... Carole felt her heart racing: She was *Cobalt* black. She looked exactly like the stallion, only smaller. She had his large eyes, his sloping shoulder and compact body. They could have been brother and sister; the resemblance was so strong. She had everything but his markings. Carole felt so shaky she had to step down to the ground. She leaned weakly against the fence.

Lisa and Stevie had seen it all. Ignoring Kate’s and John’s inquiring looks, they stepped over the fence. “Are you okay, Carole?” Lisa murmured.

“I’m—I’m fine,” Carole said. Her voice came out in a whisper. “It’s just that mare. She looks exactly like ...”

Carole didn’t finish the sentence, but it didn’t matter: Lisa and Stevie understood. Later they would have to fill in Kate and John about Cobalt, but for now they wanted to comfort their friend. There was no question Cobalt was the horse that Carole had never gotten over—and probably never would.

A beautiful black stallion, Cobalt had performed best when Carole rode him, even though he belonged to someone else. His owner was the ultra-spoiled Veronica diAngelo. Veronica badly mishandled the horse. One day she made one mistake too many. She set Cobalt at the fence all wrong. It was impossible for him to jump clean. The beloved stallion had fallen and broken his leg. There was no choice but to put him down. What made it worse was that Cobalt’s death had followed the death of Carole’s mother. It had shaken Carole to the core, so much so that she had quit riding for a while. All that was a long time ago. Now Carole owned—and loved—Starlight. But in the back of her mind, an image of the black stallion still lingered. And the mare in front of her was a living, breathing version of that image.

Drawing a shaky breath, Carole climbed up on the fence again. “She looks a lot like a horse I once knew,” she said, trying to make her voice sound normal. “It—It freaked me out for a minute.”

The black mare swiveled her ears back and forth. She paced along the fence and then stopped. She appeared to be listening for some specific sound. “It’s okay,” Carole murmured, willing the horse to understand. The mare turned uncertainly toward the group on the fence. “You’ll be fine,” Carole said.

The mare took a nervous step forward.

“All right, you guys, feeding time!” called a stable boy. The mare shied violently. She trotted to the other end of the corral, snorting loudly. Carole bit her lip in frustration.

The boy slipped through the fence rails. He had a bucket of grain and was shaking it loudly. All the horses except for the black mare turned their heads and started to amble toward him. The mare stayed where she was, tense and ready to bolt.

“We’re going to put them in the standing stalls for the afternoon,” Kate explained. “They live in the big pasture and come and go as they want. But since they’re going to be guest mounts, they have to get used to spending part of the day inside. Wanna help bring them in?”

“You bet,” said Lisa. Together they walked around to the gate. The stable boy had started to clip lead shanks to the horses’ halters.

“We always leave the halters on for the first few days,” Kate continued. “That way if a new horse panics, gets loose, or gets into a bad situation, there’s something to grab.”

Taking a look down the corral, Carole offered, “Maybe I should try to get the mare in, the black mare, I mean. She looks like she might be a little shy.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Kate replied. “She doesn’t look too happy about coming inside, does she?” They all turned to look at the mare. She was sniffing the air and pacing. “Why don’t you give it a shot? The less hassle these horses give us, the happier Dad will be about his investment.”

“Did somebody say Dad?” boomed a deep, friendly voice. The girls spun around. Frank Devine was emerging from the nearby stable. He came up and gave each of them a bear hug. “You keeping these girls in line?” he asked John.

“Yes, sir,” said John, his dark eyes twinkling.

“Good, because I wouldn’t want these dudes to get into trouble,” Frank warned.

The girls laughed. On their first trip out to the ranch, they had learned the word *dudes*. It was a word that cowboys and ranchers used to refer to novices, Easterners usually, who didn’t know the first thing about Western riding and ranch work. The girls *had* been dudes one time, but now they were seasoned enough to know that Frank was only kidding.

“Maybe this afternoon I’ll teach ’em how to saddle up and mount,” John joked.

“Would you, John?” Stevie asked breathlessly. “That would be just swell!”

Everyone laughed again except for Frank. His attention had wandered to the corral. “What is that mare still standing there? I want all the horses in—and pronto. I missed my wife’s breakfast and I *don’t* intend to miss her lunch!”

“She doesn’t seem to want to come in, Dad,” Kate explained. “Carole just volunteered to go and get her.”

