

SIDESADDLE

The Saddle Club

Bonnie Bryant

Bantam



PRETTYIN PINK

Stevie crossed her stirrups over Belle's saddle and followed Max's instructions. She was used to this exercise, and she was good at it. She also knew it was extremely useful and effective. She only wished they had more time to work with it.

Instead, the class had been spent paying a lot of attention to Miss Pink Jodhpurs and her "li'l ole horse." Sure, she knew what she was doing, but what was the point? Nobody rode sidesaddle anymore. Why would anyone want to?

Stevie recognized the darkness of her own mood, but there seemed little she could do to lighten it up. The fact that the rest of the class was oohing and aahing at Tiffani's ability to ride sidesaddle without a stirrup didn't help at all.

The end of class couldn't come soon enough.

THE SADDLE CLUB



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BONNIE BRYANT



A SKYLARK BOOK

NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

*Special thanks to Sir "B" Farms
and Laura and Vinny Marino*

SIDESADDLE

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In memory of Neil

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About the Author

“DID YOU BRING ANY carrots?” Lisa Atwood asked Stevie Lake, one of her two best friends, and they walked together toward Pine Hollow Stables. It was a summery Saturday morning in the spring, and that meant they were on their way to a meeting of Horse Wise, their Pony Club. Any trip to the stable meant a visit with horses, and horses loved carrots.

“Oh, I’m sure I did,” Stevie said, digging into the pocket of her riding jeans. Her fingers found the carrots there, all right, but the fact that they were rubbery gave her the sinking feeling that they’d been there since the last riding class—on Wednesday.

“Well, sort of,” she said, adjusting her previous answer. She drew two limp orange sticks out of her pocket. “I think I’ll spare the horses that joy.” She tossed the carrots into the tall grass at the edge of the street that led to Pine Hollow.

“I guess it’s a good thing I remembered some fresh ones,” Lisa teased, pulling a bag of carrots out of her backpack. “Be nice to me and I’ll let you give some of these to Belle.”

“I’m always nice to you,” Stevie said. “In fact, I’m always nice to everybody.” Her hazel eyes sparkled mischievously in the morning sunlight.

Lisa laughed. If there was one thing about Stevie, it was that she was *not* always nice to everyone. She was almost always nice to people she liked, but if someone irked her, she was more than capable of playing practical jokes that were anything but nice.

However, Stevie *was* usually nice to her two best friends. She and Lisa, along with Carole Hanson, were nearly inseparable. As soon as the three girls had discovered their common bond, they’d formed a group they called The Saddle Club. It had only two rules. The first was the easy part: Members had to be horsecrazy. The second rule was that they had to be willing to help one another out. Quite often that meant that Carole and Lisa found themselves supporting one of the wild schemes that Stevie was inclined to invent. Sometimes it meant helping her get out of the hot water those wild schemes often got her into.

Stevie was simply irrepressible. Once she set her mind to something, there was little that could stop her, and her friends had long since discovered that their weakest weapon against her imagination was common sense.

Common sense was something Lisa was loaded with. Compared to Stevie, she was the national repository of common sense. She used a logical approach to problem solving, rather than Stevie’s emotional one. She was clearheaded in almost any situation. These qualities tended to balance Stevie’s in their friendship. They also gave Lisa the tools she needed to be a straight-A student. Everything about Lisa was calm and logical. Her light brown hair was always neatly combed, while Stevie’s hair seemed to evade every attempt she made to capture it. Lisa’s clothes were always clean and neatly pressed, while Stevie’s apparel was more frequently retrieved from her closet’s quasi-laundry pile. Lisa’s clothes were fashionable and carefully coordinated—she’d be likely to wear a navy blue sweater and a white blouse with a blue-and-white-checked skirt. Stevie’s outfits tended to be coordinated with whatever was on the top of that laundry pile—she’d wear her patched blue jeans with her older brother’s cast-off T-shirt and a pair of socks stealthily borrowed from her twin.

brother. Stevie was definitely not fashionable. The best her mother could usually come up with to say about her wardrobe was “interesting.”

Stevie and Lisa were as different from one another as they were from Carole. Decidedly the horse-craziest of the three girls, Carole was totally organized when it came to horses and more than a little flaky when it came to everything else, Carole always knew exactly where her riding clothes were, but she might not be so certain about her social studies homework. She could answer complicated questions at Horse Wise about the seasonal changes in equine diet, but she might forget that she'd promised her father she'd make brownies for dessert.

A horn honked behind Lisa and Stevie just as they arrived at the stable driveway. They turned to see Colonel Hanson's station wagon delivering Carole to Pine Hollow. Colonel Hanson stopped his car and let Carole out, giving her a quick kiss, so that she could join her friends for the last part of the walk to the Pony Club meeting.

The girls began chatting easily on their favorite topic: horses.

“Max said there was going to be something special today,” Lisa said.

“What can be so special at an unmounted meeting?” Stevie asked. She loved learning about there was to learn about horses, but she was always happier when she was learning it in the saddle.

“Unmounted meetings aren't so bad,” Carole said, barely acknowledging that her father was driving off. “I mean, remember how interesting all that stuff was about pesticides last time?”

Only Carole would find pesticides interesting, Stevie thought. Oh, sure they were important and necessary, even essential. But interesting? Not in her opinion.

“I don't think he meant more pesticides,” Lisa said. “It's something else. And it has to do with the class, too.”

