

DREAM HORSE

Bonnie Bryant

Bantam



STEVIE TAKES A SPILL

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“I think I should call a doctor,” Deborah said.

“No, I’m okay, really,” Stevie said, pushing herself to a sitting position.

“Here, I’ll help you up,” Lisa offered. Stevie took her hand. She stood up carefully.

“Boy, I can’t believe Veronica would be so incredibly stupid as to cause an accident like

this!” Lisa snapped. “Every time I think she’s reached the limit, she finds another limit to reach!”

A genuine look of puzzlement crossed Stevie’s face. “Veronica? What’s she got to do with this? How could a nice girl like Veronica cause something like this to happen?”

Lisa and Carole looked at one another.

“Call a doctor,” said Lisa.

“No, call an ambulance,” said Carole.

THE SADDLE CLUB
SUPER #4



DREAM HORSE



BONNIE BRYANT



A SKYLARK BOOK
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BB

For Michael

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About the Author

STEVIE LAKE FOCUSED all of her concentration on the jump in front of her. She could feel the power of her horse, and she could see the brown earth beneath her horse's hooves. She could sense the warm summer sun on her back. But the only thing she knew was the jump itself.

"Come on, Belle," she whispered to her horse. "You can do it."

She leaned forward in the saddle, rose ever so slightly, and gave Belle some rein. The horse moved her head forward, anticipating the jump. Then the mare's powerful rear legs propelled horse and rider up and over. For a moment Stevie felt as if she and Belle were one being, soaring in unison. A split second later Belle's forelegs met the ground and found footing, carrying the rest of her body forward until her hindquarters landed. It was smooth and easy.

"Like the wind!" Stevie declared joyously.

"Great job!" Lisa Atwood called as she clapped for her friend. Lisa was sitting on the fence of the schooling ring.

"You've got to remember to hold your hands still," said Carole Hanson. Carole was sitting next to Lisa on the fence, watching carefully so she could critique everything.

Carole, Stevie, and Lisa were best friends. They sometimes laughed about it, because often it seemed to them that they couldn't have been more different. But they had one thing in common that was more important than all of their differences: They loved horses. They loved everything that had to do with horses. They loved to ride them, and they also loved taking care of them, feeding them, grooming them—even mucking out their stalls. They rode together at Pine Hollow Stables. Their instructor, Maximilian Regnery III, and his mother, Mrs. Reg, owned the stable. They kept costs low by asking their riders to help with the chores. Stevie, Carole, and Lisa pitched in gladly whenever they had the time, and sometimes when they didn't. Taking care of horses and helping friends never seemed like work to the three girls. It usually seemed more like fun.

The girls were so horse-crazy that they'd formed The Saddle Club. It was a simple club. It had only two rules. Members had to be horse-crazy, and they had to be willing to help one another out, whether they knew they needed help or not.

Twelve-year-old Carole was the most experienced rider of the three girls. She sometimes said she'd been born to ride. Carole had been around horses since she was a very little girl. She knew exactly what she wanted to do when she grew up, too. She was going to be a competitive rider. Or maybe she was going to be a trainer. Sometimes it seemed that being a breeder would be the best. Or perhaps a vet. Then again, maybe she'd be all those things!

When it came to horses, Carole was all business. She never forgot anything that had to do with the welfare of a horse, particularly of her own beloved bay gelding, Starlight. When it came to anything but horses, Carole could be rather forgetful. Her father, a colonel in the Marine Corps, often said that she'd leave her head at home if it weren't attached so securely.

"That's silly, Dad," Carole said. "The reason I don't leave my head at home is because I'm going to need it when I get to the stable!"

Her friends suspected she wasn't entirely joking.

Lisa, who was thirteen, never forgot anything. She was always organized and logical. Her clothes never got wrinkled. Her homework was never late. She was a straight-A student, a teacher's dream. She was the newest rider of the three girls, but she worked so hard at it—at everything she did—that she was almost as good as her friends. Max said she was one of the fastest learners he'd ever taught. Lisa was good at other things, too. She'd taken music lessons, ballet lessons, and painting lessons. She liked to act and sing and had even starred in a local production of *Annie*. Although there were many things she enjoyed doing, she liked riding horses most of all.

Stevie was as mischievous as Lisa was organized. The twelve-year-old often joked that she spent about half her time in hot water. Her friends pointed out to her that she spent the other half getting out of hot water, and since they were bound to help her by the rules of The Saddle Club, that meant they had to help with frequent rescue missions. Stevie thought that today was an exception to that. She was working very hard on her jumping skills. Lisa, the totally logical member of the trio, disagreed with that. In her opinion, what Stevie was doing by working on her jumps was attempting to get out of hot water. Stevie had made a bet with her boyfriend, Phil Marsten, that she and her horse, Belle, were better jumpers than Phil and his horse, Teddy. Today's practice was an attempt to help Stevie through her latest "harebrained notion," as Carole sometimes called them, because Phil had described Belle as a "pretty good jumper." "Pretty good" wasn't anywhere near what Stevie thought of Belle's abilities. *Fabulous* was the word she would have used.

"All right, I'll try again," Stevie said. "And this time, I'll hold my hands still. I've got to get it right because there isn't much time until the contest." She circled Belle around the ring and prepared for another go at the jump.

