

HORSEFLIES

Bonnie Bryant

Bantam



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A BAD CASE OF SPRING FEVER

Starlight chewed the bit and tossed his head. Then he began to dance in a little circle. Finally Carole gave up. She rode him to the gate and briskly dismounted. "Starlight, I don't know what's going on with you today, but I think we both need to take a time-out!" Starlight snorted in reply but followed Carole back toward the barn.

"How did it go?" Mrs. Reg asked, looking up from her desk as Carole and Starlight clomped by.

"Oh, okay," said Carole, not bothering to hide the frustration in her voice. "Getting Starlight to behave is just going to take more riding than I thought."

"Well, you know your horse better than anyone," Mrs. Reg said.

Carole buckled Starlight to the cross-ties and removed his saddle and bridle. He fidgeted the whole time, shifting his weight from side to side.

"I hope you get over your spring fever before the Fourth of July, Starlight," Carole said as she quickly brushed the dried sweat from his coat. "Otherwise we'll have to invent a whole new name for whatever it is you've got!"

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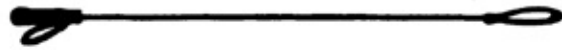
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THE SADDLE CLUB



HORSEFLIES



BONNIE BRYANT



A SKYLARK BOOK
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HORSEFLIES

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I would like to express my special thanks

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Excerpt from Pine Hollow #1: The Long Ride

About the Author

"ARE WE GOING to meet your crazy friends here?" the little boy asked. He held Lisa Atwood's hand tightly as they walked down the lane toward Pine Hollow Stables.

Lisa laughed. "Well, we're going to meet my friends, Jamie. But they're *horse-crazy*. Not *crazy crazy*."

"Oh, I see," Jamie said.

Lisa squeezed Jamie's hand. It was the first day of summer vacation and she'd already gotten a baby-sitting job. She'd promised her parents that she would contribute fifty dollars each month of her own money toward her riding lessons this summer, so she was thrilled when Mrs. Bacon asked her to baby-sit Jamie for the whole week. She needed every penny she could scrape together to continue her lessons, and a weeklong baby-sitting job would go a long way toward her goal.

"Look," Lisa said as they rounded the last curve to the stable. "There they are, waiting for us."

Stevie Lake was sprawled on a hay bale, wearing her usual riding outfit of shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. Carole Hanson sat next to her in faded breeches and field boots. Lisa blinked and almost stopped. From this distance it looked as if Carole, who was probably the most horse-crazy of the trio, was sitting at the stable reading a book.

"Hi, everybody!" Lisa called. "Sorry I'm late."

"Hi, Lisa." Carole looked up and smiled.

"Who's your friend?" asked Stevie, sitting up.

"This is Jamie Bacon," Lisa said. "Jamie, these are my friends Stevie and Carole."

Jamie smiled, revealing one missing front tooth. "Hi," he said shyly.

Lisa laughed. "These are the other members of The Saddle Club, Jamie. Or at least, most of them." The three girls had started The Saddle Club some time earlier. The only rules were that members had to be crazy about horses, which they were, and they had to help the other members when they got into trouble, which they did.

"I'm going to be baby-sitting Jamie all week," Lisa explained. "And since he wanted to learn something about horses, I thought, What better place to learn than here?"

Carole smiled at the serious-looking little boy. "Have you ever ridden a horse before, Jamie?"

"No," Jamie replied, trying to peek inside the barn. "But it looks pretty neat."

"I asked his mother if it would be okay to bring him to Pine Hollow, and she thought it was a wonderful idea," Lisa said.

"That's great," agreed Carole. "I can't imagine a better place to baby-sit than at a stable."

Lisa spied the paperback book on the hay. "What's this?" she asked Carole, picking it up and peering at the cover. "Greek mythology? Didn't they tell you? School's out. The principal announced it at assembly last Friday." Lisa was used to her friends' good-natured teasing about her own compulsive study habits. Here was a chance to tease Carole back.

"Can you believe it?" Stevie chimed in. "She's beginning to act just like you! She's actual-

spending the first day of summer vacation working on a school project that's not even due until fall! I've got so many plans for the summer I won't have time for anything like that!" Stevie pulled a piece of straw from her dark blond hair and began to count up all her summer plans. "First, I'm going to ride every day. Then I'm going to swim every day. Then I'm going to dream up a whole bunch of terrific new tricks to play on my brothers. And then I'm going to invent at least fifteen new desserts to eat at TD's." TD's was the ice cream shop where The Saddle Club held many of its meetings. Stevie flopped back on the hay and shook her head incredulously at Carole. "I wouldn't spend a single moment of summer doing schoolwork."

Lisa looked at Carole. "You must admit, Carole, it's not really like you to spend the first day of summer vacation reading a schoolbook."

"But this isn't just any school project," protested Carole. "This is really cool. Everyone in our class had to choose a summer reading assignment for the new English teacher, and I chose Greek mythology, mostly because Kate Summerfield had already chosen horses. I didn't really want to read about mythology, but when I thumbed through the book, it looked pretty interesting. It's about this wonderful pure-white horse with wings named Pegasus and a beautiful youth named Bellerophon."

"'Beautiful youth?'" Stevie wrinkled her nose and frowned.

"You know, a handsome young Greek guy—big brown eyes, wavy brown hair, broad shoulders."

"Oh." Stevie nodded. "I get it."

"Anyway, Bellerophon captures Pegasus with a golden bridle that the goddess Athena gave him, and they ride up into the clouds and kill this monster called the Chimera that's got a lion's head and a goat's body and a dragon's tail—"

"Whoa!" Stevie interrupted. "Golden bridles? The goddess Athena? Goat bodies with dragon tails? There goes Carole's summer!"

