

# White Horse

by

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# Chapter I

## Skylark

The weather was changing and the white stallion knew it. Leaves tossed upwards, flashing their undersides. Gusts carried the low growl of massing thunder clouds. Muscles quivering, the too-thin horse reared and then broke into a swerving gallop, halted by the paddock's board fences all around him. The wind blew his sweeping mane and tail into silver eddies that shone in the gathering dark. Distantly he heard the uneven rumbling of a car and saw a flash of headlights from the road, half a mile beyond the trees. For a moment he stood trembling, nostrils flaring in defiance. And then he began his restless circling again.

A flash of lightning and crack of thunder caused Sky to jerk against the seat belt of the car's worn passenger seat. Quivering with exhaustion and anxiety, she looked over at her mother who was peering through streaming rain, gripping the steering wheel. She glanced

at her daughter and forced a smile.

“Almost there...” her voice trailed off and she looked back at the dark road. Sky nodded and stared out too. She had heard about the yellow farmhouse where her mom grew up. Finally she would see it.

Suddenly, her mom cranked the wheel. Sky’s shoulder banged against the passenger door as the car turned abruptly into a gravel driveway almost hidden by thick shrubs.

“These bushes weren’t so big before,” her mom said.

“It’s okay.” Sky absently rubbed her shoulder and stared toward the house. Just the way her mom had described it – square, butter-yellow, with a steep red roof over its second storey, big evenly-spaced windows on the ground floor, and a wide covered porch at the back. Light shone warmly through uncurtained windows on the lower floor. So tired she could cry, Sky leaned toward the light as the car growled over the driveway. On either side, tiny white roses glimmered through the dripping shrubs – more splashes of light against the night.

The car lurched and stopped. Her mom switched off the ignition and the rumble of the engine faded. For a moment, Sky and her mom sat silently, staring at the farmhouse they had driven so long to reach.

“We’re here,” her mom said. “Remember, Sky – don’t say anything about...about...”

“Mom,” she began, “Are you sure...”

Her mom gripped Sky’s arm tightly, fear stiffening her fingers.

“I’m not sure about anything,” she whispered. “But this is the best I can come up with. So don’t say anything! Please! Promise me, Sky.”

Her daughter hesitated only a second, then nodded, a quick jerk of her chin, rippling her straight white-blond hair. “I promise. And I’ll remember.”

Her mom smiled. The fingers on Sky’s arms squeezed more gently and were withdrawn. “Well then, let’s do it,” her mom said, shoving open the rusted car door.

Fear had knotted into her stomach now, but Sky was determined not to disappoint her mom. Other people had done enough of that. Jerking on the passenger door’s handle until it opened, Sky stepped out, nearly stumbling. They had been driving for two frantic days and now she felt dizzy with cramped muscles and exhaustion. She didn’t make a sound, however, just swung her backpack over one thin shoulder and marched through the rain up to the covered porch. Carrying her own pack, her mom followed.

“Ready?” Hardly waiting for her daughter’s nod, she peered through the panes of glass set in the door and rapped on the wood frame. “Hope she’s home....”

Her mom was breathing hard, short breaths through flared nostrils and she’d run her fingers through her pale hair so often, it looked like she’d fought her way on foot through the storm. The bruises on her cheek and jaw looked murky green in the porch light. Sky pulled her eyes away from her mom’s tired face and tried to peer into the dark room behind the door. A moment later, a light warmed the kitchen and a woman strode forward, looking at them through the glass. A brown dog, the size of a small cow, woofed beside her.

“Who’s there?” the woman demanded staring out into the half-light.

“Aunt Judy, it’s me – Lindey. Your niece.”

“Lindey? *Lindey!*”

The door swung open. A middle-aged woman in jeans and a faded sweatshirt, her graying, frizzy hair pulled into a pony tail, gripped the collar of the dog with one hand and held out the other in welcome. The dog strained against her hand, broke loose and galumphed to Sky, plopping on his wiggling rear as he thrust his muzzle into her stomach.

He pranced up and down on alternating front paws showing he wanted to leap up in greeting but was too well mannered to do so.

“He’s harmless,” Aunt Judy called to Sky. She held out her arms and with a swallowed sob, Sky’s mom stepped into the offered hug.

Sky looked straight into the dog’s great brown eyes and sank to her knees. The dog laid his mammoth head on her shoulder in welcome, slobbering on her shirt.

