

ABBY'S PONY LOVE

By Susan Count

Barn Job

A horse drawing taped to the frozen yogurt shop door fluttered.

“Horseback Riding Lessons? Dream Horse Stables.” Even though riding lessons were impossible, Abby couldn’t look away. Then tiny print across the bottom of the flyer drew her closer. “Working student position available.”

I can work. Perfect! I need to get this job.

As she hurried home, she strategized how to ask her parents. She wouldn’t chicken out. This was her big break to be near horses. Might be her only chance since they’d made it clear they were never going to buy her one.

Even as her hands trembled, she took extra care setting the table. She adjusted the spacing between the fork and the plate ever so precisely, then arranged a white cloth napkin. If she served it up right, they might let her apply for the barn job. “Wash your hands for dinner,” she told her sisters as Dad set food on the table.

Mom entered the house in slow motion, kicked her black pumps under a chair, and placed each thing she carried onto it, barely making a sound. She turned the cell phone ringer off and sighed as she settled at the dinner table. Closing her eyes, she seemed to concentrate on her breathing. Maybe this wasn’t the best time.

Abby set the rooster salt and pepper shakers right by Dad's place. As she sat, she caught his eye. "This roast smells fantastic."

"Thanks, brown eyes. I had it in the oven on low all afternoon." Dad dolloped mashed potatoes next to the roast on his plate. "I'm becoming quite a good cook if I do say so myself."

"Since you can make amazing gravy, you can take over that job permanently." Mom grinned. "Right, girls?"

The twins and Abby all giggled like they were in on a grand conspiracy.

When the laughter quieted, Abby took her best shot. "Speaking of jobs." She swallowed hard, wiping her nervous sweat on her yellow stretch pants. "There's a flyer on the door of the frozen yogurt store about a barn job at that equestrian center by the park. A working student position. If I can get the job, they'd give me horseback riding lessons in exchange for barn chores."

Dad reached for the butter. "Since school's going to start in just over a month, isn't it too late to add such a time-consuming activity?"

"But I'm a great student. I almost got all A's last quarter. I can handle it. I promise."

"Sounds fun, but I'm sorry." Mom shook her head. "I need you to take care of the twins."

"But they're going to be ten next month," Abby objected. "Can't they stay out of trouble until Tara gets home?" She withered under her mom's steady gaze and clamped her teeth together to keep her tongue from wagging. Had she gone too far?

Mom sighed. "You know the answer."

Just like that, the family's good cheer and Abby's hopes flushed away. Her older sister, Tara, had been responsible for the twins until she got the job at the discount store. Now she worked long hours trying to save college money, and the babysitting responsibilities passed to Abby.

The twins looked at each other and said in unison, "We're old enough."

"I don't think so." Mom set her fork down. "You girls are way too young to be left alone."

Dad pulled a roll from the breadbasket. "I agree, but I—"

"I get it," Abby interrupted. "It's my turn to babysit, so I can't do what sounds like the best job ever."

"Go to your room, young lady." The sudden stern in Dad's voice said Abby'd crossed the line. "Think about how rude you're being."

"Don't come out until you are ready to apologize," Mom added.

"Yes, ma'am," Abby answered politely, but in her mind, she shoved back her chair and stormed to her room.

She sat at her desk and drummed quietly with her fists. "This is not fair." She ranted to the girl in the mirror. "So what are you going to do about it?"

She crossed her arms as she waited for an answer. "You going to give up and hide behind a book like you always do? This is your only shot. You've got to go for it."

Reason calmed her anger. *Five minutes to six o'clock. I'm running out of day. I've got to fix this fast.*

She opened her decorated box of inspirational quotes and flipped through the colored note cards. "There's got to be something in here that will help."

A yellow card poked up and she pinched it from the others.

“When all your eyes see is darkness, look for the light with your heart.” She tossed the card on the desk and picked up another. “When all hope is gone, pray for a miracle.”

Hmm, miracles are good.

“If things aren’t going as planned, it’s because God has a better plan.”

She dropped the cards back into the box. “That’s what I need—a better plan.”

She stood. With a deep breath, she faced her failures. To the mirror, she said, “Be sorry. Be sincere. Beg.”

When Abby returned to the kitchen, Mom worked on her computer. Dad chunked a detergent pod into the dishwasher and shut the door.

He sat at the table with Mom. “That was fast.”

“I’m so sorry. I was horrible and rude.”

“And?”

“It won’t happen again.” Abby hung her head.

“See that it doesn’t.”

She nodded that she understood. “I know it’s up to me and I love the twins, but I’ve never wanted anything so much. I’ve always loved horses. I’m really sorry.”

Mom stilled her fingers over the keyboard and gave Abby a stern look she knew well. “Frankly, we were leaning toward grounding you for the rest of the summer, but your outburst is uncharacteristic of you.”

“Your mom and I want to give you credit—you’re a great student. That doesn’t happen without a lot of hard work and commitment.”

“I try hard. But I’m not good at making friends. I could make friends with a horse or other girls like me who love horses.”