"Just five more days of this," Lisa remarked to Carole. The jump-off between Stevie and Phil was scheduled for the following Saturday morning before their regular Pony Club meeting. Stevie had wanted it to be in the afternoon on the theory that Belle probably liked sleeping in on Saturday mornings as much as Stevie did, but Phil couldn't do it in the afternoon. His uncle Michael had invited him to fly in his glider with him.

"Imagine thinking that going up in a glider is going to be more important than comparing our horses' jumping. Why couldn't he fly in the morning?" Stevie had asked indignantly.

"Because gliders require thermals for lift, and it's hard to find thermals before the afternoon sun has warmed the air," Lisa had explained.

"Whatever," Stevie had said.

"How do you know these things?" Carole had asked Lisa.

"I looked it up," Lisa had told her. Carole had thought that was probably why Lisa was a straight-A student.

Stevie circled Belle around the ring and approached the jump again. She often said riding was easy as long as you could remember a million things at the same time: heels down, toes in, back straight, arms relaxed, hands still, weight evenly balanced—and that was just for starters.

Something flashed in her right eye. Someone was walking out of the stable and into the ring.

Stevie turned to look. The minute she turned her head, it changed her balance, and as soon as that happened, Belle hesitated. That meant that Stevie and Belle were too close to the

jump when Belle took off. The horse popped the jump and then had to scramble to keep her footing when she landed.

“Ugh!” said Stevie.

“Not pretty,” Lisa said.

“The worst!” Carole told her.

“That’s a fine way to greet me,” said Veronica diAngelo. The three girls looked at the new arrival. If there were two things The Saddle Club always agreed about, the first was that they were crazy about horses and the second was that Veronica diAngelo was the most obnoxious girl in the entire town of Willow Creek, Virginia—perhaps in the entire world. Veronica was in their Pony Club and took lessons with them. She had her own horse, a very valuable Thoroughbred named Danny. Everything about Veronica, it seemed, was very valuable. Her clothes were from the most exclusive shops at the mall, her hair and nails were always perfect, and she often showed up at Pine Hollow in the backseat of her father’s limousine or the front seat of her mother’s Mercedes.

“Everything about her is valuable except her personality,” Stevie had once remarked. “I wouldn’t give you a nickel for that.”

Veronica was snobbish, petty, and manipulative. She was pretty and vain and thrived on admiration. She never considered anybody else’s feelings, either. It was typical that she barged in without considering that her presence might distract Stevie and her horse.

Lisa glanced at Veronica. The other girl was fiddling with an expensive-looking camera. Lisa had taken a number of photography classes at school. Some of her pictures had even been published in the local newspaper. She knew a lot about photography, and she’d never known that Veronica had the slightest interest in it.

Stevie drew Belle to a halt. She was annoyed with herself because she’d allowed Veronica to distract her. She didn’t want to give Veronica the satisfaction of knowing that. She put one hand on her hip and looked at the interloper.

“What are you doing with the camera?” she asked. It was a simple question, but Veronica took it as a challenge.

“This isn’t just any camera,” Veronica said with a sniff. “It’s a highly technical piece of photographic equipment. It automatically adjusts itself to the perfect lens opening and focus distance to maximize results.”

“Ah, so you can read, too,” Stevie said. “I bet that’s just what it says in the brochure. Now tell me, what is it you’re planning to maximize results on?”

Lisa and Carole snickered. Stevie was as good at getting under Veronica’s skin as Veronica was at getting under Stevie’s.

“Actually, I intend to maximize results all the way to Rome, Italy. Perhaps you haven’t read about the photographic contest that the mall photography shop, Photo World, is running. First prize for the junior winner is a two-week trip to Rome. I’m already picking out my wardrobe. I think I’ll take the—”

“Gee, can I help you with this?” Stevie asked, suddenly eager. “It would be great to have you out of here for two whole weeks! Look, I’ll pose for you. I’ll be a model. Anything to be sure that you maximize your results.”

“Don’t bother,” said Veronica. “In the first place, I don’t need your help. In the second place, the contest rules require that the picture be of somebody doing something that requires

skill. You looking like a dummy doesn't take any skill."

Lisa and Carole cringed. Stevie's remark had been mean but mildly funny. Veronica's was simply cruel. If Stevie felt challenged to get even with her, it was likely to be big trouble. Carole was about to suggest that Stevie get back to her jump practice, but Stevie turned Belle and trotted off without the suggestion. There were times when all three of them knew that the only way to deal with Veronica was to ignore her totally.

Stevie circled the ring again and this time kept her focus on the jump. She didn't notice Veronica walking away. She didn't even see her friends perched on the fence. All she saw was the jump, and the only thing on her mind was getting over it in perfect form.

"Great!" Lisa said when Belle landed smoothly.

"You're getting it," Carole agreed.

Stevie grinned and rode over to the fence to talk with Lisa and Carole.