Carole laughed at Stevie's shocked expression. "That's not all I'm going to do this summer, Stevie. Judy Barker asked me if I'd like to work more hours with her on Tuesdays, to get a better feel for what it's like to be an equine vet. Besides, I'm going to ride Starlight every day and hang out with you guys."

"Really? You're going with Judy every Tuesday?" Lisa's blue eyes widened.

Carole nodded. "I'm so excited! I'm going to learn a lot."

"That's wonderful. I think your book sounds wonderful, too," said Lisa. "Maybe I'll read it after you finish."

"Actually, it doesn't sound too bad," admitted Stevie. "At least it's about horses."

"But not just any horses," Carole added dreamily. "Horses with wings."

"Do any horses here have wings?" Jamie's high voice broke the silence as each member of The Saddle Club tried to imagine what it might be like to soar through the clouds on a flying horse.

"Sorry, Jamie." Lisa laughed. "I'm afraid not."

"Sometimes it feels like they have wings when they gallop, though," Carole said.

"Or when they go over a double oxer," added Stevie.

Jamie frowned. "Aren't oxers cows?"

This time all the girls laughed. Lisa knelt down in front of Jamie to explain. "Jamie, a double oxer's a kind of jump. Would you like to go inside the stable and see what it's like in there?"

We can give you a tour. In fact, we could even ask Max if he would let you ride one of the ponies.”

“Really?” Jamie’s eyes shined with excitement.

“We can ask him,” replied Lisa.

Stevie jumped off the hay bale. “Let’s go! Coming, Carole?” she teased. “Or would you rather stay here and read about Pegasus and the beautiful youth Beetlejuice?”

“Bellerophon, Stevie,” Carole said as she shoved the book into her backpack. “And no way. It’s time to go see some real horses now.”

Lisa took Jamie’s hand again, and The Saddle Club began his tour of Pine Hollow Stable. Though the warm summer sunlight sparkled outside, the inside of the U-shaped stable was cool and dark.

Jamie gave a loud sniff and rubbed his nose. “There’s something in here that tickles,” he said.

“That’s hay,” explained Carole. “Or maybe sawdust. Smells good, doesn’t it?” Carole thought everything inside a barn smelled wonderful—hay, oats, saddles, and especially horses. A gray-and-white cat strutted out from behind a water bucket as they walked toward the stalls.

“That’s Seabiscuit,” Lisa said as the cat curled himself around Jamie’s leg. “He’s one of the best barn cats.”

“Really?” Jamie stroked Seabiscuit’s arched back. “How many cats live here?”

“About a thousand,” Stevie said.

“Actually, more like ten,” Lisa said. “Mice like to nibble at the horse feed, and the cats help get rid of the mice.”

As they turned the first corner, Stevie’s bay mare, Belle, thrust her head over the stall door and nickered softly in greeting. Carole’s horse, Starlight, did the same thing.

“This is my horse, Belle, Jamie,” Stevie said as she lifted Jamie up to give Belle a scratch behind the ears. “She knows my voice. In fact, it’s music to her ears.”

“And my voice is music to Starlight’s ears, Jamie,” Carole added. She lifted Jamie up to give Starlight the same kind of scratch.

After Jamie had been properly introduced to Belle and Starlight, Lisa led him down to Prancer’s stall.

“Is this one yours?” Jamie asked, scrunching up his eyes as the big Thoroughbred mare leaned over the stall door to sniff his hair.

“No.” Lisa sighed wistfully, wishing she would someday have enough money to own her own horse. “But she’s the one I ride all the time.” She smiled as Prancer nuzzled Jamie’s ear. “Prancer doesn’t like the barn cats, but she loves children.”

“She’s beautiful,” Jamie said, reaching up to stroke Prancer’s velvety nose.

“Let’s show Jamie the tack room, and then go ask Max if we can take him on a ride,” Stevie suggested.

As the four headed to the tack room, various horses stuck their heads out of their stalls, curious to see who was walking by. The group went into a large room filled with saddles, bridles, and all sorts of bits. One wall was dotted with black velvet riding helmets.

“Wow.” Jamie stared at all the equipment. “I guess it takes a lot of stuff to ride a horse.”

“It sure does.” Carole smiled. “You need a saddle so you can sit securely when the

gallop.”

“And a bridle so you can steer them in the direction you want them to go,” added Lisa.

“And a helmet so you won’t crack your head open when you fall off.” Stevie laughed.

“That’s right.” Max Regnery, their riding instructor and the owner of Pine Hollow suddenly appeared in the tack room, carrying a clipboard in his hand. “All those things are very important when you ride.”

“Max, we were just going to look for you,” Lisa said. “This is Jamie Bacon. I’m baby-sitting him, and I was wondering if we could take him for a ride on one of the ponies.”

Max looked down at Jamie. Max’s normally bright blue eyes looked tired, and lines of fatigue seemed to pull his mouth down. “Have you ever ridden a pony before, Jamie?” he asked.

“No, sir,” Jamie replied in a solemn voice.

“I asked his parents for permission to bring him here, Max. They said it was okay,” Lisa explained.

Max didn’t answer but seemed to stare off at a spot somewhere over Jamie’s head.

“Max?” Lisa said. “Are you all right?”

“Uh-huh,” Max mumbled through a deep yawn. “Sorry. I’m just not with it today. Maxi came down with chicken pox and nobody’s been able to get any sleep at our house for the last several nights.”

“Chicken pox? Oh, Max, we’re so sorry!” Carole said with concern. “She’s not horribly sick, is she?”

Max shook his head. “Just uncomfortable, mostly. Babies Maxi’s age have a hard time with scratching, and you know how chicken pox itches. Deborah thinks she must have picked it up here, that morning she stayed in her playpen in my office.”

“I don’t know,” said Stevie. “There’s a lot of it going around. My little brother, Michael, spends hours on the phone talking to his friend Shawn Davidson, who came down with it a week ago.” Stevie rolled her eyes in exasperation. “Now I can barely get on the phone to make my own calls.”

