

SADDLE SORE

Bonnie Bryant

Bantam



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“I CAN’T RIDE!”

“Hi, Monica,” Kate said, in a slightly strained tone.

Monica glanced briefly at Kate, then looked away. “Hi.”

Emily spoke up. “You know,” she said to Monica, “you ought to do what we did when we got here—let the grown-ups take the luggage, and get on a horse as quick as you can! We’ll get a snack and wait for you, and we can all ride together.”

Monica scowled at Emily. “I can’t do that,” she said rudely.

Emily flushed but remained polite. “Why not? We don’t mind waiting.”

Monica’s face turned red. She looked as if she didn’t know whether to cry or to spit at Emily. “I should think it would be obvious why not,” she said. “People with one leg don’t ride horses.”

THE SADDLE CLUB



SADDLE SORE



BONNIE BRYANT



A SKYLARK BOOK

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SADDLE SORE

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About the Author

“LOOK! YOU CAN see the mountains!” Emily Williams leaned forward, pressing her face against the pane of one of the plane’s small windows. “Some of them still have snow.”

“The Bar None isn’t that high up,” Emily’s friend Lisa Atwood assured her. “We won’t be riding through snow.”

Emily sat back. “That’s good, I guess, since I only brought summer clothes. But riding through snow is fun!”

“Riding through sagebrush is fun, too,” a third friend, Carole Hanson, said.

“Well, I don’t know about riding *through* sagebrush,” joked the final girl in the cabin, Stevie Lake. “Riding *near* sagebrush, maybe. Riding around it. Riding past it and admiring the sagebrush—that’s fun. But riding *through* sagebrush hurts! It’s prickly.”

“I’ll write that down so I don’t forget it,” Emily said dryly. The others laughed. It was hard for them all not to laugh, when they knew they were on their way to have a great time riding at the Bar None ranch.

Lisa, Carole, and Stevie had been best friends for a very long time. They were all completely horse-crazy, and, in fact, they had met at Pine Hollow, a riding stable in Willow Creek, Virginia, where they all rode. When they discovered how much they had in common, they formed The Saddle Club. Its only two rules were that members had to help each other out, and they had to be totally, irredeemably, horse-crazy.

They hadn’t known Emily Williams for that long, but already she was one of their closest friends. Because she had cerebral palsy, Emily rode at the Free Rein Therapeutic Riding Center, a place for disabled riders. She was a very good rider. She even had her own horse, a loving palomino named P.C. Sometimes Emily came to Pine Hollow to ride, but she kept P.C. at Free Rein.

“You won’t believe it, Emily,” Carole said, her dark eyes shining with excitement. “The land is so open—you won’t see a fence for miles.”

“Oh, please,” Stevie retorted. “The only way she won’t see a fence is if she shuts her eyes. Em, they keep the horses in paddocks close to the barns, just the way you’d expect. They’ve got a little pasture for grazing, too, next to the ranch house, and they’ve got wire fences strung around the whole property. Otherwise the cows could just mosey into town.”

“And Mrs. Devine’s garden is fenced, too,” Lisa remembered.

“Otherwise the cows would eat lettuce for lunch,” Stevie said.

“Please!” Carole said, aiming a firm smile at Stevie. “You know exactly what I mean, and Emily does, too. Of course there are fences. There just don’t *seem* to be any. We can ride for miles, and if we ride in the right direction, there’s nothing to stop us at all.”

“Except a nasty bunch of sagebrush,” Stevie murmured, and they all laughed. Of the three Saddle Club members, Stevie was the most playful, and she loved all sorts of jokes. Stevie’s plans often landed them all in hot water, but her cleverness just as often bailed them out.

“So if my horse bucks me off, it’ll be able to run for miles,” Emily said. “You’re right, Carole, that is something to look forward to.” She said it with a laugh, and the others laughed in response.

Emily's personality was a lot like Stevie's. Both liked to have fun, but both could be incredibly stubborn. Emily's stubbornness often worked to her advantage—she kept trying things until she did it.

"A Bar None horse would never buck a rider off," Carole protested. "Wait until you meet them, Emily. They're the sweetest horses in the world."

If the others were horse-crazy, Carole was horse-berserk. Someday, her friends were sure Carole would do great things in the horse world, but for now she contented herself with learning every single thing possible about them and spending all of her free time around them.

"Better than P.C.?" Emily asked. "Better than Starlight?" Starlight was Carole's own horse.

"Well, no, of course not," Carole amended. "But aside from P.C. and Starlight, they're the sweetest horses—"

"What about Belle?" Stevie demanded, at the same time as Lisa said, "What about Prancer?" Belle was Stevie's horse; Prancer was the lesson horse Lisa usually rode.

"Sorry," Carole said. "Okay, aside from P.C., Starlight, Belle, and Prancer—"

"What about Topside?" Stevie asked. Lisa added, "What about Delilah?" Both were favorite Pine Hollow horses.

Emily laughed. So did Carole. "I guess you'd better just say they have very sweet horses like the Bar None," Emily said.

"That's right," Carole said. "I'd better not draw comparisons. I couldn't, anyway. Horses are all so different, like people."

"Emily, you'll love it," Lisa said softly. She was the quietest and most academic member of The Saddle Club. "I remember the first time I came to the Bar None. I really hadn't been riding for very long then, and I had never imagined a place like it."

"I have," Emily replied. "I've been dreaming and daydreaming about this trip ever since we learned we were going." Then she laughed again and tossed back her short dark hair. "I have to admit, I think Pine Hollow is pretty close to perfect, because of all the trails! It's hard to believe that this place will be even better. And I *can't* believe I'm here on this plane with you guys. It's amazing."

"Colonel Devine wanted to thank you," Carole said. "He told us you helped him a lot."

