

A person with long hair, wearing a pink and white plaid shirt and dark pants, is riding a black and white pinto horse. The horse is standing in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. The background shows a hazy, rolling landscape under a warm, golden sky. The title 'Horse Dreams' is written in a stylized, red, serif font in the upper right corner, with three small white stars above the word 'Horse'.

**Horse
Dreams**

Backyard  Horses

A wooden fence runs across the bottom of the image. Four small, dark birds are perched on the top rail of the fence. The background behind the fence is a soft-focus landscape with a warm, golden light.

Dandi Daley Mackall

author of the bestselling Winnie the Horse Gentler series


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Horse Dreams

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Summary: Horse-crazy fourth-grader Ellie James constantly dreams about having a horse of her own, and God finally seems to have answered her prayers, but not with the gleaming black stallion she has been longing for.

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To Helen Isabella Hendren, “Ellie”

Backyard horses are the opposite of show horses. They don't have registration papers to prove they're purebred, and they might never win a trophy or ribbon at a horse show. Backyard horses aren't boarded in stables. You can find them in pastures or in backyards. They may be farm horses, fun horses, or simply friends. Backyard horses are often plain and ordinary on the outside . . . but frequently beautiful on the inside.



The Lord said to Samuel, "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The Lord doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

1 Samuel 16:7

1



Imagine!

It's the moment the world has been waiting for. Ellie James enters the horse show ring on her champion stallion, Ellie's Prancing Beauty. The crowd at the Hamilton Royal Horse Show goes wild. They jump to their feet and clap. The lean, black American saddle horse prances past the stands. The judges can't take their eyes off the gorgeous horse and his talented rider. Ellie is dressed in a classic black riding habit and tall

English boots. She is the youngest rider in this year's contest. The horses are called to a canter. Ellie and Prancing Beauty float around the ring. The crowd cheers. The horses line up. The winner is announced. . . .

"Ellie! Miss James!"

I look up. But instead of a judge carrying a trophy for me, it's my fourth-grade teacher standing over my desk.

"Ellie?" Miss Hernandez taps her foot. She frowns at me.

I stare at her for a second before the dream fades. The horse show ring turns back into four walls and twenty-three desks. "Sorry, Miss Hernandez," I mutter.

She keeps staring at me like she's waiting for an answer. "Well?"

But I didn't hear the question. "Um . . . you

see . . .” I am about to give up and admit I’ve been daydreaming—again. Then I see Colt Stevens. He sits in the desk in front of me. Behind our teacher’s back, Colt is using sign language to spell out *r-e-p-o-r-t*.

“Right,” I say, getting my brain back. Colt and I both learned how to sign so we could talk with my little brother. But we’ve discovered that sometimes sign language can come in handy at school too.

Like now. “My report?” I give our teacher my best smile. Colt’s older sister says my smile is the best thing about me. That and my eyes. I have big brown eyes, the only thing big about me. I’m the smallest kid in fourth grade.

Miss Hernandez looks surprised that I know what she’s talking about. “Yes. Your report.”

“I’m going to do my science report on horses,” I tell her. I haven’t quite figured it out yet. But I know it will have something to do with horses. Everything I do has something to do with horses.

A wave of laughter splashes around our classroom.

Miss Hernandez sighs. She's tall and skinny like a racehorse. The best thing about *her* is her long, black hair that she wears in a ponytail almost every day. "Your science report is about horses?" she asks. "You do remember that the report is on an experiment you choose to do? What will you try to prove *scientifically*?"

I shrug and hope she'll move on to somebody else.

She doesn't. "Ellie?" Our teacher is nice. She says this in a friendly voice. But it still makes my stomach churn.

I bite my bottom lip for three seconds. Then it comes to me. "My experiment will discover the best way for me to get a horse."

A bunch of kids laugh, including Colt.

"That doesn't sound very scientific," Miss

Hernandez says. She crinkles her nose like she's afraid she might be hurting my feelings.

"It *is*, Miss Hernandez," I tell her. "I'm going to report on three ways to get a horse. I'll try all three ways and see which works best."

Her thin lips twist. She's either about to sneeze or about to laugh. "And what exactly are the three ways you plan to try to get this horse?"

