

The Trouble With Chad

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Hannah stormed into the stable, leading Chad, the bay gelding. “Why do they blame *me*?” she yelled. She plunked down on a hay bale and put her head in her hands.

Chad nuzzled her hair as if to say, “It wasn’t your fault. I’m the one who stumbled.”

“I’m sorry, Chad. I know it’s just a lousy horse show, but I thought the people in my Pony Club were my friends. Just because we knocked down a pole, they’re all mad.” Hannah stroked Chad’s black forelock, then growled, “I hate them and I hate competing.”

“I know it wasn’t you...” A creepy voice whispered from the shadows behind Hannah.

“W... who are y... you?” Hannah shrieked.

“Wow, it’s easy to scare you!” Hannah’s friend, Raven, popped into the open, laughing hard.

“That isn’t funny!”

“Yeah, it is!” Raven laughed even harder.

“Humph!” Hannah marched out of the stable, dragging Chad by his lead behind her.

“Look, I know it’s not your fault. Okay?” Raven said, following Hannah out into the warm sunshine. “And I’m really sorry for saying you lost us the competition!”

“Well, you should’ve said that five minutes ago when everyone freaked out at me!” Hannah replied. “But it doesn’t matter now. I’m quitting the Pony Club!”

“But—”

“*But nothing!* I’m quitting and that’s final!” With that Hannah leapt up and stormed away again, still pulling Chad behind her. She quickly gathered up all of her show supplies and started loading up the trailer.

“Excuse me,” a soft voice said from behind her. Hannah turned around to see who it was.

“Hi. I just wanted to say I thought you did fine. It wasn’t your fault that your horse stumbled,” the girl said apologetically.

“Thanks. It’s nice to know that not everyone is mad at me,” Hannah said, looking at the girl, trying to figure out where she’d seen her before.

“I’m Janie. I just joined Pony Club. I’m not good enough to event yet. I just came to watch. You have a beautiful horse.”

“Thank you!” Hannah said a bit more warmly, giving Chad a good scratch between his ears. “He means everything to me.”

Janie smiled and nodded. “He’s so sweet. What’s his name?”

“This is Chad,” Hannah said.

“Nice name,” said Janie. She turned as if she wanted to go, then stopped, looking embarrassed. “Do you want to practice for the next show with me tomorrow?”

“I thought you said you weren’t good enough yet to compete,” Hannah said, puzzled.

“I’m not, I just want to improve. If I get good enough, Holly might choose me to show next time.”

Hannah agreed and soon she and Janie were meeting almost every day. After a few weeks of practice, Janie was just as good as the other pony club riders.

At next Pony Club meeting, Hannah checked the board. She saw her name and started doing a happy dance all the way to her gelding’s stall.

“Yes, I’m showing! I’m showing!”

Janie looked at the board too and noticed she was in advanced short stirrup. “Omigosh! Yippee! I’m in the show too!” She ran up to Hannah to tell her the good news.

When Hannah heard Janie was in advanced, she was jealous. She’d been riding for a long time and she was the one in novice? And Janie, a total beginner, was in advanced? Totally not fair!

She pushed past Janie and ran towards the hay lift, throwing herself onto the gigantic piles of hay.

“It’s not fair! I trained her, but I’m in a lower class than her? Darn you, Chad! Why are you such lousy show horse?” Hannah screamed, pounding the hay with her fists.

Holly, the barn owner, came around the corner to get hay for her horse and overheard Hannah’s temper tantrum. It was impossible not to.

“Why’d you pick that horse to ride?” Holly picked up a bale of hay.

“Huh?” Hannah raised her head from the hay and looked at Holly.

“You wanted that horse, so you have to stick with him.”

“B...b...bu...” Hannah said.

“No buts. Chad loves you. He tried his best, and besides you were leaning too far in the saddle. You unbalanced him. The only thing he could do was stumble,” Holly explained, wiping some of the sweat off her forehead.

“No, I wasn’t,” Hannah protested.

“Yes, you were,” Holly’s voice was firm. “Chad is a fine show horse. You two just need to practice a little more—and you need to get control of your temper if you’re going to come to my barn.”

Hannah got up, nodded sullenly and rushed away.

All everyone does is tell me how wrong I am or how bad I ride, she thought. Then her face reddened with shame. Maybe, just maybe, Holly was right and she was partially to blame. “I spent too much time with Janie, when I should have practicing more myself,” she muttered under her breath.