"Your hands were much better this time," Carole said. "And it sure makes a difference when you look straight ahead. Now, I think it'll help if you try to remember to keep the lower half of your arm in a straight line with the reins. In other words, no bends from your elbow to the horse's mouth—"

"What's up, girls?" The three girls looked over and saw Deborah Hale Regnery. Deborah was Max's wife, and they liked her very much, though sometimes they wondered how Max could love somebody who knew so little about horses. Deborah was an investigative reporter for a big daily newspaper in Washington, D.C. She and Max had met while she was doing a story on horse stables near the city, and it was love at first sight. In spite of some "help" from The Saddle Club, Deborah and Max had managed to get engaged and married. Now Deborah was learning as much about horses as she could.

"Hi, Deborah," they greeted her.

"Come to watch some fine jumping?" Stevie teased.

"Partly," Deborah said. "I saw the three of you out here, and I thought it was a chance to ask you some questions."

"Sure," said Carole. "What can we do for you?"

"Well, my editor got a tip that there's a shady horse dealer in Rock Ridge—you know where that is?"

"It's west of here," Stevie said. "Near the mountains, right?"

"That's it. The town is named after the craggy mountain ridge that seems to hang over the area," said Deborah. "Anyway, a man named Mickey Denver has been selling horses for years, and he seems to have built up a reputation for less-than-honest dealings."

"That makes me furious," said Carole. "A few bad apples and everybody thinks all horse traders are crooks."

"Like used-car dealers," Lisa suggested.

"Exactly," said Deborah. "The world is full of honest people, but, as Carole said, a few dishonest ones can ruin it for everybody."

"So, what does your editor want you to do?" Stevie asked.

"He wants me to find out if it's true that the man's a crook," said Deborah. "But the trouble is, I don't know any more about buying horses than I do about riding them."

"Well, you're learning how to ride them," Lisa reminded her.

"That's what I mean," Deborah said. "Yesterday when Max was working with me, I

pointed out six things I was doing wrong all at once.”

“Only six?” Lisa asked. “My record was eight.”

Deborah laughed. “And he keeps telling me what a fast learner you are! Anyway, my editor wants me to go buy a horse from this man. But I really don’t know what to look for, and I don’t know if I ask Max, he’ll tell me a zillion things and I’ll never remember them all. How do you know if you’re being bamboozled? I mean, Carole and Stevie, you both have your own horses. What told you these were the right ones for you?”

“Easy,” Stevie said. “Love at first sight.”

“Ditto,” said Carole.

“That isn’t helpful,” Lisa told her friends. “You two love *any* horse at first sight.”

“True,” Stevie confessed. “But I was right about Belle, wasn’t I?” And then, to prove her point, she turned Belle around with a flourish and began cantering toward the jump.

Everything felt right this time. Stevie kept a straight line from her elbow to Belle’s mouth and sank her weight into her heels. She’d show Deborah exactly how it was done. The jump was near. Stevie rose in the saddle, leaning forward and giving Belle some rein. In a split second, she’d signal the horse to jump.

“Yoo-hoo! Stevie! Look at me!”

On the other side of the jump, right outside the ring, stood Veronica, expensive camera in her eye. She waved, calling Stevie’s attention.

Stevie’s head snapped up. Her balance became skewed. There was a flash. Belle shied. Her hindquarters stopped. Her forelegs flailed wildly. Stevie, totally unprepared for the sudden halt, flew off, soaring gracefully over the jump while Belle remained on the other side. There was silence.

Carole gasped. Lisa screamed. They both jumped off the fence. Deborah ran toward Stevie. In a second, Carole had Belle’s reins. Lisa and Deborah knelt over Stevie.

Their friend lay motionless on her back with her eyes closed, arms and legs splayed.

“Stevie!” Lisa called.

“Is she okay?” Carole asked, leading Belle over.

Deborah held Stevie’s hand and felt her wrist for a pulse. The girls watched in horrified silence. Deborah nodded. She could feel the pulse. But so much else could be wrong!

The moment felt like an eternity. Then Stevie’s eyes fluttered open. Deborah made her lie still and asked Stevie to move her arms, legs, hands, and feet one by one. She seemed okay.

Lisa and Carole breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank God you had on a hard hat,” said Carole.

“I think I should call a doctor,” Deborah said.

“No, I’m okay, really,” Stevie said, pushing herself to a sitting position.

“Here, I’ll help you up,” Lisa offered. Stevie took her hand.

“Boy, I can’t believe Veronica would be so incredibly stupid as to cause an accident like this!” Lisa snapped. “Every time I think she’s reached the limit, she finds another limit to reach!”

A genuine look of puzzlement crossed Stevie’s face. “Veronica? What’s she got to do with this? How could a nice girl like Veronica cause something like this to happen?”

Lisa and Carole looked at one another.

“Call a doctor,” said Lisa.

“No, call an ambulance,” said Carole.

“I already did,” said Deborah, tucking her cellular telephone back into her pocket.

“LOOK, HERE IT IS,” Lisa said, flipping open her mother’s family medical encyclopedia. *Concussion*. That was the word the emergency medical technicians had used as they’d put Stevie into the ambulance at Pine Hollow.

Deborah had been allowed to ride with Stevie to the hospital. Lisa and Carole had to stay behind. They’d used the time well. First, they’d untacked Belle, groomed her, and put her back in her stall. Then they’d hurried over to Lisa’s house, where they knew they would get word on their friend. Waiting for phone calls was hard. Lisa had suggested doing some research. “Not that we don’t trust the doctors,” she had said. “But we know Stevie better than they do.”

