

DRIVING TEAM

Bonnie Bryant

Bantam



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“IT’LL INVOLVE A LOT OF TEAMWORK AND COOPERATION.”

“Stevie Lake,” Max said, his blue eyes twinkling. “I’ve got something special for you. In honor of the, uh, let’s call it friendship, you and Veronica have struck up this morning, I like you two to train your horses to pull the Pine Hollow wagon. Girls, you’ll have two weeks to turn those saddle horses into a team and give a demonstration for the Cross County Pony Club!”

Stevie couldn’t believe her ears. Did Max actually believe that she and Veronica were *friends*? Were they going to have to train their horses together? For a demonstration that *Phyllis* was going to be watching? She shook her head. Maybe she’d misunderstood. She raised her hand again.

“Max, did I hear you correctly?”

Max grinned and nodded. Carole and Lisa glanced at each other as Stevie buried her face in her hands with a groan. Both of them knew that turning Belle and Danny into a smooth working team was going to be a lot easier than turning Stevie and Veronica into one!

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DRIVING TEAM



BONNIE BRYANT



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DRIVING TEAM

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About the Author

“YIKES!” STEVIE LAKE cried as she slipped and fell to one knee in a wide puddle just in front of the stable. Globbs of cold, thick mud splattered all over her jeans and shirt. “It’s really slick out here!”

“Come on, Stevie !” Carole Hanson motioned to her friend. “Horse Wise is about to begin!”

Stevie sloshed inside the stable, shivering as she pulled her wet sweatshirt close around her neck. The smell of damp hay tickled the inside of her nose as she fought back a sneeze. “I’m glad we’re meeting in Max’s office,” she said. “This weather is really lousy.”

“Can you imagine anybody trying to ride in rain like this?” asked Lisa Atwood, who was also waiting for Stevie. She looked up at the driving sheets of water that fell from the gloomy November sky. “You’d probably catch pneumonia, and who knows what your poor horse would catch?”

“Rhinopneumonitis, probably,” decided Carole.

“Huh?” Stevie said, frowning.

“I think that’s one of Carole’s fancy words for a horse cold,” laughed Lisa.

Stevie groaned. “I know a fancy word for being late, which is what we’re going to be if we don’t hurry.”

“Then let’s go,” said Lisa. “We were late for the last meeting. I don’t want to get the cold shoulder from Max again.”

The three girls hustled through the Pine Hollow stables. It was the place where they had first met and where they had discovered that each was just as crazy about horses as the others. That was when they’d formed The Saddle Club, a club that had only two rules—the members had to be crazy about horses, and that they had to help each other out whenever possible. Lisa Atwood was the newest to riding, but she was also the oldest and most logical of the trio. Carole Hanson could be scatterbrained about everything from returning her library books to whether her socks matched, but when it came to horses, she was almost an expert and never forgot anything. Stevie Lake, the third member of the club, was often knee-deep in some crazy predicament or practical joke. Though Stevie was as devoted to horses as Carole and Lisa, much of The Saddle Club’s time was devoted to getting out of the trouble Stevie’s schemes had gotten them into. Still, they had such terrific adventures getting either into or out of their dilemmas that nobody minded.

The girls hurried around a corner, where warm yellow light poured from the open door of Max’s office. Maximilian Regnery III was the owner of Pine Hollow, the stables that had been founded by his grandfather Maximilian Regnery I and passed along to him by his own father, Max II. Max now stood behind his desk, chatting with the crowd of young riders who were seated on the floor of his office.

“Well, if it isn’t Carole, Lisa, and Stevie.” Max checked his watch and grinned. “You’re whole thirty seconds early.”

“Hi, Max,” Lisa replied as other riders scooted over to make room for them on the floor.
“We would have been here sooner, but Stevie had a slight run-in.”

Max frowned. “With a horse?”

“Actually, with a mud puddle.” Laughing, Stevie held her mud-splashed jeans away from her legs.

Just then Mrs. Reg, who was the stable manager as well as Max’s mother, stuck her head into the office.

“Max, have you got a minute to meet a new rider?” she asked.

“Just thirty seconds,” he answered.

“That’s enough.”

“I’ll be right back,” Max said to the assembled Pony Clubbers as he stepped into the hallway.

“Maybe then we can finally begin,” said a sarcastic voice from the leather armchair in the corner. “Some of us have been waiting for hours.”

The girls turned. The voice belonged to the richest, snootiest girl at Pine Hollow, Veronica diAngelo. She’d curled herself up like a cat in Max’s one good chair, wearing a gorgeous green cashmere tunic and sparkling white jodhpurs. The sweater matched her eyes exactly, and looked expensive. All Veronica’s friends sat around the chair, casting admiring glances at her sleek new haircut and beautiful outfit.

“I may be late, Veronica, but at least I came dressed to work,” Stevie snapped, her white sweatshirt still clinging to the back of her neck. “Unlike some people who have the nerve to think that if they come dressed in fancy clothes they can get somebody else to do their chores for them.”

“Are you implying that I haven’t done any work today?” Veronica’s eyes flashed.