The Devines owned the Bar None and ran it as a dude ranch. Colonel Frank Devine was one of Carole's father's friends. His daughter, Kate, had first been Carole's good friend; now she was an auxiliary member of The Saddle Club. Colonel Devine had been a pilot in the Marine Corps and still did some flying for corporations out West. Whenever he came to the East Coast, he tried to arrange a get-together for Kate and The Saddle Club.

The Bar None had become a popular vacation spot for families. Last spring Colonel Devine had called Carole to explain that he wanted to expand their facilities. Many of his former Marine Corps buddies were veterans of the Vietnam War, and a number of them were disabled. He wanted them to be able to enjoy the ranch, too, so he was taking steps to make the Bar None accessible to everyone. Kate had told him about The Saddle Club's work at Fort Rein and the friend they had made there. Could he talk to Emily?

Carole had given him Emily's phone number, and later Emily had told her they'd had a long conversation. Frank Devine had already been in touch with several national organizations for the disabled, she said, including the North American Riding for the

Handicapped Association, or NARHA, which oversaw therapeutic riding organizations. But he had some specific questions to ask a rider, and she'd been able to answer most of them. A few months later, he'd invited them all West for a week, including Emily. Colonel Devine was flying the small plane they were in now, taking them to Kate and the ranch.

"He wanted to thank me, but he said he wants to get some work out of me, too," Emily said. "He wants my opinion on his improvements." She grinned. "This is going to be real fun."

"Passengers, prepare for landing." Colonel Devine's voice was stern over the intercom.

Emily giggled. "Does he always sound like that?"

Stevie nodded. "When he's flying, he becomes this whole other person, Colonel Invincible Captain of the Skies. Don't worry. At the Bar None he's a regular dad."

"He seemed regular before the plane took off," Emily said.

They gathered the books and snacks they'd spread about the small cabin and zipped the backpacks closed. Emily fit the cuffs of her crutches over her forearms. To walk she needed both crutches and leg braces, but to ride horses she didn't need either. She had a wheelchair but she avoided using it whenever she could.

When the little plane landed, Colonel Devine had no sooner dropped the ramp down when a tall girl came flying up it. "Stevie!" she shrieked. "Carole! Lisa! *Emily!*" She gave them each a hug, nearly knocking Emily down.

"Kate!" they all shrieked back.

"Come on, let's go!" Kate said, grabbing backpacks and hurrying them out the door. "Mom's in the truck, she's dying to meet you, Emily. We brought snacks in case you're hungry, and John says hi to all of you. If we get back quickly we can ride before dinner, and, oh, Carole, wait until you see the new foals!" Kate clattered down the ramp.

Emily burst out laughing. "You're right, Carole," she said. "You said I'd feel like I knew him right away, and I do. Who's John?"

"He works at the Bar None—he and his dad. He's our age." Lisa's eyes were shining. She liked John Brightstar quite a lot. They all did, but Lisa liked him the most.

Emily made her way slowly and carefully down the ramp. None of The Saddle Club offered to help her, and neither, they noted with satisfaction, did Kate. Emily was very firm about doing things for herself.

Before long they were all on their way to the ranch. The drive was barely long enough to exchange all the news with Kate. Before long they were talking about horses.

"This is P.C." Emily pulled a photograph out of her backpack. "I knew you'd want to see what he looked like, so I brought this. It's his summer coat, fortunately. In winter he looks like a yellow bear."

"He's adorable!" Kate said. "Look how nice his expression is."

"He's perfect for me," Emily said. "He tries to do everything I ask."

"Emily even taught him to lie down on command," Stevie bragged. "She uses it for mounting and dismounting whenever there isn't a ramp around." Emily couldn't lift her foot high enough to mount a horse from the ground.

Emily grinned. "We all taught him that, Stevie, and it was your idea in the first place. But he does do it whenever I need him to."

"Well, we haven't got any lying-down horses at the ranch yet," Kate said. "Moonglow do

most other things, though. I can't make up my mind what sort of horse I want her to be, s
right now I've got her jumping logs, schooling trot extensions and collections, and working c
spins."

The others laughed. Trot extensions and collections were advanced English-style ridin
spins were advanced Western. "What sort of saddle are you riding her in?" Carole asked.

Kate shrugged. "Usually Western, but sometimes English."

"I didn't think you were jumping much out here," Lisa added.

Kate shrugged again, this time with a wide grin. "You see a log, you might as well jump it
she said. "Moonglow seems to think so, too." Kate had gotten Moonglow from a governmen
sale of wild horses. Moonglow's training had been an extensive project that Kate thorough
enjoyed. Before her parents bought the ranch, Kate had been a top competitive junior ride
but her drive to win had taken all the fun out of riding for her. She'd given riding up entirel
until she met The Saddle Club; now she rode strictly for fun.

"We'll have to see some logs, then," Carole said. She loved jumping. "Kate, we came to a
agreement on the plane. Emily's never ridden in a place like this, and we haven't been he
for a long time. So we're going to ride all week long."

Kate looked surprised. "Do you ever do anything else?"

"Well, sometimes—"

"This week we're not doing *anything* but riding," Stevie cut in.

"Ride, ride, ride," Lisa said.

"Great!" said Kate.

Emily grinned. Her friends could see how thrilled she was.

"So, Emily," Mrs. Devine said, over the back of the front seat, "did Frank tell you all abo
our improvements?"

"No, he just told me to fasten my seat belt. What's new?"

They talked for a while about the ramps added to all the buildings, for wheelcha
entrance, the enlarged doorways in some of the bunkhouses, and other modifications th
Devines had made. Kate told them excitedly about the retraining program she and Joh
Brightstar had undertaken with some of the ranch saddle horses.

"We tried to do everything the people from NARHA told us about," she said. "Getting the
used to the mounting ramp and being mounted from either side, getting them to move o
voice and stick commands, as well as leg commands—everything. Plus, of course, makin
sure they're super calm. We've got two or three horses we think are completely ready, an
several more are coming along.