The Horse Wise meeting on Saturday morning was usually followed by a picnic lunch and then a riding class. That meant that almost all of Saturday was devoted to horses. To Lisa, Stevie, and Carole, that meant that almost all of Saturday was pretty special, particularly when they could follow it up with a visit to their favorite ice cream shop and a sleepover at one of their houses.

“Well, then, we'd better hurry,” Carole said, picking up her pace.

“Morning, girls.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Reg,” they said, greeting the stable manager, who also happened to be the mother of their riding instructor and Pony Club director, Max Regnery.

Mrs. Reg had a look in her eye that said there were chores to be done. It was, actually, the look she almost always had in her eye, because at Pine Hollow, as at any stable, there were always chores to be done, everything from feeding, watering, and grooming horses to mucking out stalls and cleaning tack. Horses were a lot of work, and the riders at Pine Hollow were never allowed to forget that. They learned that looking after their horses and ponies was every bit as important as riding them. Everyone was expected to pitch in. It was a way to learn. It was also a way to keep costs down so that the riders' families could have some relief from the expenses of riding and maintaining horses.

“We don't want to be late for the meeting,” Lisa said, hoping that might get them out of the dirty mucking job.

“This'll just take a minute,” said Mrs. Reg.

Lisa and Carole were invited to bring a bale of hay down from the loft. “And Stevie, can you help the new rider rinse out the trough in the ring?”

“Sure,” Stevie said. She didn’t mind. Everybody helped. Well, almost everybody. Pine Hollow had one rider who thought she was too good to help, that she didn’t need to help, that other people had been born to perform her chores: Veronica diAngelo. If Mrs. Reg asked Veronica to do something, she would always agree sweetly and then turn around and give the task to someone else. Her favorite victim was Red O’Malley, the head stable hand.

As far as Stevie was concerned, it was too nice a morning to let anything get her down—including thoughts of Veronica. She’d rinse the trough in ten minutes, and that would leave her ample time to get to Max’s office for the start of the meeting.

As these thoughts flashed through Stevie’s mind, the words Mrs. Reg had actually said began to register: “the new rider.” Making her way through the barn to the ring, greeting the horses she passed on her way, Stevie began to wonder.

Pine Hollow was in Willow Creek, Virginia, about twenty miles outside Washington, D.C. Because of the high turnover in government jobs in Washington, people were always moving into and out of Willow Creek, so there were often new faces at Pine Hollow. Stevie liked meeting new people. She had a natural rapport with all kinds of people. So she wondered about the new rider.

She didn’t have to wonder long. The new rider was pointing a hose at the trough and doing her best to loosen the accumulated grunge.

“Mrs. Reg doesn’t usually give such icky jobs to new riders,” Stevie said, approaching the girl. “Here, let me give you a hand.”

The girl turned off the water and stood up to meet Stevie’s gaze. “Oh, she didn’t give me the job. I just saw that it was dirty and offered,” she said.

“Good move,” said Stevie. “I guarantee you’ve won your way into Mrs. Reg’s heart. Hell, my name is Stevie Lake.” She took the other girl’s offered hand and shook it, though it felt odd to shake the hand of someone her own age.

“Tiffani Thomas,” the girl said. “Do you think that brush over by the barn will help?”

Stevie looked. It was exactly what they needed. She went to fetch the long-handled brush. As she walked back, she couldn’t believe that she hadn’t noticed at first what Tiffani was wearing. They were riding clothes, all right, but not like any Stevie had ever seen, except for the highly polished black leather boots, Tiffani was wearing jodhpurs. Pink jodhpurs. Spotless pale pink jodhpurs, Stevie glanced down at her own dirty paddock boots and her riding jeans already splashed with mud and water from the hose. And nothing that happened in the next ten minutes made Stevie one iota cleaner or Tiffani one single spot dirtier. It was amazing.

“I’m only here for a short time?” Tiffani said as they chatted about riding and Pine Hollow. “I really live in Tennessee, but my father had to go on a long trip and my mother wanted to go with him, so I’m staying with my aunt Jessie here in Willow Creek for this semester? I’ll be at Willow Creek Junior High?”

She wasn’t really asking questions. It was just the way she spoke. Her lilting accent made every sentence sound like a question.

“Oh, I go to Fenton Hall,” Stevie said. “I guess that’s why we haven’t met before.”

“Right, well, and we haven’t met here at Pine Hollow yet because my horse just got here. You wouldn’t think it would be so complicated to ship a horse a couple of hundred miles, b

I guess it is? I'd said to Mama and Daddy that there was no way I wasn't going to have Diamond with me. He just arrived on Thursday?"

"How great," Stevie said. "Well, I know you're going to love it here. Pine Hollow is great and my two best friends go to Willow Creek—um, you'll meet them in just a minute."

Stevie made a final spray at the trough and then laid the running hose at its bottom to fill up.

"Come on, let's get to the meeting. The first thing you're going to learn about Max is that he just hates it when people are late to his meetings and his classes."

Tiffani put the brush back where it had been, then told Stevie how glad she was to have someone there to show her the way. "It's just such a big old barn. I'm sure I'd get lost?"

"Oh, I don't think so, Tiffani," Stevie said. "All you have to do is follow your ears to where absolutely everybody is talking about horses!"