Stevie looked at her outfit and shrugged. “I don’t know many people who come to muck out stalls dressed in cashmere sweaters.”

“I’ll have you know that I came early today, mucked out Danny’s stall all by myself, and then changed into these clean clothes,” Veronica said as her friends Betsy Cavanaugh and Meredith Durham nodded in agreement.

Veronica eyed Stevie’s tattered sweatshirt and soggy jeans. “In case you haven’t noticed, some of us don’t like to lounge around in dirty, wet clothes. We prefer to get our work done and leave the muck and dirty straw on the manure pile, instead of bringing cute little samples of it to Horse Wise meetings.”

Everyone in the room chuckled. Stevie looked down at her clothes and felt a flush of embarrassment. Mud was caked on both legs of her jeans, and several wisps of hay dangled from the sleeves of her sweatshirt. She looked back at Veronica’s spotless outfit and shook her head.

“Sorry, Veronica. But I’m still not convinced you got here early just to get a stall mucked out. I think you must be playing a very late April Fools’ trick.”

“You don’t believe me?” Veronica held out her hands, displaying ten perfectly shaped nails all painted a delicate pink. “Then come look at the dreadful damage it did to the manicure I got just yesterday!”

Normally Stevie would have ignored Veronica’s boasting, but the manicure display was simply too much. She picked her way between Joe Novick and Adam Levine until she stood

directly in front of Veronica's chair.

"See?" Veronica held up her nails for inspection.

Stevie bent over and studied them. Though each was still a mostly perfect pink oval, two nails on Veronica's right hand had been recently chipped. Then Stevie took a deep breath and almost passed out from shock. Wafting up from Veronica's delicate white hands was the pungent aroma of horse manure. Veronica was telling the truth. For once in her life, she had actually gotten up early and done some work!

Stevie stood up straight and grabbed one of Veronica's hands, lifting it so that everyone in the room could see. "I want everyone here to know that on this day, Veronica diAngelo actually cleaned out her own horse's stall. She chipped two of her very own fingernails, and her hands have the distinct aroma of *eau de cheval*." She dropped Veronica's hand and turned back toward her.

"I'm sorry for ever doubting you, Veronica," she said with a deep bow. "I had no idea you had become such a hard worker. I apologize for accusing you of being a slacker, and if, in the future, I ever see any little potty accident that some horse might have had on the floor, you'll be the first person I call to clean it up."

With that, the room was filled with snickers. Veronica flopped back in the chair to powder her own cheeks now pink with embarrassment.

Max returned to the room and tapped a pencil on his desk. "Okay, okay, you guys, let's get this meeting under way. We've got a lot to talk about. Stevie, take a seat. You and Veronica can finish your conversation later."

Stevie crept back to Lisa and Carole and plopped down on the floor just as another deluge of rain beat down on the roof of the barn. Max glanced up at the ceiling, then turned to the assembled riders and grinned.

"I don't know if any of you are aware of this, but in two weeks we're going to have a joint meeting with the Cross County Pony Club."

A murmur of anticipation rippled through the riders. Lisa and Carole grinned at Stevie whose boyfriend, Phil Marsten, was a member of Cross County. Even though they were equally good riders, there was nothing either of them liked better than competing in some aspect of horsemanship. Their competition was friendly, but Stevie was always looking for an opportunity to show off what she considered her superior riding skills. Phil seemed to have similar notions about his own skills.

"And so"—Max frowned briefly at The Saddle Club girls and cleared his throat—"in honor of all this driving rain that's pelting our barn today, we're going to do projects on driving horses. That'll be the program we present for our meeting with the Cross County club."

"You mean driving horses to shows and trail rides?" May Grover asked from her spot beside the filing cabinet.

"No," Max explained. "I mean driving horses themselves. Horses pulling wagons and chariots and sulkies."

"Sulkies?" Brittany Lynn piped up. "What's a sulky?"

"That's what Veronica is most of the time," whispered Stevie. Lisa and Carole tried to squelch their giggles.

"Well, that's what I'm hoping we'll find out," said Max. "Driving is a horse sport all by itself—very different from jumping or dressage." Max looked at the riders crowded into the

office. "Have I got any volunteers to make reports at the joint meeting?"

Stevie's hand shot up first. There was no way she was going to let an opportunity like this pass by. Max might let her do some special, wonderful report that Phil would remember for the rest of his life! Lisa and Carole raised their hands, too, as did some of the other riders. Soon one of Veronica's manicured hands was waving in the air as well.

"Good." Max beamed. "I'm glad you're excited about this. I think it's going to be a lot of fun. Let's see how I can pair you up, now." He studied the volunteers for a moment and scratched his chin.

"Okay. Lisa Atwood and Carole Hanson, why don't you two work together on a ten-minute report called 'Driving Through History'? That way we can find out what sulkies are."

"Sure, Max," replied Lisa. "Sounds like fun."

"Polly Giacomini and Anna McWhirter, why don't you two give us a ten-minute report on driving tack? There's all sorts of special equipment you need to drive a team of horses."

"Okay." Polly scribbled something in a small notebook and moved over to sit beside Anna.