“Hello,” Sky whispered. Obliging, the dog snuffled her ear and swashed a great wet tongue over her chin and half her face. Sky giggled and her eyes glowed with pleasure.

“Moose! Moose! Stop that!” Aunt Judy stepped back, keeping one arm around her niece’s waist as she spoke to Sky. “Honestly! He looks like a monster but I swear he won’t hurt you.”

“No, we’ve made friends.” Sky stood and dropped her hand to the shoulder of the panting beast now leaning against her so hard she had to brace her feet to stay upright.

“Lindey, what are you doing here?” Aunt Judy demanded in bewilderment. “Is this your little girl? It’s been twelve years! I thought you were in California cooking for some big hotel?”

Sky’s mom smiled and heaved a big sigh.

“I was. But you know what the times are. I got laid off. So here we are.”

Aunt Judy peered at her sharply. “That’s quite a bruise on your face.”

Sky’s mom leaned over to scratch Moose’s head. “I tripped and fell – hit my face on a railing.”

“Un huh,” Judy said. “And I’m queen of Kalamazoo.” Aunt Judy’s eyes were disapproving. “But come in and sit down. Can I make you a sandwich?” Her gaze swung to the girl still standing close beside the dog. “And what’s your name? I remember it’s something unusual. Hippy sounding.”

Lindey forced a laugh. “Even you are too young for the hippy generation, Aunt Judy. Her name’s Skylark...but she goes by Sky.”

“And how old are you, Sky?”

“Eleven,” Lindey said, “and she’s mature for her age.”

Aunt Judy looked over the straight, thin girl before her. “You don’t look eleven.”

Sky met her eyes steadily. “How old are you?”

“Forty-three.”

“You look forty-three. One day you’ll probably look fifty-three, but it won’t change when you were born.”

Aunt Judy’s cool grey eyes met the steely

blue ones. “No, I guess it won’t. Do you always say what you think?”

“Sky!” Lindey interrupted, pulling her daughter close. Sky twisted away and stood straight again. “I’m sorry, Aunt Judy. We’ve driven all the way from California without hardly stopping. Can we sit down a bit?”

“Of course.” Aunt Judy pointed them toward a living room that was simply furnished with a blanket-covered recliner, coffee table and sofa, but overall cluttered with bookshelves, magazines and framed art. A big screen TV droned on one wall. Aunt Judy motioned them to the blue and brown striped sofa, moved a pile of books to the coffee table, and switched off the set.

“Get comfortable,” Aunt Judy said. “So Lindey, after hardly a word in years, why are you here?”

Sky watched as her mom smiled her best smile and relaxed her shoulders. But she twisted her fingers and her skin flushed against the smudgy circles under her eyes.

“Aunt Judy,” she said, “I’m desperate. I...we need a place to stay for a few days. My money’s gone, but I’ve got a job – a good job – lined up...but I won’t get paid for a week or two. and ...I can’t take Sky to a shelter or leave her in the car.”



Sky's eyes widened a bit at that. She and her mom had been in shelters before and slept in the car a couple of times too. But The Nightmare had found them and made them come back. Sky felt her own fingers curling into fists. Her Mom had told her that this time, because she'd discovered his secrets, they would keep going until they got away from him. Until he forgot about them. Sky reminded herself that she just had to keep quiet. Her mom had promised that they would never go back to The Nightmare's world again.

"Explain," Judy said.

"Sky, do you need to go to the bathroom or anything?" Lindey prompted.

Recognizing her mom's cue, Sky nodded and stood up. Aunt Judy pointed to the hallway and said, "At the end."

Sky went, made noise closing the door, and trying not to think about how it would look if she were caught, sneaked back to the edge of the hallway. Her heart was pounding but she made her breath stay soft. Since The Nightmare had entered their lives three years ago, she made it a rule to never let adults talk without her listening.

"There isn't much to explain," Lindey murmured. "You know what it's like trying to get a job these days. I jumped at the chance of

this one in Seattle, but I don't have any money, so I'm hoping, that you would help us out just for a few days."

"What about the money you inherited from your mother?" Aunt Judy's voice was razor sharp. Sky could picture her mom smiling the right smile, and then dropping her eyes. Even now, after everything, her mom wasn't much of a liar. Sky willed her mom to get it right, to make the lie okay. They didn't have anywhere else to go – and she had promised they would be safe.

"I hate to say it, but this isn't the first time I've been out of work...and a child costs a lot... and maybe I made some bad decisions."

That's for sure, Sky thought.