Hannah found herself right outside Chad’s stall and slipped quickly inside. The large bay gelding greeted her with a slobbery wet nose, which had just come out of the water bucket.

“You goof!” Hannah giggled at the horse, pushing him away.

“Can I come in, please?” Janie’s quiet voice came from outside the stall.

“No. You’re the absolute last person I want to see right now!”

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry,” said Janie in small, squeaky voice and then she dashed away crying. Hannah looked up with surprise. She’d never seen anyone get that emotional at the barn before... besides herself anyway.

“Maybe you should say you’re sorry to *her*,” said Holly from a nearby stall she was cleaning.

Hannah jumped; she hadn’t noticed Holly there. “Why should I?”

“Well, maybe she just wants to be your friend.”

“Right now I don’t want to speak to her, let alone be her friend!” said Hannah, then she stomped out of the barn.

Leaning against the side of the barn that faced toward the road, away from the riding ring and all the smiling, chatting, happy people, Hannah scowled. No one was ever on her side. Did Holly even stop to think about how it would feel to have the girl she’d trained go ahead of her? No, of course not!

She was still complaining in her head, debating quitting the Pony Club for good, when a movement in the bushes near the gate to the farm caught her eye. It looked like—it was—Janie. That was weird; what was she doing? She should be riding with everyone else. Then Hannah realized she wasn’t alone. There was a van, almost totally hidden by the bushes, and someone dressed completely in black was talking to Janie. Janie shook her head and looked like she was about to turn away, when all of a sudden, the person in black grabbed her and dragged her inside the van. Then the van sped away! Hannah ran after it, straining to see the license plate.

Hannah didn’t know what to do. She ran to get Holly, but couldn’t find her anywhere. She tried to remember the van and license plate number, but couldn’t at first because she felt so panicky. Finally, she remembered it was a white Astro-van with dark tinted windows and the license plate number was XYZ-FNE. She got out her cell phone and called the police, rushing her words about what happened, then sat on a bale of hay outside Chad’s stall to wait for the cops to arrive. She was crying and scared.

They were barely on the scene, when Holly rushed over to Hannah.

“What’s wrong? And why are the cops here?”

“I saw someone kidnap Janie. I had to call them!”

Holly put her hands on her hips and one cop came over to them.

“Are either of you named Hannah?” asked the cop.

Hannah slowly raised her hand.

“You’re Hannah? Well, we found the van you saw, but it was empty. All that was left was this note.” The police officer handed Hannah a piece of paper: *Give us what we want or she will die.*

Hannah dropped the paper and fell to the ground. Everything went black. She awoke moments later to hear Holly ask, “What do you think they want?”

“Wait, there’s something on the back,” the cop turned the note over. “It says, ‘We want Chad, the valuable show horse in stall 5. Give us the horse.’” The cop looked sternly at Hannah. “I’m afraid they mean it. Any suspects?”

“I... I think so, maybe” Hannah stammered. “I saw Jim, the new stable hand, in the hayloft with a guy dressed all in black. I had to get some more hay for Chad and they were just there, talking. I didn’t think anything of it at the time.”

“Wait, this horse is yours?”

Hannah nodded, unable to speak.

“He belongs to the stable, but Hannah rides him,” said Holly.

The cop wrote something on a notepad. “Thanks for the information.”

“There’s a horse trailer behind the barn,” Holly said, “We can put Chad in there.” She called stable hand over to load Chad up.

When the cops left to watch the stable hand, Holly and Hannah were alone. “But you can’t!” Hannah protested.

“Do you want to get Janie back or not?” Holly’s stern voice made Hannah stop arguing. “We’ll find a way to bring them both home safely, I promise.” Holly’s voice softened a bit and Hannah nodded.

Hannah helped load Chad onto the trailer. She gave him a big squeeze.

“I don’t want to see you go, buddy.” Hannah buried her face into his mane and sobbed.

“Hey, I have an idea. Maybe he won’t go!” Holly reached for her cell phone.

“What do you mean?” Hannah pulled her face out of Chad’s mane.

Holly asked the truck’s driver to wait, then started dialing numbers on her hot pink razor cell phone.

“Do you remember Chad’s sire?”

“Yes,” Hannah replied hesitantly.

