

## Zeb, the Zony, and the Crazy Afternoon

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Carrie was mad. Everything was going wrong. First, she found out that she'd failed her math test. How was she going to tell her parents? Then Tasha, her arch enemy at school, had told her that Ryan, Carrie's crush, liked some other girl. And if that wasn't enough? Her best friend, Sadie, cancelled out on their after-school ride.

But that wasn't going to stop Carrie. If she had to go riding alone, then she would!

Swiftly, she saddled up Zeb, her zony (Zebra cross Pony) and started off on the trail ride. Maybe it would actually be good to be alone. She wasn't in the mood for people. Her dad's warnings about the dangers of riding without a partner came back to her, but she ignored his voice in her head. If she stayed next to the stream, she wouldn't get lost.

As she rode, the good smell of the trees around her made her calm down and after awhile she found a large field. She was cantering around it with Zeb when suddenly lightening struck!

Terrified by the bright flash and following crash, Zeb panicked and ran off.

Carrie managed to stay in the saddle, but pulling the reins as hard as she could did nothing to slow him down.

"Heeeeeeeeeelllllllllp!" Carrie screamed.

The only response to Carrie's plea came from the sky. And it wasn't helpful. It started to rain... hard.

Soaked and shivering, Zeb stopped finally when he saw a light from a small cabin in the forest.

"Zeb," Carrie said, "Where are we?"

Zeb snorted as if to answer, "Go ask if you can go into the cabin, and I'll stay under the large tree over there."

Carrie knew what he meant, so she let Zeb canter to the cabin. As Carrie dismounted, the lights in the cabin turned on. Carrie took Zeb's reins and led him to the door. She knocked, but nobody answered. She knocked again once more, this time harder. Still nobody responded. That was weird... the lights had turned on. Someone must be there. Really feeling the cold now, Carrie opened the door and peeked in.

"Hello?" she called. It was strange. Nobody was home. Maybe the lights were on a timer?

"I guess they won't mind if I stay for a little bit," Carrie muttered to herself, looking over at Zeb. He shifted and shook his head as if to say, "No."

"Oh, come on, Zeb—There's no-one here!"

Zeb stood still suddenly, then raised his head high and laid his ears back. Carrie saw the whites of his eyes. "Zeb, it's okay. You don't need to be scared."

Carrie tugged the reins lightly, planning to lead Zeb away from the house that was scaring him, but her movement only seemed to frighten him more. He reared up. Startled, Carrie dropped the reins. She watched in horror and disbelief as Zeb ran off.

"Zeb! Zeb!" she called. "Come back—Come back."

But he didn't.

The trail Zeb disappeared down was overgrown and hard to walk. Carrie's face and arms stung with scratches from the branches she was scrambling through trying to find Zeb, but she kept walking, calling for her beloved zony.

"Where are you, Zeb? Please come back—I'm sorry if you were scared. Please forgive me—Come back!" Carrie wiped her tear-streaked face. He had to be here somewhere. How far could he have gone anyway?

Half an hour later, she found herself back at the front door of the cabin. She'd been walking in circles! But maybe there was a telephone inside. She could call for help. The door opened with a creak and she stepped inside.

As she made her way to the phone, something sitting on a table caught her eye—a beautiful necklace with a large gold horse pendant.

"Wow, how gorgeous!" Carrie said. She picked up the necklace. It was warm in her hand—and so pretty. She slipped it into her pocket, then paused, shocked. What was she doing? She was no thief! She put her hand back into her pocket, about to replace the necklace, when a snorting sound came from outside, followed by a loud voice saying, "Ain't he a beaut'?"

"Yeah! We could sell him on EBay!" another voice said. "We'd be rich! Filthy rich!"

Carrie heard a distant whinny—a whinny that she'd know anywhere—and her hand flew to her mouth. The necklace lay forgotten, deep in her pocket.

"Zeb?" she whispered. "Zeb!" Her joy was cut short, as the voices spoke again.

"Get the rope, Bob!"

"I'm on it, Fred!"

"You better be, 'else we ain't gonna be rich!"

"Got'im."

Oh no, Zeb was in trouble!

Carrie heard Zeb's hooves crashing against the ground, and she ran out of the cabin. Two wranglers were fighting the terrified zony. There were ropes around her beloved Zeb's neck.... It was too much. Carrie fainted.

She woke up back in the cabin with a lady standing over her. The lady was talking to someone else.

"Do you think she's going to be okay?" asked the lady.

"Yes, she's just suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome. She will wake up soon," responded a man who Carrie thought to be the doctor.