"Oh, Stevie, you're so funny!" Tiffani's laughter was light and musical. Stevie had never heard anything like it. She hadn't actually thought her joke was funny enough to merit musical laughter, but she realized that Tiffani was probably nervous. After all, she was in a strange place, among unfamiliar people, and her aunt had made her wear those awful jodhpurs today. That alone would have given Stevie hives at least, and there was no telling what it might have done to her laughter.

"Well, it's this way," she said, showing Tiffani how to get to Max's office. Max was waiting at the door.

"Oh, good, Stevie, you and Tiffani have already met. Then perhaps you could introduce her around to everyone."

Stevie didn't mind doing that. She introduced Tiffani first to Carole and Lisa and then to some of the others who were already there, including Veronica, Meg, April, Joe, Max, Jasmine, and Corey. It turned out that Tiffani already knew April because they were in some classes together, so Stevie felt she could leave the two of them to talk while she returned to her own best friends.

"Pink?" Lisa whispered when Stevie sat down. Lisa was always perfectly dressed herself but she almost never criticized what anybody else wore.

"Look, she's staying with her aunt here. She must have left her own jodhpurs at home in Tennessee, and this was all they could get at the last minute when her horse arrived," Stevie said. It was the only logical explanation.

Carole looked confused. "What are you two talking about?" she asked.

"Her clothes," Stevie whispered.

"She's got some on, doesn't she?" Carole asked.

Her friends grinned and rolled their eyes. Trust Carole not to notice something as noticeable as pink jodhpurs.

"Well, did you hear about her horse?" Carole asked.

"What about her horse?"

"Max told me she's got a Tennessee walking horse," Carole said. "They're a great breed you know. They're related to Saddlebreds and have a number of things in common. They were specially bred to be pleasure riders, which is true of Saddlebreds, too. Their gaits are unique, though, and smooth as glass. The idea was that their owners should be able to spend a whole day in the saddle while riding around their plantations. There's something called the

running walk. The hind feet overstep the front ones by more than a foot! Maybe she'd let me try him out sometime. I've ridden walkers before, but I don't think we've had one boarded here since—well, I guess there was one ...”

Lisa and Stevie exchanged glances. It was totally typical of Carole to ignore pink riding pants in favor of talking about an unusual breed of horse. In fact, if there had been a horse in the room, Carole wouldn't have noticed an entire Pony Club wrapped in bath towels.

“Horse Wise, come to order!” Max called out.

"ALL RIGHT, THEN," Max said, wrapping up the meeting. "Who can name the five basic facial markings on a horse?"

Tiffani raised her hand and Max gave her a nod. "White face, stripe, blaze, snip, and star," she said.

"Very good. And how about the feet?"

Carole answered that one: "Long sock or stocking, short sock, white pastern, short white pastern, and coronet."

"Nice job," he said to both of them. It was a well-deserved compliment. For the entire meeting, which was on the subject of horse colors, every time Max had a question, either Carole or Tiffani had the answer for him. "So good, in fact, that I'd like to ask you two to do some research for us and present a report at the next unmounted meeting in two weeks. Would that be all right with you?"

"On what subject?" Tiffani asked.

"How about horse breeds?" Max suggested.

"Great!" Carole said. Then she turned to Tiffani. "I've got this terrific book. You're going to love it. But you probably already have it."

"If I do, it's in Tennessee," Tiffani said.

"Well, then we'll share. First, you can look up—"

"Ahem," Max said, cutting off their conversation. "I think I'm the one talking now...."

"Sorry, Max," Carole said.

"The meeting is adjourned, but I do have a treat for you at the class, so hurry up, eat your lunches and get tacked up. We'll meet in the ring in one hour."

That gave the Pony Clubbers just enough time to gobble down sandwiches and tack up. Carole, however, was in no rush to eat. She wanted to talk to Tiffani some more, and she wanted to meet her horse.

"Why, of course you can meet Diamond," Tiffani told Carole. "He's the sweetest old boy in the whole state—at least that was true in Tennessee. I can't vouch for Virginia yet, but I'm pretty sure—"

"Don't say that until you meet Starlight," Carole said, teasing back.

"Is that the beautiful part-Thoroughbred bay with that pretty star on his face over there?" she asked.

"That's my boy," said Carole, flattered that Tiffani had noticed her horse in the confusion of her first day at a new stable.

"And who owns the part Saddlebred that's in the stall across from Diamond?" Tiffani asked.

"That would be Belle. She belongs to Stevie Lake. Stevie's the one who—"

"I know Stevie," said Tiffani. "She came to my rescue and did most of the work cleaning out the trough this morning. She's lucky to have such a nice horse. You know, Saddlebred and Tennessee walkers have a lot in common. They're both real American breeds, and they're practically cousins. I bet Belle and Diamond will get along like a house afire."

“Belle’s a great horse,” Carole told her. “She’s kind of mischievous and she’s got a mind of her own—just like Stevie, if you want to know the truth—but she’s a joy to ride and Stevie’s just crazy about her.”

“No wonder,” said Tiffani.

As the two of them walked together down the aisle, Carole took the opportunity to introduce Tiffani to all the horses there. Since the other riders were eating lunch, the girls had the stable to themselves, which allowed them to talk about horses without interruption. As they chatted, Carole became more and more aware that Tiffani really knew a great deal about horses. And she was a good listener, too. When they came to Belle’s stall, Carole gave the mare a pat on her pretty face and formally introduced her to Tiffani.

“We’ve already met,” said Tiffani, reaching to scratch Belle on the cheek just where she liked it best, instinctively knowing where it was. “And now I can introduce you to Diamond.”