“He looks exactly like Chad. I saw him at a horse fair,” Holly replied.

“Oh!”

Holly began to talk to somebody, but Hannah couldn’t understand a word she said.

“Who’s she talking to? She seems to be talking gibberish to me!” Hannah asked Zack, Holly’s boyfriend, who’d come up from the main house as soon as he’d heard about the kidnapping.

“Oh, she has a friend who’s Norwegian, and she talks fluent Norwegian with her.

Hannah shifted from foot to foot nervously. What was Holly up to? She tried to make sense of what the young woman was saying, but it was no use.

Holly hung up her phone and smiled brightly. “We have ourselves a plan! My friend owns Gallant Tempest, Chad’s sire. If we can get Tempest here, we can set up the trap with Tempest as the bait. Chad will be perfectly safe, I promise!”

“Great! But isn’t Tempest like worth a whole lot more than Chad?” asked Hannah.

“Yes, but you don’t want to lose *your* horse, do you?” asked Holly, motioning for Chad to be taken out of the trailer.

Hannah suddenly felt even more awful. It was her fault that all of this was happening. If she hadn’t gotten mad at Janie, Janie wouldn’t have went off on her own and gotten kidnapped. And now to fix the problem she made, Hannah had to put someone else’s horse in danger. Hannah hated herself, but another emotion was mixed with the hate. She was grateful to Holly’s friend for being so kind to them.

Chad nuzzled Hannah. “Hold on.” Hannah pushed Chad’s muzzle aside. Chad nuzzled her again. “Hold on I said!” She pushed him away again. He ignored her shove, and this time when he nudged her, it was so forceful she almost lost her balance. He lowered his neck, so she could grab him before she fell. As soon as she was steady on

her feet, he nudged her again. Finally she got the idea—he was telling her to get on him. She petted him apologetically.

“I get it, I get it—just a minute though, okay, boy?” she said to her horse.

Holly looked at her questioningly.

“I’m going to ride Chad to find Janie. They couldn’t be far from here—look how quickly the police found the van. I bet the kidnappers took her to the woods. I’ll—”

“No,” Holly interrupted. “It’s too dangerous out there alone, and with kidnappers on the loose! Do you want to be next?”

Chad stomped with his front hooves, but Hannah looked down at the ground and mumbled, “No...”

Holly gave a weak smile. “We’ll get her back. Don’t worry. I’m going to pick up Chad’s sire. You just sit tight, okay?” She climbed into the truck along with one of the police officers and drove away.

Hannah cast a nervous glance towards the cop who had stayed behind to keep an eye on the stables. Maybe, just maybe, she could slip away to find Janie without him noticing. She walked Chad to the barn door to see where the cop was—he was just turning the corner to the side of the barn. She had a moment then, but she’d have to be quick. There was no time to saddle or bridle Chad, so it was a good thing he was trained to take leg cues. Using an overturned bucket, she jumped onto Chad’s bare back.

“C’mon,” she whispered, nudging him forward and guiding him away from the barn with his halter rope.

Chad galloped into the woods. Hannah looked around. She didn’t want to get whacked in the face by a branch. Chad jumped over a log like he was flying. Suddenly the smell of smoke filled Hannah’s nose. A small log cabin lay ahead. And it was on fire!

Red and orange flames danced from the smoking roof, stopping Chad dead in his tracks. Not ready for the sudden halt, Hannah flew over his head. With a loud thump, she hit the ground. She didn’t know if it was the pain or the heavy, black smoke that brought tears to her eyes. She slowly stood up and rubbed her back.

The cabin was ramshackle and looked deserted. That was good, but what if a forest fire started? A sudden cry proved Hannah wrong. There was somebody in there! Knowing Chad wouldn’t come any closer to the fire, she ran to the cabin alone. She got as close as she could and peered through the flames.

“Hello?” she called. “Is there anybody in there? Can you hear me?”

“Hannah?” a voice called back. It sounded like Janie!

“Janie?” Hannah tried to peer through the flames in the doorway. She thought she saw Janie lying on the floor. A huge shadow moved in the centre of the fire and suddenly a man burst through the door.

“Get out of here, Hannah!” Janie yelled, but Hannah barely heard her over the sound the raging fire burning around her.

The man charged toward Hannah. What could she do? The man was almost upon her when she got an idea.

“Chad!” she yelled. “CHAD!” she yelled again.