"Emily, I'm going to give you Spot for the week. He used to be my horse, until I g
Moonglow, and he's got wonderful gaits and a great disposition. You're going to love him
He's an Appaloosa."

Emily grinned. "Thanks, Kate. I'm sure I'll love him."

"One of our mares is doing amazingly well," Kate continued. "Her name is Buttercup. I'v
been working with her a lot, because I want her to be ready for Monica. Monica always rid
Buttercup when she comes here." Kate's voice dropped to a sad tone. "I haven't told yo
about Monica."

Mrs. Devine looked over the back of her seat again. "Such a tragedy. And they'll be he
tomorrow."

“Who?” asked Lisa.

“Monica and her parents,” Kate replied. “See, they started coming here the first year we opened the ranch, and they loved it so much they came back every year. Monica’s our age. She’s funny and athletic, and a great rider. We got to be pretty good friends.

“She had an accident on a motorbike last fall. It crushed her lower leg, and they had to amputate it. Her parents had already made their reservations to come here. They told Monica they wanted to cancel, but Monica wouldn’t let them. She wants everything in her life to be the same as it used to be.”

Kate’s eyes filled with tears. “I wanted to have disabled people come to the ranch, but I didn’t want that to mean Monica! I mean—of course I’m glad she’s coming, I’m just so sorry this happened to her.”

Carole patted Kate’s leg sympathetically. Lisa gave her shoulder a squeeze. “It sounds terrible,” Stevie said. “We’ll just have to do all we can to make sure she has a really good time.”

“If she was a good rider before, she should still be a good rider,” Emily said. “Does she have an artificial leg?”

Kate blinked. “I don’t know.”

Mr. Devine shook his head. “I don’t think so. I think it’s still too soon.”

“That’s too bad,” Emily said. “What about her knee? Did they save her knee?”

Lisa burst out laughing. “Emily, what a question! You sound so practical—in a ghoulish sort of way.”

Emily shook her head. “Think about it. If she still has a knee, her seat in the saddle will feel pretty normal. Otherwise it will be harder for her to balance, without an artificial leg.”

“She still has her knee,” Kate confirmed. “I didn’t talk to her—she was still at the rehab hospital when her mother called here—but her mom said it was just her lower leg.”

Emily nodded. “Good. She can use a crop for leg commands, the way I do, but she should be able to adjust quickly. She’ll be able to ride every day, just like us.”

“The more the merrier,” Stevie said, and the others agreed.

COLONEL DEVINE PULLED the truck to a stop in front of the ranch house. "Home, sweet home," he said.

The girls piled out. "C'mon!" Kate said. "Let's go see the horses!"

"What about your luggage, hmm?" her father asked. "Or maybe Emily wants a glass of water. Have you thought about that?"

"Oh, the luggage!" Lisa stopped in her tracks. "I suppose—"

Kate pulled her forward. "He's joking! Don't worry about it! Only—"

"I'm not thirsty," Emily said, walking forward without a backward glance. "Which barn has my horse in it?"

As they approached the horse barn, a tall, dark-haired boy in a cowboy hat and blue jeans came out to greet them. "Hi, everybody," he said softly. "Hi, Lisa."

"Hi," Lisa returned. "Emily, this is John Brightstar. John, this is Emily Williams."

John tipped his hat. "Pleased to meet you, Emily," he said. "I've been working Spot for you. Want to try him out?"

"Right now?"

"Why not?"

Emily beamed. "Wonderful!"

They entered the big, high-ceilinged barn. Inside, the air was rich with the fragrance of hay. Only one horse stood in the stalls inside.

"Where's Stewball?" Stevie demanded. Stewball was the horse she always rode at the B. None. "You've made poor Spot stay inside by himself! Where are all the others?"

"Outside, where they belong," John replied. "And poor Spot has only been inside for ten minutes, since I saw Kate's dad's truck turn off the road. I haven't even gotten him groomed yet."

"That's good," Emily said. "I'd rather groom him myself, so I can get to know him." She walked to the door of the stall and held her hands out so that Spot could sniff them.

"Here's what John and I thought," Kate said to The Saddle Club. "Emily's never ridden Western, which is a little different, and she's used to her own horse, not Spot. So—sorry, Stevie, if this disappoints you—we thought just Emily should ride right now, in the paddock to get used to things. We can all show her how to do it. Then tomorrow we'll head for the trails, where we belong."

"That sounds perfect," Carole said.

"I agree," Stevie said. "Just let me duck outside and tell Stewball about it. I wouldn't want him to think I was ignoring him." She went out the back door.

Emily attached a lead rope to Spot's halter and led him into the aisle. She tied him there so that she could groom him. "Is Stevie always that way about Stewball? She talked about him the whole trip, but she never actually told me what he was like."

"Put it this way," Lisa said. "Stevie and Stewball are *exactly* alike."

"Oh." Emily chuckled softly.

Kate came out of the tack room with a bucket of grooming supplies in her hand, a Western

bridle slung over her shoulder, and a heavy Western saddle over her arm. Carole and Lisa quickly relieved her of saddle and bridle. Kate handed the grooming bucket to Emily.

Emily took a rubber curry out of it, then set the bucket down on the ground. She had to maneuver carefully around it so that she wouldn't hit it with the tip of a crutch. "Here's a tip for improvement for you," she said. "See, Kate? I'm going to have an awful time getting stuff in and out of that bucket. When I bend over I sometimes lose my balance. At Free Rein, we've got a little shelf to keep stuff like this at waist level. Your dad could build one in here."

"I'll tell him," Kate said. "That's a good idea."

"When Emily comes to Pine Hollow, we use a hay bale," Carole said. She dragged one within Emily's reach and put the bucket on it.