They turned around. Diamond was poking his head over the gate to his stall. In spite of the obvious joke about Tiffani’s horse being named Diamond, it was clear he’d been given his name not for that but for the diamond-shaped star on his forehead.

The horse was tall, perhaps sixteen hands; his eyes glimmered intelligently in the sunlight that filtered into the stable. He greeted his owner with apparent affection, happily nibbling on the carrot she offered him.

“I missed him so while he was still at home,” Tiffani said. “And this afternoon will be the first time I get to ride him. I haven’t even unpacked his tack yet.” She gestured toward the trunk outside the stall.

Carole leaned over and snapped open the latch on the trunk, lifting the lid. The trunk was neatly packed with everything a horse needed to travel. She reached in to pull out the saddle so that she could perch it on the nearby rack until Tiffani was ready to tack up.

“Huh?” Carole said, surprised, when her arm hit something funny as she tugged at the saddle. “What’s this?”

When she looked again she knew what Max’s surprise was. Diamond’s saddle had a built-in padded hook on its left side. That was a rest for the rider’s right leg. Tiffani rode her Tennessee walking horse sidesaddle!

“NOW, EVERYBODY WATCH how she mounts,” Max said to the class a little later when Tiffani was beginning her demonstration. “In many ways, riding sidesaddle is just like riding astride...”

Few people were actually hearing what Max said. Carole, for one, was far too intent on not missing anything about Tiffani’s technique. Her mind was flooded with a hundred questions she hadn’t had time to ask during the lunch break, in addition to the three hundred she had asked during lunch break. Well, maybe not three hundred, she consoled herself, but an awful lot.

Stevie wasn’t thinking of questions right then. She was thinking about answers. She nudged Lisa. “Well, that explains the pink jodhpurs,” she whispered.

Lisa didn’t appear to have heard her. “I said, that explains the pink jodhpurs,” Stevie repeated.

Lisa nodded absently, barely absorbing Stevie’s words, and that annoyed Stevie a little more than she wanted to admit. She and Lisa had missed Carole at lunch. Stevie thought they really needed to get together to talk about the silliness of this new phenomenon that had hit Pine Hollow so hard: the Tiffani phenomenon. Between pink jodhpurs, li’l ole S’uthe expressions, and now sidesaddle riding, Stevie had had her fill of Miss Tiffani Thomas and thought it was high time for a Saddle Club meeting to talk about her.

“How about TD’s after our class?” Stevie whispered, once again trying to get Lisa’s attention. TD’s—short for Tastee Delight—was an ice cream parlor within easy walking distance of the stable. The threesome often gathered there for Saddle Club meetings.

“Huh?”

“TD’s?”

“Oh, sure,” Lisa agreed.

One down. Now Stevie had to get Carole’s attention. It wasn’t easy. All the riders were on their horses, in a circle, facing the center of the ring where Tiffani was demonstrating sidesaddle technique.

“It’s not really very different from riding astride in most ways,” she said. “The horse—we call my li’l Diamond, anyway—seems to know to adjust to one-sided leg aids. I sometimes ride him astride just to see if he remembers, and, like an elephant, this ole boy never forgets!”

There was appreciative laughter from the other students.

“Well, class, it’s not so different from a horse that can be trained in both English and Western, is it?” Max asked.

“And like a horse that responds to the different signals he might get from a rider or from the driver of a cart or wagon,” Carole said.

“Exactly,” Max agreed.

Stevie knew it wasn’t going to be easy getting Carole’s attention. When she got totally drawn into a subject—any subject, but especially one having to do with horses—it was hard to distract her.

Stevie raised her hand to wave at Carole. Carole didn’t see her, but Max did.

“Stevie? You have a question?”

“Um, nothing,” she said.

Tiffani continued. “I think the only thing that’s hard at all for my li’l genius here is that he balances differently when I’m riding astride from the way I do when I’m in my sidesaddle. He’s more used to the sidesaddle, so if I change to riding astride, it takes him a few minutes to become accustomed.”

“Isn’t it kind of dangerous?” Meg asked. “I mean, like, don’t you fall off a lot?”

“No more than you do,” Tiffani answered. “Actually, maybe less. This here leg rest will really hold you on the saddle tightly, so even at a pretty high jump—”

“You jump sidesaddle?” April blurted out.

“Well, sure,” Tiffani told her. “You can do anything in a sidesaddle!”

“Psssst!” Stevie tried hissing to get Carole’s attention. No luck.

“Whooooaaa,” Tiffani said when Diamond shied a little. The horse settled immediately. Stevie hadn’t even noticed because she was so intent on getting Carole’s attention.

If Carole didn’t notice a wave and she didn’t hear a hiss, maybe she’d notice if Stevie did both at once.

“Psssssssst!” Stevie hissed loudly, waving at the same time.

Carole didn’t notice, but everyone else did—especially Diamond, who was more startled this time than he had been the first. He stepped to his left and gave an irritated buck, flicking his tail protectively as if he were moving out of the way of an attacking animal.

Tiffani, unprepared for that sudden movement, lurched to her left, and then, when Diamond stopped, she totally lost her balance and began to slip off the saddle, almost dangling from the leg rest. In balletic slow motion she recovered, first by grabbing the saddle and then by regaining her footing in the stirrup and pushing herself back up. She seemed to swerve to the right and then corrected her balance, regaining her position.