“You bring up an interesting point. Friendships tend to be formed around a common interest.” Dad leaned on his elbows. “Before you erupted into a girl we didn’t recognize, I was about to say I could take responsibility for the twins when you’re at the barn.”

Abby’s lips parted, and soon, her mouth gaped open.

“Your mom and I talked about this situation while we cleaned up after dinner. I believe we can agree the apology sounded sincere.” Dad paused as if rethinking his conclusion. “If you think you can handle such a big commitment then, until I find another job, I’ll deal with the twins. It would be good for you. And, like you point out, it would bring you in contact with other girls who love what you love.”

The barn doors to Abby’s dream flew open. She hugged her parents with all the joy she felt. One hurdle leaped. One to go. “Can I go ask about the job? The barn manager might need someone on the weekends. I could for sure do that? Right?”

“Now?” Mom glanced at the clock and frowned. “You’ve hardly touched your dinner. And what about your summer literature class?”

“I finished the report for my required reading, and I’m almost done with the extra credit book. It’s about a girl in a wheelchair and a foal born with a clubfoot. Then she finds out the foal will be put to sleep. You just know she has to save the foal, but it looks hopeless. It’s so exciting. I can’t wait to finish it.” Abby rushed her words to not give Mom an opening to stop her. “I’ve got to go now. If I wait, someone else might get the job. It has to be now. It’s early yet. There’s always someone at a barn.”

Mom raised her hand. “Go then. I agree with Dad. Plus, exercise would be good for you.”

“Come on.” Dad motioned for her to follow him to the garage. “I’ll help you with your bike.” He handed her the air pump. She filled the tires while he tightened the nut holding the handlebars. “There ya go.”

“Thanks.” She pushed off and coasted down the driveway, her golden brown hair streaming behind her. As she pedaled, she rehearsed her speech. “Hi. I’m Abby. I’m twelve and in the seventh grade. I love horses, and I’m a good student and a hard worker. I know a lot about horses because I’ve read books about them in the school library. I saw your flyer, and I’d like to apply for the working student position. I can start now.” *Not bad.*

The stable was only ten minutes away on her bike. She’d ridden by once and watched the girls jumping—such beautiful ponies. But she’d been too shy to talk to anyone. Would she get there to apply for the job only to chicken out? What if they already gave the job to someone else?

She propped the crummy bike on its kickstand. It held. As soon as she turned her back, the bike toppled onto the blacktop. She picked it up and settled it against a shrub. “You’re better than nothin’, but not by much.”

She paused to take in the barn’s beauty. A red softened with age coated its outside. The long alley lured her into the barn. Birds chirped and flitted through the cobweb-covered rafters. One horse whinnied and another answered. The stalls were small boxes with wooden doors. The hinges must be the originals. The latches looked like rusty prayers to keep in the horses. Each stall had a blue hook to hold a halter. A

wheelbarrow angled to the side as if someone left off doing a disagreeable chore. The strong smell as she passed the wheelbarrow made her nose run. But what overwhelmed her were the faces looking at her as she stepped into the shaded barn. Horses and ponies of all sizes and colors.

“Wow,” she breathed, wanting to touch each one. An Appaloosa pony thrust his head over the stall door, and his nose demanded her attention. “Later, I can fall in love with you later. First, I need to get the job.”

With a surge of determination, she pulled her shoulders back and strode through the barn looking for the office. A musical voice traveled toward her. Drawing near to a room with a light on, Abby waited in the doorway for the young woman to finish her phone call.

Dressed in breeches and a long-sleeved blouse, the woman tilted her head and nodded along with the speaker. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll make sure to take care of it.”

When the woman hung up and saw Abby, surprise registered on her pretty face. “Can I help you?”

Sweat dripped from Abby’s underarms and soaked the inside of her arms. She shifted and gnawed on her upper lip. *What am I doing here? I know nothing.*

“I’m Elena. I’m the barn manager and the head trainer. Are you here about horseback riding lessons?”

Abby stared at the trainer. Her tongue tied in knots, and she couldn’t make it work.

“I’m a certified instructor. I grew up and trained in classical dressage in Andalusia, Spain. That’s the Andalusian horse capital of the world. I’ve been teaching here for three years. I’ll have you riding confidently in no time.”

It must have been obvious Abby forgot the question because the trainer repeated it. “You’re here to take lessons, right? We have classes starting up this week.”

Abby nodded yes. Then she shook her head no. Not one word of her speech could she remember. “Work—working student?”

“Ah, yes. Come in.” Miss Elena lifted a pile of folded horse blankets from a chair and motioned for her to sit. “What experience do you have?”

“Experience?” *Could she say none out loud? How does someone get experience anyway?* “I—I’ve read a lot. I love horses.”

“I see. While I expected to train the right person, I need someone experienced. Would you like to sign up for lessons?”

“I’m a good student, and I learn fast.”

At a loss for words, the barn manager looked away and cleared her throat. Abby filled the gap. “I—I’m a hard worker, and nobody would try harder than me.”

