

Chapter 3

THE WIND BLEW in Amanda's face as she cantered ahead. Her eyes filled with angry tears as she tried to erase the frustration she was feeling. It was bad enough not knowing who she was but now she had to do a project on it. Wiping away a stray tear, she leaned forward over Lancer's long, sleek neck. As he felt her weight lifting off his back, the powerful muscles in his hindquarters propelled him faster. His ears flattened back, his mane and tail flying in the wind; he lengthened his strides, extending into a gallop. As the wind buffeted her, Amanda's skin felt stretched. She gulped for air, feeling Lancer's powerful acceleration beneath her. Flecks of saliva, like silvery threads caught by the wind, sailed past her. Lancer's nostrils flared and vibrated with every beat of his hooves hitting the ground. *Prrrp!... Prrrp!* The rhythmical pounding of hoof beats and the snorting sounds of both horses breathing hard from the exertion was music to Amanda's ears. *This is what life is supposed to feel like*, she thought, as they galloped side by side, *carefree and happy. No arguments, no hard feelings, just ... happiness.*

As they neared a small clump of elm trees, Amanda and Chelsey reined in their horses and slowly broke into a trot and then a walk. The girls lengthened their reins, allowing the horses to relax and catch their breath. They stopped by the trees and dismounted, loosened their girths

and pulled up their stirrup irons. Taking the reins over their horses' heads, they let Lancer and Zombie graze on the short tufts of grass. The girls removed their riding helmets, then sat down on a large smooth rock, and munched on the apples they had brought with them.

"That felt great," exclaimed Amanda. She bit off a chunk of apple and gave it to Lancer. "The wind blew all my frustrations away."

"Good. I hate it when you get mad." Seeing Amanda's scowling face she quickly added, "But, I remember. It's Saturday!"

Laughing, Amanda playfully punched Chelsey's arm. "That's what I like about you, Chelsey. You can read my moods. Just like my dad and Sam can. Now if only mom wouldn't be so critical and expect me to be perfect, and if Julie would stop being 'Miss high and mighty', life wouldn't be nearly as difficult."

"You, perfect? Now that would take a miracle!" The girls laughed. Standing up and stretching, Chelsey asked "When is Sam coming home?"

"His year-end exams are coming up next week. Hopefully he will come home soon after that. I'll be glad to see him. He's been away at Med School for so long and I miss him being around, not only because he sticks up for me but I really enjoy his company." Looking at her watch, she announced, "Time to go."

After giving their apple cores to the horses, the girls tightened girths, flipped the reins back over their horses' heads, pulled down the stirrup irons, and mounted. The late spring morning sun, having burned off the mist in the valley, was now high in the sky. Turning for home the two friends encouraged their horses into a brisk trot. Breaking into a canter along the ridge of the hill, Amanda shouted, "Come on, one last gallop." Urging their horses forward, the girls

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galloped neck and neck before Lancer surged ahead, staying in front all the way until they reached the end of the ridge.

“Whoa Zombie!” shrieked a breathless Chelsey, easing her horse into a walk. “Gosh Amanda, Lancer sure can move! I thought Zombie was fast but we couldn’t keep up with you. It’s like Lancer had grown wings, just like Pegasus, the winged horse.”

The girls loosened the reins, letting their horses stretch their heads and necks down and recover after their exhilarating gallop. Suddenly, Amanda stopped and exclaimed, “That’s it! Brilliant, Chelsey!”

“What’s brilliant?” asked Chelsey, stopping beside her.

“Wings!”

“Wings? What are you talking about?”

Turning to her friend, her eyes sparkling, Amanda declared, “Wings! You said wings, just like Pegasus the winged horse!”

“What’s so brilliant about that?”

“Remember, Mrs. Phillips spoke about the importance of Roots ... knowing where you came from? And Wings ...what you will do when you grow up?”

“Yes.” Chelsey frowned, not knowing where this line of thought was going.

“I don’t know about my roots or where my wings will come from, but I do know about Lancer’s roots and wings. I’ll do my project on him!”

“You ...” started Chelsey, then bit back her words. She abruptly changed her mind, seeing her friend’s happy face.

“Yes, that’s what I’ll do. Maybe I’ll talk to Mrs. Phillips on Wednesday,” said Amanda, nodding. They silently rode back to the stables, each occupied with their own thoughts.

