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Colt

Backyard  Horses



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Cowboy Colt

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To Cassandra Eve Hendren, “Cassie”

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



Best Friends

“Come on, Dream. You can do it, girl.”

I try to sit as still as the sun on my bed. Outside my bedroom window, my new horse, Ellie’s Dream, whinnies to me.

My horse. It’s still hard to believe I have my own horse. For almost all the nine years of my life, I’ve prayed for one. And now I have the sweetest pinto in the whole world living right in my own backyard.

Dream is what Larissa calls a “backyard horse.”

Larissa Richland is a girl in my fourth-grade class. She makes fun of backyard horses. She keeps *her* horse boarded at a stable in the city. She'd never dream of having a horse without papers to prove what great ancestors it came from. I'm pretty sure she's never ridden anything that wasn't a purebred. And I'm absolutely certain her horse has never set foot in her backyard.

But I can't imagine a better place for my horse than in my own backyard.

Where I live, in Hamilton, Missouri, most people have big yards. But our house sits on the edge of town, the last house in town limits. And our yard is as big as a small pasture.

To make Dream a pen, my dad built fences on three sides of our yard. For the fourth side, he used our house. And my bedroom faces the backyard. That makes Dream's home about as close to mine as you can get.

I scoot to the edge of the bed. I can see Dream just outside my open window. Her buddy, a calico cat, is curled on her back.

“Here, Dream,” I call again.

Every morning for the past two weeks, I’ve tried to get Dream to stick her head through my bedroom window. I used to dream about owning a famous black stallion or a fancy show horse. I imagined him sticking his head in my window to say good night and good morning.

I don’t have the stallion or the show horse. But to me, my black-and-white pinto is better than all the black stallions in the world.

I stick my hand out the window. Dream steps closer. I feel her warm breath on my hand. I stroke her white blaze. It’s jagged, like a lightning bolt.

Soon her big brown eyes soften. She inches closer. Closer. She stretches out her neck . . .

Knock! Knock! Knock! “Ellie?”

I ignore the knocking at my bedroom door.
“It’s okay, Dream,” I whisper.

Again there’s a knock at the door. “Ellie? Ellie!”

Dream backs away from the window and out of my reach. She whinnies. Then, with a bob of her head, she trots off.

“Are you in there?” Dad knocks again.

“Coming, Dad.” I drag myself to the door. I was so close! One more step, and Dream would have stuck her head in.

I open the door.

“Oh, good. You’re dressed.” My dad looks like he hasn’t slept all night. “I’ll drive you to school. That will give us a couple of extra minutes.”

“Dad, I almost got Dream to stick her head in through the window.”

“Wouldn’t that hurt?” He stands in the doorway and flips through pages of his notepad.

“The *open* window.”

“Ah. Much better. And why would you want her head in your window?” he asks.

“Why? Because . . .” I’m not sure. Maybe because it would show she trusts me. “I guess because Dream is my best friend.”

“Ah,” Dad says again. “But what about Colt?”

What about Colt?

Dad has no idea what a good question this is. Colt Stevens is a boy in my class, and he lives across the street. We both love horses. Colt has been my best friend since kindergarten. Only he hasn’t been much of a friend lately. He acts like he’s mad at me. And I don’t even know why.

“Okay. Dream is my best not-human friend. Besides, I don’t think Colt would like sticking his head through my window.”

“What? No, I suppose not,” Dad answers. He’s staring at a page full of exclamation points.

“So what’s the trouble, Dad?”

“It’s about this rhyme. I need help.” He comes in and sits on the foot of my bed. Dad’s notepad has scribbles on every page. “I can’t seem to get it.”

My dad works at Jingle Bells Ad Agency. He has to come up with great ad ideas all the time, or they’ll fire him. If the ideas need to rhyme, he usually comes to me for help.

“Okay. Shoot.”

“Good. I need a jingle for a used car lot. But not just any jingle, Ellie. My boss wants me to come up with a thirty-second slot for a TV commercial.”

“That’s great, Dad!”

“Hmmm. It is. That’s true. Only I’m fit to be tied. I’ve been up all night, and I’m out of rhyme. It’s a great used car lot too. Owned by the Bear! Can you believe it? I may even get to meet the Bear.”

“The Bear?”

“You know. *The Bear*. He’s a baseball legend and whatnot.”

“And now he sells used cars?” I ask.

“He does. And if I don’t come up with a jingle, I may have to ask him for a job. And I’d make a lousy salesman.”

“How about ‘Go to Bear’s Lot—for cars . . . and whatnot’? Just kidding.”

“No time to kid, Ellie. This is serious.” Dad glances at his watch. “We’d better head for the car. Keep thinking.”

“Where’s Ethan?” Ethan is my little brother. He’s the tallest and nicest kid in second grade. I’m the shortest in fourth.