Carole had agreed. It had only taken them a few minutes to locate the encyclopedia and look up *concussion*.

“It says here a concussion results from impact to the head,” Lisa read, her finger running down the column of fine print.

“Check,” Carole said. “She definitely had an impact to her head.”

“There’s usually a headache,” Lisa read.

“Check,” said Carole, recalling how Stevie’s hand had flown up to massage her sore head when she awoke.

“And sometimes loss of consciousness and memory,” Lisa concluded.

“Double check,” said Carole. “I can’t believe she didn’t remember Veronica’s part in the accident.”

“Even if she didn’t remember it, how weird was it that she called Veronica ‘a nice girl’? I mean, that isn’t memory loss—it’s a change of personality!”

“Does it say anything about that?” Carole asked.

Lisa finished scanning the entry in the encyclopedia. “Not a word,” she said. She closed the book and was returning it to the bookshelf when the phone rang.

Carole answered it. “It’s Chad,” she said to Lisa. Chad was Stevie’s older brother. Carole turned her attention back to the phone. “It’s definitely a concussion,” Carole reported. “Doctor says it isn’t too serious. She’ll stay overnight in the hospital to be on the safe side.”

“Can we visit?” Lisa asked. Carole relayed the question.

“Sure,” Chad said. “But the doctor doesn’t want anyone to stay too long. She’s supposed to get rest.”

“Okay,” Carole agreed. “That makes sense. Is there anything she needs, anything we can do for her?”

“As a matter of fact, there is,” Chad said. “She wanted me to ask you to call Phil and let him know. I told her I’d be glad to call him. For some reason, I don’t think she trusted me to do it.”

“Do you think that might have something to do with the time you told Phil the family couldn’t wait until the two of them got married so you could have Stevie’s room?” Carole asked.

"It was just a suggestion," Chad protested.

"As I recall, Stevie didn't think it showed good judgment," Carole reminded him. Stevie's actual reaction had been somewhat stronger than that. She'd talked seriously to her parents about putting Chad up for adoption.

"Yeah, right. But anyway, can you guys call Phil?"

"Glad to," said Carole. "And thanks for letting us know she's okay."

A few minutes later, Lisa had Phil on the telephone and told him what had happened.

"I'll get to the hospital in about an hour," he said, after asking his mother if she could drive him. "I'll meet you there, in front of the place, okay?"

"Well, sure, but is this a good time for you to go over?" Lisa asked.

"Absolutely," said Phil. "I've been working with Teddy, and he's in a foul mood. To tell you the truth, I'm glad for an excuse to stop and give us both a rest. It's almost like what happened to Stevie, in fact. I was out on the jump course, and one of my sister's cats ran out in front of Teddy and spooked him. He shied sideways, and I just flew off him. I landed on my rear with my feet sticking straight out in front of me. I felt so dumb! So, Teddy got spooked, and I'm sore on my saddle seat. Too bad I can't stand up in the car on the way to the hospital! Anyway, I'll see you there in one hour. Bye."

"Bye," Lisa said. She hung up the phone. One hour would give Carole and Lisa just enough time to put together a goody basket for Stevie. There was work to do.

An hour later, Lisa's mother dropped the girls off in front of the hospital at almost exactly the same moment that Mrs. Marsten let Phil out of their car. Lisa was carrying a bag for Stevie. Phil had a bag in his hand, too.

"What did you bring her?" Lisa asked.

"Oh, it's just funny stuff," said Phil, almost embarrassed. "You know, Stevie-like things."

"We know," said Carole. "We brought her a jar of monster goo."

"You're kidding! So did I," said Phil.

"I guess we all know Stevie, huh?" Lisa joked. "Well, we also brought her a book of knock-knock jokes—she'll really like those, don't you think?"

"I hope she likes the book of knock-knock jokes you brought as much as she likes the one I brought," said Phil.

"Really?" asked Carole.

"Really," said Phil. "Like you said, we know Stevie."

The three of them laughed. It turned out that they had brought some different things, too. Phil had a teddy bear—a gift from his horse, he said. Carole and Lisa had brought a Slinky and a selection of cassettes. They were glad to see that Phil was lending her his portable tape player.

The three of them entered the hospital and followed the guard's instructions to find Stevie's room.

Stevie was asleep when the three friends walked in. There was a bandage around her head secured under her chin. She looked weak and small in the large hospital bed, surrounded by control devices. It looked very official. On closer examination, Lisa realized that one device was to adjust the bed, another was for the television, and the third was to call a nurse. Stevie, always interested in controlling things, was clutching all three in her hands.

Their tiptoe steps awoke Stevie. Her eyes fluttered open. She smiled at her friends.

“How are you feeling?” Phil asked.

“I feel great,” Stevie told him. Lisa and Phil each handed her a bag of goodies. Stevie loved her presents and gave her friends hugs. She said there was a young doctor who was going to particularly appreciate what she had in mind for the monster goo.

“What’s the bandage for? Did you cut yourself or something?” Carole asked. She couldn’t remember anything about the accident that would have required a bandage.

“It’s to hold an ice pack in place,” Stevie explained. “The thing about concussions is that they come with major headaches. The ice helps. The bandage is just to get sympathy because the doctor says I’m really not very sick.”