"Thanks," Emily told her.

Carole grabbed a brush and went around to Spot's other side. She started untangling his mane, humming as she did so. It felt so great to be back at the Bar None, surrounded by horses, mountains, and friends. But not in that order. Maybe friends, horses, mountains. Friends, horses, mountains? It was hard to decide. The mountains were definitely the least important, so they should go last. Friends were most important, so probably they should come first. But then horses were important, too, and the Devines had so many horses, they really outnumbered the friends. Maybe horses should be first, because there were so many of them. Carole laughed.

"What's so funny?" Emily came around Spot's rump and started to curry his withers.

"I'm trying to decide what friends are worth in terms of horses," Carole said. "If I have four friends here, how many is that in horses? The Devines have nearly a hundred horses—but maybe foals don't count as much—"

"How good are the horses?" Emily asked.

"Very good."

"How good are the friends?" Kate chimed in.

"The best."

"Then each friend is worth thirty-two point two five horses," Emily said. "So unless you've got more than, uh—"

"One hundred twenty-nine," Lisa said. She was good at math.

"One hundred twenty-nine horses here—we're still worth more."

"Sorry, Carole," Kate said. "Last count was seventy-eight horses, including foals."

Stevie came back in time to hear most of this. "Stewball counts quadruple," she said. She picked up a comb and started on Spot's tail. Lisa was picking out Spot's feet. Emily traded the curry for a large body brush and began brushing the dirt from Spot's flanks.

"Hey," Kate protested to The Saddle Club, "the only reason I didn't grab a brush is that you guys told me Emily didn't like to be helped. Now there's nothing left for me to do!"

"You could brush his face with the soft brush," Emily suggested. She went on to explain. "They're right, I do like to do things for myself. It drives me crazy when people rush in to help me because they think I can't do something, or because I'm doing it more slowly than they would. But two things make this different: First, you guys are my friends, and even when you're helping me I know you know I'm capable of things. Second, Kate, this is The Saddle Club. Have you ever seen them stand near a horse and not try to groom it? You should have been there the first time they met P.C. They practically had to sit on their hands

not to touch him.”

Kate laughed. Carole said, “She’s got us figured out.”

Lisa had just started to wonder where John had gone when he came in through the back door. “I watered the paddock down,” he said. “It’s dusty out there. Is Emily ready?”

Kate finished explaining the intricacies of a Western girth to Emily. It was the only thing truly different about saddling up a horse Western. “We’re ready,” Kate said.

Emily led Spot outside. Though she walked slowly, Spot kept his head level with her shoulder, just as he should. “Good boy,” Emily murmured.

“He’s always been this good,” Kate said proudly.

John showed off the mounting ramp he had built. It was a wooden platform about two feet high. On one side it had steps, like a regular mounting block, but on the other side it had a long, shallow ramp.

Emily started up the ramp. Steps were almost always too high for her to climb. “This is great,” she said. “Only, John, you might want to add a handrail to both sides, not just one. I don’t need it, but some of your other guests might.”

John nodded. “I didn’t think of that. I have been teaching the horses to get used to being mounted from either side.” Horses were almost always mounted from the left side only, but some riders with disabilities found it easier to mount from the right.

Kate helped hold Spot still in front of the block while Emily unfastened her leg braces and set her crutches down. She held on to Spot’s mane and the back of his saddle for support.

“The stirrups look different,” she said.

“That’s because they’re made of wood,” Kate explained. “They won’t feel much different except that in Western riding you usually ride with your stirrups a little lower.”

“Did you remember to bring your crop?” Lisa asked. Emily showed it to her. “Good,” Lisa said. Crops weren’t generally used in Western riding, but Emily always rode with one because she had trouble moving her legs to give the horse the correct signals. She gave them with the crop instead. She called her crop her third leg.

“We’ve been using a crop on Spot for a couple of weeks now,” Kate informed her. “He should be thoroughly used to it.”

“All aboard,” Stevie said.

Emily grinned. She carefully climbed into the saddle and settled her feet in the stirrups. She picked up the reins, and Kate moved away from Spot’s head. Spot stood still, waiting for Emily’s signal.

Emily looked around with mock dismay. “Help! I never thought about this. How do I ask a Western horse to walk?”

“How do you think?” Stevie asked.

“How should I know? I might have to pull his tail or something!”

Kate laughed. “It’s the same as English riding,” she said. “The horses are trained to the same cues. Just pretend you’re riding P.C.”

Emily nodded. “That’s a relief. I’m not sure I could reach his tail.” She signaled Spot to walk and pointed him toward the rail. “This saddle’s comfortable. It’s much more like a chair than my saddle at home. How do I look?”

The Saddle Club, Kate, and John surveyed her critically. “You tell her,” Kate said to John.

“Oh, no,” Emily said. “Sounds like I’m doing something wrong.”

“You look relaxed and comfortable,” John said, “but you’re holding your reins in both hands.”

“What should I be doing? Holding them with my feet? Draping them around my neck? Hands seem like the obvious choice here.”

“Hand,” Stevie said. “Hand, not hands. Put both reins in one hand, and keep them loose.”

“Like a cowboy,” Emily said.

“You *are* a cowboy now,” Kate said.

Emily grinned. “I never thought of that.” She walked Spot several times around the arena. “Feels good. What else?”

“Move your rein hand so that your left rein drapes across his neck,” John directed. Emily did. Spot instantly swung to the right, away from the rein.

“Wow!” Emily cried. “He turned!”

“Sure.” Kate looked proud. “That’s called neck reining, and most Western horses do it. Spot does it very well.”

“Cool beans,” Emily said. She neck-reined Spot in a serpentine pattern around the arena. Then, following John’s instructions, she jogged and then loped around the arena. A jog was a Western trot, and a lope was a Western canter. She did circles and changed directions at all three gaits. She looked easy and confident, and Spot obeyed her perfectly.

