

LUCKY HORSE

Bonnie Bryant

Bantam



RANDOM HOUSE
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The logo for Random House Children's Books features a colorful illustration of three houses: a pink house on the left, a blue house in the center, and a green house on the right. The houses are stacked and have various colored roofs. Below the illustration, the words "RANDOM HOUSE" are written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font, and "CHILDREN'S BOOKS" is written in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font below it.

STORM ON THE MOUNTAIN

“Oh, no!” Carole heard her father cry.

“What?” She was barely able to make herself heard above the wind and rain.

“We must have gotten disoriented when we got up so fast,” he called, his voice now hoarse from yelling. “The trail’s over there, right across from where we just were.”

Carole’s heart skittered with fear. “You mean we’re going to have to cross the mountaintop again?”

Her father looked down at her and grinned. “Are you with me, kiddo?” he asked softly.

Carole only nodded. She was afraid that if she spoke out loud he’d know how scared she was.

Colonel Hanson waited until a clap of thunder rolled away, then stepped out from the shelter of the skinny trees. Again they had to bend at the waist and throw themselves into the wind.

They had almost reached the middle of the mountaintop when suddenly the sky lit up as if a million fireworks had all exploded. A crash of thunder like no other boomed across Carole’s ears. The earth itself seemed to tremble beneath her feet. The sky went bright, then dark, then she couldn’t see anything. Where was her father? He had been there just a moment before. Then the sky lit up again, and she saw his crumpled form.

“Dad!” she screamed.

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LUCKY HORSE



BONNIE BRYANT



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LUCKY HORSE

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"I'LL HAVE ONE scoop of strawberry with mint syrup one scoop of pistachio with cherry syrup and one scoop of fudge brownie with those bright orange sprinkles." Stevie Lake looked up at the waitress and grinned. "We're celebrating today."

"Uh-huh." The Tastee Delight waitress scribbled on her pad and frowned. "Was that fudge brownie with orange sprinkles or pistachio with orange sprinkles?"

"Fudge brownie," Stevie explained. "Cherry syrup on the pistachio."

"Okay." The waitress looked at Stevie in wonder. "Coming up."

Carole Hanson and Lisa Atwood, Stevie's two best friends, watched the waitress walk back to the counter. Then they both leaned over the table.

"What are we celebrating today, Stevie?" Carole whispered. "International Make Yourself Sick with Ice Cream Day?"

"Yeah, Stevie," said Lisa. "I thought this was just a regular day. We're sitting in our usual booth with our usual waitress, who took your usual *unusual* order."

Stevie grinned, then sighed. "I guess we're celebrating the last Saddle Club meeting before you-know-what starts."

Lisa and Carole stared at Stevie. The girls were all members of The Saddle Club, a club they had started some time before when they had first met at Pine Hollow Stables. The original rules of the club were that members had to be crazy about horses and had to help each other out at all times. Since the three spent most of their time together, around horses, and since the practical joker Stevie was the main source of most of the troubles that they needed to solve together, obeying the club rules was not a problem. In fact, they enjoyed it.

"That's right," Carole said sadly. "School. I almost forgot. I like school well enough, but it doesn't compare to spending every day at the stable!"

"I know." Lisa nodded. "Now we won't be able to ride morning and afternoon. Or feed or water or groom our horses every time they need it. We'll have to sit at a desk all day instead of in a saddle."

"Please," Stevie groaned. "Don't remind me."

Lisa smiled. "I've gotten to love being with horses so much this summer that I even like cleaning up after them. I never knew Calypso and Doc that well, but after three months of mucking out their stalls, I feel really close to them."

"Gosh, Lisa," Stevie said with a laugh. "Mucking out stalls is getting a little too close to the horse for my taste."

Just then the waitress appeared with their order. She put chocolate shakes in front of Carole and Lisa and a huge multicolored platter of ice cream, sprinkles, and sauce in front of Stevie.

"Enjoy," she said, shaking her head as she went to take an order from the next booth.

"Enjoy?" shrieked Carole, her deep brown eyes growing wide at the sight of Stevie's platter.

"Yeah, Stevie," Lisa said. "This is a new height, or maybe depth, for you."

Stevie shrugged. "I've got to do something to cheer myself up."

"Anyway, like I was saying, I've just gotten to know so many of the horses so much better." Lisa sipped her milk shake. She was the least experienced rider of the three, but she was catching up fast. "I'm not even afraid of being around Danny anymore. Even after we took him to the dance, I still got nervous around him. I was always worried that something might happen to him and I'd get blamed. After all, he is valuable. But he's such a nice horse."

"Too bad you can't say the same for his owner! Anyway, Danny's not the one you should be afraid of," said Carole, giggling. "Veronica is." Veronica di-Angelo was Danny's owner, and also the richest, snootiest girl at Pine Hollow. She'd gotten The Saddle Club into trouble more than once.

"I feel sorry for Danny." Stevie swirled a bite of pistachio ice cream around in cherry sauce. "Veronica loves the way Danny can make her look good at a horse show, but she doesn't really appreciate him as a horse."

"You know he hasn't been ridden in over a week?" Lisa said. "Veronica's been too busy shopping in Washington for her fall wardrobe."