"Drugs?" Aunt Judy demanded.

"No!" Lindey's voice was vehement. "Never. I hate drugs. I've seen what they do...I had a friend, in California..."

There was silence. Sky tiptoed back to the bathroom and flushed the toilet. She turned on the tap and then eased back to her listening post.

"I won't give you money," Aunt Judy said.

"And I didn't ask for any," Lindey retorted. "But Aunt Judy...I could use a place for us to stay for a few days. And you're the only family I've got." Sky heard the catch in her mom's

voice. "I wanted Sky to see where I grew up, the place I loved before I made all those dumb mistakes..." Her voice trailed off but there was no answering sound from Aunt Judy. "Does...is Neil McClelland still raising thoroughbreds?"

"Yes," Aunt Judy said. "Winners, too. That single-minded determination of his to grab every dollar has made him rich." She paused. "His breeding and training programs are flawless though," she said grudgingly. "His horses are some of the best in the country."

Sky edged closer to the wall, feeling a thrill of desire so intense it caught her breath. Her bedtime stories had always been about horses, about the beautiful thoroughbreds and race horses her mom had once helped train. In her dreams, in the darkest of times, she imagined herself riding bareback through flower-laden fields or standing perfectly balanced, arms outspread, her body swaying easily to the perfect rhythm of a perfect horse. Free....

"I didn't see a horse, but if you've got one I'll muck out the stables." There was a thin edge of longing in her mom's voice.

"I don't keep a horse these days."

"No. I guess they're too expensive....You have to have something I can help you with, Aunt Judy. You remember how good I am at splitting wood?"

Aunt Judy laughed, a short bark of amusement. “I’ll bet you’ve still got that scar on your leg.”

“Right here – but only one. I learned.”

“Yes, Lindey,” Aunt Judy said, “I’ve never met anyone could make as many mistakes as you. But at least you don’t make the same mistake twice, and you may be irresponsible but I’ve never known you to be mean. The two of you can stay.”

“Thanks...thanks, Aunt Judy.”

So relieved she wanted to cry, Sky went back into the bathroom, turned off the tap, and returned to the living room. Her mom was leaning back into the sofa cushions in exhaustion, but her face twitched into a small smile. “Hey kiddo,” she said, pulling her into a hug. “How about we stay here for a few days?”

Head against her mom’s warm shoulder, Sky looked at Aunt Judy, assessing. Aunt Judy returned the gaze, also assessing. She isn’t sure she likes us...*me*...Sky realized with the quiver of fear she’d almost gotten used to. But like all the other times, she pushed it away.

Moose huffed and collapsed into a pile of warm fur at her feet, managing to rest his head on her knees. Sky laid her hand on his head and sighed; her eyes drooped suddenly, and later, after she had chewed through half a sandwich

and gulped a mug of hot tea sweetened with sugar lumps and milk, she was hardly aware of stumbling upstairs to a small bedroom with a pink flowered quilt on the soft bed. Stripped to her underwear, she crawled in between the sheets, letting her hand trail over the side to rest on Moose's massive head. *Sleep...finally, sleep....*

The next morning, the sun was barely up when a noise woke Sky. Completely still in the unfamiliar room, Sky searched her memory for where she was. A second sharp bang, the sound of her mom's car choking and revving, flooded the memory into her mind. Sky yanked herself out of bed, and, hands pressed against the glass, watched through the window. The plan. *Her mom's plan....* When the car turned onto the road and grumbled away out of sight, Sky got back into bed and pulled the quilt up over her head. She scrunched her eyes shut, made her breath stop coming in tight gasps, and ignoring the trickle of tears that leaked from her eyelids, at last drifted back to sleep. She dreamed again that she rode a white horse, standing, arms-utstretched, rising and falling, light as a sunbeam in the rhythm of pounding hooves.

# Chapter 2

## Jeremy

The alarm buzzed Jeremy awake, drilling through a brilliant dream of snowboarding down the mountain at the Pass. He groaned softly, slapped the snooze button and collapsed into his pillow. For a moment he squeezed his eyes shut – no use. Sleep was gone. Shoving his floppy hair out of his eyes, he looked over to see the dawn light stealing across his window, shining a rainbow in the long crack he'd made years ago with a wildly thrown baseball. Jeremy's lips twitched into a ghost of a smile – that was the last time his older brother had tried to move him toward the coolness of high school jockdom. Mike had known a lost cause when he saw it.

