

IMPOSSIBLE CHARLIE

Chapter One

Jackie Knapp dragged her foot along the road as she came down the hill on her bicycle because the hand brakes didn't work. Hadn't worked for months. Even though she was going faster than she would have liked, it was still not fast enough to get home in time. Reaching the bottom of the hill, she stood on the pedals and raced towards home. At top speed the whole trip, Jackie would be only a little late and her mother might not notice.

By the time she had made it to her driveway, Jackie was out of breath and practically dropped the bike trying to jump off. She made two swipes with her foot at the kickstand, but when it didn't come down, she settled for leaning the bike up against the garage wall and ran into the house.

"You're late." Her mother was at the stove, scooping mashed potatoes into a serving bowl.

Jackie glanced at the wall clock. Twenty after six. She was twenty minutes late. "I'm sorry."

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"Do you have a believable excuse?"

"I think it's a good one."

"Let me hear it, I could use a laugh. It's been a dull day."

Jackie was relieved her mother wasn't going to lecture or scold. "I finished riding Moose in plenty of time. I got him all cleaned up and had him standing in the hall ready to feed him, when I remembered to put oil on his hooves. The blacksmith said every other day the last time he was there."

"This sounds like a long story. Why don't you set the table while you go on."

Jackie grabbed the napkins and silverware from the drawer. "I ran into the tack room and couldn't find the oil where I left it last time. Lisa never puts anything back where it belongs. So it took me a while to find the can, which she had left hidden on the floor by the feed bin. Then I had to find the hoof pick, which wasn't hung on the hook but was in the brush box. I looked at the clock, and it was five thirty, and I knew if I didn't leave soon, I'd be late. I didn't have trouble doing Moose's front feet, but when I got to the back ones, I couldn't get his foot off the floor. I pulled and shoved, and he had his weight square on both."

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"Why didn't Lisa help you?" Mrs. Knapp asked.

"This is her day for piano lessons. I was all alone. So after about fifteen minutes, I pried his foot up enough so I could just get the hoof pick underneath. He wouldn't even lift his toe off the floor. I got the oil on, got him in the stall, fed him and left. That's why I'm so late."

Her mother hung up a kitchen towel. "Is that why you're so dirty, too?"

Jackie looked down at her jeans. There were oil spots where she had been kneeling in the hoof dressing and mud where she had splashed through a stream.

"A word to the wise. Clean up before your father sees you."

"Right." Jackie ran down the hall and into her bedroom, grabbed a clean tee shirt from the drawer and another pair of jeans from the closet, then ran into the bathroom.

Her father didn't exactly object to her interest in horses, but neither was he wildly enthusiastic. He thought she would be better off doing something less expensive, like swimming, where all he would be required to provide was a bathing suit. But over the two years she had been riding, Jackie had

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managed to acquire the clothes and the equipment she needed.

Except a horse. It was out of the question. Every time the subject had come up, Mr. Knapp remained firm. Horses were too expensive. After buying it, there was feed and the vet and the blacksmith, and to his mind, it never stopped, so he vowed it would never start.

The Shors were on a treadmill, Mr. Knapp said. They got Moose for Lisa and within two years she wanted a fancier horse to take to shows. Not satisfied just riding around town, Lisa wanted to go places and needed a horse trailer and better clothes. Mr. Knapp wanted no part that.

All Jackie wanted was a horse. She wanted to ride. Even if she couldn't go to the bigger shows, there were local 4-H shows, where just a plain horse wouldn't be outclassed. Lisa had always said Jackie's horse could go with them, if Jackie ever got a horse of her own.

At least she had Moose. Lisa let Jackie take care of Moose for her 4-H project, which required the member only to care for the horse, not own it. Moose was nearly sixteen years old now, and slow and very round but he was a horse she could care for and ride.

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In the good weather, the 4-H members met at someone's riding ring, and their leader, Nancy Johnson, gave them a group lesson. It wasn't funny to anyone anymore that Moose would knock over even the smallest jump, that he couldn't canter on his left lead, that he galloped as fast as everyone else trotted and always brought up the rear on a trail ride.