After giving Lancer a quick rub down and wiping her saddle and bridle clean, Amanda waved goodbye to Chelsey, collected her bicycle, and pedalled away from the stables. Her spirits were high as she free-wheeled down the hill. Stopping

at the bottom, she dropped her bike on the grassy bank between the road and a stone wall. Leaning over the wall, she looked in on the large garden bordered on two sides by more stone walls, one higher than the other. New shoots of flowering vines were already clinging to the wooden trellis attached to the walls, and she could see rows of scarlet red tulips, in full bloom, standing like red-coated soldiers guarding the gravelled pathway. Amanda always tried to make time to stop and admire the garden every time she passed by after leaving the stables. She liked to study the layout of the flower beds, and now she eagerly awaited the emergence of perennials and brightly coloured annuals that she was sure would appear very soon. She didn't know who owned the walled garden, or the elegant, old stone house, but she had fallen in love with it the first time she had seen it.

It looked like something out of a romantic novel, featuring beautiful gardens and a large stone house at the turn of the century, steeped in mystery. The small, lead paned windows glinting in the sunlight seemed to protect secrets from within. The large, oak door with its black iron knocker, and the ivy clinging to the house walls, creeping up to the roof, added to the mystery.

Once, she had caught a glimpse of an elderly lady wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat, stooping over a rose bush. But mainly it was just the gardener she had seen, working in the flower beds or pruning the neat hedges and ornamental trees.

One day, she thought, one day I will design gardens like this.

Amanda picked up her bike and pedalled towards home. She felt happy having solved the problem of her school project and excited because her dad was coming home today. Being a senior pilot with an international airline, he was away from home a lot. But when he was home, he and Amanda always spent quality time together, side by side,

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weeding and planting the flower gardens. It was so good to have someone to share her love of flowers with, and each year he always encouraged her to think of a new design they could incorporate into the garden. *Our new garden will need a lot of work*, she thought, as ideas for designs filled her mind. Her dad didn't know her secret hopes. Nobody did yet, but his encouragement always gave her desire and dream of becoming a landscape architect a boost. *Maybe that will become my wings to fly*, she thought, as she put her bicycle in the garage and walked towards the house.

She could hear the sounds of pots and pans banging loudly as she opened the kitchen door. "Hi Julie, what are you doing?"

"Getting dinner organized, what does it look like?" snapped Julie, scowling at Amanda with her brown eyes blazing.

"Okay, okay. Don't shout. I'll just have a quick shower and then I'll help you," said Amanda, holding up her hands.

"Pee ... yooo! What a stink! It will take more than a quick shower to get rid of *that* smell," remarked Julie, pinching her nose tightly.

Amanda was about to retaliate but changed her mind. She didn't want to get into an argument. *Once a day is enough* she thought, thinking back to the stand-off with her mother that morning. Leaving the kitchen, she headed up the stairs, thinking how alike Julie and her mother were; always ready to find fault, never having anything good to say. "I'll be down in a minute and then I'll lay the table for dinner, before giving you a hand with the vegetables," she called out.

Stripping off her blue sweater, which was covered in bits of straw, she heard the hall clock strike four. *Plenty of time*, she thought. She stepped out of her jeans and headed for the bathroom, oblivious to the trail of straw and hay seeds

that had dropped off of her clothes and onto the stairs and her bedroom carpet.

As she finished dressing, Amanda heard the sound of car doors closing. She rushed down the stairs two steps at a time. Excitedly, she opened the front door. "Hello Mom! Hi Dad, it's great to see you!" She flung herself at her father and standing on tip-toes, wrapped her arms around him, hugging tightly.

"Wow, that's some welcome!" he said, laughing at her exuberance. "Let me put down my luggage so I can hug you properly." Amanda glowed in his presence. His tall frame towered above her. His short dark hair complimented the well-cut black suit he wore. The gold wings attached to the jacket's lapel and the gold braids embroidered on the sleeves of his jacket signified his pilot status. She felt a sense of pride and love that made her problems seem rather trivial when he was home.

Stepping back after greeting her, he rested his large hands on her shoulders. "Look at you! I do believe you've grown some more, Buggy, since I've been away." There was kindness in his twinkling brown eyes as he looked into her face. Amanda adored the sound of her father's voice. It was deep and his words were always so sincere and full of love; such a contrast from her mom's terse words and Julie's whiny voice. Buggy was a special name that he and Sam had for her. It had come about when she was small. She used to be forever gathering bugs and worms out of the soil where they were digging. Never wanting to see anything hurt, she would carefully carry away the tiny creatures to the corner of the garden, where she would put them safely in the tall grass.