Stevie's arm grew tired as Max assigned the other reports, until finally only her hand and Veronica's were left waving in the air. It was then that Max looked at her and smiled.

"Stevie Lake," he said, his blue eyes twinkling. "I've got something special for you. In honor of the, uh, let's call it friendship, you and Veronica have struck up this morning, I'd like you two to train your horses to pull the Pine Hollow wagon. Girls, you'll have two weeks to turn those saddle horses into a team and give a demonstration for the Cross County Pony Club!"

Stevie couldn't believe her ears. Did Max actually believe that she and Veronica were *friends*? Were they going to have to train their horses together? For a demonstration that *Phil* was going to be watching? She shook her head. Maybe she'd misunderstood. She raised her hand again.

"Max, did I hear you correctly? You want Veronica and me to turn Danny and Belle into a driving team? And give a demonstration at the joint meeting with Cross County?"

Max grinned and nodded. "You've only got two weeks to get them working together. It will involve a lot of teamwork and cooperation. Assuming that this rain stops, meet me at the back paddock at four this afternoon, and I'll help you get started."

Carole and Lisa glanced at each other as Stevie buried her face in her hands with a groan. Both of them knew that turning Belle and Danny into a smooth working team was going to be a lot easier than turning Stevie and Veronica into one!

"ANY QUESTIONS?" MAX looked over the group at the end of the meeting. "Okay, then. Let's get tack up. We'll have a flat class in the indoor ring in twenty minutes."

For a moment, as everyone got up and scurried out of the room around her, Stevie just sat on the floor.

"Stevie, are you all right?" Carole leaned over and looked worriedly at her friend.

"I think I must be in shock," Stevie answered. "Can you imagine two whole weeks of working side by side with Veronica?"

Carole shook her head. "Actually, I can't. I don't think I have the patience."

Stevie wrinkled her nose. "And you think I do?"

"I guess Max thinks you have something," Carole said with a shrug.

"I think I have incredibly bad luck," complained Stevie. "And everything could have been so great, too. I mean, I could have done a super report and really impressed Phil. We haven't seen each other in weeks. It would have been nice to show him something that I had put a lot of effort into."

"Stevie, don't you mean *show off* something you'd put a lot of effort into?" Lisa teased gently.

"Well, maybe I do tend to show off a teeny bit in front of Phil," Stevie admitted.

"Oh, this might not be so bad, Stevie," Carole said. "If anybody can pull something fantastic out of the hat with Veronica, it's you."

"Maybe I could just shove Veronica back into the hat," grumbled Stevie. "That would be fantastic enough for me."

"Look," said Carole. "Just don't think about any of this right now. Let's go tack up the horses. We haven't seen them since last Wednesday's class!"

"You're right," said Stevie, hopping to her feet. "I'm losing sight of what counts here. Being with Belle is far more important than worrying about Veronica."

They hurried back down one of the long stable corridors. Carole's gelding, Starlight, was stabled next to Stevie's mare, Belle, and both horses' heads were poked expectantly out of their stalls.

"Belle!" Stevie cried. "How I've missed you!" She reached up and gave the pretty bay mare a delicious scratch behind the ears.

"Starlight!" Carole echoed Stevie's sentiments as her horse gave a soft nicker. She hugged him gently around the neck, pressing her cheek against his soft brown hair. "Hi, big guy!" she whispered. "I've missed you!"

"I'm going to get Prancer," Lisa called. "I'll cross-tie her up here so we can talk."

"Okay," said Stevie and Carole as they hurried into the tack room to get their saddles and grooming supplies. By the time they got back, Lisa already had Prancer tied just a few feet away.

“Look,” she called as Prancer nuzzled Starlight’s ear. “I think even the horses have missed being with each other.”

“I know they’ve missed riding,” said Carole. “It’s too bad we can’t go for a trail ride after class.”

“I know,” said Stevie. “If we did, though, we’d probably all come down with rhino-newm whatever-it-is.”

“Rhinopneumonitis,” corrected Carole. “And you’re right. We probably would. Anyway, Lisa and I ought to start thinking about our report on the history of driving.”

The girls began to brush their horses. Carole curried dried mud from Starlight’s withers while Lisa picked out Prancer’s hooves. Stevie worked in silence, brushing Belle’s thick coat of winter hair. The idea of working with Veronica was hard enough to think about; talking about it would only make it worse. She decided to concentrate on Belle and just listen to all the plans her friends were making.

“We could go over to the library and see what kinds of books they have on driving,” Lisa was saying. “And we could start from the very first drivers known to man.”

“Right,” replied Carole. “Like Helios, the Greek god who drove his chariot across the sky every day, pulling the sun with it.”

Lisa smoothed a saddle pad on Prancer’s back. “Then we could just come down through history: the old Roman chariots and the Russian troikas and the hospital wagons that rescued the wounded soldiers in the Civil War.”

“And the twenty-mule-team wagons that helped settle the West.” Carole cinched up Starlight’s saddle. “And the old coaches that were early versions of buses. And sulkies and ...”

Lisa nodded. “There’s tons of material out there. We just have to figure out how to cram all into a ten-minute report.”

“Want to stop by the library after class?” Carole asked.