A loud bell rang across the ranch. Emily eased Spot to a halt. “That wouldn’t be—by any chance—a dinner bell?” Kate nodded. Emily beamed. “I love the West!” she shouted. “Go along, little dogies! Let’s eat!”

With all of them working together, it didn’t take long to untack Spot and turn him out with the other riding horses. John and his father left for home. Soon the rest of them were all sitting at one of the long tables in the ranch house dining room. Kate’s parents joined them for a hearty meal. No one else was in the room. Mrs. Devine explained to them that the only other visitors right now were two honeymoon couples, both of whom had requested picnic dinners to take on sunset rides.

“That’s all they’ve done since they got here,” Kate said. “We hardly see them at all.”

“They aren’t much work, but they aren’t much company, either,” Mrs. Devine agreed. “I’m glad all you girls could come. And tomorrow, of course, we’ll be joined by the Hopkins family.”

“That’s Monica and her parents,” Kate explained.

After they helped with the dinner dishes and said good night to the Colonel and Mrs. Devine, Kate took them to the four-person bunkhouse they always stayed in. “This week sleeps five,” Kate said as she opened the door. “I added a cot.”

“Kate always stays with us,” Lisa explained to Emily.

“Good,” Emily said.

Aside from the fold-out cot, Lisa noticed a few other small changes to the family bunkhouse. A new ramp had been added to the side of the porch, to supplement the steps, a wedge of wood had smoothed the step up to the door, and the door was wider. In the small bathroom, rails had been added near the toilet and bathtub. All of these would make it more usable for Emily and the other disabled visitors who would come.

Colonel Devine had brought their bags in and dumped them on the beds. Emily’s wheelchair was folded and stored beneath a bunk. “Let’s leave it there,” Emily said, pushing

it farther under. "I'm not using the stupid thing once this week."

"You won't have to," Stevie said. "You'll be riding everywhere we go."

Lisa yawned. "I hate to say I'm tired, but ..." She yawned again.

Stevie yawned in response, and then Emily did. Carole shook her head. She opened her mouth to say something but yawned instead. "It's contagious," Kate said. She yawned, too. "I don't know why I should be tired." She yawned once more. "But I guess I am."

"The sooner we go to sleep, the sooner we can get up and ride," Lisa suggested. The other three thought this was a perfect example of Lisa's best logic. Before long they were all in their pajamas, crawling into the bunks.

"I keep thinking about Monica," Kate confessed, as she passed around a box of cookies her mother had given her. "I'm really excited about seeing her, but I'm sort of dreading it, too. I don't want her to have a fun time here. I don't want it to be different from the way it used to be. What I really want is for her accident not to have happened. She was so lively—I think one day we rode for eight hours straight. And once we hung a rope from the barn rafter and took turns swinging into this big pile of hay. And we used to laugh together all the time."

Lisa tried to comfort Kate. "She'll still laugh. She'll be the same person—she lost a leg, but that's all. She didn't lose her personality."

"I don't know about that," Stevie said. "I mean, of course she'll still have a personality; I'm just not sure she'll be exactly the same. Like the people you read about in books, the dark heroes whose lives have been overshadowed by tragedy. It colors the soul."

"Like Heathcliff," Kate said. "Maybe."

"No, Heathcliff's a cat," Stevie said. "I'm talking real tragedy."

"Heathcliff's not a cat," Kate said indignantly. "Honestly, Stevie!"

"He's a guy in an old movie," Carole explained. "I saw it one night with my dad. He was played by somebody famous, I think, but it was in black and white."

"He's a person!" Kate said. "I mean, a character. In a book I read, *Wuthering Heights*. His life was overcome with sorrow."

"So he wasn't as nice, then?" Lisa asked.

"He wasn't all that nice to begin with," Kate admitted. "What do you think, Emily?"

Emily propped herself up on her elbow. "I don't have any idea how Monica will be," she said. "I've never met her. But if the accident just happened recently, I'm sure she'll still be upset about it. I would be. I think anyone would be."

"I am, and it didn't even happen to me," Kate said. "I guess the only thing we can do about it is make sure she has as nice a time as possible."

"We're all going to have a great time," Carole said. "I love it out here, Kate."

Emily flopped back against her pillow. "A whole week with nothing to do but ride!" she said. "I never imagined anything so wonderful!"

THE NEXT MORNING, after breakfast, the girls followed Kate out to the paddock beside the barn where a dozen or so of the ranch riding horses had spent the night. John Brightstar was already there, haltering a gorgeous chestnut gelding.

Lisa went up to greet him. "Tex looks marvelous!" she said. "He's really added some muscle since we saw him last."

John smiled proudly. "He needs it now. You should see what he can do." Tex was John's horse, and John had been training him to do reining, the most precise and elegant form of Western riding. Reining was similar to dressage in English riding.

"Come with us," Lisa said. "We're going to warm up in the side paddock for a few minutes and then we're taking Emily on her first Western trail ride."

John smiled wryly. "Why do you think I'm out here?" he asked. "Kate already invited me. I even got up early, to get my work done first."

"Great," Lisa said. Something about the way John smiled always made her stomach feel pleasantly uneasy. She often wished John lived a little closer—like, in Willow Creek, or at least in the state of Virginia. Sometimes they wrote to each other, but it was hard to keep a long-distance friendship going.

"I'll put Tex in the barn and help you guys get your horses out," he offered. He walked away, and Lisa turned back to her friends.

Emily and Carole were standing just outside the gate, waiting with lead ropes in their hands. Kate had gone into the paddock to separate out their horses. Stevie was standing just inside the gate with her arms around a shaggy skewbald's neck. "Good morning, darling Stewball," Lisa heard her say. She walked over to Emily and Carole.