Carole frowned. "I thought Red O'Malley was supposed to be riding him."

"Veronica's furious with Red. She accused him of getting a scratch on her new French saddle and told him not to go near Danny again," Lisa reported. "Now, because Danny's been neglected, he's got some kind of problem with his right front leg. He's got a bandage on it and can't be ridden for at least another week. I saw him in the back paddock. Red's longeing him every day."

"Poor horse." Carole shook her head. "He must have been foaled under an unlucky star to get an owner like Veronica."

"Danny's about as unlucky as our horses are lucky," Stevie mumbled through a mouthful of strawberry ice cream.

"What did you say?" Carole asked.

"I said our horses are lucky. We treat them like royalty. We groom them and water them and love them and ride them almost every day. And now Lisa even loves to muck out the stalls! I mean, how much luckier can three horses get?"

"I guess you're right, Stevie," Carole laughed. "Although I hadn't quite thought of it that way."

Carole and Lisa finished their shakes while Stevie worked on her ice cream. "I've been thinking," Stevie said as she started on her last scoop, the fudge brownie covered in orange sprinkles.

"Uh-oh," said Carole. "When you start thinking, I get worried."

"No, really." Stevie swallowed one orange-and-black spoonful in a single gulp. "Since Friday starts our final weekend of freedom, why don't we spend the whole time at Pine Hollow? We can go over there early Friday morning and not go home till late Monday afternoon."

"You mean spend three nights there?" Lisa asked excitedly.

"Sure. We could bring food and sodas and our sleeping bags and camp out in the hayloft right above our horses. It would be neat. Like one big sleepover with Belle, Starlight, and Prancer."

Carole frowned. "Do you think Max would let us?"

"I bet he would if we asked him nicely." Stevie stopped eating for a moment and brushed one tousled, honey-colored lock off her forehead. "I mean, we'd probably have to volunteer to do some extra chores around the barn, but who cares? We love doing those things anyway. It wouldn't be like work at all."

"That sounds like fun." Lisa's blue eyes grew dreamy. "Living above a horse is about as close to one as you can get."

"Okay," Carole agreed. "Let's meet at Pine Hollow tomorrow and try to convince Max."

"Good idea," said Stevie, scraping up her last bite of ice cream. "How can he possibly turn us down if all three of us wonderful, beautiful young riders are there begging him?"

"I can't imagine, Stevie," Carole laughed as they scooted out of the booth and walked over to the cash register. "How could he say no to anyone who can eat fudge brownie ice cream sprinkled with orange dots?"

The girls paid their bill, then agreed to meet at the stable at ten the next morning. Carole waved as Stevie and Lisa began to walk toward their homes; then she turned and hurried to the bus stop in front of the shopping center. She and her dad, who was a colonel in the Marine Corps, lived farther away from Pine Hollow than her friends, and Carole often had to take a bus ride before she could take a horseback ride.

The bus soon came, and after a twenty-minute jaunt across the little town of Willow Creek, Carole stood at her front door.

I'd better hurry, she thought, turning her key in the lock. *It's my turn to start dinner, and Dad will be home soon.* She pushed open the door. The house seemed emptier than it ever had before. Since Carole's mother had died some time ago, her father had always done his best to be home when she got back from the stable. Lately, though, he'd been busy with a new satellite communications project for the Marines, and the job had required extra hours of work. Carole knew it was necessary, but she still missed hearing him clattering around in the kitchen when she returned home.

"Oh, well," she said to herself as she took off her boots and padded sock-footed into the kitchen. "Thank goodness these special projects don't last forever."

She opened the refrigerator and looked inside, wondering what they could have for dinner. There was some leftover pot roast, some uncooked hamburger, plus a big bowl of macaroni and cheese.

Maybe I'll reheat the roast, Carole thought. *And then cook some extra vegetables to go along with it.* She put the meat in the oven to heat, then looked in the crisper to see what vegetables they had. Broccoli, lettuce, and carrots. She pulled out the carrots. They were exactly the same color as the sprinkles Stevie had just eaten on her ice cream.

"At least they'll be better for us." She laughed aloud as she closed the refrigerator door. She had just begun to peel the carrots over the sink when she heard a car pull into the driveway. Her father, Colonel Mitch Hanson, was home.

"Hi, sugar," he called, grinning as he peeked into the kitchen. "Sorry I'm late."

"Hi, Dad. How are you?" Carole smiled back at him over her shoulder.

"Other than being late, I'm great. How are you?" He threw a Marine Corps duffel bag onto one kitchen chair and strode over to the sink, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

"Fine. Just peeling some carrots for dinner."

"How about if I help?" He opened a drawer and pulled out another vegetable peeler, the

stood beside Carole at the sink. “In fact, how about we make a deal? If I help you peel a
these carrots, then will you promise not to cook them?”

“Not cook them?” Carole looked up at her dad.

“Right.” He held up one carrot. “I mean, wouldn’t it be a shame to put this little
defenseless carrot into a big pot of boiling water?” He put the carrot close to his ear. “I can
even hear it calling—‘Please don’t cook me, Carole.’ ”

“Okay, Dad,” Carole laughed. “I get the point. You prefer carrots raw.”

