

Chapter # 1 A Momentous Meeting

The door lay in shattered pieces scattered across the floor as my father flipped back his vest to reveal the gun he always carried. “I’m tired of you being so mouthy. You better learn to watch your tone with me.”

I stuck my face right in his, leaned in, and yelled at full volume. “Pull the gun!” There came a point when living no longer mattered. It didn’t matter if you lived or died, as long as the torment ended.

I never knew if it was Dad’s joy of intimidation, his apparent need to push the boundaries of society as far as possible, or his mental illness that brought him to that moment in the spring of ’91. But I knew what had brought me there.

It all started on June 1 of 1979, when my mother drove me down to Woody and Mary Browns’ house, a fairly close neighbor of ours in rural Dayton, Maine and my life was forever changed. At the age of nine, I fell irrevocably in love with the horse who’d become my steadfast companion for the next twenty-five years.

On that so long ago day, I set my eyes on the most beautiful, precious, and special creature in the whole world. A delicate new-born, filly afire with the life that surged within her tiny body; she frisked and spun around her pinto mother, her dam.

A copper, red bay with three white socks and a blaze, she sported a black mane and tail, both of which fluffed out bushy and short. I imagined them growing to be long and beautiful when she got older. Her nose gleamed a beautiful, rose-petal pink, beneath her white blaze. She frolicked and pranced around her mother. She danced like a flame and her coat shined like fire, so I thought she’d be hot to touch. Instead, she felt warm and soft, like a pillow. But I sensed the strength under the softness, the boundless energy. She emitted a life force more dynamic than anything I’d ever experienced before.

My eyes stayed locked on her. Her beauty made me think of the mirror-smooth pond, dappled with autumn leaves, reflecting a robin’s-egg blue sky and snowy clouds, which had caused me to stop and gaze in wonder at nature’s splendor. Her zest for life reminded me of a spring stream, sweetly singing a bubbling, rippling melody, prompting me to take joy in the moment. I watched her, unable to tear my eyes away and my mind overflowed with dreams. I dreamt that the best horse ever belonged to me and that I belonged to her.

Mr. Brown stood leaning against the fence beside my Mom, his straight, brown hair blowing in the breeze while Mom's curly, black hair never even rustled. He towered over her, taller and leaner than my father. He smiled widely, with his lips parted and his teeth sparkling in the summer sun. I knew not to trust that grin because sometimes Dad smiled with delight but he was only playing a trick on you and he'd explode into anger if you grinned back.

I couldn't tell the difference between Dad's true and fake faces, but Mom and my brother Ev could, so I learned to watch their eyes. If Dad was happy their green eyes lit with the bright green of wild clover, but if Dad only pretended, their eyes darkened to granite green, speckled with black and brown, stone-cold, sad eyes. Today, Mom's eyes glimmered spring-warm, glad eyes. I realized Mr. Brown really was nice and cheerful, so I asked. "What's her name?"

"Trixie," he said with his deep, vibrant voice. He chuckled when she bucked her way around in a tiny circle.

"Like a trick, with an e?"

"No, Mary wanted her name to be spelled like her mother's. Her mother's name is Dixie, so we named her Trixie. She surprised us, because we didn't know that Dixie carried a foal until I saw Trixie following her in the pasture this morning."

My smile grew even bigger. "She's the most beautiful horse in the whole world," I told Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown and my Mom smiled at each other. I knew that look; the smirk adults used when they thought kids said something foolish. In that moment, I realized they didn't see Trixie's uniqueness; maybe because Mr. Brown leased pastures to people who wanted rough board for their horses. The animals stayed in a mixed herd that varied in size from year to year. To me Trixie's birth in such a setting meant she was extra special, unplanned and unexpected, like finding a four-leaved clover when you never even searched for it. "What do you plan to do with her?"

He shrugged. "We'll wait until she grows up a little bit, and then sell her. We didn't plan on having another horse."

I kept quiet about it, but I decided that somehow I must buy Trixie. Realistically as a child, I had little chance of raising enough money to purchase such a beautiful foal. But Mr. Brown said she needed to grow up

some first, so that gave me time to earn money.

My birthday was on June twenty-third. Once in a while, I got money as gifts. This year, I planned on saving it all. Mom gave me money occasionally for helping around the house. Not an allowance like other kids bragged about having, but money for helping with an odd job or a reward for being real good.

Trixie ran around her mother. She turned and circled her again. And as I watched this tiny, delicate creature prance and caper around her dam, an immense, overwhelming feeling, too profound for me to then understand welled up inside me. *A belief, a conviction surged to life throughout me. With Trixie and me, together, everything became possible; from the mundane to the unbelievable, from the simple to the inconceivable, from trials to triumphs.* I stood transfixed in that moment, knowing that somehow Trixie and I needed to be together and in my head I started to plan.

