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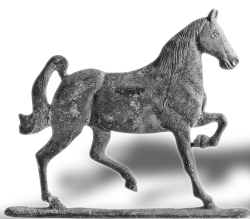
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*W*innie Willis, known the world over as “Winnie the Horse Gentler,” breezes into the lead on her famous Arabian, the great Nickers. Three more jumps and the Grand National Championship title will be hers!

A hush falls over the crowd as horse and rider approach the fallen-log hurdle. They canter in straight. They’re up and over! Now they circle left, the tall—okay, short—dark-haired girl, flowing as one with her white mare. Nickers strides for the bush hurdle. Winnie is the only rider ever to jump bare-back in this event. The powerful horse gathers strength in her haunches. No hesitation. They charge! They leap. . . . Yes! A clean jump, and the crowd goes wild!

“Winnie!”

Lizzy's voice reached the pasture, jerking me back to reality.

I brought Nickers down to a trot and stroked her neck under her flowing white mane. "Good girl. Almost had it, didn't we?"

I eyed the big hedge, the last jump in my imaginary steeplechase, the open-country horse race over nature's hurdles. I wouldn't have tried Nickers over the hedge anyway. My Arabian is the best horse in the universe, but she's not a hunter. Hunters are horses born to jump anything they come up against. The five-foot hedge would have been pushing it for Nickers. But I had to wonder what it would feel like.

"Winnie!" Lizzy called again, stepping back from the fence as I rode into the paddock and slid off Nickers. My sister collects lizards, admires bugs, and lately has developed a fondness for spiders. But she can't stand horses. It's her only fault.

"Richard Spidell called, Winnie. 'Winifred should have been here to clean stalls hours ago!' he said. I told him school had only been out an hour and his watch must be broken because you were really only 15 minutes late and would he like me to give him the name of a super

watchmaker, meaning our dad, of course. Can Dad fix watches? So he said he didn't have time to talk with *little girls*, like I was one and he was the president or something. So I said—

“Thanks, Lizzy.” I had to stop her or I really would be hours late. Lizzy talks faster than a trotter trots. She's 11, a year younger than me, but taller and minus my freckles.

Lizzy still wore her school clothes, a fall green shirt that matched her eyes and my eyes, and twill pants like most kids in my middle school wore. I still wore my school clothes, but only because they were the same as my riding clothes—jeans and a T-shirt.

“It stinks that you have to shovel manure for the Spidells again! And on a perfectly good Friday afternoon.” Lizzy handed me the soft-bristled brush and backed away again.

I shrugged.

The Spidells own every big business in Ashland, Ohio—Pizza-Mart, A-Mart Department Store, Pet-Mart, and Stable-Mart, their sorry excuse for a horse stable.

Back when we lived in Wyoming, my mom had a real ranch, where we gentled horses. But after Mom died, Dad sold the ranch. Then we

moved eastward, zigzagging across the *I* states— Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa—and finally landing in Ashland, Ohio, where I hoped to spend my whole seventh-grade year. The first thing I'd done to help was get a job mucking stalls at Spidells' Stable-Mart.

Since then, though, I'd started my own horse gentling business, putting to good use everything Mom had taught me. And I'd quit my mucking job. But it was the first day of fall, and I hadn't had a new client since Labor Day. So, since most people put off horse training until spring, I'd gone back to mucking at Spidells'.

"It's not so bad, Lizzy." I brushed Nickers' white coat against the grain, then smoothed it back down. "Winnie the Horse Gentler is still in business. I just don't want Dad to have to pay for Nickers' upkeep all winter."

Towaco, my friend Hawk's Appaloosa, whinnied from the field, wondering what was taking Nickers so long.

"I couldn't keep charging Hawk gentling fees for Towaco," I explained. "And the boarding fees won't carry us to spring."

Victoria Hawkins, a.k.a. "Hawk," had been my first client. Towaco had come along fast,

settling down almost on his own once I got him out of Stable-Mart, the sterile horse factory where horses mean about as much as anchovy pizza at Pizza-Mart or plastic umbrellas at A-Mart.

I turned Nickers out into the pasture. She kicked up her heels and galloped to Towaco. She still took my breath away.

"Besides, I have a plan." I hadn't even totally formed it in my mind.

"A plan? Winnie? It's not going to get you in trouble, is it?"

"Down, Lizzy." She followed me toward the house. A flock of geese honked overhead. "I guess it's more like a mission." My secret mission explained why jumping had been on my mind all week, why I'd been practicing over low hurdles with Nickers. "Richard and Summer Spidell are working the most beautiful, deep chestnut hunter, Lizzy. Wait 'til you see her! It's like God created that horse to fly! But the Spidells are ruining her." I took a deep breath. "I have to help that beautiful mare before it's too late."