“Well, that’s good news,” said Phil. “How can anyone have any fun in a hospital if they’re really sick?” he joked.

Stevie smiled. “Well, if you’re really sick, then you won’t notice how awful the food is.”

“Stevie, you haven’t been here long enough to have a meal,” Lisa reminded her.

“Oh, right,” said Stevie. “But when it comes, I know it’ll be awful. All I’ve had time to do is sleep, and every time I do that, somebody comes in here and asks me what my name is or if I can remember how to count backward from a hundred. Or worse, they want to make sure I’m resting. I haven’t even had time for a decent dream.”

“Have you had any dreams?” Lisa asked. She always thought dreams were interesting.

“Um, yeah,” Stevie said. “An hour and a half ago a nurse woke me up in the middle of a dream about a horse.”

“See, she’s right. She’s not really sick. Dreaming about horses is perfectly normal,” said Carole.

“Well, this wasn’t so normal,” Stevie said. “It was this beautiful bay gelding. He was cantering. He had a gorgeous gait—smooth as could be. Anyway, suddenly something startled the horse, and it got spooked and shied sideways. Next thing I saw was something flying over the horse’s head. I don’t know what it was, but it was big. Then a nurse came in and asked me who the first president of the United States was. I told her it was Frank Sinatra. That got her to leave pretty fast.”

Carole, Lisa, and Phil all laughed. It was just like Stevie to tease a nurse.

The door to Stevie’s room opened, and a young doctor came in, accompanied by a nurse with a worried look on her face. Stevie’s friends offered to leave, but the doctor said that wouldn’t be necessary.

He looked in Stevie’s eyes with a penlight and had her follow his finger as he moved around in front of her.

“Everything seems okay,” he said to the nurse. Then he turned back to Stevie. “Um, Stephanie,” he said, checking her chart, “do you happen to remember—now, don’t worry, everything isn’t totally clear to you—but would it be possible for you to recall who the first president of the United States was?”

“Napoléon Bonaparte,” she said, without batting an eye.

“Right,” said the young doctor, making a mark on her chart. “Thank you.” He smiled insincerely and then turned to Lisa, Carole, and Phil. “I think Stephanie could use a little more rest now,” he said. “Perhaps you’d like to come back tomorrow?”

Carole was about to set the doctor straight and explain that Stevie was just being funny, but Phil tugged at her sleeve.

“Sure thing, Doctor,” he said. “Bye, Stevie. We’ll check in tomorrow to see how you’re doing.”

“I’ll be home by tomorrow,” she said brightly.

“We’ll see,” said the doctor.

“Come on,” said Phil to Lisa and Carole.

As they scurried through the shiny hallways of the hospital, Lisa asked Phil why he’d been in such a hurry to get out of there.

“Because something very strange is going on,” he said.

“Wait a minute. You know she was joking about the president. It’s a dumb question. She was just giving a dumb answer,” Lisa said.

“Not that. Of course she was teasing. No. It was about the horse in her dream.”

“What about it?” asked Carole. “I’ve seen lots of horses shy. That didn’t seem strange to me.”

“What was strange was that she was describing exactly what Teddy did at exactly the time she was dreaming about a bay gelding getting spooked. Don’t you see? She described what happened to me. And the thing she saw flying over Teddy’s head was my body!”

Lisa stopped walking and put her hands on her hips. “Are you telling us you think Stevie suddenly developed ESP from a bang on her head?” she asked. “Also, keep in mind that the accident that put Stevie here in the hospital is a lot like the one that made you fly over Teddy’s head and land on your backside. She was probably just dreaming about her own accident.”

Phil paused for a moment. Then he shrugged. “I guess my notion is pretty kooky, isn’t it?”

“That’s one way to put it,” Lisa said.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But it did seem strange. I mean, it happened to me about an hour and a half ago, and that’s when she was having the dream.”

“And the same thing happened to her about *three* hours ago,” Lisa reminded him. “It makes sense that she would dream about the accident that landed her in the hospital even if her accident involved a mare and her dream was about a gelding.”

“I guess,” Phil said.

They started walking again and got to the front door of the hospital just as Mrs. Marsten arrived to pick Phil up. Mrs. Marsten offered the girls a lift, but they just had a short walk. They were going over to Pine Hollow on their way back to Lisa’s. They all agreed to visit Stevie together the next day. Then Phil drove off with his mother.

“Can you believe that?” Lisa asked. “ESP? Sometimes I wonder who’s weirder: Phil or Stevie.”

“You know, I feel a little bit sorry for the doctor who is worrying about whether Stevie—um, I mean *Stephanie*—knows who the first president was.”

“Especially if he’s the same doctor she was talking about when she mentioned the monster goo,” said Lisa.

“The problem with Stevie is that only her best friends understand that what’s normal for her may not be exactly what the medical textbooks say is normal for other people.”

“And I guess that’s why we care about her so much,” said Lisa.

MAX AND DEBORAH were having a serious conversation when Lisa and Carole arrived. The girls weren't trying to overhear, but it was hard not to because the couple was standing right behind Starlight's stall.

"But how are you going to know?" Max asked.

"I don't know, but I will," Deborah said.