With a grunt, Jeremy heaved himself out of bed and after a stop in the bathroom, pulled on old jeans, a torn sweatshirt, and stained sneakers. He passed into the kitchen, turning his eyes away from the sight of his dad

asleep and snoring raggedly in the living room recliner. There was an odor of stale beer lying heavily in the room.

In the kitchen, Jeremy slipped an apple into his pocket and took out the carton of milk. Popping open the spout, he drank quickly, gulping so fast he almost choked. Then wiping his sleeve across his mouth, he put the milk back on the shelf. His mom had hated it when he or Mike drank from the milk carton, but she wouldn't have much liked his dad getting drunk all alone at night either.

For a moment, Jeremy felt a rush of guilt and a bunch of other bad emotions – his mom would hate the way the family was all wrong. Mike was gone off to school, Jeremy practically sleepwalked through his days, and his dad... Jeremy's mouth formed a thin line...all day his dad did the right things – went to work, bought groceries, made sure Jeremy had clean clothes and Mike had college tuition. But at night that front disappeared and his dad got lost in beer. No one in the family laughed any more. All the laughing and fun had been cremated with his mom last fall.

But just like every day, even on the day of the funeral, the horses still had to be fed. Moving silently, so as not to wake his dad, Jeremy went out the kitchen door, and hands in his

pockets and breath puffing vapor, trudged out to the barn. Their six horses were in the field, but when they saw him, depending on their horsey personalities, they trotted or walked or galloped toward him. Like he always did, Jeremy called out to each one while he forked sweet hay into the wheelbarrow.

“Hey Molly, you need to tell that colt of yours not to run so hard up to the fence. Hear that, Rook? You’re going to go so fast you’ll slam into it. Then Mr. McClelland won’t want you to be in his stable. You want to be a champion, don’t you? What about you, Prince Caspian? Maybe you can give your son some pointers.” The old horse eyed him with dignity, but then snorted. Jeremy laughed. “He’s not that bad. Just young. Look at Fledge! Last year he was a crazy colt and now he’s learning everything we can teach him. Pretty soon he’ll be a high-stepper – as good at dressage as Molly or Firebird or Lady. Just you wait.”

Jeremy forked the hay over the fence into several piles. Once that was done, he checked that the troughs were full of clean water, and put away the fork and wheelbarrow. Blowing on his hands, he watched the horses for awhile, listening to them huffing and snorting companionably. He wondered if he should ride Molly today, put her through her paces.



Molly had been his mom's horse – they had won a lot of competitions together. Dad had said they ought to sell her, being so valuable and all, but not one of them could face sending her off to a new owner. So instead, Dad had made a deal with Mr. McClelland to breed her with Prince Caspian. The showy black horse was old and had never been a big winner in the circuit, or Neil McClelland wouldn't have allowed it for so little money. Their neighbor was notorious for his hard deals and so Jeremy wasn't surprised that he had insisted on first rights on Rook. Jeremy hoped Rook was too small for national competitions. The colt was the only good thing that had happened to the family in more than two years and he wanted to train Rook himself. Neil was good to his horses, but Jeremy knew his mom had taught him to understand them better.

Jeremy clucked his tongue and Molly, head bobbing, walked over to the fence. For a moment, he rubbed the insides of her ears with his thumbs, loving the sound of her blowing questions and stamping hooves. She knew there was an apple waiting in Jeremy's pocket.

“Do you miss her?” Jeremy asked. “Do you remember mom?”

Molly snorted and tossed her head.

Jeremy accepted that as a yes, and offered her the apple. She took it delicately, fastening her big teeth on the fruit and wiggling her soft lips to hold the apple while she crunched contentedly. Jeremy gave her one last pat and turned toward the house. Just then, a loud bang – a car backfiring – echoed across the field. Three of the horses cried in panic.

Volcanic anger, erupting from somewhere deep, made Jeremy start spitting swears. An old car turned out of Judy Whitmore's driveway, backfired like a gunshot again, and roared away down the road. His eyes caught the flicker of a curtain in an upstairs bedroom, but the shrill neighs of the horses yanked his attention away from any curiosity he might have had. Firebird and Grace were shaking, tossing their heads and half-prancing, eyes wide at the frightening noise. Speaking softly, Jeremy climbed over the fence and spent the next few minutes reassuring the two skittery mares. As they calmed from the unexpected noise, he calmed from his unexpected fury. Still, he felt like he was rattled loose inside – nothing new to that any more.