“Ethan said he’d wait for us in the car.”

“Mom?”

“She left for the worm fair.”

I don’t ask. Mom volunteers for all kinds of things. I guess worms have needs too. I grab my books and follow Dad to the car.

Ethan is in the backseat. I use sign language to

say *Thank you* as I climb into the front. I'm pretty sure it's my turn for the back. But Ethan doesn't keep score.

Ethan puts down the library book he was reading and smiles. It's at least a sixth-grade book. My brother can't talk or hear. But he still makes better grades than I do.

"I'd like the jingle to end with 'the Bear!'" Dad says. Like we all do, Dad signs when he talks so Ethan isn't left out. "Everybody around here knows who the Bear is—everybody except Ellie James, I guess." He laughs a little.

Ethan taps Dad's shoulder. He holds up his hands to let Dad read in the rearview mirror: *Dad, are you making an ad for the Bear? For real?*

"I'm trying to," Dad says.

I know Dad is really worried. A couple of weeks ago, he was up for a promotion. He turned it down. Since then his boss has been crabbier than

ever. Mom can't stand for anybody to be mean to Dad. I overheard her tell Dad she'd like to tie Ms. Warden to an anthill and fill her ears with jelly.

"Tell me about the Bear, Dad," I say. It usually helps if I know something about Dad's clients.

"The Bear was number one in baseball years ago. He played for the Kansas City A's before the team moved to Oakland and Kansas City got the Royals," Dad explains. "After that, he did a short stint with the Cards—the St. Louis Cardinals. And he finished out his career back in K. C. as a pitching coach for the Royals. The Bear was number one wherever he went."

He even got number one on his jersey, Ethan signs.

"We have to make people trust him with cars and whatnot, the way they trusted him on the field."

"I'm guessing you don't want me to rhyme *bear* with *mare*?" I ask. This is our little joke. I always try to get horse words into Dad's jingles.

“No horses this time, Ellie.”

My brain runs through words that rhyme with *bear*: *prayer, care, share, there, wear, hair, dare, fair, pear, rare, stare, tear, anywhere*.

“Okay.” I clear my throat. “For a deal that’s fair, when you need some care . . .”

I stop. Out my window I see Colt walking to school. I’m pretty sure he told me his dad was driving him all week.

“Keep going. Keep going,” Dad urges.

“Dad, can we stop for Colt?”

“What? Ah. Yes.” Dad slams the brakes. “Ellie, finish the rhyme. Please?”

I roll down the window. “Colt, want a ride?”

He checks his watch. Then he climbs into the backseat. He and Ethan exchange *heys* in sign. Colt learned sign language when I did, just so he could talk with my brother.

“Ellie?” Dad pleads.

“Sorry, Dad. You could end it with something like ‘Where can you go? I’ll tell you where. To your number one friend. That’s the number one Bear.’”

“Yes! Brilliant!” Dad says. The rest of the way to school, he keeps muttering to himself.

I turn to the backseat. Colt is frowning out the window.

“Somebody put grumpy in your cereal this morning?” I ask. This is what my mom says to me when I’m grouchy.

Colt glares my way. Then he turns back to the window.

Ethan raises his eyebrows at me. He taps Colt’s arm and signs, *Looking forward to your birthday? One week from tomorrow, right?*

Colt nods his fist to sign, *Yes*. But he doesn’t look excited. Ethan and I go crazy before our birthdays.

Colt digs into his backpack and comes out with an envelope. He hands it to me.

I open it. It's an invitation to his birthday party. "Cool! Thanks, Colt."

"My parents made me invite everybody in my class," he says. "I didn't even want a party."

I try not to read too much into that. Colt has invited me to his birthday parties every year since kindergarten. "That's cool," I say because I don't know what else to say.

Colt shrugs. "Whatever."

"Hey," I try, "want to come over and ride Dream after school?"

When he doesn't answer, Ethan does. He signs, *Colt already promised to help me at practice before my game tonight. I want to learn to throw a curve like Colt's.*

Colt still says nothing.

I'm glad he's helping Ethan, though. My

brother joined the county's Youth League baseball team at the end of last season. Ethan doesn't say anything, but I don't think the other kids are very friendly to him. And the coach has called Mom to complain that he doesn't know how to coach a player who can't hear him.

Dad pulls into the school loading zone. Colt is out before Ethan and I get our seat belts off.

"Is Colt all right?" Dad asks.

"Far as I know." I get out and thank Dad for the ride.

The sun is bright, and the sky is clear as I walk into school. But I can't shake the gray cloud that hung over Colt.

Colt Stevens is still my best friend. We've been through a lot together. So I guess it's up to me to cheer him up.

Only I have no idea how.