“Which are, of course, all to us.” Carole laughed.

“Well, yeah.” Stevie shrugged and grinned.

“So, Max, can we give Jamie a ride?” Lisa asked.

Max rubbed his eyes. “Okay. You can give Jamie a ride if you put a helmet on him and promise not to let go of the lead line.” He looked at Stevie and Carole. “You two can supervise him on either side.”

“We promise,” said Lisa.

“Then put him on Nickel. He just got back from a beginner class, but he should be okay for a short ride like this.”

“Thanks, Max!” Lisa said.

“Have fun.” Max yawned again as he returned to his clipboard.

The girls took Jamie down to Nickel’s stall. The silver-colored pony looked up from his feed trough when they opened the door. His jaws were still moving and a long wisp of hay dangled from his mouth.

“Uh-oh,” Stevie said. “Looks like Nickel was just having a midmorning snack.”

“Oh, he won’t mind being interrupted.” Carole snapped a lead line to his halter. “He’ll be

done with that mouthful by the time we tack him up. Let's let Lisa and Jamie lead him to the cross-ties while you and I get his tack."

The girls showed Jamie the proper way to lead a horse, and under Lisa's watchful eye, the boy led Nickel to the cross-ties. Carole and Stevie scurried for his saddle and bridle. By the time Nickel was tacked up and ready to go, he had finished his hay.

"Here." Stevie grinned and handed Jamie a riding helmet. "This looks like it might fit."

Jamie put the helmet on and buckled it under his chin. "Wow," he breathed. "Cool!"

"Okay," said Lisa. "Ready?"

They couldn't see Jamie's face, but the black helmet nodded up and down. Together the four of them led Nickel to the stable door.

"Don't forget to touch the horseshoe, Jamie." Stevie pointed to an upright horseshoe nailed to the entrance of the stable. "It's a tradition here at Pine Hollow. Everybody touches before they ride, and no one has ever gotten seriously hurt."

Stevie lifted Jamie and he touched the horseshoe with one finger; then they led Nickel out into the sunlight. The outdoor ring was empty.

"Okay, Jamie, the first thing to remember is that you always mount a horse from the left side," Carole began.

"How come?"

"Because in the old days, people wore swords attached on their left sides, so they couldn't mount their horses from the right." Of The Saddle Club members, Carole knew the most about horses. "What you do is this. Hold on to the saddle with both hands, put your left foot inside my hands, and I'll boost you onto Nickel. Lisa will hold him like she promised, and Stevie will spot you from the other side."

"Okay." Jamie did as Carole told him, grabbing the saddle and stepping into her intertwined fingers. She gave one heave, and suddenly Jamie was sitting tall in the saddle.

"Wow!" he cried. He turned his head and looked around. "I'm so high up!"

"Put your feet in the stirrups and lightly hold one rein in each hand." Carole helped Jamie adjust his feet and hands. "Horses have sensitive mouths, so you don't want to pull too much on Nickel's bit."

"Okay." Jamie kept his hands just as Carole had placed them.

She grinned up at him. "Ready?"

He nodded.

"Great. Lead on, Lisa."

Slowly Lisa led Nickel and Jamie around the ring, while Carole and Stevie kept pace on either side. Nickel covered the ground with his gentle, swaying walk. Jamie's cheeks grew pink with excitement. "This is fun!" he cried. "Can we go faster?"

Lisa looked over her shoulder at Carole and Stevie. "What do you think?"

"I guess we could trot," said Stevie. "It might be hard to keep up if he canters, though."

"Okay, Jamie," said Lisa. "We're going to do the horse's next fastest gait, which is called a trot. It's a little bumpy, so squeeze tightly with your legs and keep your heels down."

"Okay." Jamie nodded.

Lisa clucked and Nickel moved quickly into a smooth trot, the girls jogging along with him.

"How are you doing up there?" Carole called breathlessly after they had trotted around the ring twice.

“*Grrreeaaat!*” Jamie sounded as if he were being bounced on someone’s knee.

“Can we stop now?” huffed Stevie. “Before I have a heart attack? Remember, Nickel’s got twice as many legs as we do!”

They slowed to a walk, then stopped in front of the gate. “It’s time for me to take Jamie home, anyway,” said Lisa. “I promised his mother I’d have him back in time for lunch.”

“So how did you like riding, Jamie?” Carole asked the beaming child.

“It was great!” he exclaimed. He looked imploringly at Lisa. “Can I come back and ride again sometime?”

She looked up at him. “Maybe we could work something out with your parents and Ma. Right now, though, I need to get you home.”

“You and Jamie go ahead, Lisa. Stevie and I can cool and untack Nickel,” offered Carole.

“Really?” Lisa asked.

“Yeah, that way you can get back faster and we can take a long trail ride this afternoon.” Stevie said with a grin.

“You’ve got a deal!” said Lisa.

Carole showed Jamie how to dismount. He unsnapped his helmet and handed it to Stevie. “Thanks for the ride,” he said softly. “It was lots of fun.”

“It was our pleasure, Jamie,” replied Stevie. “We of The Saddle Club like nothing better than to introduce people to the fine art of equitation.”

“Come on, Stevie,” Carole said, pulling Stevie and Nickel toward the stable. “See you later, Lisa. Bye, Jamie. Glad you had a good time. Hope you can come and ride again!”

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Lisa burst into the tack room. “Hi!” she called. “I figured I might find you two in here.”

Stevie and Carole looked up from soaping two bridles.

“Mrs. Reg said this pile of tack needed cleaning,” explained Stevie. “So here we are.”