"After everything I've heard about Stewball," Emily said, "frankly, I expected him to look a little more spectacular than this! This is a movie-star horse?" When The Saddle Club's friend Skye Ransom had filmed a movie at the Bar None, Stewball had been used as a stunt horse.

"Only because he takes such good direction," Lisa said. "We had to dye his coat so that he would match this gorgeous, brainless horse they brought in. They used the gorgeous horse for close-ups."

"Stewball's a fabulous cow horse," Carole added. "He can cut a cow out of a herd like nobody's business. In fact, that's really the reason Stevie didn't buy him. She was going to, but it would have meant taking him away from the one thing he loves and does well. He wasn't cut out to be an English horse."

"He's still gorgeous," Stevie said hotly, coming toward them leading Stewball. "Emily, I heard what you just said about my darling not looking spectacular. All I can say is, if we were having a beauty contest, I'm not sure Stewball would do worse than P.C."

Emily laughed. "Pretty is as pretty does. I've said that a hundred times myself. Don't get your dander up, Stevie. I'll say he's gorgeous if you want me to."

"You'll say he's gorgeous on your own, once you see me ride him," Stevie said. "He's a horse and a half."

Kate led two horses over, Spot for Emily and a pretty red roan named Berry for Carole.

Carole gave Berry a hug. "We always ride the same horses when we're here," she explained to Emily.

Finally Kate brought out Lisa's bay mare, Chocolate, and her own Moonglow. Before long they were all ready to ride. They had agreed that Emily should have just a little more practice in the Western saddle before they hit the trails, so they all warmed up in the empty side paddock.

After trotting and loping Tex a few times around the arena, John showed Lisa and the others why Tex's hindquarters were so heavily muscled. "Watch this!" He loped Tex three quarters of the way down the side of the fence, then sat back and gave an invisible command. Instantly, Tex seemed to sit down. His hindquarters dropped and locked; he left skid marks ten feet long as he slid to a stop.

The Saddle Club cheered. "He's really getting good!" Carole said. "He's really listening to you."

John inspected the skid marks with a proud smile. "That wasn't too bad," he admitted. "See, he stopped nice and straight."

"That was amazing," Emily said. "What was that?"

"It's a reining move with a very complicated, technical name," John explained with a grin. "We call it a stop. The longer the skid, the better."

"I want to learn how," Emily declared. "Does Spot do it?"

John shook his head. "Later in the week, I'll start to teach you both."

"Great!" Emily loped Spot up the arena and back. She sat up, and Spot came to a perfectly obedient, but normal, halt. "Don't forget," she said to John.

"I won't." Next he demonstrated a rollback. He galloped Tex down the fence line, then in one motion turned him around and galloped straight back. He did large fast circles, dropping into slow small ones, he changed leads at a gallop, and he spun in circles. The girls applauded.

"If we had a cow, I could show off Stewball's cutting skills," Stevie told Emily.

"I'll get some," John volunteered. He rode out the gate, and in a few minutes he was back herding three young calves in front of Tex. The calves trotted into the ring and stood in a confused-looking miniature herd.

"We had them up by the barn to get vaccinated," Kate explained. "Go for the one with the white ear, Stevie."

Stevie pointed Stewball at the calf with the white ear. Then, to make a point, she tucked her reins loosely under her knee and crossed her arms over her chest. While Stevie stood motionless in the saddle, Stewball moved in on the calf. He dodged right, left, and left again, and suddenly the calf was trotting in front of him, away from the other two.

"Wow," Emily said. "I've never seen anything like that. He does it entirely on his own, doesn't he?"

Stevie picked up the reins and gave Stewball a hug. "He certainly does. All you have to do is stay out of his way. But he's not an autopilot horse, except when there are cows around."

"You show us something, Kate," Carole asked. She gave Berry's neck a warm pat. Part of what she always looked forward to about the Bar None was seeing how Kate and John trained the horses. Carole liked riding English best because she loved to jump, but she was always interested in learning new things. Someday she'd like to try her hand at reining, too.

“Moonglow doesn’t do reining moves as well as Tex,” Kate said, “and she doesn’t cut as well as Stewball. But here’s one thing she does better than either of them. Move away from that barrel, Emily.” Emily jogged Spot away from one of the three barrels in the middle of the ring.

“*Hi-yahiiyi-yah!*” Kate shouted to Moonglow, and the mare burst forward into a gallop. When they were even with the first barrel, Kate pivoted Moonglow tight around it. She galloped toward the second, spun around it, then spun around the third and galloped back toward the others. “Whoa,” Kate said softly, and Moonglow dropped back to a walk.

“So *that’s* what those barrels are for,” Emily said.

“Yep.” Kate was slightly out of breath. “We’re going to barrel race at some horse show this fall.” She settled her cowboy hat more firmly on her head. “This has been fun, but had we better get going? Emily, you look like you were born in that saddle. Let’s hit the trails.”

Jogging Stewball around the clumps of sagebrush that dotted the ranch landscape felt like heaven on earth to Stevie. She couldn’t believe how lucky she was. In front of her, Emily swayed slightly in the saddle in time to Spot’s long-reaching walk. Behind her, Carole hummed contentedly beneath her breath. Lisa, John, and Kate rode ahead. Most of the people she most enjoyed riding with were right here, around her, under this deep-blue bowl-shaped sky. Stevie’s heart soared.

“Hey, Stevie, remember the time we were camp counselors out here?” Carole’s voice came into Stevie’s reverie.

“Ugh—don’t remind me.” A few years ago, Eli Grimes, one of the Bar None’s former wranglers, had invited The Saddle Club to be junior counselors at a camp he was running. It had been a difficult week, to say the least. “At least *I* didn’t fall off leading a trail ride,” Stevie said.

Carole laughed. “Don’t remind me.”

Emily twisted in the saddle. “You fell off? Carole, I didn’t think you ever fell off.”