“Sure,” said Lisa. “It might take us two weeks just to figure out what we want to say.”

Just then they heard a sad sigh from the other side of Belle.

“Stevie?” Carole asked. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” Stevie replied glumly. “I’m just listening to what a great time you guys are going to have working on your project while I’ll be stuck here with You-Know-Who.”

“Oh, Stevie, maybe it won’t be so bad.” Lisa adjusted the bit in Prancer’s mouth. “Maybe she really has changed for the better. Maybe she’ll come early in grubby clothes to work on the driving project.”

Stevie tightened Belle’s girth. “Yeah. And the moon’s made of green cheese, and there’s a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow.”

Lisa shrugged. “I know Veronica’s changing might be far-fetched, but it’s not absolutely totally impossible.”

Stevie sighed again. “But I don’t want to spend ten minutes with that creepy girl, much less two weeks. Plus, I’ll actually have to try to cooperate with her!” Stevie shook her head. “The only time I ever have any fun with Veronica is when I insult her!”

Lisa laughed. “Well, I guess the next two weeks are just going to be a real challenge for you.”

Carole snapped on her hard hat. “Stevie, Veronica probably messed up her manicure s

badly this morning that she'll beg off doing any more work for the next two weeks. You won't have to put up with her at all."

"Right!" cried Lisa. "You'll be free to do the whole project yourself!"

Stevie's honey blond hair seemed to stand on end. "That's the good news? I get to train two saddle horses to drive as a team and put on a demonstration in front of Phil all by myself? In two weeks?"

Carole frowned. "Well, okay, maybe that's not such good news, but look at it this way: it might be the best thing in the world if Veronica doesn't show up. Agreed, she's a rotten human being, but she's got a wonderful horse. Danny's a smart, willing animal, and training him should be a piece of cake. You'll be the star of the whole show, and Phil will be there to see it all!"

Stevie buckled Belle's chin strap, then grinned. "You know, you might be right. It would be hard, training two horses all alone, but if I could pull it off, it would be spectacular!"

"Why don't we just concentrate on having a spectacular flat class now, Stevie?" said Lisa. "Then we can all three think about the Veronica problem afterward."

"Okay," Stevie replied, once again smiling as she led Belle toward the indoor ring.

THE INDOOR RING had been cleared of all jumps and cavalletti, and most of the Horse Wise riders were waiting for class to begin. When Stevie saw that Veronica was at one end of the ring talking to Polly and Betsy, she led Belle to the opposite end. Lisa and Carole followed.

"How come we're going over here?" Lisa asked.

"I don't want to ride too close to Veronica," replied Stevie. "Some of my dirt samples might accidentally rub off on her."

Carole glanced over her shoulder. "At least she's not riding in her cashmere sweater," she giggled.

"That means she's changed clothes three times already this morning, and it's not even ten o'clock." Lisa shook her head. "That must be some kind of record."

Suddenly the girls heard a loud clap. Max strode to the center of the ring. "Okay, everybody. Mount and warm up for about five minutes. Then we're going to do some exercises in pairs."

"What's this thing with pairs Max has today?" Stevie asked as she climbed up on Belle. "Why can't we work as trios?"

"Beats me," Carole replied. "Maybe this is Max's Promote Harmony by Riding in Pairs campaign."

"Well, I'm all for that," said Stevie. She glanced at Veronica. "Only some of us need to become distinctly more harmonious."

The girls started walking their horses slowly around the ring, building up to an extended walk and finally a slow trot. It felt good to get their stiff riding muscles limbered up, and by the time Max had clapped his hands again, all the horses and riders were ready for the lesson. Even Stevie felt good. All problems, she decided, looked smaller from the back of a horse.

"Okay." Max walked to the center of the ring. "Today we're going to work on some fairly simple exercises, but we're going to work on them in close pairs, side by side. It's important that you and the person you're teamed up with work together and cue your horses in making these gait changes smoothly and at the same time. Understand?"

When everyone nodded, Max continued. "Okay. Let's choose partners. Everyone who's working with someone on a driving project, just pair up with your partner. Everybody else, team up with the rider behind you."

For a moment everyone scrambled to get a partner. Lisa and Carole trotted to the side of the ring, happy to be teamed up, but Stevie gulped as she tried hard to remember what she had just decided about problems looking smaller from the back of a horse. Veronica diAngelo and Danny were walking straight toward her and Belle.

"Veronica." Stevie sighed. "Looks like we're on the same team again."

Veronica tossed her head and scowled.

When everyone was ready, Max waved his hands for their attention. "Okay, move with your partner to the outside of the ring and start walking clockwise."

Stevie tried to smile. "Do you want to be on the left or right?"

"Oh, please," said Veronica. She turned Danny sharply to the right and began walking behind Polly and Anna. Stevie had to hurry to catch up.

"Do you want the inside or the outside of the ring?" Stevie asked again as she pulled Belle up beside Danny.

"It doesn't matter a bit to Danny," sniffed Veronica as she cast a disdainful glance at Belle. "He's a Thoroughbred. He can do anything."

"Well, so can Belle—" Stevie sputtered, only to be cut short by the sound of Max's voice.