All the Pine Hollow riders were expected to help out with stable chores, and Max’s mother, Mrs. Reg, who was the stable manager, could usually find plenty for them to do. Though the girls grumbled sometimes, they really didn’t mind. The chores always had to do with the health and safety of the horses, and that was important to them.

“It could have been worse,” Carole reminded them. “There were a bunch of stalls that needed to be mucked out.”

Lisa sat down beside Stevie. “Give me that last bridle and I’ll help. That way we can finish faster and get on the trail.”

Carole handed Lisa the bridle, and together the girls rubbed the clean-smelling saddle soap into the stiff leather reins.

“Did you get Jamie home in time for his lunch?” Stevie asked as she cleaned green goop off a snaffle bit.

Lisa nodded. “He talked about Nickel all the way back, and his mother gave me a tuna fish sandwich.” She smiled. “They’re really nice, and Jamie had a wonderful time here at the stable.”

“He seems like a neat little kid,” said Stevie. “I’m glad you brought him over.”

“I wonder what it would be like to have a bridle of gold,” Carole said dreamily as she cleaned a noseband. Lisa and Stevie exchanged grins. Carole obviously wasn’t paying attention to their conversation.

“Well, you probably wouldn’t need to rub it with saddle soap,” Stevie said, giggling. “You could just dab metal polish on it, or you could have one of your goddess pals sprinkle it with diamond dust.”

The girls looked at each other, then collapsed in laughter.

“What’s so funny?” a woman’s voice called from the doorway.

The girls turned. Deborah, Max’s wife, stood there in jeans and a sweatshirt, a tired smile on her face.

“Oh, just one of Stevie’s jokes,” replied Lisa. “How’s Maxi? Max told us she’s got chicken pox.”

“She had a terrible night last night. None of us got any sleep. She just itches and itches in places she can’t reach to scratch. Babies have such a miserable time with this disease.”

“That must be awful,” said Carole. “Poor little thing.”

“It is awful.” Deborah sighed. “The only good thing about it is she’ll never have to go through it again. You can only get chicken pox once.”

“That’s a relief!” exclaimed Lisa.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Stevie asked.

"I don't think so," Deborah answered wearily. "But thanks for asking. Are you three going on a trail ride?"

"Yes." Carole's dark eyes sparkled. "It's The Saddle Club's first official trail ride of the summer."

"Well, have a good time." Deborah smiled. "I've got to get back to Maxi."

"Bye, Deborah," called Lisa. "Let us know if there's anything we can do to help."

"I will. Thanks." Deborah's voice faded down the hall toward Mrs. Reg's office.

The girls turned back to their job. The once-stiff leather bridles with dirty bits were now clean and hanging along the wall. "These look great!" Carole announced. "I'd say we're done."

"Then let's go," said Stevie. "Last one tacked up is a rotten egg."

Stevie grabbed Belle's lead rope. Carole snagged Starlight's bridle. Lisa scooped up Prancer's currycomb and dandy brush. Then they hurried to their horses' stalls. In a few minutes they all met at the main entrance of the stable, tacked up and ready to go.

"Whew!" said Stevie, out of breath. "I'd call that a draw. Nobody has to be a rotten egg today."

Carole laughed. "Good. I don't feel much like being one after all that bridle cleaning. Which trail do we want to take?"

"Let's do the creek trail," suggested Lisa. "We can have a nice ride across the meadow and then go wading in the creek."

"Sounds good to me," Stevie agreed.

The girls walked their horses to the back of the stable, where the creek trail began, then mounted. Prancer and Belle took off at a trot, eager to go for a run in the woods, but Starlight snorted and balked as if he would rather stay at the barn.

"Come on, boy." Carole squeezed Starlight with her legs as she watched Stevie and Lisa disappear around the first curve. Starlight backed up instead of going forward and twisted his head around to look at Carole. "Everybody's going that way, Starlight!" she cried, squeezing him with her legs again. Finally the bay gelding turned in the right direction and trotted quickly after the other two horses.

Spring fever, Carole thought as Starlight caught up to Prancer. He's got spring fever and his muscles are tight. I need to ride him a lot more.

The trail Stevie led them along went a little way through the woods. Above them the sunlight twinkled through a leafy green canopy of trees, and a jaunty mockingbird trilled as they rode past. The sweet smell of blooming honeysuckle drifted through the air. "Isn't this a wonderful day?" Stevie called over her shoulder.

"It's absolutely perfect!" agreed Lisa.

"Want to canter when we get to the meadow?"

"Yes!" Lisa and Carole cried in unison.

They trotted until the woods thinned out into a grassy green meadow speckled with tiny yellow wildflowers. The ground was smooth here and the grass soft. It was the perfect place for a fast ride. The three girls pulled up side by side.

"Everybody ready for the first official canter of the summer?" Stevie asked with a grin.

Carole and Lisa nodded.

"Then let's go, and the last one to the creek's a rotten egg!"

The girls urged their horses into a canter. This time when Prancer and Belle bounded forward, Starlight did not hesitate but ran right along beside them, eager to be first.

Carole shifted her weight over Starlight's withers and relaxed into the horse's gait. She could feel his muscles moving beneath her as his hooves thudded on the grass. The breeze blew cool on her face, and the flower-dotted meadow passed by in a blur. Just ahead was a small tree that had fallen in a storm. As soon as Starlight saw it, he nosed ahead of Belle and Prancer and galloped even faster. To Carole, it seemed as if they were flying. As they approached the tree, Starlight slowed a bit to gather himself; then he jumped high and long over the fallen trunk and branches. Carole closed her eyes as his powerful back legs lifted them into the air, but she wasn't afraid. She suddenly knew exactly what it was like to ride a horse with wings. No wonder Bellerophon loved Pegasus so.

When she opened her eyes, the creek was coming up fast. "Whoa, boy," she said softly, sitting back in the saddle and shortening her reins. Though Starlight settled down into a canter, he tossed his head up and down as if he really didn't want to quit running yet.