Carole rolled her eyes. “Please. I’d be the only rider ever who hadn’t. But it wasn’t much fun getting dumped in front of a bunch of sniggering little brats, I’ll tell you. They were all convinced they could ride better than me.”

The trail widened, so Carole and Stevie came up beside Emily. Emily waved her crop in the air. “You were right—no fences,” she said. “This is the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. I love it here.”

“We do, too,” Stevie said. “That camp was the only bad week we’ve ever had here. Part of that was our fault, but part was just bad luck.”

“And part was because we had to work the whole time,” Carole said. “I don’t mind working in general, but I have to admit, it’s a lot more fun to just ride.”

“A whole week of riding,” Emily said. “This is wonderful.” The trail they had been on widened further into open prairie. Lisa, Kate, and John waited for them to catch up, and they all rode on together. “You know,” Emily continued, “when I was a little girl, I used to daydream about being in a place like this. Even before I knew how to ride, I pictured myself on a galloping pony, bareback, with the wind blowing and the whole prairie stretched out before us. We could run forever and never get to the end.” She gave a self-conscious laugh. “Silly, isn’t it?”

“Not at all,” Kate declared. “And it’s a daydream that can come true. Spot’s a horse, not

pony, and I think you'd do better to keep the saddle on him for now, but we've got the prairie and the wind, and we can certainly gallop. Want to?"

"You bet!"

Kate launched Moonglow into a gallop and Emily sent Spot right behind. The others followed, laughing. Carole bent over Berry's neck, feeling the mare's strides swallow the ground. Thoroughbreds were the fastest horses over long distances, but nothing could beat a quarter horse in the first quarter mile. Berry caught Moonglow and passed her. Tex streaked ahead of even Berry, and Chocolate surged right on Berry's heels.

John's arm went up to signal to the others that he was slowing down. One by one, they brought their panting horses to a walk. Emily's face glowed. "That was fabulous!" she said. "Thank you, Kate, thank you!"

Kate grinned. "You're welcome. But remember, this is only the first morning. We'll have lots of gallops this week. What now? Do we keep going, or head back?"

"I hate to say this," Stevie said, "but I'm starving."

"I second that," Emily said.

Kate turned Moonglow. "Back it is. But really, what were we thinking? Next time we bring food." Then she said to Emily, "Something about the prairie makes people hungry. You should see how much some of the ranch guests eat."

"I hope nobody's keeping track of what I eat," Stevie said, in mock alarm.

"Oh, we have been," John said with a straight face. "But the deal is, as long as you still eat less than Stewball, we won't charge you for groceries." He turned to Lisa. "I have to tell you though, she's getting pretty close. I've been encouraging old Stewball to eat up, but Stevie may be in trouble soon." They all roared. "Hey, there's my dad waving. I'd better go." John said good-bye to all of them, then loped across the prairie to where his father stood next to a pickup truck loaded with hay.

"Does he always work so hard?" Emily asked.

"Always," Kate confirmed. "John's a born rancher. We're lucky to have him and his father here."

As they approached the ranch buildings, they saw a large car pull up and stop outside the house. "That must be Monica," Kate said. She urged Moonglow into a faster walk. "Come on, let's go say hello."

By the time they were close, a man and a woman had gotten out. The man was unloading suitcases from the back, while the woman leaned over an open back door, speaking to someone inside. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins," Kate called cheerily.

Both adults jumped, as though startled, and when they turned toward Kate, both looked worried. In fact, thought Lisa, they looked as though they wished they hadn't come. They greeted Kate in muted voices, and Lisa thought it looked as if they were making a big effort to smile.

"I'm glad you're back," Kate said. "Hi, Monica!"

The figure in the car made no response. Lisa and Carole exchanged glances. Lisa felt awkward. Mr. Hopkins pulled a pair of metal crutches, like Emily's, out of the trunk of the car. He handed them to his wife. "Here, darling," Mrs. Hopkins said, handing them to the girl in the car. "No, not—oh dear. Try it this way—"

"Mother, that hurts! Stop it!" The girl's voice was strident.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Look who’s here, darling, it’s Kate. And some other visitors.”

“Great,” said Monica. “Spectators. Just what I need.” She didn’t say it loudly, but the wind carried her words back to Lisa, who flinched. They should have given Monica a chance to meet them on her own terms. But then, Kate would have ridden up to greet them if Monica hadn’t been hurt, so she should do the same thing now—shouldn’t she?

Monica stood up, supporting herself on the crutches. She had long red hair and an angry expression. Just like them, she was wearing a cowboy hat, T-shirt, and jeans, but the right leg of her jeans had been neatly folded and pinned under so that it wouldn’t dangle where her leg should have been.

“Hi, Monica,” Kate said, in a slightly strained tone.

Monica glanced briefly at Kate, then looked away. “Hi.”

Kate introduced her friends to Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins and to Monica. “They’ll be staying here almost as long as you will be,” she said. Monica didn’t respond.

Emily spoke up. “You know,” she said to Monica, “you ought to do what we did when we got here—let the grown-ups take the luggage, and get on a horse as quick as you can! We’ll get a snack and wait for you, and we can all ride together.”

Monica scowled at Emily. “I can’t do that,” she said rudely.

Emily flushed but remained polite. “Why not? We don’t mind waiting.”

Monica’s face turned red. She looked as if she didn’t know whether to cry or to spit at Emily. “I should think it would be obvious why not,” she said. “People with one leg don’t ride horses.” She turned her back on Emily and hopped toward the car.

“Sure they do,” said Emily.

Monica turned back, scowling, to say something over her shoulder. Lisa was sure it would have been something rude, but they never got to hear it. Monica tripped over the curb and fell in a tangle of crutches. Her parents rushed forward.

“Oh dear! Are you hurt?” her mother asked.