“Thanks, Carole, but if she’s going to be trouble, why don’t you leave her to one of the wranglers? You girls can take these four in”—Frank gestured to the horses assembled at the gate—“and Mick, here, will follow with the black. Okay?”

Carole nodded. Frank was not only Kate’s father and the boss of the ranch, he was also their host at the Bar None. To argue with him would be rude. But instead of going and taking another horse’s lead, she let Stevie, Kate, Lisa, and John get ahead. They each took a horse from the stable boy, Mick, and moved off in a group, talking animatedly about the new arrivals. Carole hung back to watch. The minutes ticked away as first Mick, then Frank had to go at catching the mare. Mick tried coaxing her with grain. Frank tried speaking to her while

he crept closer. Nothing they did seemed to make a difference. The mare would wait until they were a few yards away; then she would spin and dash to another part of the paddock, forcing them to start all over.

“If I were mounted with a rope on me, I’d lasso her and that would be that,” said Mick in frustration.

“Ah, well, don’t sweat it. It’s not your fault. She’s probably shaken up after the van ride,” Frank said. “We’ll leave her be for another few hours and try again this afternoon.”

“Could I try?” Carole said. She was worried that Frank would be mad at her for lagging behind. To her relief, the older man smiled.

“I like your persistence, Carole. Sure, why not? Mick, give her the lead shank.”

Looking surprised, the stable boy handed over the white cotton line. Carole took it and paused, chewing on her lip. She knew she wouldn’t be able to catch the mare if the men stayed. Somehow she sensed they would scare the horse off. But she couldn’t exactly ask them to leave. That would sound cocky beyond belief!

Wondering what to do, Carole missed what Frank said next. “Sorry?” she said. “I didn’t hear you.”

“I said, good luck, but don’t waste a lot of time if you can’t get her. Go in and have fun with Kate and the girls. Come on, Mick, we’ve gotta go see about that water pipe.”

“Right, boss.”

“See you at lunch, Carole. Noon, straight up. Don’t be late,” Frank added.

“I won’t be,” Carole said absently. She took a deep breath and walked toward the mare.

EVER SO SLOWLY, Carole let her breath out. She concentrated on the mare, trying to communicate a sense of calm. The mare tossed her head up and down. She snorted. But she stood her ground. Approaching at a snail's pace, Carole was beside the horse a few minutes later. She looked the mare deep in the eyes. She breathed in and out. "Easy does it," she murmured. "I'm not going to hurt you. I knew a horse like you once—so much like you that you could have been twins. What do you think of that, hmmm?" Carole stretched out her hand and stroked the black coat. All the while, she spoke in a low, soothing voice so that the mare would trust her.

"You need some serious grooming, don't you, girl? Pretty soon we're going to get you inside and curry you and brush you till you shine like a black pearl. That's right—nobody's going to hurt you at the Bar None. Everyone's your friend here. I am and Kate is and Kate's father ..."

As Carole went on talking and rubbing the mare's neck, a thought suddenly occurred to her. She had been assuming that the previous owners were to blame for the horse's being people-shy. She'd been guessing that they had been rough with her, or worse. But something about that theory didn't fit. The mare didn't seem abused so much as plain afraid of being caught. She wasn't exhibiting any of the signs of an animal that has *learned* to mistrust people: She wasn't laying her ears back or baring her teeth. She seemed to mistrust people instinctively. Carole made a mental note of the fact. She didn't see how it would help, but it was always good to know as much as possible about a horse that you wanted to train. Sometimes knowing one little thing—like the fact that a horse was petrified of water, say—could save years of exasperation.

Carole lingered a long time with the mare. She patted her and scratched her withers. She took her gloves off. Even though her hands were soon freezing, she pulled burrs from the black mane and straightened it with her fingers. The cold began to seep into her skin, through the many layers of clothing, but Carole persisted. Finally, after a long time, Carole clipped the lead shank to the mare's halter. She didn't try to bring her in right away, though. Instead she led her gently back and forth across the corral, asking her to walk and halt, walk and halt. Finally the mare seemed to relax. When the refined black head was lowered in boredom, Carole knew that she had gained the mare's trust. Only then did she lead the horse inside to a waiting stall.