“Absolutely.” Colonel Hanson grinned and took a bite of crunchy carrot. “I mean, why try
to improve upon perfection?”

“Okay. I guess that means we’ll have pot roast and macaroni and cheese and raw carrots
tonight.”

“Sounds great to me.” Colonel Hanson took another bite of carrot. “Hey, guess what?”

“What?”

“You know how much I’ve had to work these last few weeks, ever since the Link Life
project started? Coming home late and going in to work early?”

Carole nodded. She knew how much she’d missed spending time with her father and how
much he’d hated to be away.

“Well, Link Life is almost finished. As of sixteen hundred hours tomorrow, your old dad
will be back.”

“That’s wonderful, Dad!” Carole turned to her father and gave him a hug. “I’ve really
missed having you here when I get back from the stable.”

“And guess what else?”

Carole blinked. It seemed like her dad was getting as bad as Stevie in the “guess what
department. “What?”

“General Williams was so pleased with all we’ve accomplished that he gave me a four-day
weekend off, beginning Friday.”

“Super!” Carole hugged her father harder.

“And guess what else else?”

Carole couldn’t help laughing. “What now, Dad?”

“I’ve arranged for just the two of us to go up to one of the national wilderness areas in the
Blue Ridge Mountains. My old buddy Colonel Cheatham is going to lend us his tent and all his
new solar camping equipment.”

Carole frowned. “His solar camping equipment?”

“Yeah. It’s great. We won’t have to stay in any cabins or motels. We can rough it just like
the pioneers, but we’ll be comfortable and we’ll be in one of America’s most beautiful forests.
Doesn’t that sound great?”

Carole looked up at her father. A wide grin was spreading across his face. “Gosh, Dad, you
know I love to camp.”

“And I like spending time with my favorite daughter,” he said, squeezing her shoulder.
“And what better place to do it than out in nature, surrounded by the latest in camping
equipment?”

She smiled. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, but I guess you’re right.”

“I knew you’d be excited. Let me go change out of this uniform, and then I’ll help you
finish dinner.”

Carole turned back to the sink as her father hurried out of the kitchen. She picked up another carrot and began peeling it, then sighed. Why did all the fun things in life always seem to happen at the same time? When she'd started supper she'd been thrilled about the prospect of spending the weekend with Stevie and Lisa at Pine Hollow. Now her dad had come home and told her that he'd planned a wonderful father-daughter camping trip.

She shrugged. It would be great to spend all weekend at Pine Hollow, but it would also be great to hike through the Virginia mountains with her dad. It seemed like they hadn't really talked in forever.

No, when she thought about it, the decision wasn't a hard one at all. Maybe she could sleep over at the stable some other time with Stevie and Lisa. Opportunities to camp with her father didn't come along every day, and she just couldn't pass this one up.

"MAX, WE'VE GOT an offer you can't refuse!" Stevie's voice echoed down the corridors of Pine Hollow.

Carole hurried through the sweet-smelling barn, a half-eaten bagel in one hand. She overslept that morning, and though her father had been kind enough to give her a ride, she was still late. Stuffing the last bite of the bagel in her mouth, she started to run. She turned the final corner on one leg and skidded into Max Regnery's office. Max, who owned Pine Hollow along with his mother, Mrs. Reg, was sitting behind his big desk just as Stevie was getting wound up to make her final pitch.

"Ah," said Max, smiling at Carole's appearance. "The third and final member of The Saddle Club. I guess this makes it official."

Stevie and Lisa turned and looked at Carole.

"Right." Carole swallowed her bagel and grinned sheepishly. "Sorry I'm late."

"Don't worry." Max leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "I'm sure we haven't even come close to the good parts yet."

Stevie cleared her throat and began. "Max, what we want to propose is this: Since we've spent most of our time this summer here at the stable, and since we've learned how to do all the chores so much better than we ever did before, and since now all the horses practically regard us as ... as blood sisters, we were wondering if we could spend our entire last weekend of freedom here at Pine Hollow."

"Your last weekend of freedom?" Max frowned. "You're not going to jail, are you?"

"No, we're going back to school Wednesday," Stevie explained. "We'd never do anything that would land us in jail."

"But it might as well be jail," Lisa said.

"Yeah, Max." Stevie took over again. "It might as well be jail. We have to sit still for hours at a time and we have to eat this terrible food in the cafeteria and all these dorky teachers make us do stuff like algebra problems and science projects. In fact, it's worse than jail. It's torture."

"Oh, the horror," Max replied softly. He didn't crack a smile, but his blue eyes were twinkling. He looked at Stevie. "And you want to postpone this prearranged torture somehow?"

Stevie shook her head. "We can't postpone it. But we want to squeeze every little drop of fun out of our last days of summer vacation. And if you'll let us stay here for the weekend we can."

"But we'd work," added Lisa. "We wouldn't just stay up in the hayloft and goof off."

"Oh?" Max's mouth curled up with interest.