“No!” Monica threw a crutch sideways. She pounded her fist in the dirt. Tears streamed down her face. “This is stupid!” she yelled. “You were right—we should never have come here! I can’t do this! I can’t do anything anymore!”

MR. AND MRS. Hopkins huddled over their daughter. After her angry outburst, Monica fell silent. She seemed to be trying to contain her tears. Mrs. Hopkins put her arms around her daughter's shoulders while Mr. Hopkins retrieved the crutch that she'd thrown out of reach.

"I'm sorry I yelled," she muttered, as they helped her stand. "Yelling doesn't change things. I know that." Her face was red and tear-streaked.

"I know, dear," said her mother. "It's all right. I'm sorry, too—I never thought it was a good idea to come here."

"We can go straight home," said her father.

Monica looked at the ground. She still hadn't looked at The Saddle Club or Kate or Emily and she seemed very embarrassed and upset. "No. I want to stay. We always come to the Barn. None." She began to slowly hitch herself toward the ranch house. She didn't look back, not even at Kate, her friend. Her parents followed, hovering around her like a pair of butterflies.

"Well," Kate said, with a soft sigh, when the Hopkinses had gone inside, "that was awful!"

"I feel terrible," Lisa agreed. "Did we say something we shouldn't have?"

Emily turned Spot back toward the stable. "I'm sorry if I shouldn't have asked her to ride. I thought it might be easier on her to try it right away."

Kate shook her head. "No, I think asking her was okay. I don't think we said or did anything wrong." She fiddled with the end of her reins. "I'm just not sure anything we could have said would have been right. This is so hard."

In somewhat depressed silence, they took their horses back to the stable and began to unsaddle. Before they were finished, the dinner bell rang for lunch.

"Already!" Stevie said. "No wonder we're so hungry! It's later than I thought."

"No wonder I'm so sore," Emily said, as she hung Spot's bridle in the tack room. "We rode a long time."

The others looked at her with concern. "You're sore?" Carole asked.

"Sure. Aren't you?"

Carole thought about it. "I guess so. But just a little, in my legs and seat. Everyday riding is a lot sore."

Emily shook her head playfully. "Me too. Did you think maybe I had some kind of special soreness?"

Stevie snorted and Carole rolled her eyes. "You could have, for all I know," Carole said. "You have to tell us if we're pushing you too hard, Emily. We don't forget that you haven't done anything like this before."

"I know," Emily said, as they began to walk toward the ranch house. "But you don't remember it every single second of the day, either, and I appreciate that. Don't worry. It's just regular old saddle sore, and I'm glad of it. It means I'm getting some good exercise, and more importantly, it means I spent the entire morning on a horse!"

"Hear, hear!" cried Stevie. "Hooray for horses! Hooray for saddles! Hooray for being saddle sore!"

"I wouldn't go that far," protested Lisa.

“Oh, come now,” said Stevie. “Surely, for the glory of spending a morning amidst the hills and scrubs, amidst the open prairie—”

“Amidst the amber waves of grain—” Carole teased.

Kate began to hum “God Bless America.”

Stevie continued, ignoring them. “—surely, for the delight of being one in spirit with these wonderful four-footed creatures here on this glorious ranch—”

“Are you talking about the horses?” Lisa asked.

“Surely,” Stevie said loudly, “a little momentary discomfort to the posterior regions is something we can all willingly endure!”

“Well, of course,” Emily said. “I said so all along.”

They went into the ranch house and sat down. “Neither of the honeymoon couples has come for breakfast yet,” Mrs. Devine informed them, as she set a plate of barbecue sandwiches in front of them. “Kate, after lunch I want you to take some baskets of food to their bunkhouses. Just leave them on the porches for them. After I run you into town, I have some errands to do, so I won’t be around to feed them until dinnertime.”

Kate’s mouth dropped open. “How could I forget!”

“Forget what?” Carole asked.

“Christine’s dog show! I mean,” Kate amended, “I didn’t forget I had to help her, I just forgot to tell you guys about it. I’ve had so many things to tell you!”

“Christine is another one of our friends out here,” Lisa explained to Emily. “She lives just on the other side of the ranch, and she usually rides with us a lot. She’s got a horse named Arrow and a dog named Dude.”

“She’s been training Dude for dog obedience trials,” Kate said. “Have you seen those? They’re miniature obstacle courses, with jumps and ramps and all sorts of things. The fastest dog wins.”

“I saw some once at a fair,” Emily said. “It was hilarious.”

“So I’ve been helping Christine with Dude, and I promised I’d come to the trials, to assist her—sort of like being a groom at a horse show. This is just a little event, like a practice. I know Christine would love to have you come, but I don’t think she’ll care if you don’t. I mean, if you come you wouldn’t be able to ride this afternoon.”

“Not ride!” Emily spooned some coleslaw onto her plate. “I thought you guys rode all the time!” Remembering how funny the other dog trials had been, she almost wished she were going to see Dude perform. Almost.

Stevie passed Lisa the bowl of chips. She looked up at her friend and knew Lisa was thinking the exact same thing she was. It would be great to see Christine and Dude, but Emily couldn’t ride by herself on the trails. She would have to go to the dog trials, too—and she was so excited about riding. They glanced across the table at Carole, who also seemed to be sharing their thoughts.

“Not ride!” Stevie said. “We couldn’t not ride!”

“Tell Christine good luck for us, please, Kate,” Lisa said, “but we were planning to spend the afternoon in the saddle.”

Kate smiled. “She’ll be less nervous without an audience, anyway,” she said. “I know she’ll understand.”

“Ask her to come back and ride with us,” Carole said. “She needs to meet Emily.”

Kate agreed readily. "Don't show Emily all the good spots until I get back."

"How could we?" Stevie asked. "We can't ride fast enough to see all the good spots in one afternoon."

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