On the way in, the mare stopped and put her head down to the ground. She foraged with her hoof, pawing at the snow till she found a tiny shoot underneath. Carole studied her movements. She was surprised that a domesticated horse would go to such lengths to get a bite of grass.

Before leaving, she made sure there were water and hay in the stall.

"I promise I'll come back this afternoon, but right now I've got to go in myself and eat lunch." Carole glanced at her watch to make sure she was on time. She caught her breath

with a start: It was half past twelve—half an hour late—and she wasn't even ready!

LUNCH WAS NEARLY over. Frank took a last sip of coffee, wiped his mouth, and pushed his chair back from the table. Lisa and Stevie held their breath, praying he hadn't noticed Carole's absence. Kate's father wasn't a strict man, but he didn't like guests—even guests like The Saddle Club—running around the ranch getting lost and missing meals. It was a formula for trouble.

"I have to hand it to Carole," Frank said. The girls exchanged worried glances. "She's even more horse-crazy than I would have believed." He chuckled. "I left her out there an hour ago with that black mare, and I'll be darned if she isn't still trying to catch her."

"Oh, I'll bet she's caught her by now," Lisa said confidently.

Frank looked at her, surprised. "You think so?"

Lisa nodded vigorously. "Absolutely. Carole can catch anything that moves. She probably started talking to the mare and lost track of time."

Stevie seconded her friend. "Yup. Happens all the time at Pine Hollow. We'll be waiting for her, thinking she's in trouble, and instead she's just sitting in Starlight's stall having conversation."

Frank laughed heartily. "A conversation? But that would mean the horses talk back."

"They sort of do," said Lisa. "Not the way you'd think, but I swear Carole understands them." She could tell by Frank's expression that he didn't quite believe her. "It's true," she insisted. "It's just ... It's just this weird thing," she finished lamely. *Heck, she thought, I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't seen Carole get through to difficult horses so many times before.* Still, Lisa was pleased to see that John Brightstar had a thoughtful expression on his face: *He believed her, at least.*

"I'll put a plate of food in the oven for Carole," Phyllis volunteered. "I'm sure she'll want it when she remembers. Now, are you girls ready for pie-making lesson number one?"

Stevie stood up from the table. "As ready as we'll ever be, ma'am," she declared, imitating a soldier going off to combat.

Kate, Frank, and John helped clear before heading their separate ways. Frank went to his office to do some paperwork. John went out to the ranch truck: He had to run some errands in town. At her parents' insistence, Kate went to her room to do a couple of hours of homework. "But Mom—"

"Don't 'but Mom' me," said Phyllis. "That was part of our agreement: Even with your friends visiting, you've got to get some work done."

"Yes, Mom," Kate said, sighing.

Lunch cleanup took no time at all. Phyllis explained that she tried to tidy up after herself when she cooked. That way, the only things to be done after the meal were stacking the dishwasher and putting food away. "Of course, it doesn't always work, especially when I'm busy, but it's a good principle, anyway." She paused to flip through her recipe box. "Now, I thought we'll start with a classic: a nice, simple, one-crust pumpkin pie that you can impress your mother with next Thanksgiving. The filling's a snap, so we can concentrate on the crust." After a moment's search, she took out a tattered card and clipped it to the refrigerator. Just then the telephone rang.

"Hello, Bar None." Stevie and Lisa watched as Phyllis's face changed from anticipation to

resignation. "I see.... Of course.... No, please! It's no trouble at all." Jotting a note down on a piece of paper, she hung up the phone. "Girls, I'm so sorry, but I'm afraid that we're going to have to postpone the lesson. I've got to go on a little rescue mission."

"It's nothing serious, is it?" Lisa asked, envisioning a guest with a broken leg, then a cow stuck in a ravine.

"No, thank God. It's just that Brenda has discovered that after six months of sitting at a desk, she's not in great shape. They're in town and she doesn't feel up to snow-shoeing back.

"So you're going to go get her?" Stevie asked, horrified. "Boy, I'd make her walk!"

Mrs. Devine smiled. "Unfortunately, I don't think that would make the Bar None very popular with the McHugh family. Anyway, it's just a half hour's drive into town." She sighed. "I only wish they had called five minutes ago. I could have asked John to give her a ride. But this is what running a guest ranch is like—you have to be flexible." Phyllis removed her apron and hung it on a nail beside the refrigerator. "We'll try again tomorrow, okay?"