"Absolutely," said Stevie. "Lisa would muck out all the stalls every day and I could help Red tack up the horses for the riding lessons and Carole could paint some of the jumps and of course all the horses would be fed and watered and groomed twice a day. And, and ..." Stevie desperately looked around Max's office. "And we'll sweep out your office and we could even

try to shovel up that big pile of manure ...”

Max held up one hand. “Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. In exchange for bunking down in the hayloft for three nights, you’d be willing to do all those chores?”

“Oh, yes!” cried Lisa and Stevie together.

“Well, I’ll tell you something. Mom, Deborah, and I were just trying to figure out who would get to watch the stable if we took a weekend trip up to Dorothy DeSoto’s training farm on Long Island. We’d almost given up on the idea, but if you three are willing to do all that, then this is a deal I can hardly pass up.”

“Oh, Max!” Stevie cried.

“But you won’t have to start moving the manure pile. I’ve hired some guys with backhoes to come and do that next week. Everything else, though, is perfectly acceptable.”

Lisa and Stevie grabbed Carole and began to jump up and down.

“Wait, you guys,” Carole said as her friends bounced in the air beside her. “I’ve got some bad news.”

“Oh no,” said Lisa. “Won’t your father let you come? My mother let me, and she never let me do anything unless it’s approved by every adult within a ten-mile radius.”

“No, it’s not that. My dad’s big project at work has just ended and he got a four-day weekend as a reward. He’s planned this father-daughter camping trip for the two of us.” She smiled regretfully at her friends. “As much as I’d love to be with you guys, I don’t often get a chance to spend time like this with my dad.”

“That’s okay, Carole,” Stevie said. “We understand.” She turned to Max. “Is it still okay if it’s just Lisa and me?”

“You don’t think just the two of you will get spooked here in the middle of the night? Stables are full of scary noises at two in the morning.”

“Of course not, Max,” Stevie assured him. “That’s kid stuff.”

Max smiled. “Okay, then. It’s fine with me. Just to prove how good a sport I am, you don’t have to paint all the jumps. But everything else on your list remains.”

“Great,” said Stevie, extending her hand. “It’s a deal.”

As Max shook hands with Stevie and Lisa, his phone rang. With a wave he shoed them out of his office and turned to talk to the caller about dressage lessons.

“Oh, wow,” said Stevie as the three girls walked toward their horses’ stalls. “I can’t believe we’re going to do this. A weekend sleepover at Pine Hollow!”

“I’m just sorry you won’t be here, Carole,” Lisa said.

“Right,” grumbled Stevie. “It’ll be fun, but it won’t be perfect.”

Carole sighed. “I know. I really wanted to come, but I haven’t had a chance to be with my dad in a long time, and he’s so excited about this trip.” She looked at her friends. “He’s borrowed some really fancy camping equipment that’s all run by solar energy.”

“Wow,” said Stevie. “That’s really state-of-the-art stuff. I’ve seen my brother Chad drool over that kind of gear in his camping magazines.”

“I can’t wait to see how it all works.” Carole giggled. “I think Dad’s almost as excited about taking all this equipment up into the wilderness as he is about taking me.”

“It’ll be a great trip for both of you, though,” said Lisa.

“I know.” Carole smiled. “I’ll just miss you guys a lot.”

“Here are some other guys who’ve been missing us a lot,” Stevie said as they turned the

corner. All along both sides of the passageway, the horses poked their heads out from the stalls. Their ears stood erect, and their eyes sparkled. Starlight's and Belle's stalls were together, and Prancer's was a little farther down the aisle.

"Looks like some friends of ours want to go for a ride," Carole laughed as Starlight nickered at her.

"Me too," said Stevie. "It seems like years since we've been on a horse."

"Stevie, we rode yesterday," Lisa reminded her.

"I know." Stevie frowned. "I just keep thinking about school and how much time that's going to take away from riding."

"My mother would say you need to get your priorities in order," Lisa said with a laugh.

"Oh, they'll be in order by Wednesday. Right now, I just want to have fun. Last one tacked up's a rotten egg!"

The girls raced to the tack room and got their equipment. In a few minutes all three riders stood at the entrance to Pine Hollow with their horses brushed and their saddles tight, ready to mount up.

"Whew," Stevie said as she pulled Belle up last. "I think that was a record!"

"I do, too," agreed Lisa. "It's one of the few times you've had to be the rotten egg."

"It's just my school-a-phobia kicking in," said Stevie as she touched the good-luck horseshoe tacked to the wall and hopped up on Belle's back. "And the only cure is a nice long ride in the country."

One of Pine Hollow's traditions was that riders all touched the good-luck horseshoe before riding. So far, no one who had done that had ever been seriously injured.

Carole and Lisa each buckled on their helmets and touched the horseshoe, then mounted up and followed Stevie.

Stevie began leading them to the back of the stable property, where all the trails began. On their way they saw Danny out in the paddock, grazing uninterestedly, his right foreleg wrapped in a red bandage. When The Saddle Club rode by, the big gray gelding pricked his ears and whinnied as if he wished he could come along, too.

"Look at Danny," Carole said as they trotted past. "He looks so sad. I feel sorry for him."

"Me too," said Lisa. "He's such a beautiful horse."