"No way. I'm coming."

"You can't," she said. "He'll know who you are. You'll blow my cover! This is my job!"

"It won't make any difference if you don't know what you're writing about," said Max.

"But Max—"

Max spotted Lisa and Carole. "How's Stevie?" he asked. The girls told him about their visit. "When she starts thinking about monster goo and a doctor, you can tell she's on the mend," he said, looking relieved.

"The trouble is that Stevie is so, um ..." Carole searched for a word.

"Stevian," Lisa supplied.

"Yes, I think you mean *one of a kind*," Deborah translated.

"Right," Carole agreed. "She's so *unique*, it's going to be hard for her doctors to know whether she's thinking straight. I mean, she really got a nurse upset when she told her that Frank Sinatra was the first president of the United States."

Max grinned. "It's nice to know that Stevie is being a challenge for someone else for once!"

Deborah wrinkled her forehead in thought.

"What's up?" Lisa asked her.

"Well, Stevie has a way of solving problems that I sometimes admire. I was just trying to think what she'd do with the problem I have about this investigation into Mickey Denver's business."

"Easy," Lisa said. "She'd tell you to take her along, say she's your daughter, and pretend that you're buying a horse for her. She doesn't know as much as Max, but she knows enough to know when a horse dealer's out-and-out lying."

"Too bad she's in the hospital," Deborah said.

"Ah, but you've got the second- and third-best thing here," said Carole. "Lisa and I can help."

"Great idea," Deborah said brightly. "It's perfect, in fact!"

"Oh, no way!" Max began. "This man is a—"

"Horse trader," said Carole. "We know quite a bit about horses. We'll know if he's trying to pass off a nag as a Thoroughbred."

"He'll see right through you!" Max said sternly.

"Max! Don't forget who had the starring role in *Annie*," Lisa reminded him.

"Right, so you're going to sing to him?" Max asked sarcastically.

Deborah spoke calmly. "Darling," she said, "this is exactly what I need. For one thing, the girls *do* know about horses. For another, a little girl and her doting mother are going to see

like easy marks to a crooked horse trader. It's perfect."

Max seemed to want to say something more. Then he sighed and relented. "I thought Lisa would be simpler with Stevie in the hospital, but it seems that she's here even when she isn't."

"That's the magic of Stevie, isn't it?" Carole asked.

It only took Lisa, Carole, and Deborah a few minutes to set up what Carole called the sting operation. Deborah would be the mother, of course. Lisa would pose as her daughter and Carole as her daughter's best friend.

"I'm not going to have any trouble playing that part," Carole said.

"I won't have any trouble being a horse-crazy girl," said Lisa. "The hardest part is going to be pretending we don't know much about horses."

"You're right about that," Carole agreed. "Do you think I've got time for a few acting lessons before we go?" she joked.

"Don't worry, dear," said Deborah in a very motherly voice. "If you make any mistakes, I see that you're grounded."

Carole snapped a clean salute. "No mistakes, ma'am," she promised.

"It's really not going to be too hard," said Deborah. "Your job is to be totally enthusiastic about any horse he tries to sell us, okay?"

"Deal," Lisa and Carole said.

"Come on, let's call and see when we can meet him," she said.

It only took a few minutes. Mr. Denver seemed pleased to know he had a potential customer. He suggested that they come over on Thursday afternoon. He and Deborah chatted for a few minutes while Deborah tried to describe what she thought Lisa had in mind.

"Her father and I want to get a nice horse for her—something sweet and gentle. She's a new rider, and we can't have her on anything too wild."

There were a lot of *hmms* and *sures* and one or two *of courses*. Then Deborah thanked him and hung up.

"What was all that about?" Carole asked.

"He wanted to tell me some things I should know about buying the perfect horse for 'Little Lisa,'" Deborah said.

Lisa's eyes closed to angry slits. "I hate him already," she said.

"Ah, but you mustn't let him know that," said Deborah.

Lisa opened her eyes and fluttered her lashes innocently. "I know that, Mommy," she said like a good little girl.

"Mommy?" Max said, overhearing the end of the conversation. "I kind of like the sound of that!"

"Oh, Max!" said Deborah. "Just let us do our job, will you?"

LISA REGARDED HERSELF critically in the mirror. She opened her eyes wide and spoke. "Oh, what a beautiful horse! Can I have him, Mom? Please! Please!" she begged. It was the tenth time she'd tried this since yesterday when Deborah had agreed to let Lisa pose as her daughter. Now Lisa thought she had the whine exactly right.

She smiled at her reflection. Deborah didn't have a thing to worry about. Lisa would be perfect in her role of a horse-crazy girl. She was confident that Carole would do well in the part of the horse-crazy girl's best friend. After all, that was what she was.

She was only sorry that Stevie wouldn't be there to see it. It was such a Stevian scheme. That made Lisa remember that Stevie had thought she'd be home from the hospital this morning. Lisa decided to call and find out.

Chad answered the phone.

"No, she's not home yet," he said. "The doctor thinks she's okay, but he said she hit her head really hard. Of course, he doesn't know what a hard head she has."

Lisa wondered briefly if there was ever a moment when Stevie and her brothers were not at odds with one another.