"Okay, riders, go three strides at the walk, then go into an extended trot *together, at the same time*. And don't run up on your neighbor's rear end. I don't want anybody kicked today."

Stevie began to count Belle's strides. Just before she asked Belle for a trot, Veronica and Danny hopped out ahead, already trotting briskly. Stevie squeezed Belle with her legs, trying to catch up. They trotted, out of balance, halfway around the ring.

"Okay," called Max. "That was pretty good. Now I'm going to count. When I say *five*, I want you all to ask for a canter. But remember, ask for it *together*." He looked at Stevie and Veronica. "Some of you guys look like you're riding horses on a merry-go-round. Okay. One, two ..."

By the time Max reached *three*, Stevie had caught up with Veronica. "Can you give me some kind of signal when you're going to change leads?" Stevie whispered.

"No!" snapped Veronica. "I need to concentrate on Danny. You just watch us and do what we do."

Stevie tried to watch Danny's and Belle's front legs at the same time. Just before Max called out "five," Veronica pushed Danny into a canter. Stevie did the same, trying to stay together, but Veronica had asked Danny for the wrong lead. He and Belle cantered around the ring, almost bumping into each other in the turn. Finally Stevie asked Belle to make a flying lead change just to avoid having the two horses cantering together so awkwardly.

"Okay." Again Max aimed a sharp glance at both of them. "Everybody walk."

Stevie and Veronica pulled both horses down into a walk. "Why can't we work out some kind of signal for what we're going to do?" Stevie whispered. "Max doesn't look too happy with our performance."

"I'm sure Max is perfectly pleased with the way Danny and I are performing." Veronica raised one eyebrow. "You and Belle, on the other hand ..." She gave Stevie a sickeningly sweet smile. "I'm sure he knows you're doing the best you can."

“But—” Stevie began, feeling her blood pressure rising.

“Okay, everybody,” Max called. “Some of you are doing great. Others can stand a little more practice in cooperation. Since you’re all facing the same direction, let’s all try a half turn to the right.”

Stevie pulled Belle up beside Danny, listening to Max’s instructions.

“Go into a sitting trot, then everybody circle to the right, then ride a straight line back to where you started. You and your partner should make one big half circle together.” Max looked at the riders. “Everybody ready? Then go!”

Stevie urged Belle into a trot, then applied gentle pressure to Belle’s right side with her leg. Belle responded perfectly, turning in a circle, but Danny balked midway through the turn. He stopped once; then, instead of walking beside Belle, he lunged ahead of her. Stevie had to grab Belle’s mane while the poor horse almost stood on her toes to keep from being run over.

“Okay, okay, everybody stop!” Stevie heard Max call, his voice suddenly disgusted. She looked over her shoulder and saw him coming toward them.

“Stevie and Veronica, these are easy, elementary exercises, and not once have you been together on anything. What’s going on with you two?”

“It’s not me!” cried Veronica. “Danny and I have executed your instructions perfectly, right on time. Stevie and Belle are slow. They can’t keep up!”

Stevie had just opened her mouth to say that Veronica was the one who was constantly jumping the gun and refusing to work out any signals when she saw Max’s blue eyes flash. She knew from experience that it was not the time to explain her position with regard to Veronica. Max wasn’t interested in excuses, just results. She took a deep breath.

“Sorry, Max,” she said softly. “I guess we are having some problems. We’ll just have to concentrate harder, I suppose.”

“I suppose so,” Max said thoughtfully, glancing at Veronica. “Well, let’s try it again.” He turned and walked back to the middle of the ring. “Okay, everybody, get back to your original positions!”

This time Stevie waited to see which way Veronica was going to go before she moved Belle one inch. Oh, *brother*, she thought as Veronica pulled Danny in an unnecessarily huge circle. *this is what working with Veronica’s like, I’ve got a long two weeks ahead of me!*

“STEVIE, WHAT ARE you going to do?” Carole and Lisa peeked over the stall door, where Stevie was working a burr from Belle’s tail.

Stevie sighed. “I’m just going to hang around here until Max meets with us to explain the driving tack.” She held up the prickly burr and examined it. “I wish I were going with you guys, though.”

“We wish you were, too,” said Carole. “But maybe this won’t be as bad as you’re expecting. Veronica might actually have turned over a new leaf.”

“Right,” said Stevie. “If her behavior in the flat class was any indication, she’s turned from obnoxious all the way over to unbearable.”

“Oh, Stevie, I think she just got mad,” said Lisa. “You did make everybody laugh at her at the Horse Wise meeting.”

“Well, she got me back. She made me look like a real jerk in front of Max.” Stevie smoothed Belle’s tail. “You guys may as well go on to the library and have some fun. I’ll just wait here and see what Miss Cashmere Sweater’s going to do.”

“We hate to leave you, but we do need to get to work,” said Carole.

“Don’t worry about it.” Stevie forced herself to smile. “At least I’ve got Belle to keep me company. She’s a lot more fun than Veronica any day. I’ll see you later.”

Carole and Lisa said good-bye, then turned and hurried to the bus stop at the end of the long Pine Hollow driveway.