"Easy, Starlight," Carole murmured, patting his neck and turning him in a large circle. "You act like you've never galloped before."

Starlight snorted once but finally slowed to a trot, then to a walk. Carole turned to watch as Stevie and Lisa cantered up beside her.

"Gosh, Carole," Stevie said breathlessly. "I only said you'd be a rotten egg. I didn't mean you'd be the rottenest egg on the planet forever!"

Carole frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you were going fast. Really fast. *Racehorse* fast."

"Oh, Stevie," Carole replied. She knew she'd passed Stevie and Lisa, but she didn't think she'd gone that fast. Stevie tended to exaggerate, anyway.

"No, Stevie's right," said Lisa. "You guys were a blur. I didn't think you were ever going to land after that jump."

Carole couldn't help grinning. "Wasn't that wonderful? I felt just like Bellerophon must have on Pegasus."

Stevie and Lisa exchanged amused glances. "Let's let the horses graze a little while we go wading," Stevie suggested. She lifted one eyebrow at Carole. "Unless, of course, there are some lion-headed monsters around that you and Starlight want to take on."

Carole laughed. "Not today. Flying on the ground's good enough for me."

The girls walked their horses to cool them down, then tied them to some low bushes that grew near the creek. Belle, Prancer, and Starlight were as much of a club as their riders, so there was little chance that any of them would run away. After they had begun to graze contentedly in the deep green grass, the girls sprawled out on the sun-warmed boulders that bordered the creek.

"Oh, these boots," Lisa groaned as she pulled off one tall black boot. "I love them, but they're awfully hot for trail riding." Lisa's mother insisted that Lisa have just the right clothes to do all the things she thought proper young ladies ought to know how to do. She always bought Lisa the very best, but sometimes Lisa wished her mother would listen to her mother and just buy her what she needed.

"Maybe you'll make enough money baby-sitting Jamie to buy a pair of short ones," Stevie said as she pulled off her cowboy boots.

“Jamie’s parents would have to go to Europe for six months for that to happen,” Lisa said matter-of-factly. She pulled off her socks and stuck her feet in the cool water. “Anyway, I’ve got to come up with fifty dollars of my own money each month for riding lessons this summer.”

“Ouch.” Stevie winced. “That’s a lot.” She yanked off her socks and plunged her feet into the water. “Ahhh,” she murmured. “Bliss.”

“He’s a nice little boy, though.” Carole leaned over the wide, shallow creek and watched as tiny silver minnows darted around their toes. “Baby-sitting him won’t be bad. And maybe he can come to the stable again.”

Lisa smiled. “It was fun taking him around the ring on Nickel, wasn’t it? I felt like, I don’t know, a real honest-to-goodness horseback rider.”

“I know,” agreed Carole. “I did, too. It felt so good to show somebody how wonderful horses and riding are.”

Lisa reached down and splashed a handful of cool water where her hair fell against her neck. “I really appreciate your helping me with him today.”

“That’s what The Saddle Club is for,” Stevie chirped. “To help each other out, whenever we need it.”

“So you guys really do like Jamie?” asked Lisa.

“Sure,” said Stevie. “He’s cute. When he grows up, he’ll be almost as cute as Phil.” Phil Marsten was Stevie’s boyfriend. He rode at Cross County Pony Club, and when he and Stevie weren’t competing with each other to see who was the better rider, they had wonderful times together.

“Good,” Lisa replied. “I’m taking him to the Cross County Fair on Wednesday, and I was hoping you two might want to come along.”

Stevie sat up straighter. “I’m already supposed to meet Phil there. But if you and Jamie come along, we can all do the fair together. Can you come too, Carole? Or are you sure you can tear yourself away from Pegasus and Beetlejuice?” There was a mischievous twinkle in her hazel eyes.

“Yeah, Carole,” Lisa teased. “I mean, gosh, it’s only three months until that project’s due. You don’t have true Lisa-itis if you’re not already thinking about it!”

“You two can laugh,” said Carole, “but these stories are really cool.” She turned toward Stevie and Lisa and sat cross-legged. “Bellerophon was a prince who had lost his kingdom. King Iobates sent him on a mission to destroy a monster called the Chimera, something no mortal man was supposed to be able to do.”

“Is this Chimera Mr. Goat-Breath?” asked Stevie.

“Right. Bellerophon knew he would probably be killed fighting the Chimera, and he was just about to ask for the king’s daughter’s hand in marriage.”

“Gosh,” Lisa said softly.

“But he was sworn to do what the king commanded. He was on his way to find the Chimera when suddenly the goddess Athena appeared before him. She gave him a golden bridle and told him to go and put it on Pegasus. That way, on a flying horse, he could kill the monster without being killed himself.

“Bellerophon knew about a spring where Pegasus was supposed to drink, so he went and hid in the bushes and waited. Sure enough, Pegasus came along and Bellerophon jumped on

his back. Furious, Pegasus flew high up into the heavens, but Bellerophon hung on and waited for his chance to slip the bridle into Pegasus' mouth. After he did that, Pegasus became as gentle as—

"Belle!" Stevie interjected.

"No, probably more like Patch," said Carole.

The girls giggled at the thought of Pine Hollow's gentlest, most easygoing horse suddenly sprouting wings and flying off to attack monsters.

Carole continued. "Anyway, after that, Pegasus and Bellerophon flew away to search for the Chimera, and they found it, sleeping at the mouth of a cave. Pegasus dropped down from the sky without a sound, but the Chimera woke up. They had a furious battle that lasted for hours, but in the end Bellerophon chopped off its head. The blood boiled out of its body and turned the ground to ashes."

"So did Bellerophon get back and marry the king's daughter?" Lisa asked.

Carole shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I haven't read that far."