Dad preferred children to be seen not heard. If both Ev and I silently stayed out of sight, especially when Dad thought, worked, or relaxed. He appreciated it and we might get rewarded.

Over the next few weeks, I really tried to behave properly; when I competed with Ev it became especially difficult. A year and nine months older and much smarter than me, Ev figured out all the games we played faster than me. Occasionally he let me win, but that usually only happened when he got bored and gave up trying. Lots of times I wished to find something, anything that I excelled at better than Ev, but so far it remained undiscovered.

Whenever I felt like stomping off, crying, or screaming because I never managed to win against Ev, I pictured Trixie in my head, playing beside her mother. Her dainty white socks flashing up and down as her tiny hooves danced her around in circles, her fiery coat shining in the sunlight. It calmed me down and reminded me that if I refrained from getting upset, I might get rewarded, and that meant I really did win, by earning money for Trixie. As the days went by, my brother and I got along better. Together, we managed to convince Mom to sometimes let us babysit ourselves when she went to work.

In the weeks preceding my birthday, we watched ourselves five or six times. My brother gave a huge concession by doing so. Normally, our great Aunt Irene babysat us and her son Buddy was Ev's best friend. Ev and I enjoyed going over and playing with Bud, but now I wanted to earn money. When Mom agreed to give us

a little money if my brother and I succeeded in not fighting or making a mess while she worked, Ev joined my campaign for earning cash.

Mom always paid us each the exact same amount. That change tempted me so much. She'd place it in my hand and I'd think of penny candy and toys. I'd stand there almost tasting that candy. An image of Trixie running around her mother would pop into my mind and I'd walk down the hall to my room and set the change on top of my bed, arguing with myself in my head, my childish greed for candy duking it out with my overwhelming wish for Trixie.

"Here you go." Ev and I looked at each other's coins. His hand held two quarters. Mine cupped a quarter, two dimes, and Mom placed the last nickel in my outstretched hand.

"Wow!" Ev proclaimed.

"I asked Dad. He said he heard nothing from either of you all afternoon. He didn't even realize you stayed home, the kitchen looks and smells clean, and no games litter the floor." Mom smiled widely.

"Ev made us our afternoon snack. He ate peanut butter on crackers. I had jelly."

Taller and thinner than me with long skinny arms dusted with freckles, Ev had to stretch to his fullest to reach the top cupboard; his eyelids squinted nearly closed barely allowing his eyes darkened to granite green in concentration to show, his arm knocked his thick glasses askew as he strained upwards with his fingers scratching and scrabbling through the shelf contents, searching for the container that felt right. Ev's coordination also made him much better at spreading stuff without leaving drips. He handled utensils and containers better than me. We'd learned to compromise. In trade for Ev doing the girly stuff of preparing snacks, I cleaned up the games we'd played, putting every checker and domino back in their boxes and placing them neatly on Ev's closet shelf.

"You both did very well." Mom said proudly, her whole face smiled as she pulled us each into a hug. Most people called Mom short and a little on the plump side, but both Ev and I agreed Mom was perfect for hugging. We could reach her without having to stretch every muscle in our bodies and she felt soft and cuddly, not all hard, poky bones like the people who called her plump.

Ev and I raced across the living room, our fingers clasped tight around our precious loot. He, as usual, beat

me to the stairs and I followed his thumping sneakers up the treads. Right now, Dad worked out in the garage so we raced without the fear of angering him with our noise. The sunlight shining down through the little square window at the top of the stairs made Ev's dark brown hair glint with red streaks.

Both Dad's hair and beard grew a bright carrot red, not at all like the dark apple red that shined in Ev's hair. But even though Ev's color looked much prettier, he disliked being called a redhead or even told that he had red highlights, so I only teased him about it when I thought he really deserved it.

At the end of the hall, Ev turned left and I went right into my room. I looked at my two piggy banks - well, one piggy bank and one doggy bank. The piggy bank locked closed and opened with a little key. I kept the key on the top of my bureau mirror. I needed to climb to get that key. Savings went into the piggy bank. Mom had taught me about savings. She opened bank accounts for my brother and me and told us when we planned to go to the bank so we could take our piggy banks with us.

I considered my doggy bank. Pushed against my wall, made of white and black molded plastic, he sat on the floor, hiding the big hole in his bottom. I picked him up and shook him when I wanted the money to fall out. He held money for candy and toys, not savings. I looked at the change on the bed. Fifty cents was a lot. Sometimes when Ev and I barely behaved, we only got rewarded a dime each, or fifteen cents.