“I hate to leave Stevie like this,” said Lisa as their boots sloshed through the soggy drive. “I feel like she really needs us right now.”

“I do, too,” Carole replied. “But what can we do? Max made the assignments. All we could do would be hang around and watch the disaster unfold.” She shuddered. “It might be too horrible to watch.”

“You’re right,” said Lisa. “And then we’d be too upset to get our own project done.” She sighed and ran her hand through her shoulder-length blond hair. “I guess Stevie’s going to have to get through this on her own.”

After a short ride across town, the girls got off the bus in front of the big redbrick library, where two stone lions guarded the doors.

“Do you have anything we can take notes on?” Lisa asked, stopping in front of the library door.

“No,” said Carole. “I bring more apples and carrots to Pine Hollow than I do paper and pens.”

“Then why don’t we go into that stationery store across the street and pick up some note cards? We’ll probably find a lot of information we’ll need to write down.”

They hurried across the wet street to the stationery store, where Lisa bought three packs of four-by-six index cards and two pencils. Carole bought a tiny horse bookmark and a pack of

butterscotch.

"In case we get hungry," she said as Lisa gave her a quizzical look. "My dad says it's okay to eat candy in the library as long as you don't throw the wrappers on the floor."

"Whatever," laughed Lisa as they splashed back across the street and hurried between the two big lions.

Inside, the library was a cheery, warm hive of activity. Bright lights shone overhead and people checked out books, clicked away at computers, read magazines, and researched projects at the long tables.

"Where shall we start?" whispered Carole.

"Why don't I see what I can find on the library's catalog while you check out the horse section?" suggested Lisa. "Do you know where it is?"

"Six-thirty-six in the Dewey decimal system," reported Carole with a smile. "I've spent about a jillion hours there."

"Then see what you can find, and I'll meet you over there when I finish at the computer."

"Okay."

Carole walked to the corner of the library that held all the animal books, while Lisa found a free computer terminal. She sat down and opened her note cards, then started searching the library's catalog by typing in the word *chariot* in the subject field. She punched Enter, and a few seconds later all the titles concerning chariots flashed on the screen. Lisa wrote them all down, then typed in the word *stagecoach*. An instant later the computer listed seven books about stagecoaches. In just a little while, Lisa had a pile of index cards filled with books about driving.

Research doesn't take long at all when you've got a computer doing the legwork, she thought. Wish they'd assign us our own computers in school, just like they give us math and English books.

When she'd researched all the driving topics she could remember, she hurried over to find Carole. At first she didn't see her, but then she turned a corner in the stacks, and there sat her friend with a pile of eighteen books in front of her.

"Gosh," said Lisa, "looks like you're finding a lot. I got a bunch of titles from the computer too."

Carole frowned at the books she'd gathered. "I bet there are still more. Let's go ask the librarian."

Lisa followed Carole over to the return desk, where a pretty blond woman in a bright blue sweater was putting books on a cart. She smiled as both girls approached the counter.

"Hi, girls," she said sweetly. "I'm Mrs. Davidson. Can I help you find something today?"

"Yes. We need all the books you've got on driving," Carole said.

"Driving?" Mrs. Davidson blinked. "Aren't you a little young to be studying for your licenses?"

"Oh, no," Lisa laughed. "Not car driving. We mean horse driving. Like carriages and wagons and things like that."

"Oh." Mrs. Davidson chuckled. "I see. You mean team driving. Let me see. I believe I shelved a book on team driving just the other day."

She stuck a pencil behind one ear and bustled out from behind the counter. "If I remember it's right over here." She walked quickly to an area of the stacks Carole had never been to before, reached up to the top shelf, and pulled down a thick red book titled *Customs and*

Carriages.

“Great,” said Carole, thumbing through the book. “Are there any more?”

“Give me a few minutes,” said Mrs. Davidson, “and I’ll see what I can find.”

Carole and Lisa moved the books Carole had gathered to a table while Mrs. Davidson fluttered from shelf to shelf, adding volumes to their collection.

“Okay,” Mrs. Davidson said a few minutes later, when the tabletop was covered with books. “I think that’s it.”

“Gosh,” said Lisa, counting quickly. “That’s forty-three books on driving.”

“Is that enough?” asked Mrs. Davidson.

“I think so,” laughed Carole. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Davidson. We could never have found that many books by ourselves.”

“My pleasure,” Mrs. Davidson said cheerily as she went back to the return desk. “I never mind helping young readers with a project.”

“Wow.” Lisa eyed the huge selection of books. “Where should we start?”

Carole frowned. “Why don’t we go through these and reshelve the ones that won’t be much help—you know, the ones that are too babyish or too technical?”

“Good idea,” said Lisa. “I’ll sift through the ones at this end of the table. You take the ones down there.”

Carole sat down and opened the first book. The title was perfect—*Driving Through History*—but she realized after she’d thumbed through the first few pages that it was a fictional story about a pair of guys in a magical car that travels through time. Carole checked to make sure the guys hadn’t driven near any ancient chariots, then rose to her feet. “This one looks interesting, but it’s not going to help us with our report. I think I’ll reshelve it.”