"Wi-n-n-ie?" Lizzy's voice sounded so much like our mom's when she'd known I was up to something that my breath stuck in my windpipe.

“Like Summer is just going to hand that horse over to you? I don’t think so!”

Summer Spidell and I had gotten into it even before school started. And Richard, Summer’s 16-year-old brother, considered himself my boss since I worked for his dad. They’re what Mom called “horse possessors.” Instead of loving horses, they possess them for profit or pride.

“Lizzy, you should see what they’re doing to that mare!” A picture of Richard on the hunter flashed into my mind. I could see every outline of the mare’s muscles, rippled like a bronzed statue of a war hero’s steed.

When I was a little kid, I’d had my memory tested with 19 other guinea-pig kids. I was the only one who came out with the label “photographic memory.” I remember being surprised—not that my mind could take pictures and store them in absolute detail, but that it didn’t happen to everybody.

If I could have controlled the “camera” in my head, I’d have taken a shot of the hunter running free in the pasture. Instead my mental picture showed Richard smacking Bold Beauty for refusing the high jump.

I shook my head to empty out the image. "Lizzy, that horse came to Stable-Mart because she'd refused a couple of high jumps. She was edgy, but not scared of everything like she is now."

"Just be careful, Winnie. Don't get fired . . . again. Dad would freak."

Lizzy was right about the Dad freaking part. It hadn't been easy getting Dad to trust me with my horse business. Getting fired wouldn't exactly help my image. Besides, Dad and horses didn't mix. I'd never seen him ride. When we had the ranch, if Mom took a spill, she'd keep it from Dad so he wouldn't worry. Mom used to say she knew how much Dad loved her because he put up with her passion for horses.

I had to admit our dad was doing the best he could with two girls to raise on his own, especially since nobody ever claimed Winnie Willis was easy.

In Wyoming, I'd helped Mom with the horses, soaking up the way she got their trust and kept it. Dad used to travel into Laramie six days a week to boss people around in an insurance company. When Mom was killed in a car

accident, Dad and I lost the only thing we had in common. It was taking time to get each other's trust and keep it.

"Don't worry, Lizzy. I'm just making friends with Bold Beauty in between her horrible practices with Richard."

"Bold Beauty? You named her already?"

Lizzy had never hung around with Mom and me when we gentled horses. But she knew our secret—that we tried not to name a horse we couldn't keep. It was hard enough giving them back to their owners. Still, since we needed to call them something, we'd make up names that described them. Mom would have liked the name Bold Beauty.

We reached the maple where Lizzy fed her lizards. She squatted and touched the ground. Larry, her fence lizard, crawled up her arm. Made me shiver.

"I better get going, too," Lizzy said. "Mr. and Mrs. Barker are going out on their Friday night date. Isn't that too cute! Mr. Barker rocks! I'll bet he brings her flowers."

The Barkers' oldest son was one of the few friends I'd made in Ashland, and Lizzy did a lot of baby-sitting for his five younger brothers.

“Tell Barker hey for me!” I called as Lizzy ran in the house.

I back-biked to Stable-Mart, pedaling backward to go forward over scattered yellow, red, and brown leaves. The back bike looks like a regular bike, but Dad redid the gears and chains in reverse. It’s just one of my dad’s inventions, like the musical toaster or the electric shoehorn. At least I didn’t have to ride *those* to school.

As I wheeled into the stable, I heard Bold Beauty’s anxious snorts and the thud of her hooves echoing from the indoor arena. I raced to the end of the stalls, where I could watch without being spotted.

Summer Spidell shouted something at her brother as she galloped the mare toward a pole jump. She looked the part of an equestrian in jodhpurs and tall black boots, her long blonde hair tucked under a bowler. But her seat was off balance, and Beauty loped out of position.

Hawk walked up behind me. “She is magnificent.”

“Hawk, they’re ruining her! Look! Summer’s going to clip that jump.”

Sure enough, Summer leaned so far forward that the horse took off too soon. Front and back

hooves ticked the pole, knocking it down. Summer jerked the reins, using them as lifelines.

“Coward can’t jump, Richard!” Summer cried, trotting over to her brother. “This is a waste of time!”

“Coward?” I repeated, anger surging through me. Summer was the coward. That’s why the horse was losing confidence.

“Summer says the horse’s real name is Howard’s Lionhearted Lady,” Hawk explained. “They’re calling her Coward’s Chickenhearted Baby.”

I turned to Hawk. She looked great, as always. Her shiny black hair fell neatly to her waist, and the leather capris and buckskin shirt she wore made her look like a fashion model. But something was missing, and I couldn’t figure out what. . . .