"I said it before: He's unlucky," Stevie called over her shoulder. "He's got creepy owners like Veronica for an owner."

"Hey, could you guys add one more thing to your list of chores this weekend?" Carole gave Starlight a pat on his neck.

"Anything," Stevie said. "Now that we don't have to shovel that big pile of manure."

"Could you take care of Starlight for me?"

"Sure," answered Lisa. "We'll take extra-special care of him, just for you."

"Thanks." Carole smiled. She knew she could depend on her friends.

As they reached the end of the paddock, Stevie and Belle picked up a trot and headed toward the creek trail. The day was tailor-made for a horseback ride. Puffy white clouds floated through a deep blue sky, and late-summer cicadas rasped in the underbrush along the creek.

"Anybody want to canter to our favorite spot?" Stevie asked, grinning over her shoulder.

"Absolutely!" said Carole, and Lisa nodded.

Stevie only had to touch Belle with her right heel and the pretty bay mare moved into an easy canter. Starlight followed, and Prancer stretched her long legs out as well. Soon all three girls were flying along the wide trail in the deep green forest, the warm wind blowing across their faces. They cantered, trotted, and walked until they reached a wide spot by the creek where the horses could graze and the girls could dip their toes in the water.

“Wow.” Lisa slid off Prancer. “That was great.”

“It was even better than yesterday,” Carole said as she led Starlight over to a patch of tender clover. “Starlight just gets stronger and stronger.”

“So do we,” added Stevie. “I bet we’re all much better riders than we were at the beginning of the summer.” She sighed. “Now it will all go to waste, though, because of dumb old school. Our skills and muscles will atrophy—that’s a vocabulary word from last year—from lack of use.”

“Oh, Stevie, quit thinking about it,” Lisa said. “School isn’t that bad, and you can’t do anything about it anyway.”

“I suppose,” replied Stevie, plopping down beside the creek and removing her boots.

The girls wiggled their toes in the water until the sun grew hot in the sky. Carole and Lisa wondered what their new classes would be like, and finally even Stevie admitted that she was a little curious about who her math teacher was going to be. Too soon it was time to go, so they put their boots back on and pulled their horses away from their happy munching.

They knew better than to race back to the barn, so they took the rest of the trail at an easy trot and the last quarter mile at a walk. When the Pine Hollow paddocks came into view, Carole stood up in her saddle.

“Look,” she called. “Danny’s in practically the same spot we left him in. Isn’t Red supposed to be longeing him?”

Lisa nodded. “He is, but maybe he got busy with a class or a delivery of hay.”

Carole frowned as they rode closer to the paddock. As much as she disliked Veronica, she liked Danny a lot, and the idea of a talented, intelligent animal being ignored made her uncomfortable. She wondered if Stevie and Lisa wouldn’t start on their promise to her just a little early.

“Hey, you guys,” she said, pulling Starlight to a halt right beside Danny’s paddock. “Since the longe line’s right here and Red seems to be busy, if you two will take care of Starlight now, I’ll go ahead and longe Danny. He didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

“Go ahead.” Lisa took Starlight’s reins. “We’ll look after Starlight for you.”

“Thanks.” Carole smiled as she grabbed the longe line and crawled through the fence.

The big gray nickered, then trotted up to Carole. She noticed he favored his right leg just a little bit.

“Hey, boy,” she said softly as she clipped the line on his halter. “Looks like you’re doing okay. We’re going to do a little work now—just what the doctor ordered.”

She led Danny to the center of the ring and walked him in a circle, letting the longe line pull slowly. As the circle grew larger, Danny’s pace grew faster. Carole knew from her work with the vet, Judy Barker, that it was important to keep a horse moving while he was on the mercurials or his muscle tone would suffer. She worked Danny for fifteen minutes clockwise, then another fifteen minutes counterclockwise. At the end of the half hour, he was warm but not sweaty, and he looked pleased when they stopped, as if he knew he’d done something the

would help him heal.

“Good boy,” she said, rubbing him between his eyes. She unsnapped the longe line and dug in her pocket for one of the carrots her father had forgotten to eat the night before. She planned on giving them to Starlight, but Danny had worked so hard, he deserved at least one. “Stevie and Lisa will take good care of you this weekend,” she promised him as she coiled up the longe line and walked to the stable.

By the time she got to Starlight’s stall, Lisa and Stevie were just finishing up.

“Starlight’s all tucked away,” Stevie reported. “He’s got fresh water and hay, and Lisa gave him a nice brushing.”

“Thanks, you guys,” Carole said as she gave Starlight a farewell scratch behind his ear. “You be a good boy, Starlight. Mind Stevie and Lisa—do exactly as they say. I’ll see you Monday.”

Starlight twitched his nose at Carole for a moment, then turned his attention to his new hay.

“That must be horse for *okay*,” Lisa said with a laugh.

“I guess that’s it for me,” Carole said. The girls began walking toward the stable entrance. “I’ve got to go home and do a few chores before we leave tomorrow. How about you guys?”

“We need to figure out what we’re going to bring tomorrow night,” said Stevie. “I’ve never camped for a whole weekend with twenty-five horses before.”