"Begging, crying, and praying."

Miss Hernandez turns around, with her back to the class. Her shoulders are shaking. When she faces me again, I'm pretty sure she's trying not to laugh. "Let's talk after school, Ellie. Who wants to go next?"

Ashley Harper raises her hand. She reads her plan right off her paper: "I'm going to do an experiment on how to make a horse's coat shiny. I think molasses added to a horse's breakfast will do it."

Ashley has long, curly blonde hair and blue

eyes. Colt says Ashley will probably be a movie star when she grows up. Her dad—not Ashley—loves horses almost as much as I do. He's the 4-H horsemanship leader. He keeps about a dozen show horses as a hobby. Every Saturday we meet at the Harpers' stable for horsemanship practice, and he lets me ride one of his horses. Ashley can ride any horse she wants from her dad's stable. They're all hers, really. And she still skips half our practices.

Miss Hernandez talks to Ashley about her plan. Ashley has it all worked out. She'll give molasses to some of her horses and not to others. She'll keep track of everything in a notebook that she shows our teacher.

I try to listen to other people's ideas. Colt plans to experiment with kites and keys and lightning. Miss Hernandez wants to make sure he does it safely, but I can tell she's crazy about the idea. But

it sounds like cheating to me because Ben Franklin did it first.

It's hard to stay tuned in to our class. My brain keeps wanting to change the channel. Seth is talking too fast about his basketball experiment. Something about balls with different amounts of air in them. He gets so excited that it's hard to keep up with him. His words turn into a buzz inside my head.

So I turn to the window.

Colt teases me about sleeping in class, but I don't. I dream in class, but I don't sleep.

I dream horses. I don't just dream *about* horses. I dream up horses so real I can smell horse. Horse is the best scent in the whole world. They could put that stuff into perfume bottles and make a fortune. Or candles. Maybe I'll do that when I grow up. Then I'd have enough money to buy all the horses I want.

I dream horses at night too. Maybe it's because every single night before I go to sleep, I pray that God will give me a horse. I've prayed that same prayer as long as I can remember. I'll be 10 in a few months, and still no horse.

I tune in to my classroom again. Larissa Richland is explaining how she's going to prove that hot air is lighter than cold air. Or the other way around.

My head turns back to the window even though I don't tell it to.

I know every inch of the school yard outside this window. A green shrub with shiny, pointy leaves grows under the window ledge. Then there's grass and dirt. One wall of our red brick school sticks out on the left. I can see a maple tree just past the wall.

Out a little farther is the flag pole. I imagine riding to school on a beautiful black stallion and tying my horse to the pole. I picture myself slip-

ping down from a shiny English saddle, then hugging my horse's neck before jogging in for class.

In the middle of the Hamilton Elementary School lawn, a sign says, "Welcome!" Sometimes it announces things, like visitors and days off school.

Now I imagine that school is over and I'm sitting on my black stallion.

I'm wearing a black velvet riding helmet and tall black boots. My coat tails fly behind me as my horse and I gallop toward the welcome sign. The sign says, "Go, Ellie!" because the whole school is counting on me to win the Hamilton Royal Horse Show.

As I gallop toward the sign, students watch from their classroom windows. My horse picks up speed. We close in on the sign. It's our jump. I imagine my horse springing off the ground. Up, up, up we sail. Clouds

circle us. We clear the sign and thump to the ground without losing stride.

I glance over my shoulder at the cheering crowd of students. I wave. I see my little brother, Ethan, standing nearby and grinning proudly. I give him the I love you sign—outside fingers up, thumb to the side. He returns the sign. Then I turn—

But wait. Another horse is coming. A shaggy horse, covered with mud. It trots one way, then the other. It zigzags like it's lost. I'm not sure what color it is. But I think it's spotted. A pinto? One blob of spot looks like a crooked saddle. The horse is so skinny. It gallops up a side street and disappears.

But it was there.

It was real.

"Miss Hernandez!" I cry, turning back to my classroom.

Miss Hernandez is writing on the whiteboard. She stops in the middle of a word. “Ellie? What’s the matter?”

I can hardly get the words out. My throat is dry. I point to the window. “Out there!”

“What? What is it?” our teacher asks.

“I saw a horse!”