Then I got it. “Where’s Peter Lory?” Hawk’s exotic red bird, a chattering lory, usually rides on her shoulder everywhere. She’d named her pet after an actor, Peter Lorre, who played gangsters in really old movies before they invented color.

Hawk’s expression almost never gives away what she’s thinking. But this time her forehead

wrinkled and her eyes glistened. "I had to leave him at Pat's Pets until we get back from Europe."

Hawk's lawyer parents were taking her to check out a fancy boarding school in Paris. "Pat will take great care of Peter," I said. "I'll check on him, too. And *you* get to miss a week of classes!"

Hawk stared off into space. "I do not want to attend a boarding school."

"So tell them, Birdbrain!" I meant it as a joke. Hawk's totally into birds.

"For your information—" her words came out round, each one separated from the next—"many birds have remarkable brains. Chickadees, for example, hide thousands of seeds for winter and then grow new areas of the brain to remember where the seeds are. Scientists are studying *bird brains*."

"I just meant you should be honest with your parents. You can tell them straight-out how you feel," I explained. "It's like jumping horses—all a matter of confidence!"

A scuffling sound came from the arena.

I sneaked closer for a better look. Sawdust and bright lights gave the Spidell indoor arena the look of a horse show. The ring was the only

thing I envied at Stable-Mart, but I'd lose the bright lights and make the corners horse-friendly.

Summer swore at her brother, dismounted, and reset the pole jump she'd just botched.

Richard climbed into the saddle and yanked the reins so hard I could see the mare salivate.

"Richard's worse than Summer!" I complained to Hawk. I wanted to scream for him to stop.

He headed for the same jump Summer had nicked.

As he cantered past us, I whispered to Hawk, "The stirrups are too short. He rides too far back anyway!"

Beauty pricked her ears forward, then back, the way horses do to take in their surroundings. But Richard tightened the reins and dug his heels into her ribs as they approached the jump. She *had* to be confused.

I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed the scar at my elbow, a horseshoe-shaped souvenir from the car accident that killed my mom. I couldn't bear to watch what I knew would be a lousy jump.

Thu-dump. Thu-dump. Thu-dump. Then a silence.

I opened my eyes in time to see the rough landing. Beauty stumbled. Richard jerked her head up and plopped hard in the saddle.

"I can't stand it!" I whispered.

"Winnie!" Hawk warned. "Don't—!"

But I was already storming the arena.

Bold Beauty nickered when she saw me, her soft brown eyes pleading with me not to make things worse. God must have planted that look because instead of losing my temper—and my job—I stopped and stroked Beauty's foaming neck, turned a darker red from sweat. I inhaled the horse scent that never fails to calm me down.

"Take her in and clean her up!" Richard shouted, dismounting. "Her owners are coming by later."

I stared at Richard as he yanked off his bowler and ran his fingers through his sandy blond hair. Lizzy says girls in high school are dying to go out with him, but I don't see why. Richard Spidell is the kind of guy who would lead a horse to water and *make* him drink. If Summer is a chip off the old, hard-hearted Spidell block, Richard is a chunk.

"Glad to help, Richard," I said, doing my best

to sound convincing. If I wanted him to let me train Beauty, I'd have to get on his good side . . . if he *had* a good side.

He straightened to his full, nearly six-foot height and narrowed his eyes at me. "'Glad to help'?"

Summer sidled up to her brother, their suspicious expressions a perfect match. "I know what you're thinking, Winnie. And the answer is *no*," said Summer.

Richard looked from Summer to me and back. "What's she thinking?"

Summer sighed. "Winifred Willis thinks she can do better with this *coward* of a horse than we can. You know what a great horse whisperer she thinks she is."

I glanced back at Hawk for support. She nodded for me to go for it . . . but *she* stayed put.

"Look, Richard . . ." I chose to ignore Summer. "Give me a chance with the mare. I'll work her until she gets her confidence back. You don't even have to tell the owners—"

"Who do you think you are?" Richard demanded.

Summer laughed, a cross between a giggle

and a cackle . . . a gackle. "If Richard and I can't get this horse to jump, *you* sure can't!" She sneered at me, then eyed her big brother. "Shouldn't Winifred be shoveling manure or something?"

Richard snatched Beauty's reins out of my hand so hard my palm stung. "Summer can groom Coward here. You better get those stalls cleaned if you want to keep your job."

I watched them walk off with Bold Beauty in tow. My throat burned. How could two people I think so little of make me feel so rotten?

"Sorry, Winnie," Hawk said as I hurried past her and went into the barn.

I pulled on rubber boots and went to work, stabbing the spade into a pile of manure. *This isn't over, Spidells! You can treat me like Cinderella and send me off to sweep cinders. But I'm going to rescue Bold Beauty if it takes a giant pumpkin and a fairy godmother to do it!*