When the horses were quiet and his hands about frozen in the cold morning air, Jeremy headed back into the house. He sniffed appreciatively at the smell of coffee.

“Horses okay?” his dad asked, squinting a little at the light that flashed through the opened door.

“Yeah, a car spooked them, but they settled down,” Jeremy replied. He pushed the door shut as gently as he could and sat at the kitchen table. “Looks like it might come on to rain later, so I was thinking of taking a ride on Molly after breakfast.”

“Mmm,” his dad answered. “Want some coffee?”

“Sure.” His dad poured out two mugs and took the carton of milk from the fridge. Jeremy filled his mug to the brim with milk and wrapped his cold hands around it.

“Dad?” He hesitated.

His dad grunted and sat opposite, nursing his own mug of coffee.

“Dad?” Jeremy started again.

“What?” His dad’s eyes were swollen and red, half-open. The stubble on his chin and cheeks gave him a muzzy, undefined look.

“Do you think you should be drinking so much?” Jeremy’s heart pounded but he tried to keep his face passive. It wasn’t working. He could feel that same volcano feeling from this morning.

“I think you should mind your own business,” his father said, his voice sullen, like

a stranger's. "You're not wanting for anything. And I don't know where you think you got a right to talk to me like that. Maybe you should worry instead about getting your math grades up past a D."

"That...the math...that has nothing to do with it!" Jeremy stammered. "It has nothing to do with you drinking every night."

His dad seemed to try to become reasonable, to ignore the anger seething between them. "I look after my business, Jeremy. You look after yours."

The volcano inside him was erupting again. Jeremy thrust himself away from the table, hardly able to see, his eyes were tearing up so bad. But as he flung out the door, he shot over his shoulder, "It didn't just happen to you, Dad. Mom dying, didn't just happen to you."

Sky dressed slowly, pulling on her last clean shirt. There was a smudge on her jeans where some ketchup had dripped off her fries two days ago, but she didn't think anyone would notice. Moose nudged her with his head and tentatively licked the spot. Sky felt a giggle bubble up from her belly. Well, unless Moose kept licking, probably Aunt Judy wouldn't notice. Sky slipped her feet into her sneakers

and stood in the center of the room, staring at her nearly closed door. Last night she had been too exhausted to look around, but even though her heart was bungee jumping in her chest, she would fix that right now.

Cautiously, she pushed the door open all the way. The second floor of Aunt Judy's house seemed small. The stairs joined the hallway almost in front of Sky's room; the bathroom lay opposite a few steps away, and another short corridor led to a room that was out of Sky's line of vision. A sound of clicking computer keys was faintly audible. Sky rubbed her hands on her thighs, trying to decide what her first move should be.

The bathroom. Definitely the bathroom.

A few moments later, Sky lingered in the hallway again, still listening to the *tip tap* of keys, wondering if she should interrupt, return to her bedroom or venture downstairs. Moose, obviously bored with her indecision, woofed imperiously. The typing stopped and Aunt Judy called out. "Moose! I hope you didn't wake up that girl!"

"No, I'm awake," Sky said. She was not sure she liked being called *that girl* but there was not much she could do about it. She went and stood at the doorway to the other room which she saw had been set up as an office, not a

bedroom. Computers, printers and a scanner were arranged with precision along a wall-length table. Much of the available space was covered with neat stacks of paper.

Aunt Judy swung around on a swivel chair, away from the computer. She wore the same type of jeans and sweatshirt as she had last night, although in a different color. Her hair was no longer in a ponytail but stuck out in a crinkly halo around her head.

“Good morning,” Aunt Judy said. “I have a terrifyingly tight deadline for my manuscript. I haven’t heard your mom up yet, but there’s milk and juice in the fridge; I left cereal and English muffins on the counter. Bowls and glasses are in the cupboard. Just search until you find whatever you need...what’s your name again? Sky! Help yourself to whatever you want, Sky. And tell your mom to go ahead and make coffee or tea, whenever she gets up. The two of you looked exhausted last night. Okay, I’ve got to get back to work. I swear these deadlines are going to kill me...” She swiveled back to her computer and the rapid *tap tap* began again.

Sky retreated from the doorway and walking silently, the way she had learned to over the last few years, made her way downstairs.

Unbidden, a memory flashed across her mind.