Fifty cents. I thought about putting twenty-five cents in each bank. Twenty-five cents bought a lot of candy. Some money still remained in doggy bank. While good, candy disappeared so quickly. I looked at the change again. Then I thought of it. I picked up the dimes and put one in each bank. Next I put the quarter in piggy bank and the nickel in doggy bank. The more important thing, Trixie got more. Plus, fifteen cents still bought a lot of candy.

The next morning dawned clear and bright, I laid in bed, stretching under the covers and then I heard banging, echoing down from the garage on the hill as Dad worked. I jumped out of bed and pulled my clothes on as quickly as possible. Today, Mom intended to take us to town, first grocery shopping and then the bank. When I arrived downstairs, Ev already sat at the table. I ran over, shook myself out a bowl of fruit loops, and started eating. Mom had to leave for work by noon, so we needed to hurry into town and get the shopping done quick, or she wouldn't have time to stop at the bank.

I ate fast and brought the bowl to the kitchen where Mom washed the pans from Dad's breakfast. "Are you all set to leave?" I forgot things quite often and frequently ran back into the house to get this or that. To prevent delays, Mom started getting me prepared before herself or Ev.

I ran upstairs and got the piggy bank. He weighed a lot not just because of the change inside him, but because a dark brown metal that shined a bright orangey-red if rubbed hard enough made up his body. I wrapped my hands around his belly. I trotted downstairs and placed him in the back of the car. Then I remembered that I needed his key. Back upstairs, I stood on the edge of my bed and stretched my arms out, leaning over towards the bureau top. With my fingers firmly grasping the sides of the bureau, I pushed off with my toes, wriggling and slithering until I lay belly down on top of the bureau. I stood up with my head now brushing the ceiling and plucked the little key off of the very top bureau shelf. I sat down, leaned over and jumped down to the floor. I stuffed the key firmly down into my pocket and ran to the car.

Sitting in the backseat already buckled in, I remembered my candy change. I could buy a soda to drink while Mom shopped. Once again, I left the car door open and sprinted up the stairs. I grabbed the doggy bank around his neck and shook him hard. Change scattered everywhere. I heard Ev across the hall getting his own bank off his bureau. They were almost ready, so I scrambled around the floor and gathered up the change, squeezing under the bed to get the ones that rolled away the farthest. I trotted down the stairs, double-checking to make sure the piggy key still lay in my pocket. As usual, Ev beat me to the car.

When we first got to the grocery store, I bought a Welch's grape soda. Then I bustled around trying to help Mom hurry up the shopping, but mostly getting in her way. By the time we got to the checkout, Mom alternately bit her lip and wrung her hands while holding her breath and grinding her teeth. Ev and I fished items out of the cart. I dropped about half of mine before they made it to the counter. With a long drawn-out sigh, Mom pointed to the other side of the checkout right by the doors. "You go stand there in my sight and don't move. This won't take long."

I trudged over to the designated spot, dragging my feet. Why was I always the clumsy one? While I stared down at my soda morosely, a hand slid in front of me and a nickel dropped with a plunk and fizz down into my soda. My startled eyes shot up to meet the gaze of an elderly lady. "Why'd you do that?" I asked.

“You’re not collecting change?”

“Ah... No. I’ m just waiting for my Mom.” I pointed her out at the cashier’s counter.

The old lady looked down at my soda. “Well, if you’re not collecting money, can I get my nickel back?”

I didn’t dare drink my last gulp of soda for fear of choking on the nickel. So the last of the soda drizzled all over my fingers as I upended the can and shook it. But the doggy bank cooperated more than the soda can. No matter how hard or fast I shook the can; the nickel refused to drop out. It just bounced around inside the can, clinging and clanging.

With an exasperated sigh the elderly lady shook her head and tottered off, leaving me with sticky, purple streaked hands to follow Mom and Ev to the car explaining what happened. Both Mom and Ev laughed. On the way to the bank, Ev took the can and tried to get the nickel out for me. After all, I deserved it for losing the last of my soda. But even though Ev managed to do many things better than me, no matter how many different ways he tilted and thumped the can, the nickel refused to drop out.

Mom unlocked piggy for me and we walked into the bank. I ran to the bathroom to wash my sticky hands and then joined Mom and Ev in line, where Mom handed me my change. The teller counted out my three dollars and thirty-five cents, typed it in my book, and then let me pick out a lollipop. So even when I saved the money, I got some candy.

Plus, it remained my money, I could go to the bank and ask for it back. You only used savings for something real special. My brother talked about saving for a motorbike. I saved my money for Trixie. Mom needed to okay what you took out. That worried me a little; she didn’t realize Trixie was the best horse in the world. But she admitted that Trixie looked beautiful, so she’d probably let me take out my money for her.