“Okay,” said Lisa. “I’ll stay here and go through these.”

Carole found the empty spot where the book belonged. It was on a shelf just above the floor. She got down on her hands and knees to shove the book into the right slot and found herself peeping through to the other side of the stack. Standing on a stool in the next aisle were a pair of small red sneakers, which were under a small pair of blue jeans, which were apparently attached to a little kid. It seemed to Carole as if the child was trying to hide in the dingiest corner of the library. Quietly she reshelve the book and leaned forward to peep around the stack.

A little girl stood there. She wore a red wool sweater along with her jeans and had curly hair, almost as blond as Mrs. Davidson’s. Though she was standing as if she wanted to be invisible, in her arms she clutched one of Carole’s all-time favorite books, *Misty Chincoteague* by Marguerite Henry.

“Hi,” said Carole, barely above a whisper. “That’s a great book, isn’t it?”

The little girl nodded.

“I just adore it. Have you gotten to the race parts yet?”

“I don’t know.” The little girl shrugged. “I can only look at the pictures.”

Carole frowned. “How come?”

“Because I can’t read yet.”

“Oh,” said Carole. “I see.” She leaned against the bookshelf with a dreamy look in her so brown eyes. It had been seven or eight years since she had learned to read, but she could still remember sitting on her mother’s lap, running her fingers over the words in her horse book

They had all seemed so wonderful and mysterious, and she'd hardly been able to wait to go to school so that she could learn to read the stories about these great animals whose pictures she loved. Now she couldn't imagine not being able to read, especially about horses.

Carole smiled at the little girl. "How old are you?"

"Five." The little girl held up all the fingers on one hand. "My name's Cynthia and I just started kindergarten."

"Hey, that's great," said Carole. "That means you'll be reading in about a year. Then you can check out all these wonderful books about horses and read them all you want."

"But I want to know what happens to the horses in this book now." Cynthia's lower lip stuck out as if she might cry. Carole moved closer and sat down beside her.

"Well, let's see," she said. "Maybe I can explain what's going on."

She thumbed through the book and smiled at the illustrations she remembered so well. "This is the fierce pony stallion the Pied Piper, who's chasing the great mare Phantom back to the herd, away from Paul and Maureen, who want to catch her."

Carole turned the pages, explaining the pictures. "Here Paul and Maureen are working hard to earn enough money to buy the Phantom, if they can catch her on Pony Penning Day. And here Paul has to jump in the water to save Phantom's foal, Misty, from drowning in the sea!"

"Wow," said Cynthia. "How can you tell what's going on just by looking at the pictures? Not even my teacher at kindergarten can do that."

Carole laughed. "Well, this is one of my most favorite books. I bet I've read it about fifty times. I could almost tell you what happens from memory."

"Could you?" asked Cynthia excitedly. "Would you?"

"Sure," answered Carole, settling back against the bookcase. "About five hundred years ago Misty's pony ancestors were shipped from Spain to work in the gold mines of Peru, but a great storm blew in and wrecked their ship. The ponies broke free and finally swam ashore on Assateague Island...."

"Carole?" a familiar voice rang out. "What on earth are you doing?"

Carole looked up. Lisa stood there, pencil and note cards in hand.

"Oh, hi, Lisa." Carole gave a sheepish grin. "I was just reading, uh, *Misty*."

"Reading *Misty*?" Lisa frowned. "I thought you were reshelving books we didn't need."

"Well, I was, but this little girl was trying to figure out *Misty* just by looking at the pictures, and I thought I'd help her out. Her name's Cynthia, and she likes books about horses."

"Hi, Cynthia." Lisa knelt down and smiled. "My name's Lisa. How old are you?"

"Five," Cynthia replied shyly.

"Do you go to school?"

"I go to kindergarten, but my teacher hasn't taught me how to read yet."

Lisa smiled again. "You know there are brighter, nicer places to look at books than the dark old corner of the stacks. Why don't you move to one of the children's tables?"

For a long moment Cynthia stared at the floor. "Because I need to hide," she finally replied, her voice just a whisper.

"Hide?" Lisa looked at Carole and frowned. "How come?"

"Because that mean old Mrs. Davidson would be real mad if she found me here again."

Carole looked at Cynthia. "But why? Mrs. Davidson loves to see kids use the library. She

helped us gather lots of books about driving.”

Cynthia dug the toe of her right sneaker into the carpet. “Mrs. Davidson has found me here before. She doesn’t like it when my mother leaves me here.”

“Your mother leaves you here?” Lisa’s voice rose in alarm.

Cynthia nodded. “She leaves me here to go to the mall and shop. She buys all sorts of stuff. I bet she spends a million dollars a week at the mall.” She gave a loud sniff.

Lisa and Carole exchanged glances. “Just like You-Know-Who,” Carole said softly, thinking of Veronica diAngelo and her mother, who seemed to spend half their lives driving from mall to mall looking for stuff to buy.

“So, does your mom leave you here for a long time?” Carole asked.

Cynthia nodded. “She’s not going to pick me up today until six.”

“Six?” Lisa cried. “Cynthia, the library closes at five-thirty. Do you just wait on the steps for her all by yourself?”