The horse raised his head and looked at his human with curiosity. Now that Hannah had gotten his attention, she shook her arms at him and hollered, steering him in the opposite direction. She knew he would head for home and when Holly saw him she was sure to know that Hannah was in trouble. Chad was gone in a matter of seconds.

The man grabbed her arm. She screamed. "Please hurry, Chad. Please!" she managed to yell before she felt a swift blow on the head and everything went black.

When she opened her eyes she saw that the fire was under control. The man was tying Janie's legs together. He was talking to her in a low menacing tone. "If you try—" He went and tied her arms behind her back. "Another stunt like that you are going to wish you hadn't defied me, understand?" Janie nodded tearfully. When the man left the room Hannah saw that the room was charred.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

"Hannah, I should have told you. I'm so sorry," Janie whispered. "It's my dad."

"What about him?" Hannah asked, recalling a conversation where she'd overheard Jim telling another stable hand that Janie's dad had left his family.

"He's had his eyes on Chad for a long time. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. He was asking me all about him, and I had to tell him. Oh, Hannah, I messed everything up. I only trained with you to find out more about Chad. I wasn't trying to out-do you, really. I just—Oh, Hannah!"

Hannah felt worse than ever for Janie. Imagine having that man as her father.

"But, you? *You* set that fire?"

She nodded. "Dad said we were going to use this as the drop off for the ransom. He wouldn't have killed me, but he would hurt me Hannah. I didn't know what to do! I set the fire, so they'd be able to find us." Janie broke down and sobbed.

"It's okay, Janie," Hannah whispered. She couldn't imagine what she'd have done if her father was like that. Yesterday her biggest problem was stupid Pony Club. Janie had much bigger things to deal with. She moved closer to Janie. "I'm really sorry too. If I had known, I would've—well, never mind. I was so selfish! Will you forgive me?"

"Of course, Hannah. I never should have done it, it's just I *had* to obey dad, or..." Janie began to cry again. "I've always wanted a nice dad, like yours."

"When have you seen *my* dad?" asked Hannah, trying to remember if she had introduced them. She hadn't.

"When he came to pick you up from a Pony Club show," Janie said, in a choked voice. "He looked so kind and protective, and, and, like a real dad."

Hannah didn't know what to say. Here she thought she had had the most problems in the world, but now she realized that she had everything. Two great parents, friends, and so much more. "Oh, Janie, I—"

The door creaked open, interrupting Hannah. Janie's dad stepped into the room. Hannah's eyes widened and Janie's red face grew redder. Hannah did not like the look in the fierce man's eyes. He looked at Janie and growled, "If that horse doesn't show up within an hour, you'll never see your little friend here again."

Janie whimpered as he shut the door behind him with a bang. Hannah felt like she would faint. Did he mean it? Janie had said he wouldn't kill her, but admitted he'd hurt her, and she was his daughter! Would he hurt Hannah, or do worse? She shivered, even

though the room was still warm from the fire. “And to think that just this morning I was throwing a hissy fit over not winning the competition.”

Janie made a sound that was half sob and half giggle. “I guess your life has changed a little bit since then. I wonder what your grandkids will say when you tell them this story.”

“Yeah, I wonder,” said Hannah, but she was thinking grim thoughts. “If I live that long.”

“Don’t say that!” Janie gasped in despair.

Hannah didn’t much like saying it aloud either. “I’m sorry I’m like that, Janie,” she whispered. “I’m always dwelling on the bad things.”

“It’s easy to do.” Janie tilted her head to one side and sighed. “There are so many things in this world that are just messed up.”

“Well,” Hannah said with a sudden determination. “I’m done fussing over it. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Janie’s eyes widened. Her eyes were grey like her dad’s, but hers were a gentle grey, while his were fiery and terrifying. “You heard him Hannah! We’ll make him angry!”

“We can’t just wait here,” Hannah said firmly, glancing about the room and trying to think. She didn’t want to rush headlong like she had into the woods. Their safety was at stake. Her eyes lit on a loose board in the wall. It was black and charred. “Look, Janie! The fire weakened that board over there. If we put enough pressure on it, we can get out.”

“You really think so?” asked Janie.

“Yes! Too often I think like a pessimist, so I’m going full force in the other direction!”

“Being unrealistic?”