Everything started flooding back to Carrie. Her poor Zeb! She tried to muffle her sob, but it was too late. The lady leaned over her and stroked her hair lovingly. Just then Carrie fully realized what had happened.

"Zeb!" she cried, sitting bolt upright.

"Who?" the lady seemed surprised at Carrie's sudden movement.

"You've got to help me! My zony's been kidnapped. He's bay with stripes on him like a zebra." Carrie's eyes glassed up and she knew she was going to cry again. Stupid tears! Why couldn't she just be brave? She sniffled.

The doctor was talking to the lady again. “The best thing you could do for her is to take her home. I’ve been to her farm before.” There was the sound of a pen on paper like the doctor was sketching out a map.

“Zeb!” Carrie screamed out at the top of her lungs. “Zeb, don’t worry. I’m coming for you.” She tried to get to her feet, but the lady pushed her down firmly. “You’re not going anywhere, young lady. You are not well!”

# # #

“Look, Fred! One thousand dollars!”

“We need more.”

“Fred! Look! Som’one betting millions!”

“We’re gonna be rich!”

A scuffling noise of rope falling to the ground and the bang of the wooden gate made the men look up from their lap top computer just in time to see Zeb rear and run away.

“Uuhhhh... Fred? Horse is gone.”

“You think I can’t see that myself?!”

# # #

“I hear him! It’s Zeb! He’s coming!”

“Now, dear, that can’t be true!” the woman said.

“It’s him! It’s Zeb!”

Zeb ran toward the cabin. He whinnied in joy, knowing Carrie was there. Again Carrie tried to run to him, but again the woman held her down. Angry shouts came from outside the cabin.

Zeb could be in danger! Carrie broke away from the woman’s grasp. She flew out the door, the doctor and the woman close behind her.

“What are you doing?” she shouted at the two suspicious looking men.

Suddenly her test score, her crush on some boy, and her tiny problem with Sadie didn’t matter much at all. What on earth was happening here?

“I sent them to catch your pony for you, dear,” the woman explained, pushing Carrie back into the cabin. She smiled at the doctor, as if to say, “Poor kid.”

The doctor, who saw no reason to stay, climbed into his car and left.

The woman came out of the cabin, locking the door behind her, and approached the two men. “You almost cost us a lot of money!” she whispered to Fred and Bob. “Now get that animal and take it to the sale. Or can’t you handle the beast?”

The two men struggled to load the recaptured Zeb into the hunter green trailer that was cleverly disguised in the woods. Zeb’s neighs pierced the air. Carrie struggled to get out, but the heavy wooden door held fast.

“Don’t worry!” the woman cooed through the window. “They’re just taking him to your house.”

# # #

Zeb reared, bucked, and kicked again.

“Man, Fred! How’s we gonna get’im in the trailer?”

“Bob, just shut up and give me the rope.”

“Yeah, yeah...”

The woman was losing patience.

“I’ve got to go make sure that kid isn’t destroying my house,” she hissed at Fred and Bob. “Get control of that beast already!” She made her voice sweeter. “If you get the job done, you might get a raise... maybe...”

# # #

She slipped through the back way. Carrie was staring hopelessly out the window.

“Dear, I’m back! They’re going to take good care of your horse; they’ll have him back at your place right away! Don’t worry!”

“But I need Zeb!” Carrie said.

“You can see him before he goes...”

“Really?”

“But it will be the last time you ever see him!”

“What?!”

“We’re selling him! HA! And you didn’t realize that! HA!”

The woman had left the back door open a crack and Carrie saw the mistake before the woman realized she’d made it. Carrie ran outside, grabbed the ropes out of Fred’s hands, and jumped on Zeb. Quickly she made a make-shift bridle. Bob recovered from surprise first and jumped in her way, blocking the trail.

“Where do you think you’re going, little lady?” he asked, grinning from ear to ear. He took hold of the reins, and pulled the zony into the trailer, rider still on board. Carrie sat in the saddle, mute, her brain stuck in neutral mode as Bob slammed the door shut and latched it tight.

“Great. What are we gonna to do with the girl? A horse is one thing—a kid’s a whole other!” said Fred.

“We’ll take care of her somewhere along the way—Now let’s get moving,” the woman said crossly, coming up behind the two men, making them jump.

“What? You’re coming with us?”

The woman just scowled and crawled into the back seat of the extended cab pickup.

Fred and Bob got in the truck and started down the road. They were going to sell that horse!

Carrie jumped off Zeb’s back and started banging on the trailer. “Let me out!” she screamed.

Then Zeb backed up to the trailer door and gave it one good kick. The door flung out on the road, making it easy for Carrie and Zeb to escape.