They walked to the end of Pine Hollow’s long drive, then joined in a three-way hug.

“I hope you have a great time with your dad, Carole,” Lisa said. “We’ll miss you.”

“Thanks.” Carole smiled. “I’ll miss you guys, too. I’ll think of you when I’m out in the woods, cooking brownies in my solar-powered oven.”

“Have a great time,” added Stevie. “And don’t worry about Starlight. He’ll be number one on our list.”

“Thanks,” Carole called as she hurried to the bus stop. “I know you guys’ll have fun. I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“Call us as soon as you get back.”

“Right,” Carole said with a bright farewell wave. “I’m sure we’ll have a lot to talk about!”

“HEY, CAROLE! CAN you lend me a hand for a second?” Colonel Hanson’s voice boomed from the kitchen.

“Sure.” Carole opened her bedroom door. “I’ll be right there.” She tossed a pair of clean socks on her bed and hurried through the house. Her father stood at the kitchen door, his eyes shining with excitement.

“I want you to see all this neat stuff we’re taking with us,” he said.

Carole followed him out into the driveway and gaped. Tents and sleeping bags and backpacks spilled from the back of their station wagon like a Thanks-giving cornucopia. Carole blinked. All this was supposed to be for a four-day trip to a national park in Virginia. The only place she’d ever seen this much equipment was when she saw her father’s battalion going on maneuvers.

“Gosh, Dad,” she breathed. “Your buddy Colonel Cheatham must really love to camp.”

“He does. Last year he went up to Mount Rainier in Washington State. Almost made it to the top, too.” Colonel Hanson smiled at Carole. “Come, let me show you some of these things.”

She walked over to where her father stood. Two down sleeping bags were rolled up on the ground, along with a couple of blow-up mattresses. A telescope stood next to two camping chairs, which sat next to two camping armchairs, and two camping stools rested nearby. A special bag for water hung from the door of the station wagon, just touching the top of a thing that looked like a miniature blackboard.

“What’s that?” Carole pointed to the blackboard-looking thing. “We’re not going to practice for school, are we?”

“Oh, no.” Her father laughed. “That’s a solar energy collector. You point that black panel toward the sun and it charges a battery inside.”

Carole frowned. She couldn’t imagine Colonel Cheatham climbing Mount Rainier with a solar energy collector strapped to his back. “And then what does it do?”

“Well, after it charges up, it can run all this other equipment.”

“What other equipment?”

Colonel Hanson grinned and held up a big lantern. “This solar-powered light bank so that we can read in our tent at night.” He turned around, searched through the rest of the equipment, and finally held up a thing with spindly metallic legs that looked like a space satellite. “And this, which is a solar-powered stove, where we’ll cook things that we’ve kept in our”—he pointed at a shiny aluminum box and grinned—“refrigerator.” He put the stove down and knelt in front of the refrigerator. “It runs on batteries, but they can be recharged by—”

“Solar power?” Carole finished his sentence for him.

“Right!” He looked up at her. “Isn’t this great?” He leaned over and opened the refrigerator. “And look what we’ve got to eat—spaghetti and fried chicken and brownies. How’s that for roughing it with your old man?”

“Great,” Carole said, hoping she sounded more enthusiastic than she felt. Her favorite camp food was a simple hot dog sizzled over an open fire. It looked like her dad was trying to see how many gourmet meals he could cook with solar power.

“And,” Colonel Hanson continued, “we’ve got collapsible bowls for mixing up the pancake batter, collapsible cups, and a collapsible clothes-drying rack, in case either of us falls into the creek.”

Carole blinked in amazement. “What are all those shoes over there?”

“The tall boots are hiking boots. The shorter ones are walking boots. The soft-soled shoes are for sitting around camp, and the things that look like slippers are for keeping your feet warm when you don’t want to wear boots at all.” Colonel Hanson reached into the back of the station wagon. “And look at these.” He pulled out a pair of khaki trousers. “These look like pants, right?”

Carole nodded.

“Well, with just a few quick zips of this Velcro ...” Colonel Hanson fidgeted with the pants for a moment, then pulled one leg off. “Ta-da! You’ve now got shorts!”

Carole didn’t know what to say.

“And I bet you thought this was a jacket, right?” He held up a tan-colored jacket.

Again Carole could only nod.

“It is. But it’s also a vest.” Colonel Hanson unfastened the arms of the jacket just as he had the legs of the pants and pulled off one sleeve. “If you’re out hiking in a jacket and pants and you get hot, with just four quick zips of Velcro, you can be in shorts and a vest!”

Carole stood there, looking at her father holding up a vest that had once been a jacket, and pants that could soon be shorts, and started to laugh. She couldn’t help it. He looked just like someone you’d see on television, selling camping gear in a commercial.

“Oh, Dad,” she laughed. “I’ve never seen as much Velcro and solar energy in my life. Compared to all this stuff you’ve got, staying at the Ritz would be roughing it!”

Colonel Hanson’s eyebrows drew together in a frown. “You think so?”

“Well, it is a lot of fancy equipment,” Carole said gently.