"Actually," Chad continued, "there may be something to be concerned about, because she still doesn't remember that it was Veronica's fault she got thrown. Like you and Carole said when Stevie isn't ready to blame Veronica or me for everything that ever happened to her. She's not normal, right?"

"Right." Lisa had to agree.

"Anyway, the doctor said this kind of amnesia is not unusual with a concussion, but he's being cautious, so he wants her to stay there another day or two. There was something else about Frank Sinatra and Napoléon Bonaparte."

Lisa giggled. "Any doctor looking into Stevie's mind is at a real disadvantage if she or he doesn't know what the 'normal' Stevie is like."

"I don't know what you mean," said Chad. "*Normal* is not a word I use in connection with my sister."

Lisa was tempted to mention that Stevie had said the same thing about Chad not long ago, but she really didn't want to get between the two of them. She passed up the opportunity and instead told Chad that she and Carole would visit Stevie later that day.

"Good idea," Chad said. "You two will probably do a better job of cheering her up than I can."

"Probably," Lisa said, recognizing that Chad's remark showed real concern for his sister. She and Carole always knew that the Lake children cared about one another. It was just that sometimes they had very strange ways of showing it. "I'll let you know how she is," Lisa promised. Chad thanked her and they hung up.

Lisa quickly called Carole, and the two of them agreed to meet at the hospital when the visiting hours began.

At noon the girls walked together down the long polished hallway to Stevie's room.

Everything was quiet inside. They tiptoed in. Stevie was asleep. Lisa put her finger to her lips. The girls each slid into a visitor's chair and waited quietly.

Carole was a little concerned that Stevie was sleeping so soundly. She was even more concerned when she saw that Stevie's lunch tray on the rolling table next to her bed was untouched. Carole knew that Stevie's complaint about hospital food was strictly pro form. Stevie had a stomach of iron—she could eat anything and frequently did. If she was getting fussy about food, then perhaps she really wasn't getting well.

Suddenly Stevie shifted around in her bed.

"Ouch!" she cried out.

Her eyes flew open.

"Are you okay?" Lisa asked quickly.

"Should I get the nurse?" Carole asked.

"Oh, no, I'm fine," Stevie said, smiling at her friends.

"But you yelled ouch," Lisa said.

"I guess I was just having a dream," said Stevie. She scratched her head in thought. "How about your foot?" she asked Carole.

"My foot? Nothing's wrong with it," Carole assured her.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, because in my dream Starlight stepped on your foot and it hurt a lot. That's why I said ouch."

"You say ouch when I get hurt in your dreams?" Carole asked.

"That's what friends are for!" Stevie joked.

Lisa and Carole laughed. Stevie was beginning to sound more like herself.

"So what exciting things am I missing while I'm having these weird dreams in this strange hospital bed?" Stevie asked.

Carole and Lisa exchanged glances. There was a moment of doubt about whether they should tell Stevie what they were up to with Deborah. She'd be so jealous of the adventure. But lying to Stevie was hard. It was as if she had some sort of antenna that picked up their evasions, especially from her two best friends. Carole nodded at Lisa, who filled in Stevie on the plan. Stevie loved it.

"You thought of that without me there?" Stevie asked.

"You were there in spirit," Lisa said.

"Right," Carole agreed. "Deborah said she wondered what you would think of doing."

"Once she suggested that, it was easy," Lisa said. "I just thought of the craziest possible plan, which was the two of us pretending we didn't know anything about horses, and then all the details fell into place."

"Oh, I wish I could go along!" Stevie said.

"Where do you want to go?" her doctor asked, hearing Stevie's remark as he walked into the room.

"It's a long story," said Stevie. "But will I be able to go to Rock Ridge on Thursday?"

"Don't even think about it," he said. With that, he brought out his penlight and went through the same exercises Lisa and Carole had seen the day before. He tapped on Stevie's knees and ankles with a little rubber hammer. He asked her a few questions.

"Who is the president?" he asked.

"John Wayne," Stevie informed him solemnly.

“Very good,” he said, equally solemnly.

Stevie couldn't contain herself. She giggled.

“Just as I thought,” said the doctor. “Okay, here's the story. You can go home tomorrow but you've got to go to bed and stay in bed. You jostled your brain around rather severely and it needs time to settle back where it belongs. Do you understand?”

“But Rock Ridge isn't that far. And it would just be a quick tr—” Stevie tried.

“Bed,” the doctor said, cutting her off. “Or I'll keep you here to be sure you stay in bed.”

“Home and I'll stay in bed, I promise,” Stevie told him. “As long as my friends promise to tell me absolutely everything—and I mean *everything*—that happens in Rock Ridge.”

“We promise,” said Lisa.

“On a stack of bedpans,” Carole confirmed.

“Well, that settles that,” said the doctor. “I'll check on you in the morning to be sure you're okay, and I'll call your parents, too. For now, you should rest.” He left the room.

Carole and Lisa knew the last remark was the doctor's way of telling them it was time to leave. Now that they knew Stevie was getting better and going home, they could. They each gave her a little hug, gentle ones so they wouldn't jostle her brain any more than it had already been jostled. They left as they'd come in, on tiptoe, because Stevie's eyes were closing again.

Outside the hospital, Lisa and Carole paused to consider what they would do. There was little time until their riding class. They decided to use the extra time in the best possible way. They were going to give Belle a complete grooming.