Carrie jumped on Zeb’s back and the fantastic zony leapt out! They galloped up into some thick woods, jumping logs and winding through trees.

Zeb’s ears pricked up and he suddenly stopped. Another rider came into view, riding a stunning black Arabian. Zeb tossed his head happily. Another horse! Before Carrie could react he danced over to the big Arabian mare and nickered hello.

“Whoa, Misty!” the girl on the Arab said, looking nervous.

“S-sorry about that.” Carrie stuttered, backing her zony up. She looked back in the direction she had come. Good! Those loonies hadn’t noticed she was gone yet.

“What’s the matter?” the new girl asked. “You look white as a ghost.” She let Misty blow her greeting to the odd little pony. “My name is Alice. This is my horse, Misty. Are you lost?” she asked.

“I’ve got to get out of here! Two creepy lunatics are chasing me!” said Carrie unsteadily.

Alice gave Carrie a second glance, and seemed uneasy again. “I haven’t seen any lunatics around here before—Maybe you’ve been out in the cold too long. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine... I just need a minute to rest” said Carrie. As soon as Carrie caught her breath she explained the whole story to Alice. They were still talking about it when both Zeb and Misty startled and jumped to the side.

A large green bush nearby was, well moving. Zeb sidestepped away from the bush, his ears forward and alert. Once he figured he was a safe distance from the bush, he stretched his nose out and gave a short snort. Carrie tried to talk to him in soothing tones to calm him down, but her voice was quivering. What if it was the men and that awful woman?

She squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the worst, but all that came was a quiet giggle. Slowly she opened her eyes to see Alice laughing.

“Don’t worry, it’s only a rabbit!” Alice said, pointing to a small, fuzzy figure hopping away.

Carrie let out a deep breath that she hadn’t realized she was holding. Zeb looked at the bunny curiously. Just then another rider galloped up on a beautiful blood bay Arabian stallion.

He reined his horse in when he saw Carrie and Alice, then introduced himself. “Hello, I’m Charlie and this is Enzo, you guys ok?”

# # #

They drove a mile or two down the road before the woman realized that the door to the trailer was open. They pulled over and jumped out, but when they looked in the trailer it was empty.

The woman freaked and yelled at the men, “GO FIND THAT ZONY!!!!” she screamed.

The men took off into the woods to search. Off in the distance they saw three riders; one was that stupid girl. The striped horse would give her away anywhere.

Carrie saw the men just as they saw her. Her voice was panicked. “Those are the men that are after me and Zeb!”

Charlie recognized them too; they were well-known felons.

“RUN!” he yelled. All three riders took off at a gallop, and the men ran after them. The horses were galloping along the trail at full speed when Enzo jumped across a large log.

“Zeb can’t jump that!” Carrie yelled.

“Nor can Misty,” Alice added.

Charlie halted Enzo. “Take the path next to the log! It will lead to my stable!”

“Okay!” Carrie and Alice said as they galloped off to Charlie’s stable.

When they arrived, Charlie was waiting for them.

“We’ll go into the stable and lock all the doors,” Charlie said, “I’ve dealt with Bob and Fred before—They can’t get into my stable!”

“Let’s go!” Carrie and Alice screamed. In just a moment, they were locked in the warm barn, surrounded by the safe, comforting smell of hay.

“How do you know Fred and Bob?” asked Alice, sliding off Misty to the smooth, worn stable floor.

“Well, Fred is my father...” admitted Charlie, sounding ashamed. Before he could say anything else, there was a loud, pounding knock on the door.

“Charlie, let us in. We know you’re in there!” shouted Fred.

Charlie ignored the knocking. “Fred is smart and all,” Charlie warned, “But Bob is a knucklehead—really stupid.”

“They tried to steal Zeb!”

“That’s the usual.” Charlie’s voice was sad. “My dad works with a lady named Mina. She steals horses and ponies, then Fred and Bob sell them.”

“But why Zeb?”

“Zeb is unusual,” Charlie replied, “Who wouldn’t want ‘a horse of a different color’? I bet people would pay a lot of money for him.”

Another pound came at the door and Alice shot a nervous glance toward it.

“Don’t you think it was a bad idea to take us to your home... you know, since this Fred guy lives here?”

Before he could answer Carrie remembered the necklace that she had put in her pocket. She pulled it out and turned it over in her hands a few times.

Charlie looked at Carrie curiously.

“Do you know what that is?” he asked, a hint of excitement in his voice. He stepped towards Carrie and took the necklace from her hands.

“This is perfect!” He almost shouted, but thought better of it and kept his voice at a whisper. He showed the girls a tiny crack down the middle of the pendant and opened it up to reveal a hidden compartment with a key inside.