“No, being OPTIMISTIC! Now hurry up before your dad comes back.” The girls ran across the room. Pushing with all their strength against the board, they prayed that it would give even a little.

After five minutes of pushing, Janie slumped down against the wall, sweat and tears streaming down her face. “It’s no use,” she whispered. “It’s only a little black. It’s not loose.”

“Oh, yes it is,” grunted Hannah, who was still pushing. Suddenly she fell back with a yelp. The board was sticking out of the wall, and she could see the trees outside. “Look! We did it! Snap out of it, Janie! We’ve got to get out of here!”

Janie looked up and gasped. They dug into the softened wood with their fingers, and managed to yank the wood out of its position.

Hannah peered out of the hole they had made. “No one out there; come on, let’s hurry!”

They bolted from the cabin and made for the woods. “Ow!” cried Janie. Hannah turned around to see her friend flat on her face, her sneaker twisted in a tree root protruding from the ground. Hannah ran back and helped Janie up. They started running again, this time looking where they were going, when suddenly they heard a twig snap. They stopped dead still.

“What was that?” Janie whispered. Hannah just stood there, her eyes wide with fright. Another twig snapped, then they heard footsteps. Heavy ones. Headed their way! “Come on, Hannah! Let’s run!”

Janie started to take off in the opposite direction of the sound, but Hannah grabbed her arm. “No, wait! Don’t you hear something odd about those footsteps?”

Janie stopped and listened. “Yes, they sound... like there’s two people!” Her face grew ashen. “What if it’s my dad, with someone else?”

“I don’t want to risk it! Let’s get out of here!” They turned and started to run again, but didn’t get far before they both screamed in terror. Peering out from a clump of bushes was a face! Janie crumpled to the ground in a faint. Hannah began to laugh. It was Chad! He calmly plodded out from the bushes with Holly on his back.

“What took you so long?” cried Hannah, still laughing hysterically with relief.

“It took a while to tack Chad up, but I came as fast as I could,” answered Holly. “What’s wrong with Janie?”

“To make a long, looong story short, the man is her dad. He’s had his eye on Chad for ages, and she joined the Pony club to get him information, even though she didn’t want to. He had us imprisoned in a little cabin, but we got out and were afraid you were him and someone else!” she said in a rush.

Holly’s mouth twitched. “That’s quite a story!” She pulled out her cell phone, and was just dialing 9-1-1 when Hannah screamed. “Look out, Holly!”

Holly twisted in the saddle just in time to see Janie’s dad leap from a rock behind the horse. Hannah screamed again as the man landed full force on Holly, knocking her off Chad. She hit the ground with a thud, banging her head hard, and lay motionless.

The man snatched Chad’s reins and balanced on his back. He gave the horse a ferocious kick in the ribs. “Come on, you stubborn mule! MOVE!” But Chad didn’t want to move. He didn’t like the man who had knocked Holly off of him and then yanked painfully on his bit. Chad reared.

“Daddy!” Janie cried in fear for her father.

Hannah felt momentarily confused. When her loyal horse had reared, she’d felt only triumph. Why was Janie worried for her dad? He wanted to hurt her, for crying out loud, but still Janie was muttering calming words to Chad to calm him. It didn’t work. Chad bolted. Her dad lost his grasp and fell. He sprang up and grabbed the person nearest to him—Janie.

Chad trotted over to Hannah and rubbed his head against her, breathing heavily.

Janie whimpered as her Dad shrank back towards the forest, gripping her tightly. “Hand over the horse,” he said. “Hand him over!” he yelled. He didn’t hear the others creeping up behind him.

Raven and Jim were there on their horses. Judging by the looks on their faces they were worried. Hannah’s eyes stung with tears when she realized that they were out looking for her. The last time she spoke to Raven, she’d been freaking out at her over Pony Club. The last time she’d said anything about Jim, she’d been hinting to the cop that he was up to something bad. That all seemed so silly now. She felt especially bad about Raven; she’d been ready to throw their friendship away. Raven liked to joke and she too

had an occasional temper, but she was the kind of friend that would be there for you, no matter what.

They'd both halted when they heard the man yell, and now their horses were shifting with tension. Raven spotted Hannah and smiled a smile of nervous relief.

And to think she'd been brushing her aside week after week!

Suddenly, Janie's father let go of Janie and lunged for Hannah, who held Chad's reins, and seized her by the wrist. "I said, give me that horse!"

