

It was a wild ride. The night was dark and cold, and the rain poured down in sheets so that I could barely see anything in front of us. The horse moved effortlessly under me, and though I was terrified, I was also exhilarated at being able to ride this powerful creature. Star was in control, not me, and luckily, she knew just where I needed to go. We pounded down the track from the stable to the lane leading to the rest of the farm, and without hesitating, Star turned right and headed toward the main stable yard.

Lem's cap was plastered to my head, but some wet curls escaped and lashed my face, falling in my eyes and blinding me further. I only knew we were getting close to the main buildings when I felt Star begin to slow beneath me.

She pulled to an abrupt stop in the same spot where Hank had parked his truck three days before. As I tried to catch my breath and unlock a hand to wipe hair out of my eyes, she let out a great whinny and then another and another.

Lights went on over the doors to the buildings on either side of the yard. Men stumbled out of the buildings, grumbling as they pulled on rain gear. One voice cut through all the noise.

"What's goin' on here?" growled Silas Dimkins. He suddenly materialized on the ground below me. Star immediately began to fidget and back away. She turned in circles, trying to avoid the grabbing hands of the men surrounding us. One of the men grabbed for Star's bridle but pulled back in surprise when he didn't find one.

"Please, Mr. Dimkins," I called down. "My brother is sick and..."

"Why in tarnation is this horse out of her stable?" He ignored me, but I tried again.

"We met you three days ago, Mr. Dimkins. I need your help!"

I dug my heels into Star's flanks a bit harder to try to keep her in one place. Mr. Dimkins peered up through the rain at me as though seeing me there for the first time. My heart sank as a twisted grin spread across his ugly face. "Well, boys, looks like we've got us a horse thief." He turned his back to me and jerked a thumb over his shoulder, saying, "Pull him down and take that crazy horse back to the stable. Then we'll have some fun dealing with the horse thief."

Before any of the stable hands could react, Star turned in a half circle and thrust a leg backward. Her hoof hit Mr. Dimkins squarely in the back and sent him flying forward to land face down in the mud.

Star reared up and flailed her forelegs at the men surrounding us. They wisely backed away, and she hit the ground running forward, with me still clinging to her back. As we sped away, I heard Silas Dimkins cursing and yelling behind us, so I knew Star hadn't killed him at least. The horse galloped from the main stable yard on toward the big house at the end of the lane. I gazed at it in wonder through the wet curls hanging over my eyes. Red bricks, white shutters and green ivy covered the huge three-story mansion that was fronted by tall white columns and a deep porch. It was the house I had told Lem about, the house of my dreams.

I didn't have time to ponder long on this though. Lights were already illuminating the circular drive in front of the house, and a small group of men and women had gathered there, a few holding lanterns in their hands. I guessed they were servants of the mansion.

Star galloped into the midst of this group and stopped so abruptly that I almost flew over her head. I sat up and took a deep breath. I needed to interrupt the voices babbling around me, but before I could say anything, rough hands grabbed hold of my leg, and I looked down into the face of a bearded man.

"Get off that horse, you scum!" yelled the man.

"No," I cried. "I need help for my brother!" I pulled back away from the man.

"You there, Tobias," the man called to a tall, dignified-looking man standing outside the group. "Grab him from the other side!"

"Please, sir," I called to the man called Tobias. "I'm not a thief. Star is helping me. Please get them to listen."

The bearded man's hands reached for my waist. I screamed, and Star reared up again, her front legs flailing. She let out a terrifying neigh at the same time that a bolt of lightning flashed. My jacket whipped open in the wind, and the light from the lightning reflected off the jewels of the horse brooch.

The bearded man crouched back, but Tobias stepped forward and held up a hand. He spoke to Star. “Calm, my beauty. It’s all right.” She stood still but eyed him warily as he turned to me. “Tell me, please.”

My words poured out in a rush. “We, that’s my brother Lem and me, have been tryin’ to meet Davy Shaw for three days. We walked here from town today, but the rain came, and Lem got really sick. He passed out, and I came for help. He’s back at Star’s stable. I didn’t steal this horse, I swear. I just borrowed her.”

A voice sharp as glass cut through the night. “Tobias, bring that child to me. Mr. Reed, take the horse back to her stable and retrieve the sick boy lying there. Bring him to the house, quickly. Margaret, send for Dr. McLean immediately.”

I looked toward the voice. The tall figure of a woman stood silhouetted by the light pouring from the open door behind her. I couldn’t see her face, but I could see that she was slim, with gray hair piled high on her head, and that she was leaning slightly on a cane.