"Great," Stevie said.

"Keep an eye on the oven, will you?" Phyllis added over her shoulder. "I've got Carole's leftovers warming."

"Sure thing," Lisa called. Even a little task like that made her feel professional.

When Phyllis was gone, the girls gave the kitchen counters a final wipe. Both of them felt bad that she had been called away. They wanted to leave the kitchen as spotless as possible. On her second go-round, the pie recipe caught Stevie's eye. She went to the fridge and read it over. It didn't look like there was much to it. "Say, Lis'—" she began.

Lisa glanced at her friend. She could already tell what Stevie had in mind. "No way!"

"But Lisa—"

"Forget it. I am not going to make the pie without Phyllis, so you can just drop the subject right now."

Stevie smiled. Some people had an inborn talent for talking to horses. She, Stevie Lake, had an inborn talent for talking to her friends—and persuading them to do things they didn't want to do. "Of course *you're* not going to make the pie," she said in her most wheedling voice. "We're *both* going to make the pie."

"No, Stevie—"

"You heard what Phyllis said: a nice, simple, one-crust pumpkin pie. How hard can it be?"

Lisa crossed her arms over her chest defensively. She was all too familiar with Stevie's powers of persuasion. "Very hard," she answered. "Very, very, very, very hard."

"Listen to this: The only ingredients in the crust are butter, flour, and water. Don't you think we can handle that?"

Lisa frowned. She had to admit she was surprised. "That's it? That's all that makes a crust?"

Stevie saw her window of opportunity and jumped. "Can you believe it? Three ingredients! It'll be a piece of cake—I mean, pie! Think how great it will taste—"

"Stevie—"

"I mean, think how impressed Phyllis will be—and everyone—when we serve it for dessert tonight! We'll be helping out in a big way. Phyllis is having such a busy day, and this will be one less thing she'll have to worry about." Stevie eyed Lisa shrewdly. She could tell her friend was wavering. It was time for the kill. "Think of how impressed a certain *ranch hand* will be."

Lisa's eyebrows flew up. "A certain ranch hand ... Now who could that be? I don't know what you're— Oh, *John!*" She grinned. "I'm not even sure he has a sweet tooth," she said coyly.

Stevie looked unconvinced by Lisa's theatrics. She opened the refrigerator door and took out a stick of butter. She opened the pantry and took out a canister of flour.

Lisa watched her, chewing on a nail. She felt herself weakening. "Oh, okay!" she burst out. "I give in! Let's make the pie ourselves. You're right. How hard can it be?"

Stevie congratulated Lisa on her decision. And she silently congratulated herself on her ability to influence her friends. Obviously it was as sharp as ever. " 'Preheat the oven to three-fifty,' " she read.

"Got it," Lisa said. "What next?"

"It's strange. We're supposed to 'cut' the butter into the flour."

"Cut?" Lisa asked dubiously.

"Cut," Stevie affirmed.

The two girls looked at one another. They had the tiniest inkling that they were about to get more than they had bargained for. But this was no time for thinking negatively.

"It probably just means mash them together," Lisa guessed.

Stevie frowned. "All right. That's easy enough."

Stevie got two big steak knives out of a drawer and proceeded to chop the stick of butter into tiny pieces, humming as she worked. Then she poured the flour Lisa had measured over the butter. She mashed the mixture with a fork. "The most important thing about cooking that you've really got to get into it," she announced. "No holding back." She laid the fork down and started using her hands.

Lisa watched her skeptically. "Isn't that kind of ... germy?" she asked.

"Germy, schmermy!" Stevie replied, scraping dough from her wrists. "All right, we're ready for the water."

Lisa consulted the recipe. "Okay. Three tablespoons of ice water, coming right up."

"Three tablespoons? That's it? That must be a mistake. Who ever heard of a recipe calling for *spoons* of water? I'll bet they mean cups," Stevie said confidently. "Pour it in whenever you're ready."

Lisa poured about a cup of water into the flour-butter mixture. Then she stopped. Why was she trusting Stevie's advice on the amounts? "That's all I'm adding," she announced. "It looks like too much already."

"Too much? What do you mean?" Stevie said indignantly.

Lisa pointed. "Look. The dough is all wet and ... pasty," she said.