“Follow me!” he said and ran to the back of the stable. He moved a couple bales of straw out of the way revealing a key hole. He slipped the key in the hole and opened the hidden door. “Bring your horses in here.” Charlie said. The girls gratefully obeyed.

“I’ll bring you some food later.” With that he closed the door and locked it up again...

“He locked us in here... Do you think he’s coming back?” asked Alice.

“I think we can trust him,” said Carrie.

“Yeah, but this could be a trick. After all his father was after Zeb, maybe Charlie is after the zony too,” said Alice.

“Well, I hope not, because I think we’re stuck... Wait a minute though... There’s a tunnel that way,” said Carrie, feeling around in the darkness. “Let’s look around.” She led Zeb forward.

But it's dark in here...don't you think it's better to stay put?" asked Alice, but Carrie was on her way, and Alice wasn't going to be left behind. They went deep into the tunnel...

All of a sudden Zeb reared high up in the air and gave a shrill whinny. Then he crashed down and backed up with fear.

"What is it, Zeb? What's the matter?" Carrie stroked his velvety neck, trying to calm her zony. Then Carrie looked up. A dark shadow seemed to be coming from the other end of the tunnel, moving around low to the ground.

Carrie screamed and Alice turned Misty around. The four rushed back to the original area they started from. But they could hear whatever it was deep in the tunnel moving, coming their way....

Alice buried her face in Misty's mane and whimpered softly. Oh, how she wished she had never gotten involved with this strange girl and her zony! But there was nothing she could do about it now except for wait for what would happen next. Then she felt something brush past her, just close enough to touch her leg. With all the courage she could muster, Alice looked down.

It was only a dog! A dog with a collar. The light was dim, but Alice thought she read the name "Max" on its tag. Max barked at them to follow him, then turned and started to lope down the tunnel. Then he stopped and turned to look at them.

"I think we need to follow him." said Carrie. The two girls crept slowly down the tunnel again with their horses. The horses' hooves echoed on the floor.

We're making an echo on dirt ground... That's weird, thought Carrie. But then it was too late! Someone slammed the door to a trailer and drove off with Carrie, Zeb, Alice, and Misty inside!

# # #

The driver was none other than Charlie, but he wasn't betraying them. He was taking them to a safer place. He liked Carrie and thought she was pretty, and he didn't want his dad to get a hold of her or her horse. He drove off down the road, heading toward a farm outside of town that his loving grandma and grandpa owned.

"I'm bringing you to my grandparents' farm!" Charlie said to girls when he stopped for gas. "They're nothing like Fred or Bob!"

Carrie and Alice sighed in relief and got into the cab of the truck.

They arrived at Charlie's grandparents' farm.

"Finally, we're here," Carrie shouted.

Zeb pranced out of the trailer doing some happy bucks. Misty followed Zeb watching him closely.

"Look at that I think Misty likes Zeb!" Charlie laughed.

"Aww, how cute! They can have a little foal!" Alice commented.

Carrie imagined Zeb's foal: It would be a bright bay with Zebra stripes! She sighed. "It would be great if Zeb and Misty had a foal!"

"Yeah! But what would we call it?" Alice asked.

"How 'bout Zebian?!" Charlie joked.

*Charlie's so cute*, Carrie thought. *I wonder if he likes me too*. She blushed and quickly looked down at the ground before Charlie could notice. Zeb stared at Carrie suspiciously, guessing her thoughts.

*Carrie's more beautiful than a wild mustang!* Charlie thought.

Enzo and Zeb nickered knowingly, and Zeb winked at Enzo. Enzo nodded and whinnied. At that moment Zeb bucked and Carrie flew out of the saddle and face first in a pile of mud. Charlie dismounted and ran toward Carrie.

"Are you ok?" Charlie reached out his hand. "Carrie, that was an awful fall!"

Carrie coughed up some mud.

"I'm fine!" She took his hand and got up. She brushed off some of the mud on her jeans.

Misty stared at Zeb and Enzo. "You are sooo weird!" Misty snorted to them.

"Why are you giggling—What are you up to?"

"Nothing," both horses said, then started to giggle again.

# # #

Carrie turned around and took hold of Zeb's reins, scolding him for bucking her off. But secretly she was happy for the contact with Charlie. She remounted and nudged him forward.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" she asked, her cheeks still rosy.

Charlie led them to a big brick barn behind an old style farm house. The soft smell of hay and leather warmly welcomed them in. As they entered, Carrie could tell that these were very clean people. There was a neat row of four western saddles with a bridle hanging off the horn of each. The stalls were freshly cleaned and not a cobweb hung from the ceiling.