“I appreciate that, but you’re not what I had in mind. I’m sorry.”

Abby lowered her chin to her chest. She muttered, “Thank you, anyway.” Determined not to cry, she focused on her feet and forced them to walk away.

Behind her, the manager rattled in a closet. Then quick sweeps of a broom patted the concrete floor.

Abby turned to watch. She walked to the closet like she owned it and pulled out another broom. Following a few steps to the rear of the young woman, Abby mimicked her sweeping action.

At the end of the aisle, the woman reversed. "I thought you left."

"There's work to do, and I need experience." Abby swept to the end of the concrete. Gripping the broom handle, she locked her eyes onto the manager's face. *Look confident. Isn't that what Dad said about job interviews?* "I'd be a big help. I'm strong. I just want to hang out around horses. Nothing smells like they do. The sounds they make in the barn make me smile. Their feet shuffling in the bedding. The grinding noise when they eat hay. They are amazing."

The barn manager studied her.

Abby squirmed under the woman's steady gaze.

"My worker quit right before my training classes are scheduled to start. All this at the same time is too much for me." Miss Elena gestured toward the stalls. "I need serious experienced help here."

"Since you don't have anyone else right now, could you give me a trial? I'll work for free. You won't even have to give me lessons. I'm dependable and responsible."

As the manager gave a barely perceptible shake of her head, Abby gathered her courage and pitched her last shot. "Did someone give you a chance once?"

Miss Elena rubbed her neck. "Someone *did* give me a chance once. I wouldn't be here without her having believed in me. And I am a bit desperate."

The trainer's deep sigh gave Abby hope. "I'll give you a trial."

"You won't be sorry. You'll see."

“Your enthusiasm counts for a lot. My schedule is all messed up today. It’s time to feed.” Miss Elena gestured to the horses looking at her. “I’ll show you the routine. Follow me.” She opened the feed room door across from the office. “Toss a couple bales of hay onto that cart.”

Abby jumped to the haystacks. When she tugged on the strings, the bale barely moved.

“You’ll need to throw muscle into it. They weigh about fifty-five pounds. We toss hay first. It helps keep them quiet while we get the grain out.” Miss Elena demonstrated as she talked. “Pull this lever, and it fills the can with feed. It’s on wheels, but it’s heavy.” She drew Abby into the aisle. “Each horse has two water buckets hanging in their stall, and they have to be refilled at every feeding.”

“Got it.”

“Always notice what they’ve eaten. If they turn away from food or if they left food in the feed bucket or if the water’s not been touched, I need to know—immediately. A quick response can mean the difference between a horse surviving an illness—or not.”

Abby forced a swallow. She’d pushed her way into this job. But was she up to the responsibility? Could she do this job when she knew nothing about horses except what she’d read in books?

“Each stall has a whiteboard on it with the horse’s name and what it gets fed. Pay close attention. A change in diet can cause a horse to colic.”

She gulped. When her fear remained stuck in her throat, she gulped again. Would the manager notice?

Miss Elena rapped on a whiteboard nailed to the wall over the feed bins. “This is the health tracking chart for each animal in my care. I record their annual shots, teeth floats, worming, and farrier schedule here. If an owner comes into the barn and asks you questions, this is where you come. Say as little as possible because, if they sense you don’t know what you’re doing, they will draw blood—yours. Understand?”

Abby nodded like she understood. *Floats? Worms? Blood?*

“Any questions?” When Abby shook her head, the manager continued, “It’ll be your responsibility to be here for the afternoon feedings starting tomorrow. If you’re still here once school starts, you can pick up extra hours on Saturdays or anytime you have a day off.”

“I’ll still be here!” Abby declared with great confidence. “Thank you so much. You won’t be sorry.” She spun and waved her arms. “I’ll be the best helper you’ve ever had.”

“Let’s see how it goes. Consider the next two weeks a trial period, so show me what you can do.” Miss Elena added a quick note to the board and turned back to her. “You should know—if the horse owners don’t like the job you’re doing, you’re out.”

The cold truth returned the serious to Abby’s demeanor. “Of course. I’ll make them very happy.”

Abby practically skipped down the barn aisle. She wanted to leap and click her heels together. The Appaloosa pony that greeted her on the way in left his hay manger and hung his head over his stall’s half door, watching her.

“You again.” She stopped to rub him. “Sorry, I don’t have any treats. I won’t let it happen again. Aren’t you handsome?”

The pony tilted his head to the side and flapped his lips as she scratched his withers.

Abby read the sign on his stall. "Your name is Freckles? With all those spots, that name suits you. So what's your story? Do you belong to some lucky girl who loves you over the moon?"

She drew her hand back, and Freckles flipped his nose. "You weren't done with me yet? I can't stay all night, you know." She gave him another rub. "You're so sweet. I wish I could have a pony of my own. Just like sweet-and-sour candy, you make me happy, then sad. I'll be back tomorrow to feed you. And the day after that and the day after that. If your owner likes me anyway."