“Diamond!” she said, speaking firmly to her misbehaving mount.

“Stevie!” Max cried, speaking firmly to his misbehaving student once he was sure that Tiffani and Diamond were all right. They were a little shaken but fine.

“Max?” Stevie responded, as surprised as anyone at Diamond’s reaction.

“Stevie, you know better than to make rapid, irritating motions and sounds around a horse, especially one in an unfamiliar setting. You owe Tiffani and Diamond an apology.”

“I’m really sorry,” Stevie said, meaning it. “I had no idea. I just wasn’t thinking.”

“Well, you should have been,” Max said firmly. “And now you are excused from class. They should give you adequate time to think about the consequences the next time you do something like that, or in case someone else might ever do something that thoughtless of you.”

She deserved it. She knew it. It had been stupid and thoughtless. Worse, it had been dangerous. It wasn’t as if Carole was going to go anyplace other than TD’s after class. The horse almost always went to TD’s after class. Stevie didn’t have to tie it down right then and there. What had she been thinking?

“I’m sorry, Max,” she said, turning Belle to go into the barn. She was embarrassed and ashamed. It wasn’t as if she’d never made a mistake, nor as if she would never make another, but to be punished in front of Miss Pink Jodhpurs ...

“Oh, Max, it wasn’t anything, you know?”

Stevie looked up to see if she'd heard that right. She had. Tiffani continued.

"I know she didn't mean anything by it. And I'm fine, and Diamond is fine. I just never had a chance to tell you all that he's really afraid of snakes and any hissing sound—Well, who could know that? Stevie's been so nice to me. She cleaned out that dirty ole trough with me and then she introduced me to everyone. Why, it would practically break my heart, and with Diamond's here, too, I'm sure, if she had to leave?"

Was Stevie hearing this right? Was Miss Pink Jodhpurs standing up for her when she so roundly deserved to be punished?

"And there she is, riding that beautiful ole half Saddlebred, practically a cousin of Diamond. Why, I know he'd be just heartbroken if they left? Max?"

Apparently there was something about sentences that ended with questions that appealed to Max. He took a deep breath and then let it out in a sigh.

"Okay," he said. "Stevie, you may stay, and I won't punish you further because I know you know better. Right?"

"Right," she murmured, halting Belle and returning to the circle.

Tiffani went back to her demonstration, showing the students how to signal turns and gait changes in a sidesaddle, Stevie watched, and maybe she absorbed some of the information, but almost all of her mind was concentrated on the fact that she didn't belong there. She had done something quite unforgivable and should have been punished for it. Worse than being punished was being forgiven—by Miss Pink Jodhpurs.

After Tiffani had demonstrated her skills to the class, she offered Diamond to anyone who wanted to try riding sidesaddle. Most of the class eagerly waved their hands and then took turns. The exceptions were Stevie and most of the boys. One boy, Adam Levine, declared his utter curiosity and tried it out. When he was done, he slid down off the saddle, saying that once was enough. That made everybody but Stevie laugh.

Stevie wasn't in a laughing mood.

Carole tried it next, Stevie watched as she mounted Diamond, It was just like Carole to have such an easy time of it. She seemed to have some magical intuition that showed her how to do everything there was to do with horses. As soon as she was settled in the saddle, she looked as if she'd been there all her life.

Carole took Diamond for a turn around the schooling ring. He responded to her commands almost as smoothly as he had to Tiffani's. She sat in the saddle without a tilt, a jilt, or a jog.

"Why, you're a natural at this, Carole!" Tiffani declared when Carole drew Diamond to a halt.

"Oh, I don't think so," Carole said, dismounting with almost as much grace as she had shown when she mounted. "It's so different, even when it's so similar. I liked it all right, and thank you for letting me try it, but I think I'll stick to Starlight and a regular English saddle."

It was a different story when it was Lisa's turn. She had trouble mounting, trouble balancing herself, and trouble giving appropriate signals to Diamond.

"What am I doing wrong?" she asked plaintively.

"Almost everything," Max answered solemnly. Everybody, including Lisa and Stevie, laughed at that.

"You should relax a little," Tiffani suggested. "I think you're so afraid of making mistakes that you're just about guaranteeing them."

Lisa's face was set in firm determination. "All right," she agreed. "I'll relax."

But she didn't, and Diamond knew it. So did everybody else. Lisa gave Diamond the signal to begin walking, and although he seemed a little confused, confirming to Lisa that she'd done it wrong, he stepped forward, beginning a slow, dignified walk. Lisa responded to the horse's natural movement. At first she'd been more perched on the saddle than sitting into it, but once Diamond was moving, she slid more comfortably into the leather, allowing the full weight of her right leg to rest on the saddle's hook.

"Good," said Max.

Lisa knew she was making progress. It took her longer to go around the ring than it had with Carole, because she did the whole circle at a walk. Even though what she'd done had been awkward and even klutzy, Lisa knew she'd learned something along the way. It was a familiar and exciting feeling, the same feeling she got when she understood something a teacher said that others found confusing. It was why she liked learning anything so much. As she dismounted, sliding down onto the turf in the schooling ring, she made up her mind to do it again.

"That was great!" she said. "Can I do it again sometime?"

"You sure can," said Max. "In fact, all of you are welcome to try sidesaddle riding at almost any time. As you've no doubt noticed when you've been cleaning tack, Pine Hollow owns several sidesaddles. If one of them fits you and your pony or horse, you are welcome to try it. I'll be happy to give you instruction—"

"I'll help," Tiffani offered.