*“The kid’s a spook,” The Nightmare had growled when he had not heard her enter the kitchen.*

*“I’m sorry.” Like a servant, her mom held the plate of toast out to him.*

*The Nightmare scowled and threw a piece of toast on the floor. “Want breakfast, Spook?” he taunted. “There! Help yourself.”*

*Sky retreated – she knew better than to turn her back on him. She was screaming inside for that bread, but she wouldn’t let The Nightmare see her scramble for it. Never, ever. Even if she did starve.*

For a moment Sky breathed hard, like she’d been running, but then she tightened her lips and walked slowly into the kitchen. The food was laid out, like Aunt Judy had said, and a kettle sat ready on the stove, with a tea canister and an oversized sugar bowl brimming with lumps of sugar beside it. Sky longed for more sweet tea, but didn’t want the kettle’s whistle to attract her great aunt’s attention.

So, methodically, refusing to let the memory rush her, Sky made herself a large breakfast of a buttered English muffin with cherry jam followed by a brimming bowl of cereal with milk. She ate standing, chewing

rapidly, silently, eyes darting to the kitchen door and toward the hallway to the upstairs stairway where she could still hear the soft tap of computer keys.

Her mother had slept in the extra room in the basement. Aunt Judy still hadn't realized her niece had left again. Sky told herself it was all part of her mom's plan to keep them safe – she tried not to worry about how often her mom's plans did not quite work out. Mostly Sky tried not to think about how angry Aunt Judy would become once she knew her niece had disappeared. Would she refuse to keep or feed Sky?

But worrying was useless. Fiercely, Sky forced herself to think about what to do. Being ready, staying a step ahead had kept her safe. She dropped her hand to caress Moose's soft ears. A nice house with an even nicer dog was a bad reason to stop being smart. Food was the first thing. Ever since *The Nightmare* had... Sky shook her head to empty out the memory. She just had to make sure there would be food.

Laying her partially eaten muffin on the counter, Sky took another, thickly buttering and spreading it with jam. Quietly hunting through the cupboards, she found a sandwich bag, eased it out of the box so the package didn't look disturbed, and then sealed the



second muffin within the plastic. She would need a handy hiding place where her food could be retrieved quickly in an emergency. She had gotten very good at survival.

Becoming aware that Moose gazed at her longingly, drool seeping from his starving mouth, Sky paused, muffled a giggle and gave him the crust of the muffin she had been eating. She could plainly see a big food dish brimming with dried dog food, but how could she resist those eyes. Then, moving silently again, Sky crept back up to her small bedroom. A tall bookcase crammed with out-of-date videos and thick books took up one wall.

*Tip, tap* came steadily from Aunt Judy's office.

Sky reached up and slid the bagged sandwich behind the books on the top shelf.

Unsure what to do now, Sky went to the window. Across the road, a teenage boy was riding a gleaming brown horse. To Sky's delighted eyes, it appeared that the horse almost danced under the boy's sure hands and shifting body. Drawn as if by magic, Sky ran with light feet downstairs and out the kitchen door, Moose at her heels.

Breathing hard, her heart soaring, Sky and Moose raced across the road, stopping at the white board fence. She stood on the bottom

rail and leaned forward as the whinnies and snorts of the horses called to her. The brown horse danced in the early spring grass, and Sky knew suddenly that she had come home.



# Chapter 3

## Athena

“Homework!” Athena’s mom announced, finger uplifted as though words of inspiration had texted down from the heavens. “I know you must have homework!”

“Not on the first Saturday morning of spring break,” Athena replied brightly. Grabbing her camera she raced out the front door, letting it slam behind her.

Now that her *Portraits of the Famous* photographic show had opened in New York, Ellen Faviola had returned home and was on another devoted mother crusade. Athena sighed. Would she survive being so thoroughly parented? There was at least six weeks looming ahead before her mom’s next assignment kicked in.

How would she and dad make it?

Whenever her mother flew off to New York or on one of her big magazine assignments, Athena and her dad happily went about

their days, Athena taking digital photos and fitting school in when she must, and her dad wood turning, and framing new houses when he must. Her mother was the whirlwind. Sometimes Athena wondered if she and her laid-back dad were her mom's safe anchors or her balls and chains.

Snapping the buttons of her jacket closed against the chill of gusty wind, Athena wandered along the verge of the road, eyes searching for likely subjects. She'd shot and made digital magic with the bank of cedars by the Whitmore place so many times she was sick of them. Horses, maybe? If she could get Jeremy Stolz to pose, that would be something, but she doubted he'd bother. Most of the kids at school saw him as this over-sized, round-faced kid who needed a haircut and kept his mouth shut; but Athena had seen him reach out his big hands and soft voice to those terrifyingly huge horses. Each and every one dropped its head and nuzzled him like an adoring puppy. It was magic. No other explanation. And as an artist, Athena had tried really, really hard to capture that sorcery with her camera. So far she had not been able to catch that moment of magic.