"Well, hello Charlie. What are you doing here?" Charlie's grandmother asked.

"Grandma, Fred and Bob are after Carrie and her zony, Ze—" Before Charlie finished, his grandma interrupted.

"Wait—you're way ahead of yourself. Who's Carrie?" Charlie's grandma questioned.

"This is Carrie." Charlie pulled Carrie to him. "She has a zony named Zeb. Fred and Bob are after Zeb because he's a very expensive pony..."

Charlie's grandfather, who seemed to be sweeping up nonexistent cobwebs, poked his head around the corner. "What exactly is a zony?"

"It's a cross between a zebra and a pony." Carrie explained. "Please, can you help us?"

Charlie's grandmother agreed and led the three young people to the back of the barn where three empty stalls beckoned to them. "You'll have to put some sawdust down and give them an armful or two of hay," she said.

Just then a car door slammed.

"Oh no, it's Fred and Bob!" Charlie exclaimed. He helped Carrie tack Zeb again.

"Come on, Carrie, we have to hurry!" Charlie's grandma was nervous. They could hear it in her voice.

Charlie gave Carrie a leg up and jumped onto Enzo's back.

"You're going to ride bare-back?" Carrie asked.

“We don’t have time to worry about me! Come on let’s go!” Charlie grabbed Enzo’s mane and kicked him. Enzo bolted off. Zeb and Misty followed.

# # #

“Gosh dangit, Bob! I told you not to slam that door! You scared them kids away!” Fred was furious at yet another one of Bob’s knuckle head moves.

“Well uh... I didn’t want that purty fragrance in our car to go away,” Bob explained.

“That’s it, Bob! I’ve had enough of your dumbness! Just take the truck and drive up to Mina’s. I’ll catch them kids myself!” Fred’s face was bright red and he almost fainted from all the yelling.

# # #

“Watch out!” Carrie screamed, but she was too late. The low tree branch on the trail clipped Charlie’s shoulder, hard. Charlie grunted and tried to grip with his knees..

“Charlie, you’re falling!” Carrie raced to Charlie. She tried to catch him but he fell from Enzo’s back, hitting his head on a rock. He looked unconscious.

Alice dismounted and joined Carrie and motionless Charlie. “Is he ok?” Her voice was shrill and frightened.

“I’m not sure,” Carrie admitted. She ran her fingers through his hair, searching for the bump. It wasn’t long before she found it. It was pretty large.

Alice looked nervously behind her. “Carrie, hurry! I hear those men; they aren’t far away!”

Carrie nodded. “Help me get Charlie back in the saddle,” she said. Together they heaved the boy up and into Enzo’s saddle. It must have been that extra rush of adrenaline that helped them, for they both knew that any other time they wouldn’t have been able to do it. They mounted again and Carrie took Enzo’s reins to lead him.

Fred’s vulgar language could be heard more clearly now, making the girls tense and afraid...

“Gosh dangit, you kids! I’m gonna get ya!”

That they could hear the words so clearly, like they came from right behind them, made fear swirl in their stomachs.

“Come on Alice, can’t you make Misty go any faster?” Carrie asked, holding tightly to Enzo’s reins, thankful that he wasn’t frightened by running so close to her and Zeb.

“Um, I’ll try!” Alice kicked Misty and hollered, “Giddy-up!”

“I hear an engine,” said Carrie.

“I hear something like that too,” said Alice nervously.

“We can’t keep running with Charlie like this; we need to hide!” said Carrie.

“Hey, here’s a narrow path, let’s follow it,” suggested Alice.

The path led to a place with brush all around; a small brook trickled near by.

With every bit of strength left, the girls carried Charlie to the brook, where they sat down. Charlie was still unconscious.

“You don’t think he’s dead, do you?” said Carrie as her tears started to flow faster than the brook.

“I don’t know; I sure hope not” said Alice, getting teary eyed too.

Just then the sound of a trotting horse was heard. When the figure came into sight, Carrie and Alice couldn’t even see who it was; their eyes were too filled with tears.

“Has there been an accident? Here let me help,” said the new arrival, a boy about their age.

“Is he alive?” asked Carrie.

“Oh yes. Just a little bump on the head. A splash of water should bring him to,” said the boy. “My father is a retired doctor, I’ve learned a little from him, like being able to tell if someone’s dead or not.”

“Well, thank you. It’s wonderful to hear he’s not badly injured!” Carrie said smiling.

Alice smiled too. “I’m Alice,” she said. “This is my horse Misty, and this is Carrie and her horse Zeb. Who are you?”