Stevie chewed on a blade of grass and stretched out again on the warm rock. "I guess a book like that wouldn't be too bad to read on summer vacation," she admitted.

"I don't think I'll ever mind reading and writing about horses," said Carole.

Stevie grinned at her two friends. "It just seems weird—Carole's reading a book while Lisa's teaching someone about horses!"

Suddenly a high-pitched squeal rang out. The girls turned and looked over at the horse Starlight had sidled up to Prancer and was trying to bite her ear.

"What on earth?" cried Carole, jumping up and running barefoot over to Starlight. She grabbed his bridle. "He's never tried to do anything like that before."

"Is Prancer okay?" Lisa asked worriedly, hurrying up behind her.

"I think so." Carole felt Prancer's soft ear. There were no scratches, and the skin wasn't broken. "She's okay. I guess Starlight missed." She looked up into Starlight's big brown eyes. "What's the matter with you, Starlight? You've been acting weird all day."

"That is weird for Starlight," agreed Lisa. "He's never been antisocial before."

"Oh, I'm sure it's just spring fever," said Carole, giving Starlight a pat on the neck. "He wouldn't have run that fast through the meadow if he'd been sick. I just need to ride him a little more and get all the winter kinks worked out of his muscles."

"Well, you'd better work them out soon, or else we'll have to buy Prancer a pierced earring!" Lisa laughed.

"Is everything okay?" Stevie called from her perch on the rocks.

"Just a bad case of spring fever on Starlight's part," Carole called back. "But they're fine."

The horses continued with their grazing, and Lisa and Carole returned to the creek. "Hey, why don't we put our boots back on and ride along the forest trail?" Stevie suggested. "We might see some fawns or fox cubs."

"Fine by me," said Carole. "Starlight obviously needs to work off some excess energy."

Wiggling their toes in the warm sun, the girls let their feet dry, then put their boots back on. They hopped off the rocks and walked over to where their horses were still grazing. Stevie grabbed Belle's bridle and, as usual, was the first to mount up.

"Last one to—"

"Wait, Stevie," said Lisa. "Let's just have a nice, relaxing ride back. We're not in training."

for the Derby, you know.”

“I was just going to say,” Stevie replied as Carole and Lisa mounted their horses, “the last one to see something really neat needs glasses.”

“Okay.” Lisa laughed. “You’re on.”

For the rest of the afternoon, the girls rode over the rolling Virginia countryside, splashing through streams and cantering across the broad, open meadows. Stevie found a nest of newly hatched killdeers, and Lisa had to calm Prancer down when a graceful, honey-colored doe burst from the woods and bounded across the path right in front of them.

“That’s one for me and one for Lisa,” Stevie said as they trotted three abreast at a wide place in the trail. “Haven’t you seen anything neat, Carole?”

“I’ve seen lots of neat things,” said Carole. “You two just see them first.” Actually, Carole had been looking more at Starlight than at the plants and animals on the trail. Riding all afternoon hadn’t done him the good she thought it would. Usually he was a cooperative, dependable horse. Since they’d left the creek, he’d shied at a leaf falling from a maple tree, he’d refused to go over a tiny mud puddle, and he’d tried again to bite Prancer, this time on the rump. It was as if he was determined to see how naughty he could be.

“You’ll do better tomorrow, boy,” Carole whispered. Starlight tossed his head and tried to go around Belle on the right, but Carole sat up straighter in the saddle. “I know just what you need, Starlight. A good ride every day this summer.” She smiled down at her horse. *It’s a good thing you’ve got me to take care of you,* she thought. *I know just what to do.*

The great white stallion broke into a gallop... Faster and faster he went; then suddenly he spread his wings, and with one massive downstroke they lifted him straight up into the air. Higher than any eagle, more swiftly than a falcon he flew, his graceful white neck arched and gleaming in the sun ...

A CAR HORN BLASTED. Carole jumped. The paperback fell out of her hands and she looked up, blinking in the bright sunlight. Just a moment ago she had been in ancient Greece, soaring through the clouds on Pegasus. Now she had suddenly plummeted back to Willow Creek, Virginia, where she sat in front of Pine Hollow Stables, waiting for Judy Barker to pick her up.

"Hi, Judy!" she called to the figure waving from the familiar blue pickup. Quickly Carole gathered up her book and the brown-bag lunch she'd packed and hurried out to the truck. Judy watched her and smiled.

"Hi," Judy said as Carole climbed in beside her. "I'm sorry if I startled you. You looked like you were thousands of miles away."

"Oh, not really." Carole felt a tinge of embarrassment warm her cheeks. "More like thousands of years." For weeks she'd been excited about spending Tuesdays with Judy, and here she was, on her very first trip, daydreaming about Pegasus. "I was just catching up on my reading while I waited. It's about this horse with wings."

Judy smiled. "You mean Pegasus?"

Carole looked over at her in astonishment. "You know about Pegasus?"

"Oh, yes," said Judy, checking her rearview mirror. "He was my all-time favorite character in Greek mythology."

"Wasn't it wonderful what he and Bellerophon did?" Carole was thrilled to find somebody else who knew about this fabulous horse and rider.

"It was super. When I was little I used to wish I could grow up and find a whole island of winged horses, just like Pegasus. Then I could ride and fly anywhere I wanted to." Judy chuckled as she eased the truck out into the street. "Now I guess I'd have to find one with a trailer hitch so that I could carry all my medical supplies along, too."

Carole laughed at the idea of Judy's making veterinary calls on a winged horse that pulled a trailer. She settled back in the seat and stashed her lunch under it.

"So where are we going today?" Carole asked as they turned right onto a four-lane highway.

"Out to a new client. Mr. and Mrs. Albergini at Shady Lane Farm. They moved here recently from southern California."

"What kind of horses do they have?" Carole pictured the Alberginis bringing some exotic stock of Bashkirs or Friesians to Virginia.