"And Tiffani will help," Max said.

"And I'll do it," said Lisa, mostly to herself. She was determined to find a saddle that fit Prancer and her and to work on this new skill a lot more.

"Now that we've tried that, let's work on our most basic skills," Max announced. "In every kind of riding, the most important thing is ..." He waited for the answer.

"Balance," the members of the class answered. Then, knowing what was coming, they all reluctantly took their feet out of their stirrups. Riding without stirrups was Max's favorite way of teaching balance.

Stevie crossed her stirrups over Belle's saddle and followed Max's instructions. She was used to this exercise, and she was good at it. Belle had such smooth gaits that Stevie didn't mind being without stirrups even at a trot. She also knew it was an extremely useful and effective exercise. She only wished they had more time to work with it.

Instead the class had been spent paying a lot of attention to Miss Pink Jodhpurs and her "li'l ole horse." Sure, she knew what she was doing, but what was the point? Nobody rode sidesaddle anymore. Why would anyone want to?

Stevie recognized the darkness of her own mood, but there seemed little she could do to lighten it up. The fact that the rest of the class was oohing and aahing at Tiffani's ability to ride sidesaddle without a stirrup didn't help at all.

The end of class couldn't come soon enough. Stevie couldn't wait to groom and water Belle and then escape to the peace, quiet, and privacy of TD's to talk with her friends. And when Max finally dismissed the class, Stevie was the first one out of the saddle and into the stable.

It didn't help that Diamond's stall was right across the aisle from Belle's. It also didn't help that Tiffani prattled on about how she just knew that Belle and Diamond were going to be

best friends because they were practically cousins. She apparently never registered the silence from across the aisle indicating that Stevie didn't much want to talk to her.

Stevie finished grooming and watering Belle in record time that afternoon. She eagerly walked down the aisle to help Lisa and then Carole finish their barn chores. Very quickly, all three of them were done, and after a brief stop in the locker area, they were on their way to TD's.

The girls found that someone was in their favorite booth. That didn't help to raise Stevie's spirits. She was beginning to think that absolutely nothing was going right that day. However, ice cream in a different booth was better than no ice cream. The girls slid into the one opposite their favorite.

When the waitress stopped by to take their orders, Carole asked for a butterscotch sundae with vanilla ice cream. Lisa just wanted some frozen banana yogurt. Stevie, as usual, was hungry. And she, as usual, ordered a combination that gave her friends the chills.

"Peppermint stick ice cream with bubble gum bits and marshmallow sauce. Oh, plus three cherries and some strawberry sprinkles."

"That's it?" the waitress asked. Stevie was well known for adding afterthoughts to her sundae orders. This time she refrained from asking for licorice chips or caramel walnuts.

"Well, some whipped cream, of course."

"Of course," the waitress echoed. She disappeared with no further comment.

Lisa took a sip of water. "I always hate it when Max makes us ride without stirrups," she said. "It reminds me of how far I have to go before I'm a really good rider!"

Stevie and Carole laughed.

"I'll make you a deal," Stevie said. "I'll ride for you without stirrups if you'll go with my mother to the mall. She's been grumbling about my wardrobe, using words like *disgrace* and *embarrassing*."

"Do you suppose that has anything to do with the shirt you're wearing now?" Carole asked.

"Why, this is my favorite!" Stevie said. "And it's barely broken in!"

Lisa and Carole chuckled, admiring the seven or eight small holes they could see on the front of Stevie's faded T-shirt. It *was* her favorite, though. On one side was a picture of a gooey sundae. On the back it read: LIFE IS UNCERTAIN. EAT DESSERT FIRST.

It was a fine T-shirt to wear at the stable and even at TD's. It was okay at home, too. It wasn't so fine anyplace else, especially not at school.

"Well, let's just say that perhaps your mother has a point," Lisa said. "And of course I'd come shopping with you and your mother. It can't possibly be as painful as shopping with my mother!"

"No, I actually meant that you'd go shopping with my mother without me," Stevie said.

She was about to launch into a hastily planned scheme to make that possible when the waitress arrived with their orders. Stevie stared at her sundae. There was something unsettling about it, and it took her a second to figure it out. Pink, pink, pink, white fluff, red chips, more white fluff. It looked like a Valentine's Day treat. It also looked like Tiffan Thomas. What had she been thinking?

Dismayed, she picked up her spoon and began the task of eating it anyway.

But when the waitress stepped away and Stevie looked up to thank her, for the first time she took a look at the occupants of The Saddle Club's favorite booth. They were none other

than Tiffani Thomas herself, with Adam Levine—the one boy in the class who had wanted to try out the sidesaddle.

It wasn't easy for Stevie to look at Tiffani, but it was harder to look at Adam. He was totally entranced by Tiffani, gazing at her over his untouched dish of ice cream. He hung on every word that came out of her mouth, every sentence that sounded like a question.

Stevie leaned over and whispered to her friends, tilting her head in the direction of Tiffani and Adam. "I didn't know boys liked that stuff," she said. "You know, all pink and fuzzy."

Lisa's eyes rolled up to the ceiling.

"Why do you think he wanted to try the sidesaddle?" Carole asked. "He was trying to impress her."

"They love it," Lisa said.