Stevie laughed dismissively. "That's because we haven't chilled it yet. Come on, into the fridge with you," she said, trying to gather the wet dough into a ball. "Aaah! It's alive!"

Lisa turned to see Stevie attempting to stop the dough from slipping through her fingers. With loud plops, two blobs of it landed on the floor.

"Gross!" Lisa screamed. A piece of it had jumped up and hit her cheek.

Ignoring her, Stevie shoved the rest of the dough onto a piece of waxed paper, the waxed paper onto a cookie sheet, and the cookie sheet into the fridge. "All right, now we wait an hour while—" Stevie's foot hit the spilled dough and slid forward a yard.

"Gee, I didn't know you could do a split!" Lisa joked.

Stevie glowered. She pushed herself back up. "As I was saying, we wait an hour—"

"Say, couldn't we move the dough to the freezer and then wait just a half hour?" Lisa suggested. Her practical mind was always trying to think of shortcuts.

Stevie thought. "Why not?" She took the ball of dough from the refrigerator and opened the freezer door above. A large frozen steak came shooting out and hit the floor. Lisa grinned. Stevie glared. Lisa picked up the steak and handed it solemnly to Stevie. Stevie tried to put it back into the freezer, but another steak slid out. "Here, you pick up—"

The cookie sheet of dough slid out, sloshing water. "Aaarrgh!" Stevie yelled, stamping her foot. It took the two of them about ten minutes to rearrange everything so that the freezer door would shut.

"Let's play Go Fish while we wait for the dough to chill," Lisa suggested.

"Great idea."

A half hour later, the girls ran to the kitchen, playing cards in hand. "It looks like a frozen potato stuck in an ice chip," Lisa wailed when she saw the results. "How are we ever going to roll it out?"

"Don't worry," Stevie reassured her. "We'll chop it down to size." She grabbed a knife and began hacking at the frozen crust. "Take that, you stupid crust!"

Lisa chuckled. Bits of ice flew through the air. One hit Lisa on the shoulder. Stevie laughed. "Watch out for flying frozen pie crust," she murmured.

"Ha-ha," said Lisa sarcastically. On an impulse she picked up a handful of flour and blew it at Stevie's back.

Stevie grinned. She knew a challenge when she saw one. She took a chunk of crust and lobbed it at Lisa.

Lisa ducked; the crust hit the wall. "Is that in the recipe, too?" she inquired. "Are you supposed to 'toss' the crust?"

Stevie snorted in spite of herself. "Yeah, first you toss it, and then you juggle it!" She picked up another three chunks and proceeded to juggle. One by one they hit the floor. "Hey, did you hear the way they landed? I've got rhythm!"

"Stevie, really," Lisa deadpanned, "I thought you knew better. You can't roll out the crust on the floor!"

"Oh yes I can!" Stevie said, dropping to the floor and doing a forward roll on top of the melting crust.

Lisa cracked up. "But the recipe says you're supposed to *flour* the surface first," she reminded Stevie. She took what was left in the bag of flour and dumped it on top of Stevie's head.

"Say, Lisa, wasn't this supposed to be a joint effort? I thought we were doing it *together*!" Stevie said, yanking Lisa down to the floor.

Lisa tried to sit up. She was laughing too hard. The butter wrapper had fallen on the floor. Somehow Lisa felt that Stevie's face needed a good greasing, and now was the time. She stretched out her hand ...

"Don't even try it, Atwood!" Stevie yelled. She sprang to her feet, brandishing a long forefinger at Lisa. "*En garde!*"

Lisa pawed the floor. She snorted and galloped toward Stevie on her hands and knees. In the middle of her charge, she stopped. Instead of Stevie's faded jeans and boots, she was facing

to face with a pair of gray wool slacks and black shoes. Lisa gulped. She looked from the shoes to the trouser legs to the knees. Then she sat back on her heels and looked up. Phyllis Devine was smiling down at her.

At that moment Stevie spun around, waving the apron. "Hey, Lis"! Here's your red flag," she shouted. Then she stopped dead in her tracks. Kate's mother was standing in the doorway with Carole behind her. Carole was trying very hard to keep a straight face but was only partly succeeding. Stevie felt flour cascading down her back.

Lisa looked up at her imploringly.

"Oh, hello," Stevie said nonchalantly. "We were just, you know, making a nice, simple one-crust pie."

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