A bug flew up from the grass and landed on Athena's glasses. She blew a sharp puff of

air upwards, dislodging a strand of hair so that it flopped, dark and kinky over her face and into her mouth. The bug still crawled over her glasses.

“Phooey,” she spat out the hair, pulled off her glasses and shook the bug loose. It buzzed happily away.

“I hate the country,” she announced to her surroundings. Typically, there was no answer.

Stomping along the road towards Stolz’s fields, she tripped over a discarded energy drink can. “Littering cretins,” she muttered and shoved her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. Later, if it wasn’t raining, she’d come out with a garbage bag and clear the detris that had accumulated since her last save-the-earth efforts.

Pushing her way around an overgrown camellia bush that waved ruffly pink flowers right into the road, Ahtena stopped at the edge of the pasture.

“*Ooooooh!*” She had struck it rich! Jeremy was riding that beautiful brown mare. To Athena’s enraptured eyes, they looked like a dance couple. Her fingers flew to adjust angles and settings, rapidly capturing the performance frame after frame. Too soon, Jeremy turned his horse toward the barn.

“*Ah...bug guts!*” Athena flicked back

through the shots, not entirely pleased with any. Maybe some computer work later would improve them. The deadline for the on-line photo contest was midnight tonight and despite days and days of work, she didn't have anything special to submit.

Discontentedly, she scanned the field for more subjects. An unfamiliar girl leaned over the fence, slim body bending toward the horses like a compass needle turned north. Judy Whitmore's big dog, Moose, panted in the grass beside her.

Athena stared for a moment or two, assessing the possibilities of approaching this girl.

*Minus* – the girl looked younger than her own thirteen years (*ergo*, she probably would not have anything interesting to say or be able to pose seriously for a picture).

*Plus* – there were no other kids within a mile (other than terminally shy, Jeremy).

*Minus* – the really big minus – there was that humungous canine that would probably jump on her and then with waterfalls of drool dripping on her doomed body, chew off each of her legs and then slowly devour the rest of her with great crunching, doggy joy.

Athena was very aware that her short and stocky (but not fat) build would topple like a

stack of blocks if that monster attacked. Not worth it. Definitely not worth it.

Decision made, Athena faded back behind the camellia before the girl or dog spotted her. Maybe there would be some trilliums open in the woods between Judy Whitmore's house, or even something interesting happening at McClelland's gargantuan stables. Athena crossed the road and slid through a gap in the fence where ancient plum trees had slowly pushed apart the rusty wire. Slipping behind the trees, she waded through the undergrowth that formed an acre-wide swath of wilderness between the two properties.

Dark and wild, just like relations between Judy Whitmore and Neil McClelland, her mom had said. Her mom would know, because next to photography, she most loved gossip, and was genius at ferreting out the best of it.

Athena's phone shrilled. She pulled it from her pocket and checked the display – *Mom*. Smiling, Athena silenced the ringer. "Call away, mother," she said. "I am so unavailable."

Free at last, Athena ambled through the woodsy acre, relishing the insistent whistles of mating birds and the freshness of air that had been filtered through all these lush green leaves. She crouched by a wildflower (or maybe it was a weed) with a stringy stalk and a



golden flower, and shot a few pictures, making sure she caught the image of the camouflaged spider hiding beneath the petals.

The spider was pale yellow, blending perfectly into the flower. Athena had seen the same type of spiders dressed to kill in pure white and even white with a pink stripe to better blend and wait for prey. The cunning gave her a slight chill in her belly, even while her mind recognized that unlike people, the spider had no choice about how it could survive. She didn't like them much though, not since two summers before when she had seen a spider sucking the life out of a broken butterfly.

She dawdled awhile in the woods, and then when her stomach growled, turned back toward home. Maybe her mother would use some of that parenting fervor to whip up a really great lunch. A girl could hope, Athena thought. And if that didn't happen, there was always toast and peanut butter. Again.