But he was something to ride, and he was a horse; Jackie felt fortunate for that much. Lisa didn't have to let her take care of Moose, although Lisa didn't want to do the extra work and he was so old the family didn't want to sell him. Everyone benefited from the arrangement.

Jackie returned to the kitchen, looking far more respectable, and sat down at her place. Her father, sitting at the head of the table, glanced over her appraisingly, which made her glad she had changed clothes.

"I suppose you were over at the Shors again today," he began.

"Yes, I was," she answered unsurely. He knew perfectly well she went there every day after school.

"I've always told you I wouldn't buy you a horse."

"Yes, sir, I know that." The picture of her own horse

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standing in their orchard faded in her mind.

"I was hoping you were going to get over this horse-craziness before long."

She wished he wouldn't treat her feelings about horses so lightly. Jackie loved horses, and was going to keep on loving them. A week, a month or a year wasn't going to change her mind. But she knew better than to try to explain that to him; his mind was set.

"I suppose you'll keep on riding, whatever I say."

"I'm not going to give it up, if I have a choice."

"I surmised as much," he said wryly. "Mr. Peet was speaking with me today. His daughter, Maura, is leaving for college in September, and they have to get rid of that horse of theirs. Bob wants to sell it, but his daughter says she would rather give it away to someone who really wants a horse and can't afford to buy one. I said we'd take the horse."

"Dad!"

"Only if you meet with her approval. She wants the horse to go to someone who is going to love it and take care of it the way she has. She doesn't want it going to a stable, where it wouldn't be able to go out every day or might be mistreated."

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"Perfect! He could live in the shed and come in and go out whenever he pleased, and I already know how to take care of a horse. I've been taking care of Moose for almost a year."

"You'll have chores to do first thing in the morning, even before you go to school. It won't be easy, I'm sure."

"How hard could it be? I think it's great!"

"I don't know how great it's going to be, but I told Mr. Peet to have his daughter call tonight so she can speak directly to you."

"Really? Tonight? Now?"

"Please, Jackie, finish your dinner before you get carried away," her mother admonished.

"How can I eat at a time like this?"

"Try," Mr. Knapp prompted.

The telephone rang.

"It must be her!" Jackie exclaimed, jumping up from her chair, which tipped over. She picked it up and ran to the phone, slid on the linoleum until she bumped into the wall, and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hello. This is Maura Peet. May I speak to Jackie?"

"This is me. I'm her. I mean, I'm Jackie."

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"Hi." The girl at the other end laughed. "My father says you're interested in horses."

"I'm in love with horses. I'd be in paradise if I had my own horse to take care of."

"That's what my dad said. I can just imagine our two fathers moaning to each other at work about their horse-crazy daughters. I'd like to come over and see where Charlie would live. I've had him since he was three, and I couldn't let him go to someone I didn't know. I can't keep him any longer. I'll be away in college, and it wouldn't be fair to Charlie to keep him standing in the backyard while I'm away, and besides, my parents don't want to take care of him for the next four years. My father thought I should sell him, but I'd rather give him to someone I know would love him and take care of him the way I have. I wouldn't want him being sold and eventually winding up at a hack stable where he'd be rented out by the hour all day long. Charlie's always had special attention, and I thought if I could find someone like me when I was twelve, it would be just the place for Charlie."

Jackie quickly assured Maura she had learned horse care from her 4-H club and read every book she could lay her

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hands on.

"It sounds pretty good. If it's convenient for you, I'll drive over Saturday afternoon and take a look around. Then we can talk in person. And I'll give you an idea of what Charlie's like and what you'll have to do for him."

"Saturday's just fine with me. I'll make sure I finish with Moose in plenty of time."

"Fine. I'll be there around two. See you then."

"Okay. Thank you. Goodbye." Jackie said and hung the phone back on its cradle. She stood there for a moment, not believing her luck.

She was going to have a horse of her own. If Maura approved of the shed and the orchard and herself, she, Jackie Knapp, would be able to ride her own horse to lessons and trail rides the club held. And maybe if she worked very hard all summer, she would be able to take Charlie to the 4-H Fair in August, and that was the most important 4-H horse show for the entire year.

Charlie. A horse named Charlie just had to be perfect in every way.