“Yes, but it’s all so neat and makes camping so much easier. I can remember camping on maneuvers when the only shelter we had was the foxhole we dug ourselves and the only food was whatever we could scoop out of a can of K-rations.” Colonel Hanson shuddered. “Believe me, that was not fun.”

“You’re right, Dad,” Carole said. “I forgot how much you’ve camped on duty.” She looked at him and smiled. “But don’t you think portable electric blanket liners for the down sleeping bags are a little much? After all, this is Virginia, and last night the low was only sixty.”

Colonel Hanson looked at the array of equipment spilling from the car and smiled. “I suppose you’ve got a point.” He reached in and took the two fleecy liners out. “But let’s take everything else. You never know what kind of weather you might run into.”

“Okay, Dad.” Carole smiled.

“Have you finished packing?” he asked.

“Not quite.”

“Why don’t you go finish up, and I’ll stow our gear in the car and we can plan on leaving about half an hour.”

“Okay.”

Carole hurried back to her bedroom, her head spinning. With all the gear her dad was packing, she wondered if there would be enough room in the car for the small backpack she had planned to take.

Well, if worst comes to worst, she thought with a chuckle, I guess I can sit with it on my lap.

She went over to her bed and looked at the things she had spread out to pack. Since they were only going to be gone three nights, she'd laid out three pairs of clean underwear and socks, a couple of T-shirts, a sweatshirt, plus an extra pair of shorts for the daytime and jeans for cool nights. To that she'd added bug spray, a comb, toothbrush and toothpaste, flashlight, and a new book about horses that she'd bought the week before. All her gear fit easily into her backpack.

"Gosh," she said aloud as she zippered the pack shut. "Next week I'll be packing this with schoolbooks instead of camping clothes." For a moment she felt as sad as Stevie. It had been a wonderful, horse-filled summer, and it would be hard to go back to the routine of school. She sighed, but there was nothing she could do except make the best of it. *Anyway, she thought as she picked up her backpack and hurried out to the car, what better way to finish off a perfect summer than with a perfect, solar-powered weekend with Dad?*

ON THE OTHER side of town, Stevie and Lisa were preparing their own campsite in the hayloft above Belle's stall.

"What did you bring, Stevie?" Lisa stood on the ladder, her head poking up through the hayloft floor.

Stevie piled three game boxes on top of a hay bale. "I brought Monopoly if we want to play a long game, Scrabble if we want to test our brains, and two decks of cards if we want to try our luck at gin rummy." She pulled two other objects from her backpack. "Plus my little electronic game machine, my personal CD player, and two flashlights."

Lisa laughed. "Stevie, we've got electricity up here. There's a light switch on that wall behind you."

"I know. But I figured if we turned on the lights at night we might keep some of the horses awake. Better to use our flashlights and keep everything as normal as possible for them."

Lisa wondered how normal it would seem to the horses to have Stevie Lake playing gin rummy right above their heads all night, but she didn't say anything. Sometimes it was easier not to question Stevie's logic.

"Did you bring any clothes?" Lisa asked.

"Clothes?" Stevie frowned and looked through her backpack. "I don't know. I brought some horse magazines that I haven't had a chance to read yet, and I brought sixteen extra double-A batteries, in case anything goes dead." She looked up at Lisa. "No, I don't guess I brought any clothes."

"Don't you think you'll need some?"

"Yeah. But we can walk back home for clean clothes if we get really dirty, or if we find ourselves starving to death."

Lisa shook her head. "Don't tell me you didn't bring any food."

"I brought snacks and stuff for us to eat late at night. My mom said she'd fix us a tray of sandwiches later this afternoon." Stevie smiled as Lisa climbed the rest of the way up the ladder and threw her backpack and sleeping bag next to Stevie's. "What did you bring?"

“A change of clothes, toothpaste, and soap.” Lisa shook her head. “Can you believe my mom actually wanted me to bring a first-aid kit and a weather radio? She acts as if we’re going to be camping on Mount Everest instead of in the Pine Hollow hayloft.”

“Well, your mom means well,” Stevie said. She knew that Mrs. Atwood could get some pretty strange ideas about making sure Lisa was properly equipped for every conceivable circumstance.

“Anyway, I threw in a notebook and pens, plus some bug spray and a new mystery I checked out of the library.”

Stevie laughed. “Are you sure you’ll want to read a mystery in a spooky old barn? Remember, Max says it gets pretty scary at night.”

“Like you told him, Stevie, all that’s just kid stuff.”

Stevie looked around the loft. Her games, sleeping bag, and backpack were strewn across two hay bales, while Lisa’s gear was neatly piled in the corner. “Well, I guess that’s it for now. Looks just like home sweet home, doesn’t it?”

Lisa nodded. “It sure does. Let’s go get busy with some of the chores we promised to do. Then we can come back up here and have some fun!”

"BOY, THIS IS going to be great!" Colonel Hanson rolled down the window, letting the fragrant summer breeze blow through the front of the car. "I haven't been to this part of the Blue Ridge Mountains in years, but I bet it's as pretty as ever."

"When were you here last?" Carole smiled over at her dad.

"About fifteen years ago, with your mom." Colonel Hanson tuned the radio to his favorite oldies station. "I wonder if anything's changed."