It felt good – no great – to feel Molly's graceful, muscled body between his legs. Jeremy leaned and Molly responded. He twitched the rein and Molly danced sideways, criss-crossing her legs in a playful skip. She tossed her head, clearly enjoying the

performance of her skills as much as Jeremy. He resolved to get back into the routine of riding and training the horses every day, the way he used to do with his Mom. It wasn't fair to them to be left so alone – although he had to admit that maybe the horses liked being fat and lazy.

As he directed Molly into a last controlled canter around the pasture, he caught sight of a blonde kid leaning over the fence with Moose flopped on the grass beside her. Jeremy nodded at her, more for the sake of Moose whom he liked a lot, than anything else. He didn't remember ever seeing the girl before and didn't care much either.

“Hey,” the girl called.

Jeremy turned Molly toward the barn, pretending he didn't hear her. His life was complicated enough already. And even if it wasn't that complicated, he just didn't care about anything any more, except maybe the horses.

Entranced by the sight of the mare, Sky called out to the rider, but he ignored her and disappeared into the barn. For a long while Sky leaned against the fence, wondering if there was a way to coax a horse over to her. She wished she had an apple or carrot. For a

moment she thought about pulling up tufts of long grass, but that seemed dumb when she looked across the big green pasture. True, the horses had cropped the grass short, but it was still grass.

Putting out her hand, she closed her eyes and thought hard about the horses coming to her, mentally begging them to be aware of her as a friend. She pictured them moving over to her, their heads tossing and feet prancing.

She called them with all her heart, called them the way she had always “spoken” to all the animals that came to her – the neighborhood cats and dogs, scrounging squirrels and chirpy birds. Once even a little grey mouse. They had all come to her when she called out as a lonely friend. Would these beautiful horses hear her? Would the magic reach them too?

She opened her eyes when she heard a soft whicker a few feet away. The small horse, no colt, she corrected herself, had heard her and he was there.

“Friends?” Sky whispered, holding out both hands. The horse gazed at her then, step by step moved closer, his head bobbing with each footfall as he searched her face and body for signs that she was safe. Sky held perfectly still, hands outstretched. The black colt brushed and bumped his soft lips over her

fingers, the semblance of a kiss as he searched first one hand and then the other for some kind of treat. Sky held absolutely motionless, her heart pounding in delight. Behind the colt, the other four horses ambled in her direction, stopping every few feet to twitch their elegant tails or crop a mouthful of grass, moving in wide zig zags that brought them closer to her, but cautiously, with their hooves poised to gallop away.

“I’m so glad to meet you,” Sky whispered.

One by one, their soft noses nudged her hands and arms as she breathed their thick, horsey scents and gazed into their wide eyes, all fringed with ridiculously long lashes. Their heads tossed and turned to better look at this new person. Heart pounding, breath catching, as the velvety lips brushed her arms and hands, Sky felt as if she had spun around from a cruel, dark reality, to a magic, color-bursting dream. Arms stretched out, her fingers trailed across the velvet of their cheeks and necks.

Jeremy, having finished unsaddling and grooming Molly, came out of the barn and stopped. His horses, all his horses, were clustered around that skinny girl. What was she doing? What was she doing to his horses?

“Hey!” he shouted. “*Hey! Get away from my horses!*”

The angry edge on his voice startled the animals, breaking the connection Sky had forged. One by one they ambled away, forgetting everything except the endless search for tender grass.

Sky looked up at the rough-voiced teen at the far end of the pasture, froze just a second, and then took to her heels, dashing across the road and weaving through the trees and shrubs until she was sure the boy would not know where she was. Safe. Unless he followed Moose's crashing path. Breathing hard, trembling, she threw her arm around the dog's thick neck, ignored a sloppy kiss on her neck, and peered back through the curtain of leaves.

The boy had run over to the horses and, one by one, was talking to them, rubbing their long noses and soft ears, combing his fingers through their manes and slapping their muscled flanks. They nuzzled him affectionately and then curved their heads down to tear and munch on the grass.

Sky watched as he touched one after another, checking them, connecting with the horses the way she had wanted to. When the teen did not even glance toward her hiding place, her fear faded, replaced by envy and grudging respect. Her mom had told her about the intricacies of training, of the people who

were horsemen and horsewomen. Clearly, this grouchy teenager was an accomplished horseman.

Sky wondered if she would be here long enough to get to know him, make friends and absorb what he knew about horses. She was hungry for that knowledge, the way The Nightmare had made her hungry for food. Sky sank down, and began to make plans, all the while spinning pictures of herself astride the horses, feeling their strength and beauty – the safety of freedom.