“It's the least we can do for Stevie while she's laid up,” Carole said. Lisa agreed completely.

Fifteen minutes later, the girls were hard at work at Pine Hollow. Belle seemed happy for the company and the attention. She stood completely still while Lisa and Carole tended to her beauty needs. By the time they were done, Belle's coat was gleaming.

“Stevie would be proud of us,” said Lisa.

“More important, she'd be proud of Belle,” said Carole. Lisa realized that Carole was right. When it came to horses, Carole was just about always right.

“Okay, Starlight, it's your turn now,” said Lisa.

She and Carole picked up the grooming gear and moved on to the gelding's stall. Starlight could be frisky under saddle, but when he was being groomed, he was usually docile as could be. A lot of horses really enjoy getting combed, brushed, and washed and being the center of attention. Starlight was no exception.

“Hi there, beautiful,” Carole greeted her horse. She reached up to clip a lead rope on one side of his halter while Lisa did the same on the other side so they could cross-tie him. Starlight lifted his head and shook it vigorously, pulling his halter out of reach.

“Hey, Starlight, I've got your grooming bucket,” Carole said. It was her way of assuring him that nobody was going to do anything nasty, like check his teeth or give him a shot. She held up the bucket so he could look at it.

He shook his head again, but this time he did it sideways. Lisa and Carole both managed to clip the leads on.

As the girls began the grooming, Carole knew they had been smart to cross-tie Starlight. He was in a very jumpy mood. Every time one of them touched him, he shifted away. He

stepped forward, and he dodged backward the half step that the cross-ties permitted.

“Boy, is he crabby!” Carole said when he refused to lift his foot so she could pick his hoof.

“He’s probably just jealous because we groomed Belle first,” Lisa suggested.

Carole laughed. “Maybe,” she said. If there was one thing she’d learned about horses, was that they each had very distinct personalities—as distinct as people’s personalities. That meant that they also had moods. Starlight was obviously in a bad one.

“Do you think it would be a good idea to let him stand still and get calm for a while before we finish this?” Lisa asked. “We could go change into our riding clothes while he settles down.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Carole. “But I’ve started to pick his hooves, and he’s refusing to let me do it. If I give in now, he might get ideas for the future. I’ll just finish this and then give it a rest.”

Carole stood by Starlight’s left hind foot. She put her hand on his leg and bent to run her hand down to the foot. It was her signal to him that it was time to lift his foot for a hoof cleaning. He didn’t lift it. She tugged as a gentle reminder. He lifted it. Then he swung forward, out of her grasp, and clumped it back down. It landed right on her sneakered foot.

“Ouch!” she cried.

“Wow,” Lisa breathed. “Just like in Stevie’s dream!”

MAX TAPPED HIS riding crop impatiently against his leg. “Okay, Veronica, try that jump again,” he said.

It was Wednesday. Lisa and Carole were at the afternoon class, where Max was working on jumping techniques—just as they had been doing with Stevie only a few days before when she’d fallen because of Veronica’s thoughtlessness. Lisa wasn’t given to thinking mean thoughts, but it occurred to her that she might feel a special piece of joy in her heart if, just by chance, Veronica were to have an accident while she was jumping.

“I hope she falls,” Carole whispered to Lisa.

Lisa tried unsuccessfully to stifle a giggle. She sometimes forgot how often The Saddle Club girls had exactly the same thought at exactly the same time. It was one of the things she loved about her friends.

“Quiet,” Max said in response to Lisa’s laugh.

The girls wouldn’t mind seeing something bad happen to Veronica, but not if it was their fault. They sat quietly and watched.

Veronica had been riding for a long time and had mastered a lot of basic and some advanced skills. She could jump well. Her horse, however, had mastered all the skills any horse could ever need, and he was an excellent jumper. Danny could have made a rank amateur look like a seasoned rider. He made Veronica look like a champion.

Danny was what some people called a push-button horse. All the rider had to do was push the right buttons and the horse did the rest. Veronica and Danny approached the jump at an even canter, and when they got three and a half feet from the fence, Danny simply rose and flew over the jump, landing smoothly, effortlessly.

Carole sighed. Lisa thought maybe it was envy, but it wasn’t. It was admiration—for the horse.

“Veronica, you can’t let your horse do all the work,” Max snapped. “You’ve got to be in charge or you are not learning anything at all.”

Veronica frowned, and Carole and Lisa exchanged grins. It was fun to see Veronica get criticized by their instructor.

Max gave all the riders a short break. The riders walked their horses at a comfortable gait and chatted with one another. Max’s theory was that the riders would talk about what they were learning. In the case of Lisa and Carole, he was at least half right.

“We’ve got to get back at her,” Lisa said. “For Stevie’s sake.”

“But with Danny, what could go wrong?” Carole asked.

“Maybe we could startle him,” said Lisa.

“He’s pretty steady,” Carole said.

“Maybe we could startle *her*,” Lisa suggested.

“Worth a try,” said Carole. “We do have to be a little careful, though. We don’t want to take a chance that anything bad might happen to her horse. Danny is blameless.”

“Danny is better than blameless,” said Lisa. “He’s to be pitied just because he belongs to

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