Suddenly, something woke up in Janie. "No! Leave my friend alone!" she shouted and charged, grabbing her dad by the arm.

He turned and stared down at her in surprise. "What did you say?"

If looks could kill, she'd be a pile of ashes on the ground, thought Hannah, holding Chad's reins as far out of reach as she could with her free arm. There was an awful silence, but then Janie's dad merely shook off his daughter and began to grapple with Hannah for Chad's reins.

Suddenly, Jim galloped forward on Starburst, one of the stable's horses, and slid off right onto Janie's dad.

"AAh!" came from the man's throat, as Jim got a tight hold around it.

"Call 9-1-1, Raven!" he shouted, struggling to hold the man who was larger than he was.

How many times have I heard that today? Hannah thought, but she had no time for counting, because just then, the worst happened.

Janie's dad, amidst his struggle with Jim, managed to reach into his pocket, and pull something out. Hannah felt her heart flutter up to her throat. He had a gun! But he had no control over where he aimed it. She was in a panic. He could shoot any one of them!

She heard Raven scream into the phone. "Oh, no! He has a gun; he has a gun!"

Hannah's thoughts raced. Someone was going to get shot! It was too terrible for words, but what could she do?

Holly moaned from the ground. Jim was tiring from his struggle. Janie stumbled forward and tripped over Holly. The confusion was mind boggling—and perhaps Hannah wasn't thinking straight—or perhaps deep down her brain had a plan of some sort that she just wasn't aware of, but in any case, she tried to grab at the gun in the man's hand.

Raven was looking wildly towards the woods. "We can't wait," she yelled. "I'm going to get help!" Then she turned her horse in the direction of the stable and they galloped away.

All of the sudden, a gunshot echoed through the woods.

Raven's horse was running, but Raven wasn't moving in rhythm with her horse anymore. Hannah's stomach lurched as Raven slumped in the saddle. Her horse, feeling the difference in his rider, slowed.

Hannah thought she would faint. Raven had been shot! The last time she'd talked to her she'd been so bitter. Now she might never get to talk to her again; her thoughts were cut short by more horror as another shot rang through the woods.

Chad reared but all too late. He'd been hit!

Nooo... Hannah wanted to scream but she could barely breathe. Janie's father was on his feet now, his eyes wide with anger.

"Great. Now the dang nag's useless!" he screamed in rage. He pushed Jim away and bolted, dropping the gun.

Hannah gave Janie one glance and they were off and running too. He was headed back towards the cabin.

Then the best thing that had happened to Hannah all day happened. Janie's father tripped over the same root that Janie had just a short time ago. He was heavier though, by far, and he'd been running much faster—his trip did more damage. From the way he was screaming and the way his ankle was already swelling, Hannah figured it was broken. But just to be safe, she took off her sweatshirt, and she and Janie managed to tie his wrists behind his back so he couldn't get to his feet. Now all she had to do was get Chad to a vet.

Or so she thought.

"You guys, Raven's bleeding bad!" Jim called to them.

Hannah jumped. How had she forgotten about Raven? It must be shock... She turned toward Jim to see Raven, off her horse now, looking pale and faint. Jim was squeezing her arm to keep the blood from coming. Holly was standing too, looking dizzy and worried. She took her sweater from around her waist and wrapped it around Raven's arm. The white material was almost immediately soaked red with blood.

Hannah started to cry. Holly patted her arm. "There, there. It only hit her arm, she'll be okay!" But the fact that Holly looked worried too didn't help much.

Just when Hannah thought she couldn't bear to wait even one more minute, the pulsing whine of sirens came from a distance, then grew closer and closer until they were screaming in their ears.

Three squad cars pulled up, and several policemen came running up to arrest Janie's father. And behind them were people from an ambulance; they had a stretcher, and were putting it to use. Raven wasn't even crying as they properly bandaged her wound and carried her off. Hannah knew she wouldn't be half as brave if she'd been shot.

Janie watched as her dad's arms were thrust behind his back and locked in handcuffs. "I never wanted you to go to jail," she whispered so quietly Hannah almost didn't hear her. "But some things are unavoidable, and with all the things that have happened..." Her voice trailed off

Holly seemed to see the terror in Janie and Hannah's eyes, and to know that the day had taken a huge toll on them. She reached out and took them both in a comforting hug. "There will be a happy ending to today, somehow, I promise."