“My name is Joe. I love trail riding on my mare, but I don’t usually see many people riding around here.”

“I love trail riding too. I—”

“Shhhhh... I hear something,” Carrie said, interrupting Alice.

“It’s a dirt bike! And that Fred guy is driving it!” said Alice.

“Fred?” questioned Joe.

“He sees us!” screamed Carrie.

Fred revved the dirt bike just as Charlie woke up. He jumped up and yelled, “We gotta get out of here!” Then he vaulted onto his stallion’s back, gathering the reins.

Carrie and Alice mounted just as quickly.

“Come on. Come with us!” Charlie said to the newcomer, then turned around about to nudge Enzo into a run, but he was too late.

Fred was right behind them.

“Charlie!” Fred yelled, but his voice was full of pain not anger. Charlie looked over just in time to see his father fall from the motorbike to ground. Charlie dismounted and ran to his dad.

“Ch... ch... Charlie—go! M... mi... Mina’s after you.” Fred was getting weak.

“Dad? Dad! What happened?”

“J... just go. You don’t need me.” Fred seemed about ready to faint. He was very pale. Charlie took his dad and put him onto Enzo’s bare back. He climbed up behind his dad and started to ride.

“Where are you going Charlie?”

“I need to get my dad home and help him.” Charlie said looking at his father.

“No, Charlie, your grandma’s house is too far away. He won’t make it if he’s seriously sick!” Carrie started to cry.

“Carrie, why are you crying?” Charlie dismounted again and tried to comfort Carrie.

“It’s just relief—Your dad was chasing you because he needed you. The way you helped him was really sweet,” Alice said, wiping her eyes.

Alice nodded.

“Hey Joe, do you think your dad can help?” Carrie asked.

“Certainly!”

“Thanks, Carrie.” Charlie hugged her and put a big goofy smile on his face. It stayed there the whole ride until they reached the door of the retired doctor.

“Ugh! Who are you? I don’t work any longer. I’m retired.” The man said, pushing a scarf around his neck. He seemed very meticulous of his looks.

“Please, Sir! My father fainted out of nowhere and I think he’s dying!” Charlie was getting glossy eyed.

“Oh—Why didn’t you say so in the first place? Don’t cry, young man....” The doctor hefted Fred from Enzo’s back and carried him to a bed. After a long moment of examination, the doctor exclaimed, “Eureka!”

“What Eureka?” Charlie asked.

“Well, your dad was poisoned—Looks like he ate something bad. You saved his life. If you waited any longer to seek help, he would have died!” the doctor explained.

*No, Carrie saved my dad, Charlie thought. She was the one who thought of going here!*

“Umm... Can you excuse me for just a second? And Carrie can you come outside with me real quick?” Charlie asked.

“Certainly, just don’t touch the poison ivy!” the doctor said.

Charlie took Carrie outside and put her onto Enzo, then he climbed up in front her and grabbed Enzo’s mane.

“Hold on, Carrie!” he said.

Enzo reared and galloped at a full gallop. They’d reached a canyon when Charlie finally halted Enzo. He slid off Enzo’s back and reached his hand out to Carrie. Carrie slid off and fell into his arms. She quickly looked away because she was blushing everywhere!

“Uh... Carrie, you saved my dad’s life,” Charlie said. Then he kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks.”

Carrie blushed some more.

“Well... I... uhhhh... You’re welcome?” Carrie said.

# # #

Fred woke up and saw the doctor leaning over him.

“Those kids saved your life! If you weren’t here earlier you might’ve died!” the doctor exclaimed.

“Who? Where’s Charlie?” Fred asked faintly.

“The boy? He’s outside! I’ll bring them in!” The doctor walked outside, “Charlie! Your father would like to talk to you!”

Enzo’s flanks were glistening with sweat from their fast ride back from the canyon.

“I’ll just stay out here and brush Enzo,” Carrie said.

“No, Carrie, come with me—please!” Charlie said.

“Okay...” Carrie sighed.

The doctor made a big deal of Charlie's smart thinking, but Charlie was clear that it was Carrie who taken control and figured out it was serious and that they needed a doctor.

"Little girl... if there's anythin'" Fred mumbled, "anythin' you want from me, just tell me and it's yours. You saved my life..."

"There's only one thing I want," said Carrie, then looked at Charlie, "Well, not only one thing, I guess, but my horse means almost everything to me, and I want to keep him."

"I guess that's the least I can do," said Fred, looking down. "Your zony is yours; I'll stop trying to steal him."

Everyone was quiet for a long while. Finally the four young people went outside. It had started snowing; large white flakes were falling everywhere. The four horses shook the flakes off their backs, which made the group laugh.