"Not ones who have any sense," Stevie said. "I mean, I can't see Phil spending one second goggling at her the way Adam is." Stevie's boyfriend was Phil Marsten. He lived in a nearby town and had his own horse. He was a very good rider, but Stevie couldn't even imagine him trying out a sidesaddle.

"No," Carole agreed. "Not Phil."

ON MONDAY AFTER SCHOOL, Stevie climbed the stairs to her bedroom, carrying all her books and her good intentions. She dropped the books on the floor before plopping onto her comfortable bed.

Her school day had been pretty good. She'd gotten back a history paper with a B, and she'd taken a prealgebra test that she thought she'd aced. That wasn't what made it a good day, though. It had been a good day because it had been Tiffani-free. Since Tiffani went to Willow Creek Junior High—which was where both Lisa and Carole went—Stevie was guaranteed to be without her for the entire school day.

Tiffani wasn't that bad, really, Stevie told herself. She wasn't mean or anything. She wasn't a schemer the way Veronica diAngelo was. She wasn't stupid or boorish or rude. She was just so ... Stevie couldn't find the right word to describe her. *Pink* was all that came to mind, and it felt odd to describe a person that way. But in Tiffani's case it seemed to fit.

Stevie sighed contentedly and reached for her phone. After all, it had been almost twenty-four hours since she'd talked to either Lisa or Carole. That needed to be rectified.

She dialed Carole's number first. Nobody was home, which was odd because Carole usually got home before Stevie. Maybe she'd gone to Pine Hollow or something. Lisa would know.

She dialed Lisa's number. The line was busy. Fifteen minutes later it was still busy, and another fifteen after that it was *still* busy.

Grumbling, Stevie picked up her book bag. If there was nothing else to do, she might as well get some homework done. She opened her history textbook and flipped to the assigned pages about the Roman empire. As Caesar was crossing the Rubicon, the phone rang. It was Lisa.

"I just got off the computer," she said, explaining the busy signal. "I found a whole Web site devoted to sidesaddle riding!"

"Be still, my heart," Stevie said sarcastically. Either Lisa didn't hear or the humor was lost on her.

"Well, you know, I'm always interested in learning something new. I was terrible on Saturday when I was riding Diamond, but I'm sure I could get better if I worked at it. Anything to do with horses is interesting."

"I know what you mean," Stevie said, relenting. "I liked learning how to drive a cart and sleigh—not that I want to do it all the time, but it was fun. And speaking of fun, I tried to call Carole earlier, but she wasn't home yet. Any idea what she's up to?"

"Yeah," Lisa said. "She's meeting Tiffani at the library to work on their report about horse breeds."

"Oh," Stevie said.

"I've got some science homework to get to," said Lisa. "I'll see you Wednesday at riding class, okay?"

"Okay," Stevie said. She hung up the phone and turned her attention back to Julius Caesar. Before his triumphal march through the streets of Rome, the phone rang again. This time

was Carole.

“You won’t believe all the stuff we found,” Carole bubbled. “I mean, we’d both brought the books we had at home, and then there was an even better one at the library. We learned a lot about coldbloods and warm-bloods. Did you know that *coldblood* refers to the large draft workhorses like the Friesians and Clydesdales because they do so much work in the cold areas of the world, like Scandinavia and northern Europe? The warm-bloods are mixes of coldbloods and horses from the hot areas of the world, like Arabians, and that’s why warm-bloods have both strength and endurance. And then there are horses like the ones native to Mongolia, which might be the original horse breeds from which all the other horses descended, and those horses have some vague striping on their legs that looks a lot like zebra stripes! Isn’t this interesting? I wonder how much time Max will give us for our report. I couldn’t believe how much of this stuff Tiffani already knew. We looked in our books, and she was right, but she knew most of it anyway. We made copies of lots and lots of pictures so we can make charts of all the major breed groups of horses and then of ponies. I’m always amazed at how much there is to know. Don’t you just love learning something new?”

Carole didn’t stop to take a breath. Stevie thought she might talk for hours on the subject of South American breeds alone. Carole was like that. She was famous among her friends for being able to give what they jokingly called twenty-five-cent answers to nickel questions. Stevie was used to that and in fact had often benefited from it. In this case, though, she was finding it a little hard to take. She’d also heard about as much as she wanted to hear about the joys of learning something new—especially when all that new knowledge was attached to Tiffani Thomas. This day wasn’t turning out to be Tiffani-free after all.

“Hey, stop a second,” Stevie said. “Save some surprises for me until you give your actual report.”

“Oh, right, yeah,” Carole said. “But there’s so much. We won’t be able to tell it all no matter how much time Max gives us.”

“Well, whatever is left over, you can tell Lisa and me at our next sleepover.”

“Deal,” Carole said. “So what are you up to?”

“Julius Caesar,” Stevie answered. “He’s just come to power in Rome.”

“I’ll let you get back to it. I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“Bye,” Stevie said. She returned her attention to Caesar’s exploits. Somehow they seemed to make more sense to her than either of her friends.

ON TUESDAY AFTER school, Stevie was denied the luxury of escaping to her room. For some reason her mother was oblivious to the humor in Stevie’s most recent practical joke on her beloved twin brother. It was just shaving cream!

The net result was that Stevie had to weed the flower bed in front of the house. And she’d been threatened with perpetual raking if she took out so much as one impatiens. If there was anything she hated more than weeding, it was raking. She was being very careful. She was paying so much attention to the flower bed that she hardly noticed when people walked by. But she couldn’t miss Lisa in her riding clothes on her way back from Pine Hollow.