Hannah didn't think that possible. Chad had been shot. Raven had been shot. Janie's father was going to jail. Even though he was cruel, how horrible it must feel to Janie to see her father go to jail! A happy ending?

Janie seemed to share Hannah's feelings and tears streamed down her cheeks. "I don't think there'll be a happy ending for me," she sniffed. "I don't know what will happen now. I suppose I'll stay with my Aunt, she lives about three miles from the stables."

Hannah gave Janie another hug. She wondered where Janie's mother was, but realized that was a story for another day perhaps. "That'll be cool, because then we can still see each other," she answered, willing herself to stop crying, so she wouldn't upset Janie even more.

Holly nodded. "You see, there's something good right there."

Suddenly Janie tore from them and ran straight to her dad. She looked hesitatingly at the police, and they nodded, still keeping a firm grip on the man. Janie's lower lip trembled as she reached up and gave her dad a hug. Hannah's mouth dropped open, and even Holly stared in surprise. Then Janie did something even more astonishing. She looked up at her dad, and whispered, "I forgive you, Daddy. I love you."

Her father stared at her for a minute, then said softly, "I love you too, Janie." The words sounded strange, as if he had never uttered them before. One of the policemen even had tears in his eyes. Hannah smiled.

Janie watched as the patrol cars drove away. One of the police officers stayed and looked at Hannah, Jim, Holly, and Janie. "We'll need you to come down to the office to give your testimony and file some papers," he explained.

They piled into the car, and Hannah put her arm around Janie to comfort her. Then she twisted her head to look out the back window at the vet's truck as it drove off with Chad, sedated, in the back. "I hope he's okay," she whispered sadly.

Now it was Janie's turn to be comforting. "He will be, Hannah. Just like Raven, shot in the arm, kind of. He'll be fine."

Hannah felt ashamed of herself, crying over Chad, when Janie's dad was being taken to jail and her whole life practically falling apart. "I'm okay. Chad will be fine. I'm just a worrywart. Ask anyone."

Janie shook her head, a faint smile coming to her face. "You are too brave. I wish I were more like you."

Hannah stared. "Me, brave? You've got to be kidding."

Janie shook her head, her brown hair swinging. "Nope, I'm not even exaggerating. You are way braver than I could ever be."

Hannah protested. "No, never! You lived with your father!" She suddenly clamped her hand over her mouth. "I didn't mean it like that, Janie!"

Janie smiled sadly. "I don't mind. I did, but I only obeyed him because he scared me. Now that I'm living with my aunt, things will be better."

Hannah mentally kicked herself for her stupid, blundering comment all the way to the police office. When they arrived, they went inside the big brick building and filled out the stack of papers that Officer Gert had ready for them. Janie bit her lip as she signed the papers that said such awful things about her father and several tears rolled down her cheeks.

Holly rubbed her back soothingly. "It's all right, Janie. He won't be in jail forever, and then maybe he'll want to reform and you can be a family again."

Janie smiled hopefully. "You really think so?" she asked.

"I do." Holly replied firmly.

Hannah looked up. "So do I. Why, before you know it, the end to your story will be 'and they all lived happily ever after.' Just wait and see."

Janie managed a small smile and signed her name on the last sheet of papers. Officer Gert dismissed them and they walked slowly back to the stables. As they passed the vet's, Hannah rushed inside and Janie and Holly followed.

In her hurry, Hannah nearly collided with a young vet with glasses, who had been concentrating on a clipboard, a pen behind his ear. "Where's Chad?" she demanded.

"Chad?" He blinked owlishly behind his lenses.

"The horse with a shot leg that came in about a half an hour ago, a light bay, about fourteen point two hands high?"

The vet nodded. "Oh, him. You can't see him now, but if you wait, Doctor Bowman will be out in about fifteen minutes."

They sat down on a bench in the waiting room. They waited for what seemed like an eternity, but finally the doctor came out, her white lab coat flowing behind her making her look like a mad scientist in a movie. There was nothing mad about her face though. Her long brown hair was up in a hair net, and her large hazel eyes twinkled in a friendly way. "So you're Hannah?" the vet asked.

"Y-yes. Is Chad going to be all right?"