Cynthia gave a big sigh and looked at the floor again.

“Carole, this is terrible. We’ve got to do something. No five-year-old should be left at the library all day while her mother shops at the mall!”

“I know,” said Carole. “Let’s go tell Mrs. Davidson. She’ll know what to do.”

“No, please!” cried Cynthia. “Mo—Mrs. Davidson would be so mad! She would call my mother and throw me out and never let me come back again. Then I could never find out what happened to Misty!”

“Okay, okay, calm down.” Carole put one arm around the little girl and gave her a hug. “We won’t tell Mrs. Davidson.”

“No, we won’t,” added Lisa. “We promise.”

“Thanks,” said Cynthia, blinking back tears. She held up her book. “Do you think you could read me a little bit more of *Misty* before my mom comes?”

Lisa and Carole looked at each other. “Sure,” they said together, settling down on either side of Cynthia. “We’ll take turns reading you a chapter apiece.”

“Gosh,” Cynthia said. “You two are great!”

Carole and Lisa had just started reading about Paul’s adventures on Pony Penning Day when the library lights flickered twice. Carole stopped reading and looked at her watch.

“Good grief!” she cried. “It’s five-fifteen! The library’s going to close in fifteen minutes, and we haven’t gotten anything done except pile up a big stack of books.”

“We’d better get Mrs. Davidson to put them on reserve for us,” said Lisa.

“You won’t tell her about me, will you?” Cynthia shrank back in the corner again.

“Oh, no. We’re just going to make sure nobody will check out our driving books before we’ve finished with them,” Lisa explained as she and Carole got to their feet. “Will you be okay back here?”

“Yes. I’ll just wait till Mrs. Davidson isn’t looking, then I’ll sneak out the front door. Mostly, she never even knows I’ve been here.”

Carole and Lisa shook their heads. “Well, it’s been fun reading to you, Cynthia,” Carole said with a smile.

“You’ve been great.” Cynthia grinned. “Thanks a lot!”

“Bye,” whispered Lisa as she and Carole picked up their note cards. “Maybe we’ll see you again sometime!”

Cynthia smiled and waved, then scooted back into the dark shadows of the tall bookcases.

“Do you believe that?” Carole asked Lisa. “How could someone leave a neat little kid like that to go shopping for hours at the mall?”

“I don’t know,” replied Lisa. “But then, I never would have dreamed that Mrs. Davidson could be so nice to us and so mean to little Cynthia.”

“I know,” said Carole. “I guess it just goes to show that appearances aren’t always what they seem.”

“You mean you can’t judge a book by its cover!” Lisa said with a grin. Carole groaned and began stacking their books.

"BELLE, YOU HAVEN'T looked this good in weeks!" Stevie stepped back in the stall to admire her handiwork. All afternoon she'd groomed Belle while waiting for four o'clock to come, and now the mare sparkled. Her mane and tail were free of tangles, her soft coat glistened with deep chestnut shine, and each of her hooves had been polished to a horse-show luster. She even seemed pleased with herself. Her dark eyes twinkled and she held her head high, as she knew her owner had taken extra good care of her that day.

Stevie smiled, then jumped as someone whistled right behind her. She turned around. Max stood there.

"Looks like somebody got a beauty treatment today," he said, taking note of Belle's gleaming hooves. "Even a manicure, I see. You're not starting a nail salon for horses, are you?"

"Hardly," said Stevie. "I was just putting myself to good use until four o'clock."

"Well, you've done a great job. Belle looks like she could enter the National Horse Show right now." Max looked at Stevie, his blue eyes kind. "Are you ready to learn about driving?"

Stevie nodded.

"Then meet me in the back storage room in five minutes."

"Okay." Stevie watched as Max returned to his office; then she dug in her pocket for a carrot for Belle. She held it out, and Belle nibbled the tidbit gently from the palm of her hand. "Thanks, girl," Stevie whispered. "You cleaned up like a dream. Now Max thinks I can do at least one thing right!"

She gave Belle a hug, then hurried out of the stall and down to the back storage room. Max had already turned the lights on, and Stevie could see lots of the props and jumps they'd used for Pony Club rallies and gymkhanas of the past. An old candy-striped jump brought a smile to her lips. That had been the first jump she and Belle had gone over together.

"Okay." Max suddenly appeared in the door. "Has your partner shown up yet?"

Stevie shook her head. "Not yet."

"Well, I'll show you everything and let you get started." He crossed the room and pulled a huge box from behind a cardboard figure of Uncle Sam that they'd used for Fourth of July games. Stevie could see that the box was bulging with different kinds of reins and bridles, and in fact it was so heavy that Max could only drag it across the floor.

"Well, here it is," he said, stopping when the box rested in front of Stevie. "The Pirouette Hollow Driving Tack Collection."

Stevie looked down at the box in dismay. Reins and bridles were tangled up much like the Lakes' big box of Christmas lights in their attic. Dirt and mud encrusted the leathers, and a thin layer of dust covered everything on the top of the pile.

Stevie looked at Max dubiously. "Guess it's been a while since the wagon's been driven, huh?"

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