“Hi,” Stevie greeted her. “How’s Prancer?”

“Oh, I wasn’t riding Prancer,” Lisa said, almost breathless with excitement. “I tried all of Max’s sidesaddles on her, but none of them fit. It was okay, though, because, as usual, Tiffani was very generous. She let me ride Diamond. It was great. I didn’t do anywhere near as many

dumb things as I did when I tried on Saturday. All that reading yesterday really paid off. Tiffani could hardly believe how much better I was. That doesn't mean I was good at anything, but I wasn't so obviously a beginner. It's really fun, you know. You sit a whole different way on the horse, more balancing on your thigh than on your bottom, but it works somehow. You should try it, Stevie."

"I did try it, you know," Stevie said.

"I didn't see you on Diamond."

"Not on Diamond. It was a while ago. It was okay, but frankly I'd just as soon stick to regular riding," Stevie said, yanking out an impatiens.

"There certainly is plenty more I need to learn about riding astride, so I'm not at all sure I ought to spend much time on the sidesaddle riding, but it was fun."

"How right you are," Stevie said, trying to stuff the bedraggled flower back into the earth. "Listen, I'll see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay, bye," said Lisa, and she continued on her way home.

* * *

CLASS ON WEDNESDAY wasn't much of an improvement. In the first place, Tiffani was there. She and Carole were buzzing together beforehand, talking about their presentation: Which one of them needed to buy oak tag and where could they meet to glue everything down and practice their speeches?

That surprised Stevie. The idea of Carole actually having to practice talking endlessly about horses was a bit much. She did that as naturally as she breathed.

Every time Tiffani did something in class, like change gaits or diagonals or make Diamond back up, Lisa would say something like, "Oh, that's how it's done sidesaddle!"

Even Max seemed a little overcome by the presence of Tiffani and her sidesaddle wonder horse. "You know, riders," he said, "this new aspect of riding has inspired me. I am going to give you all an assignment to work on by yourselves. I want each of you to learn something new. Pick something you haven't done before—or that you've done only a little of—something you've wanted to have a chance to learn more about, and teach it to yourself. I don't care what it is. Each of you is on your own to pick a topic and learn it. It can be a skit or a research report or anything at all. If you need help, you can get some from me or from your classmates, but the project should be yours alone. We can all share our new skills and information with one another at the Horse Wise meeting in two weeks."

It took Stevie exactly two and a half seconds to decide what her new skill would be. She would figure out a way to get a nice pair of new black cotton socks into Tiffani's laundry so that she'd never have to see those pink jodhpurs again. If she used her own blue bathrobe, it would be too obvious. Socks were good. They were really anonymous. Or a towel.

"Class dismissed!" Max announced.

Not soon enough, Stevie thought.

THURSDAY WILL BE OKAY, thought Stevie, First, no Tiffani at school. Then Carole was doing something with her father after school, so she wouldn't be able to meet with Tiffani and then tell Stevie all about it. And Lisa was going to the orthodontist with her mother, and that meant no Pine Hollow and no more breathless descriptions about sidesaddle riding. It would

definitely be a Tiffani-free day.

After school, as soon as Stevie finished raking the side yard, she escaped to the relative quiet of her room and the exploits of Julius Caesar. Just as she was getting into the reading, the phone rang.

“Hi, is this Stevie?”

“Yes,” Stevie said uncertainly. She wasn’t uncertain that she was Stevie. She was just uncertain that she wanted to talk with the person who was calling.

“It’s Tiffani!” the person announced.

“Hi,” Stevie said.

“You know, I just had this wonderful idea?” There she was, asking questions again. “I was thinking about how my Tennessee walker and your Saddlebred are practically siblings, you know?”

“Well, sort of,” Stevie agreed.

“And they just really seem to be getting along like a house afire?”

“Yes?” Stevie said, irritated that she, too, was asking a question but also hoping that Tiffani would get to her point.

“Well, I wondered if it wouldn’t be fun if the two of them—and us, of course—could take a trail ride together tomorrow afternoon? I know Diamond would just love to get a chance to see some of the woods around his new home, and Max tells me that there’s nobody who knows the trails better than you do, so it just seemed so utterly natural that we should go together with our horses?”

Stevie loved to take trail rides on Friday afternoons. It always seemed to make the point that the weekend was beginning. A trail ride was freedom, so different from school and the structure of weekdays, to say nothing of weeding and raking. It was a sort of TGIF release. But with Tiffani?

“Gee, I don’t know, Tiffani,” she said. “I’ve got a bunch of things I have to do, and I was sort of counting on the afternoon.” Right, like her Christmas thank-you notes. Now that it was April, it was definitely time to get them done. And her mother had been nagging her about doing some shopping. And there was that dentist’s appointment she’d been putting off ... “I just don’t think I can,” she said. “But you go ahead and have fun.”

“Oh, too bad!” said Tiffani, clearly oblivious to Stevie’s lukewarm response. “I was hoping to get more of a chance to know you. After all, you were so nice to me at the first meeting. I wanted a way to say thank you, too. But if you can’t do it tomorrow, how about on Saturday after Horse Wise and after the class? We should be able to get in a little time together.”

“Right, sure,” Stevie said.

“Oh, goody,” Tiffani responded. “I’ll see you then!” And she hung up the phone.

Stevie sighed. Saturday was a long, long time away, wasn’t it?

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