"Let's go for a quiet ride, okay?" suggested Alice.

"That sounds great!" said Joe, smiling.

Everyone mounted up and the horses walked on.

"Now that this is all over, I hope we won't all just split up," said Carrie.

"Of course not. We'll all be friends forever," said Alice.

"That's right, and I'll start it off with inviting all of you to diner at my grandparents' house!" said Charlie.

"That sounds great. I hope you guys accept me with the rest of you, even though I joined the adventures late," said Joe.

Alice started to smile, but the happiness in her eyes turned to terror. Her voice was a squeak. "You may have joined us late but our adventures are still going on...longer than we ever wanted!"

Everyone turned to look in the direction Alice was staring. Mina and Bob had found (*more like stolen!* Carrie thought) horses and managed to track them.

The four friends had no choice; they turned and pushed their tired horses into a run back to the doctor's home. Mina and Bob did the same.

"Fred's gonna wish he neva eva said what he said," Bob yelled behind them.

"Oh stop talking and wasting time," Mina screamed. "Get those brats!"

The kids beat Mina and Bob to the house, but barely. Charlie dismounted and sprinted for the door; the others stayed in their saddles.

Charlie was back in a flash with his dad leaning heavily on his shoulder.

"Dad, jump on!" Charlie reached his hand out.

"No, son, I can't!" Fred couldn't do it. He was either too weak or too mad at himself.

Carrie took Zeb's reins and turned Zeb around. With a strength that surprised her, Carrie swept Fred off the ground and put him onto Zeb's back. Charlie stared at her, then climbed onto Enzo.

As Carrie galloped by the cantering Enzo, she reached out and gave Charlie joking punch.

"Bet you thought I couldn't do that, eh?"

Alice started to giggle.

“Come on, guys we got no time to fool around!” Fred looked back at Mina. She rode a beautiful mare; Bob was struggling to stay mounted on what, on closer look, wasn’t a horse, but a little donkey—a little donkey that was bucking and irritable with all the forced exercise.

“See Bob, that’s why you can’t have a real horse—Riding a real pony, you would have killed yourself!” Fred laughed at his own joke which wasn’t very funny. Mina shot her pistol off into air.

“See how your stupid horses and ponies like that!” she yelled, firing the gun again and then again.

As the gun’s thundering filled the air for a third time all the horses bolted off in fear. Charlie, Carrie, Alice, and Joe managed to stay on their horses’ backs, but Fred had no such luck; he slipped from behind Carrie and landed with a heavy thud.

Getting unsteadily to his feet, he glared at Mina with glazed eyes.

“You ‘n me ain’t workin’ together no more, Mina!” he screamed. “You scared all them horses! Even Bob’s donkey.”

The kids got control of the horses and circled back to help Fred just in time to see him pull out his own pistol and point it at Mina. He was about to shoot when Joe knocked it out of his hands.

“Even though you’re on our side, I still hate guns,” mumbled Joe.

Alice looked at Joe.

“You’re so brave,” she whispered, then blushed. “Whoops, I didn’t mean to say that out loud.” She leaned her head forward to hide her face.

Suddenly there was a crashing sound in the nearby the underbrush.

What now? Carrie wondered with a sick feeling. How could things get worse?

A white mare came out of the woods.

“Luna?” Joe said, his voice soft and disbelieving. “Luna?”

Seeming to forget all about Mina and Bob, Joe vaulted off his horse and ran toward the mare, who nickered at him.

Carrie gasped. *Luna?* No... That was Sadie’s old horse, Sugar, before she got Rocket. What was Sugar doing here? Then it clicked. Carrie remembered Sadie talking about the “nice” lady she sold Sugar to. Mina!

“Well, I hate to break up this nice little reunion,” said Mina’s shrill voice behind them. “But this has gone on much too long already. I’m sick to death of horses... and kids.”

Carrie jumped. How could she have forgotten the danger they were in?

“Joe, Hide!” Carrie screamed. But there was no where to hide. And while they’d been distracted by the beautiful moon-coloured horse, Mina had gotten off her horse and stood in front of them on the trail. Bob stood behind them. Both had guns pointed and ready. They were trapped!

“None of you are leaving, Fred! Not you, not your little boy, his girlfriend or anybody else!”

“Bob, I bet you don’t even know how to aim,” Charlie said, then chuckled, trying to distract him.

“Son, Bob may not, but Mina can shoot a dime a mile away!” Fred whispered, pulling Carrie and Charlie toward him as if trying to hide behind his back to protect them.

“You’re gonna wish you neva said that!” Bob yelled, then shot aimlessly at Charlie.