"I'm not sure," Judy replied. "They called me a week ago to set up a general vet check. This should be an interesting call for you to help with, just because it is routine."

Carole looked out the window as Judy drove down the highway. Tuesday was as perfect a day as Monday had been, with sunshine and high white clouds floating across the sky. She gazed out the window as they cruised through the countryside. If she squinted a certain way at one cloud, she could just imagine a single rider on a winged horse soaring high above them.

They drove for several miles until they came to a bright blue mailbox with the words SHADY LANE in silver letters. Judy turned down the gravel driveway, which twisted through a grove of tall oak trees. "Guess this is why they named it Shady Lane," she said as the truck bounced over a rut in the tree-covered road.

The driveway ended at a large riding ring filled with brightly painted jumps. To the right was a long barn, where an older man and woman stood waiting.

"Hi," Judy said as she pulled up in front of the couple. "Mr. and Mrs. Albergini?"

"That's us." The man wore a golf shirt, jeans, and jodhpur boots. "I'm Sam and this is my wife, Claudia."

Mrs. Albergini wore glasses with purple frames and a brightly colored Hawaiian dress. She smiled at Carole and Judy. Carole smiled back. By their outfits, Carole figured that Mr. Albergini must be involved with the horses, while maybe Mrs. Albergini gave hula lessons on the side.

Judy got out of the truck and introduced herself to the couple. "I'm Judy Barker, and this is my assistant, Carole Hanson," she said as Carole got out of the truck and stood beside her.

"Pleased to meet you." Mr. Albergini shook Judy's hand firmly. He had a tiny mustache and brown eyes that crinkled up when he talked. "We've heard that you're the best vet in the county."

"Yes," Mrs. Albergini chimed in. "We feel very lucky to have you stop by."

"Thanks," said Judy. "I appreciate the compliment. Is there a particular horse you're having problems with?"

"Well, most everything is fine." Mr. Albergini ran his hand through his thinning gray hair. "But I've got three that have been acting a little squirrely lately. I can't figure out what could be the matter."

Judy gave the Alberginis a reassuring smile. "Let's go have a look at them and see how we can help." She turned to Carole. "Would you bring my bag and lab kit from the truck?"

"Right away." Carole felt a thrill of excitement as the Alberginis watched her get Judy's equipment. It was almost as if she were a real vet herself.

"Would you two doctors like some cookies and lemonade?" Mrs. Albergini called as Judy and Carole began to follow Mr. Albergini into the barn.

"No thanks," Judy replied with a smile.

"Well, I'll be in the house if you need me," Mrs. Albergini called.

"Does your property have a lot of standing water, Mr. Albergini?" Judy asked as the truck jumped over a murky brown puddle.

"Only around the barn. The rest of the land drains well. We have a creek that runs along the back."

"I see."

Carole noticed a frown on Judy's face; she realized that Judy had already begun diagnosing the situation when she'd only asked about a mud puddle. What did a mud puddle have to do

with horses being sick?

The Alberginis' barn was a long structure with five stalls on either side. Though the ventilation was good, the air was thick with gnats and flies.

"Where do you spread your manure, Mr. Albergini?" Judy asked, slapping a deerfly that had landed on her arm.

"Just right out there in back of the barn." Mr. Albergini slapped a mosquito off his own arm. "But it's fenced so that the horses can't get into it."

"I see." Judy smiled. "Now, where are the horses you've been having problems with?"

"Two are over here." Mr. Albergini led them to the far two stalls on the left side of the barn. In the first was a beautiful chestnut mare. She lifted her head and nickered when Judy and Carole came close. Her eyes were deep brown and very kind.

"This is Lady Jane," Mr. Albergini said, giving the horse a pat on the neck. "She's won lots of barrel-racing competitions, and we'd like to breed her, but I can't get her to eat anything."

"How long has she been like this?" asked Judy, a frown once again wrinkling her forehead.

"Oh, about a week. She's such a sweet, good horse. I'm beginning to think something might be wrong with her."

"Carole, would you hold her?" Judy asked.

Carole got the lead line that hung next to Lady Jane's stall, snapped it to her halter, and led her out in front of Judy. Lady Jane sighed once and stood quietly, almost resting her head on Carole's shoulder. "Good girl," Carole whispered, rubbing her soft nose.

Judy examined Lady Jane's mouth, eyes, ears, and feet. Then she rummaged in her bag for her stethoscope and listened to her heart and lungs. She felt down each of the mare's legs, then along her spine.

"I'm not palpating anything abnormal," Judy reported to Carole. Judy ran her hands along Lady Jane's muscular shoulders and thighs. She felt behind the mare's back legs and under her tail. "Everything seems okay," she said. "She's a good strong quarter horse, and she looks like she would throw nice foals."

She gave Lady Jane a pat on the withers. "Let's check her for worms. A worm infestation would certainly put her off her feed."

"That's a good idea, Dr. Barker," said Mr. Albergini. "None of these horses have been wormed since last fall."

"Okay." Judy turned to Carole. "Remember that we need to do a worm check on all the horses."

"Will she start eating again if we get rid of her worms?" Carole asked.

"She should," Judy said. She gave the mare a scratch behind her ears. "She seems to be a sound horse otherwise. I'll do some blood work on her later to make sure there aren't any other problems, but after a cleanup and a tube worming, she should start eating again and make a wonderful mother."

"That's good news," Mr. Albergini said as Carole walked the mare back to her stall.

"Who's next?" asked Judy.

"Next is Joker." Mr. Albergini walked to the next stall, where a shaggy gray Shetland pony stood munching hay. There was an impish look about him, as if he might enjoy romping in some goofy gymkhana race with balloons attached to his head. For some reason, Carole thought of Stevie.

