



God forbid that
I should go to
any heaven where
there are
no horses.

~R.B. Cunningham-Graham

Chapter 4

At dinner that night her mother tried to talk to her. Cindy could tell from the look on her face that she knew about Diamond. Had she known all along? How was it fair that adults got to decide how and when information got shared? They actually collaborated on stuff, like members of an Adults Only Club. Fine. But she wouldn't be volunteering any personal feelings. She had control over that much.

Her mom gave her so many sad, knowing looks over dinner Cindy wanted to throw up. When she finally escaped to her room, she turned on her fave, Kenny Chesney. She needed something pleasant and easy to listen to. Kenny was good for that: all those songs about the beach and summer living. She lay on the bed and let her mind wander as the calypso beat of a song filtered softly through the air.

Everybody wants to go to heaven ...

Cindy pondered the song as it skipped along. She thought about heaven, a place nobody had seen or set foot in (except maybe dead people). Adults acted like it was as real as downtown Riley. A Riley with streets of gold and overly happy people wearing halos. Not too appealing, actually. Were there Quarter Horses in heaven? Horses were not clean. She felt certain heaven was a clean place. Sterile even. And God a neat freak. How could she, a girl who enjoyed getting dirty, fit in with a bunch of clean, harp-playing saints? She thought of a certain day the previous summer—her kind of heaven. Unlike the song, it was a place she wanted to go. Right now.

It had been hot, nearly one hundred degrees every day for a week straight. She'd cleaned stalls in the early morning hours before the sun came out to fry everyone. Diamond lounged in misery in her paddock, hugging the base of a scraggly tree for its tiny rectangle of shade. After stall duty, Cindy grabbed a halter and went to fetch the mare.

"Let's get out of here, Di. We'll head for the trees. That'll keep you cool."

She fashioned quick reins out of the lead rope, lead the mare away from the barn, and jumped on her back. Insects buzzed in the still air as heat from a wicked sun snatched every last dew drop from the ground. Cindy pushed Diamond into an easy lope. They headed for a thick stand of trees at the back of the Henderson's property. By the time they got there Cindy's bare legs

were damp, the nape of her neck beaded with sweat under a veil of barely brushed hair. The sharp scent of hot horse mixed with the subtle aroma of drying grasses.

Cindy jumped off the mare, pulled down the edges of her cutoffs and flopped under a tree. Diamond eagerly foraged for the patches of grass, still green beneath the shade of the trees. Stretching out on her back full length, Cindy dug furrows in the dirt with the heel of her boots. She watched an ant crawl over her arm carrying an enormous leaf. There was no sound save the buzzing of flies, the flap of a bird's wing overhead, and the sound of Diamond chewing and swishing her tail. Time slowed to a crawl. A purer sense of peace did not exist anywhere in the world.

She didn't need halos, harps, and streets of gold. It was probably a sin, but she felt happiest with dirt in her hair and a good horse under her. Like Kenny Chesney, she was content to *not* be in a clean, white heaven right now. Still, there must be a way to know, for sure, if God existed. Something inside yearned to know the truth.

An idea popped into her head. Cindy went to the closet and reached up on the shelf. An old black King James Bible lay under a stack of *Western Horseman* magazines. Cindy pulled it down and ran her hand over the cracked leather binding. The only piece of her father she owned. There was no name inside; no indication, save the worn exterior, that the Bible had been used by anyone, including her father.