Zeb didn’t like the gun. He pushed over to Bob and reared, knocking Bob to the ground. Carrie cried out—What if Bob shot Zeb?—and hid her face on Charlie’s shoulder. Charlie tried to comfort her. Mina closed in on the group, then she grabbed Carrie.

Charlie jumped on Enzo’s back.

“What ya doing, boy? Any closer and I’ll shoot your little girlfriend!”

Charlie ignored her, hoping desperately that he was remembering Mina’s weakness correctly. He rode off towards the canyon.

There was a clicking sound as Mina cocked the gun. Almost immediately, Charlie was back. He was holding something in his hand.

“What have you got there, boy? Lemmee see!”

“Oh, it’s just a rattle snake.” Charlie opened his hands.

Mina dropped her gun, shrieking in fear—a shriek that turned almost immediately to anger. “Hey! Don’t go foolin’ me—That’s a dead rattle snake!” She tried to punch Charlie with her wrinkled fists, then lunged to pick up her gun. But the distraction had worked. Carrie had thrown the gun out of reach. Mina ran into the forest looking for it.

“Now’s our chance!” Joe said, pulling himself onto the mare’s back. He gave her a soft kick and she took off. In a blink, everyone else was mounted too and they galloped away. They weaved in and out of trees and finally emerged on a winding road familiar to Carrie. They were only a few miles away from her street!

“Look!” Charlie cried, pointing to a couple policemen who seemed to be on a coffee break. “Hey!” he yelled to them. “Hey!”

The surprised police men spilled their coffee all over themselves. Carrie almost giggled at the sight of the dancing police men, despite the fear still raging in her head.

“You!” One of the bigger cops pointed at Charlie.

“Who me?!” Charlie pointed at himself.

“Yeah, you—You made us spill coffee all over us!” the other police man exclaimed.

Charlie was surprised and embarrassed that the police were accusing him, but he was soon distracted. Mina must’ve found her gun and taken up the chase again. He could hear her yelling and whistling somewhere nearby. Suddenly there was another gun shot.

Startled again, the police men spilled the last of their coffee, but this time it didn’t seem to matter. Mina exploded from the forest with Bob close behind her. She yanked her reins furiously, hurting her horse’s tender mouth. The mare skidded to a stop on the road, right behind Zeb.

“Come on, Zeb! Go…” Carrie kicked her zony into a run, heading for the other side of the police car. Mina gave chase and soon they were galloping around the police car. They were a realistic merry-go-round!

“Hey, you! Stop, right now!” the biggest policeman yelled to Mina. “That gun is illegal.”

Mina turned to the policeman. “It’s just a starter pistol,” she whispered, as if the kids wouldn’t hear. “Don’t tell them!”

“Look here, ma’am. You can’t go terrorizing citizens with fake guns. That’s illegal too.”

“But it’s just a game,” said Mina.

Carrie pulled Zeb to a stop. “No, it’s not. She’s trying to steal Zeb from me.”

Charlie stopped Enzo beside her. “Yeah,” he said.

The policeman looked at Mina with disgust. “I think you should come with me,” he said.

Carrie couldn’t keep the grin from her lips as the policeman took hold of Mina’s horse’s reins to reason with her. She didn’t even notice the second man come up behind her until he placed a hand on her shoulder, making her jump near a foot high!

“Is your name Carrie Stone?” the officer asked. His gaze rested on the striped horse, trying to make sense of its unusual markings. Carrie nodded her reply. “I believe you have two very worried parents looking for you,” he said.

# # #

Carrie’s mom and dad ran up to her and gave her a huge hug. They were in tears. Carrie hugged them back, then turned to Charlie and walked over to him. Charlie got off Enzo and hugged her. When he pulled away, she grabbed him and kissed him. Then she blushed.

After the police took Mina and Bob away (along with Fred as a witness), Alice and Joe exchanged phone numbers with Carrie and Charlie, and left too.

Carrie’s parents, finally finished giving her hugs and kisses and convinced she was safe, drove back to their house, agreeing to let Carrie ride home if she came quickly.

“Well...” Charlie rubbed his hand through his sandy blond hair. “I guess it’s time to say good-bye.”

“No.” Carrie took Charlie’s hand and walked back to Zeb.

“What are you waiting for, boy?” Carrie giggled and pointed at Enzo. “Aren’t you going to ride home with me? What kind of friend are you?”

Charlie laughed and mounted Enzo.

“A really good one, I hope.”

Enzo and Zeb nickered and blew air through their lips.

“It sounds like they’re giggling,” Carrie said.

“It really does,” Charlie agreed.

“Race you home?”

“You’re on!”