The vet looked at her soberly. Hannah felt her insides turn to jelly, as she thought, *Chad has been euthanized. He's dead.*

But suddenly the vet's face broke into a huge smile, and she said, "He is going to be just fine! The bullet missed anything vital, and he'll be walking good as new in a few weeks time."

Hannah jumped up and let out a half squeak, half shout. "You mean it? He's fine?"

The woman nodded, grinning. "Now, here's what you'll have to do. If he seems fine the day after tomorrow, start walking him slowly up and down the stable aisle once or twice. As he improves daily, do it more. In two weeks he can go into the pasture, but only with gentle horses. Then..."

One month later, Hannah and Janie were trotting around the outdoor arena.

"No, Chad. I said trot, not balk!" Hannah reined Chad in and grinned at Janie, who was riding Spitfire, a flashy chestnut mare who wasn't as wild as her name. "How's Spitfire coming?" Hannah called out to her friend.

"She's great! She still tries to buck me off when I ask her to go over the cavaletti though."

Hannah wiped her forehead with her sleeve and walked Chad over. He was fine now, and from the way he frolicked and jumped and bucked in the pasture, you couldn't tell he had even been shot at all, except for the small scar on his leg. When she got close to Janie, she looked Spitfire over carefully, inspecting the saddle and stirrups. Suddenly she laughed. She found a small thorn. "That might explain why she's bucking."

Janie's mouth hung open. "But I checked every inch of it before I tacked her up!"

Hannah thought for a minute, then said, "I know! She must have brushed against the rosebush over there when she was shying from that cat, remember?"

Janie nodded. "Oh yeah, that would explain it!"

A movement by the fence caught the girls' eyes and turning they saw Lisa, Janie's aunt. Lisa looked almost more like a big sister than an aunt. She was twenty-nine, had long black hair, sunglasses over her eyes, and was wearing blue jeans, cute cowboy boots and a loose white top. She smiled and waved. "Janie, I need to go talk to Eddie, but be ready to go in fifteen minutes!"

Janie cupped her hand over her mouth and called back "Okay, Lisa! See you soon!"

"I wonder what she wants to talk to the riding instructor about," Hannah mused as she loosened Chad's girth. He nudged her affectionately.

Janie shrugged. "I don't know. She's grown to like him lately. I think she thinks he's cute."

Hannah grinned in a conspiratorial way. "Well, he is cute for a guy in his thirties, don't you think?"

Janie narrowed her eyes at her friend. "What are you getting at?"

Hannah shrugged and clucked to Chad as she started leading him towards the barn. "Nothing, nothing at all, except wouldn't it be cool to have a riding instructor for an uncle?"

Janie's eyes grew huge. "I never knew you were a matchmaker!"

Hannah shrugged happily, as she thought of how different things were now than they had been four weeks ago.

Suddenly a car horn honked, and Hannah's dad's car pulled into the drive. He rolled down the window and called, "Hannah, leaving in fifteen minutes! I want to talk to Eddie." The girls giggled and Hannah called back, "Okay, Dad!"

"That's funny!" Janie said, still giggling. "I hope he doesn't think Eddie's cute too!"

Hannah gave her friend a good-natured shove. "That's gross!"

"I'm just playing," she replied, sticking her tongue out.

They had just finished grooming their horses, about ten minutes late, when Lisa and Hannah's dad came out to meet them, big smiles on their faces.

"What's all this?" Janie asked, her hands on her hips in a playfully demanding way. Lisa held out her hand as an answer, and Janie nearly fell into the cross ties with surprise. "Is that what I think it is?" she gasped in astonishment.

"Is that what you think it is?" Hannah asked, wondering at her friend's amazement.

Janie squealed. "A wedding ring! A real wedding ring! Oh, Lisa, who are you going to marry?"

Lisa grinned so wide the girls wondered that her face didn't crack. "Eddie Burke, your riding instructor!" she answered, beaming.

The girls rushed over to each other and hugged and jumped up and down until Hannah's dad decided to cinch the momentous occasion by handing a sheet of paper to Hannah. "And here is your fourteenth birthday present," he said, looking like he would bust with happiness.

Hannah promptly dropped the grooming bucket on her foot and cried, "He's mine? Chad is really mine?"

Her dad shook his head. “He’s being leased to you for a year, and if you’re still in love with him by then, he’s yours.”

Janie later said that she thought Hannah would topple over in a dead faint, but she didn’t. She simply gave her dad the biggest hug the world had ever seen.