"Probably not the important stuff," said Carole, thumbing through the field guides to Eastern forests and Eastern birds she'd brought along. She giggled. "I mean, they still probably have a lot of *Quercus albas* and *Mimus polyglottos*."

"Huh?" Her dad shot her a quizzical look.

"White oaks and mockingbirds," Carole answered with a laugh. "Those are their scientific names. It's right here on page twenty-two."

"Are you taking those books with you just to show up your dear old dad?" Colonel Hanson chuckled.

"No. I just wanted to see how many trees and birds I could identify. I know all the ones around Pine Hollow, but I bet we'll see some new ones up in the mountains."

"That's right." Colonel Hanson turned onto the highway that would take them to the mountains. "And don't forget we've got that telescope. You can watch birds with it during the day, and at night we can take it up to Mount Stringfellow."

Carole looked puzzled. "Mount Stringfellow?"

"Yes. It's very famous. On clear days, from the mountaintop, you can see all the way into West Virginia, and at night you can see a billion stars. If the nights are as clear as they're forecasting, we should be able to see the rings of Saturn."

"Really?" Carole said excitedly. She'd seen pictures of Saturn, but never the real thing.

"You bet."

"Wow." She settled back in the seat while one of her father's favorite old bebop tunes came on the radio. "The rings of Saturn. This is really going to be a wonderful trip."

In the early afternoon, they rolled into the parking lot closest to their campsite. Only a few other cars were parked there, and the thick, surrounding woods made civilization seem like a distant memory.

"Is our campsite far away?" Carole got out of the car and stretched her legs. She felt as if she'd been traveling for hours.

"It's about a mile that way." Colonel Hanson looked at his map and pointed straight up the mountain.

"Gosh, that's pretty far. Are we going to lug all this equipment up there?" Carole watched as her father unlocked the back of the station wagon. The thought of carrying the solar panels and the solar stove and the six different camping chairs up a mile-long hill was bad enough, but after they'd finished hauling all the stuff up there, they'd have to set it up. By then it would probably be time for them to go to bed.

“Oh, come on, Carole.” Her dad smiled. “Remember? We’re *semper fi.*”

“I know we can do it, Dad. I guess I’m just a little surprised that you would want to take all this high-tech equipment with you.” She looked at her father. “I mean, you’re a rough, tough Marine colonel. You don’t need all this wimpy stuff.”

Colonel Hanson laughed. “Well, that’s true. I don’t need all this stuff, and if I were with the troops, I wouldn’t have any of it. But today I’m with my baby girl, and I want to make this the most wonderfully comfortable camping trip she’s ever been on.” He leaned over and gave Carole a hug. “In fact, honey, if I could spend my whole life making your life easy, I would.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Carole smiled and hugged him back. Even though lugging all this super-duper camping equipment a mile up a mountain was a little silly, she could go along with it. After all, her dad had planned this weekend just for her, and it was going to be a lot of fun, whether they were in cushy sleeping bags or not.

She looked at up him and gave a mock salute. “Just show me what you want me to carry, sir.”

Her dad loaded her up with both backpacks, the sleeping bags, and a duffel bag full of the special camping clothes. He carried all the solar equipment, the tent, and the telescope. After two trips up and down the mountain trail, they stumbled into their campsite, tired and sweating.

“Gosh,” Carole said, out of breath. “I thought we’d never get here.”

“I know,” huffed Colonel Hanson, dropping the rolled-up tent on the ground. “I think the map was wrong. I think it was more like three miles instead of one.”

“It felt like about ten miles, straight up!” laughed Carole.

“Let’s catch our breath for a minute, and then we’ll set up camp.”

They sat down on a fallen log bordering the small forest clearing that was to be the campsite. Colonel Hanson looked up at the tall trees surrounding them and frowned.

“You know, if we can’t find a sunny spot around here, then we won’t be able to charge the solar cell, and all our solar equipment will be useless.”

Carole pointed through the trees. “It looks like there might be a bigger clearing over that way. Want me to go look?”

“Would you? You can scout for a sunny spot while I set up the tent. That way we’ll be in business in time to have some fun before the sun goes down.”

“Okay.” Carole put the backpacks down and hopped off the log. “I’ll be back in a flash.”

“I’ll be waiting for you, relaxing in our luxurious campsite,” her father chuckled.

Carole set off through a tall stand of pine trees. Overhead a crow cawed from one of the top limbs. Carole looked up and smiled.

“Wonder if you’re *Cronius crokus*?” she asked as the bird tilted its head and peered down at her. She’d have to look up crows in her book when she got back to camp. She walked a short distance farther, finally reaching the bright spot in the forest. It was a campsite that no one was using, and sunlight beamed down on rich green grass, making the air feel warm and dry.

“This looks like a perfect place for solar panels,” she said aloud. “It’s big enough, and certainly bright enough.” She’d just turned to hurry back to her dad when she thought she heard a very familiar noise. Like the crow, she cocked her head to one side and listened again. There, floating on the breeze, was the undeniable neigh of a horse!

Unbelievable, thought Carole. *What kind of horse would be way up here?* Quickly she turned

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