"Does Joker have any special problems?" Judy asked as Carole led the pony out of the stall. Joker seemed frisky and eager to leave the confines of the stable.

"Calm down, boy," Carole said with a laugh as the little horse stomped one foot and twitched his tail.

"He's a great little guy, although he has begun acting up lately. He threw my granddaughter off the other day."

"Goodness. Was she hurt?" Judy asked.

"Only her pride." Mr. Albergini laughed. "Still, I hope Joker's not becoming an unsound mount."

"Well, let's see." Judy performed the same examination of Joker that she'd done of Lacy and Jane. Joker shifted and wiggled and fidgeted the whole time.

"Find anything wrong?" Mr. Albergini asked as Judy ruffled her hands through Joker's shaggy coat.

"It's hard to tell through all this hair," Judy said. She folded her arms and stepped back from Joker; then she reached into her medical bag and took out a notepad. "Let's try something," she said. "Carole, I want you to hold this pad under Joker's chin."

"Sure." Carole stepped forward and held the notepad.

"Okay," said Judy. "Let's see what we get here." She held up Joker's head and scraped her fingernails along the underside of his jaw. All sorts of dirt and dandruffy material fell onto the white paper. Judy examined it closely. "Look at this," she said to Carole and Mr. Albergini. They bent over the pad and looked. A number of tiny, brown, cigar-shaped bugs squirmed on the paper.

"Gross." Carole scrunched up her nose. "What are they?"

"Lice," Judy replied. "Joker's got a bad case of lice. Lice make horses miserable. They itch all the time and can't scratch properly and it wears them out." She looked at Mr. Albergini. "That's what's making Joker cranky."

"I'll be darned," Mr. Albergini said, amazed.

"I think Joker needs a summer haircut, a good bath with some lice shampoo, and some insecticide spray." Judy gave Joker a pat on his rump. "He'll be fine. Before we leave I'll do some blood work on him, too, just to be sure that's the only thing wrong."

Mr. Albergini and Judy moved to the next horse while Carole put Joker back in his stall. The little horse lowered his head sadly when he was put up again. "Don't worry," Carole said, giving his mane a quick rub. "You'll be playing in the meadow with your buddies in no time."

They worked their way down that side of the barn. The next three horses were fine, only needing a routine worming. Then they crossed to the other side of the barn.

"Who have we got over here?" Judy asked, swatting at a fly that buzzed around her right ear.

"This is Spirit." Mr. Albergini got the lead line and led Spirit out himself. She was a delicately formed black Arab mare with a small white star on her forehead. Though she had a pretty, fine-boned face, her coat was dull and there was a hopeless look about her eyes. "She just hasn't been herself. Acting up when she's ridden, spooking at familiar things. Just acting nutty in general."

"Hi, girl," Judy said softly as she examined Spirit. Carole watched Judy's frown grow as she felt Spirit's legs and along her belly. "I know exactly what's the matter with this horse."

“What?” Carole and Mr. Albergini said in unison.

“Both of you, lean down here and feel these bumps.”

Carole and Mr. Albergini did as Judy asked. Carole felt a whole line of swollen blisters the size of quarters. When they touched them, Spirit jumped as if she'd been pinched. “What are they, Judy?” Carole asked.

“Spirit is allergic to mosquito bites,” Judy said. “They've bitten her all along her girth line. She looked down at Mr. Albergini. “Was Spirit ridden near those puddles of water?”

Mr. Albergini nodded. “That's where my son last rode her.”

“Then that's where she picked up those bites.” Judy patted the pretty little horse. “I can give her some medicine for the bites. But let's try to make sure this doesn't happen again.”

Mr. Albergini put Spirit back into her stall. Judy and Carole worked their way down the rest of the barn. Other than one gelding needing to have his teeth floated, all the rest of the horses were fine. When they had finished with the examinations and had taken all the blood samples, Carole's shoulders ached with fatigue, but Judy had just started. She sat down on a bale of hay and began to talk.

“Mr. Albergini, have you been in the horse business long?” she asked, again swiping at the pesky flies that swarmed around her face.

Mr. Albergini's eyes crinkled up. “No. My wife and I moved here from San Diego to be near our son, who works in Washington. We bought this farm lock, stock, and barrel two months ago so that our grandchildren could ride. We rode horses in California, and we've read a lot about keeping horses since we've been here, but we're certainly not experts.”

Judy gave him an understanding smile. “Well, there's nothing wrong with not being horse experts as long as you're willing to keep learning. Your stable is in basically good shape, but you need to work harder at keeping things clean.”

“Oh?” Mr. Albergini said.

“Yes.” Judy took a pen from her shirt pocket and began writing on the notepad. “First, you need to get rid of those puddles of water. Unlike southern California, we get a lot of rain in Virginia. Standing water attracts mosquitoes. Mosquitoes carry all sorts of serious equine diseases, and you've already got one horse that's highly allergic to them.”

Mr. Albergini frowned. “I honestly hadn't thought of that.”

Judy continued. “Next, you need to start carrying the manure a lot farther away from the barn and spreading it over the ground so that the sunlight can kill the bacteria and organisms in it. Flies breed in piles of manure, and flies are a major irritant to both horses and riders.”

Mr. Albergini chuckled. “We have fifty acres. I'm sure we could find another place to put it.”

“Third, you need to scour this entire barn with insecticide and set up a program to spray for flies and ticks. You'll need to spray your horses, too, and be extra protective of those that are really sensitive, like Spirit. I can tell you what special products to buy and how to use them.”

“That would be wonderful, Dr. Barker.”

Carole watched as Judy scribbled more notes on her pad. Though a few of Mr. Albergini's horses had suffered because of his ignorance, she felt sorry for him. She could see how bad he felt.

Suddenly Mrs. Albergini appeared in the doorway. She carried a tray with three tall glasses

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