Smiling happily, she slipped her arm through his as she walked beside him up the front steps, where Julie was standing waiting.

"Hello Dad. How was your flight?"

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“Good thanks. And how are you? You look as pretty as ever.” He gave her a peck on the cheek before stepping into the hallway.

Tossing back her curls, the colour of sun-kissed wheat, Julie gave him a sweet smile, and cast a gloating look at Amanda before she turned away. A look that said, *See, he thinks I'm prettier than you.*

Amanda puckered her lips and silently challenged Julie to say something smart, as she usually did, but Julie wasn't about to give Amanda the satisfaction, not in front of their dad.

“Is dinner ready, Julie?” inquired their mother, as the two girls stared at each other.

Julie turned her back on Amanda. “Yes, it's all ready.”

Everyone was eager to find out which countries their father had flown to and what he had seen, as they sat around the dinner table.

“Thank you for getting the dinner ready, Julie.” Sophia smiled at her eldest daughter as she scooped a small spoonful of potatoes onto her plate.

“I helped too,” piped up Amanda, feeling a twinge of hurtful rejection from her mother's readiness to only thank her sister.

“Of course, Amanda, thank you,” replied her mother quickly.

An uncomfortable silence settled over the table as the dishes of food were passed around.

“So Julie, how are things at school?”

“Great, Dad. We had another career day last week. I and a lot of my friends from last year didn't know what we wanted to do after graduation, so Grade 10 has added an extra career day. That was pretty cool, hearing what my friends were thinking of doing.”

“Have you decided yet what you are going to do?”

“Yes. I think I’m going to try and take courses that will be useful for a career in fashion design. I’ll need, among other credits, Grade 12 English, Math, and Art, and maybe some Tech courses.”

“Fashion!” said Amanda, nearly choking on the water she was drinking.

Julie glared at her from across the table. “What’s that supposed to mean? For your information, fashion means well fitting clothes, beautiful materials and creative designs. But you wouldn’t know that, as you only wear jeans and tee shirts!” she said rudely.

“Julie! That was uncalled for. Apologize to your sister,” scolded her father.

Flustered, Julie glanced at her mother for support. Seeing none, she quickly mumbled ‘sorry’ without looking at Amanda.

“So, how are you doing at school, Amanda?” he asked, turning and smiling at her.

“Pretty good, I guess. I do well in Art and Geography, but subjects like Math and French, well, they’re not so good.”

Putting down her knife and fork, Amanda’s mother said, “If you haven’t improved by the time your next report card comes home, I think we need to seriously consider sending you to summer school to catch up.”

“No Mom, please, not that! I’ll work harder, I promise.”

Julie sniggered, and without thinking said, “Well I guess you won’t need too much education if you’re just going to ride horses!”

Amanda was surprised to see her usually calm father obviously becoming agitated. Before he could say anything, she quickly responded, “Who says I’m going to do that?” She was furious at her sister’s stinging remark.

“Girls, that is quite enough! What sort of homecoming is this for your father?” interjected their mother and then anxiously dabbed her lips with her napkin.

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Fuming internally, Amanda looked daggers at Julie. In a low, deliberate voice she said, "I am going to be a landscape architect when I graduate." *There, I said it*, she thought.

Julie and her mother stared open-mouthed at Amanda, who was still seething at Julie's remarks. Her dad looked down at his plate, but not before Amanda saw a broad grin crease his face. Encouraged by his silent support, Amanda stood up, placing her hands on her hips. Nobody spoke. Her short crisp announcement had silenced them all. In a confident voice, she continued, "I know exactly which subjects I need to work harder on and I promise you I will do that. I also will get some summer jobs working as a gardener for experience." She paused, waiting for a reaction. There was none. "Now, if you will excuse me, I think I'll go to my room." Thrusting her hands deep into her pant pockets, her head held high, she marched out of the dining room. Nobody spoke.

She ran up the stairs, into her bedroom and slammed the door. Leaning back against it, she exhaled deeply. She was infuriated. Her hands were still shaking. *How dare Julie think I'm not good enough to have a career*, she thought. Flinging herself across the bed, she grumbled fiercely, "Well I'll show her that I can be just as good as her!"