

Magic Pony Carousel



Star

3

THE
WESTERN
PONY

Star the Western Pony

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Chapter 1

“Look! It’s a lasso game!” cried Laura. “Let’s try that next!” She ran across the fairground, with her three brothers chasing her. They all loved anything to do with the Wild West! But Laura was the only one who also loved detective stories—she was always looking for a new mystery to solve.

As they waited in line to throw lassos over different prizes, Laura hopped from foot to foot. “Come *on*, come *on*,” she chanted.

Suddenly she heard a voice booming across the fairground. “Step up, step up for the most exciting ride of your lives! Choose your favorite pony and let Barker’s Magic Pony Carousel whisk you away on an amazing adventure! Ride a circus pony, a princess’s pony, or a cowgirl’s pony straight from the Wild West....”

“Did you hear that?” Laura gasped. She loved riding ponies as much as she loved the Wild West. A cowgirl’s pony sounded like the most exciting thing in the whole world! She looked hopefully at her oldest brother, Sam. “Can I ride the Magic Carousel, please?”

“You and your ponies.” Sam grinned. “Okay. But I don’t think the carousel’s a ride for me. I’ll just watch.”

“Thanks!” said Laura.

They left Laura’s middle brothers, Harry and Paul, in line for the lasso stall and made their way to Mr. Barker’s Magic Carousel.

Close up, the carousel’s twinkling lights glowed merrily in the dusk of early evening. Laura stared at the swirling red, gold, and silver colors, desperate for a glimpse of the cowgirl’s pony. There was the circus pony with a sparkly feather headdress and an Arabian horse that had a fiery glint in his eye. She saw the princess’s pony with its neck proudly arched...but where was the cowgirl’s pony?

Then Laura saw her. She was the most beautiful pony on the carousel! She was a rich golden chestnut color all over, apart from a star on her forehead and three pretty white socks. She wore a fancy leather bridle and a heavy tan Western saddle. She looked just like the ponies in Laura’s favorite Western movies!

“Step up, step up!” called a tall man in a red-and-green striped top hat. “Choose your favorite pony!” He caught sight of Laura. “Hello, young lady! I’m Mr. Barker. Welcome to my magnificent Magic Carousel!”

Laura smiled. Mr. Barker had such friendly, twinkling eyes! “I think I know which pony I want,” she said.

“Well, that’s a good start. But has that pony been chosen for you?” asked Mr. Barker mysteriously.

Laura was puzzled. “I don’t know,” she said.

Mr. Barker laughed and lifted his striped top hat. There was a flash of pink paper as he pulled something out from under it. It was a ticket! Laura glanced at Sam to see if he’d seen how the ticket had appeared, but he was busy looking at the ponies on the carousel.

“This is yours,” said Mr. Barker, handing her the ticket.

Laura looked at it. There was a name on it in swirling gold writing. “Star!” she read out breathlessly. The cowgirl’s pony had a star on her forehead—could that be her name? Feeling excited, she ran over to the carousel to take a closer look. The horse’s name was written on her browband.



“It says Star here, too!” she said.

“Then that’s the pony for you,” said Mr. Barker.

Star’s painted brown eyes seemed to be encouraging her, so Laura clambered quickly onto the carousel. The Western saddle was very different from the English saddles she was used to. It was much more complicated, with a big horn at the front, lots of ropes and leather pouches, and stirrups that were much lower. But as the carousel began to turn, Laura felt so safe and comfortable that it was as if she’d always known how to ride a cowgirl’s pony.

Laura waved at Sam, who grinned and waved back. The carousel music grew louder, and the horses swooped through the air as they gathered speed. The breeze blew on Laura’s cheeks, and the fairground lights seemed to glitter and twinkle around her. To her surprise the breeze felt warm, like on a summer’s day, and the air began to glow and shimmer like a summery mist. She looked up and gasped. It was no longer a cool autumn evening. Instead, the sky was a beautiful bright blue, with the sun blazing down. And she wasn’t holding on to the golden pole anymore. She had real leather reins in one hand and a rope lasso in the other!

Laura blinked. When she opened her eyes again, she could see Star’s chestnut mane flying in the breeze. Dust swirled around her, and the sound of thundering hooves filled her ears. Her jacket had disappeared. Instead, she was wearing a pink-and-white-checked shirt with the sleeves rolled up, denim jeans, and beautiful pale leather cowboy boots. The fairground had gone, and she was cantering beside a long line of cattle that stretched far ahead across a rolling plain. The cattle were all colors—brown and white, speckled and patchy—and they all had big, dangerous-looking horns.

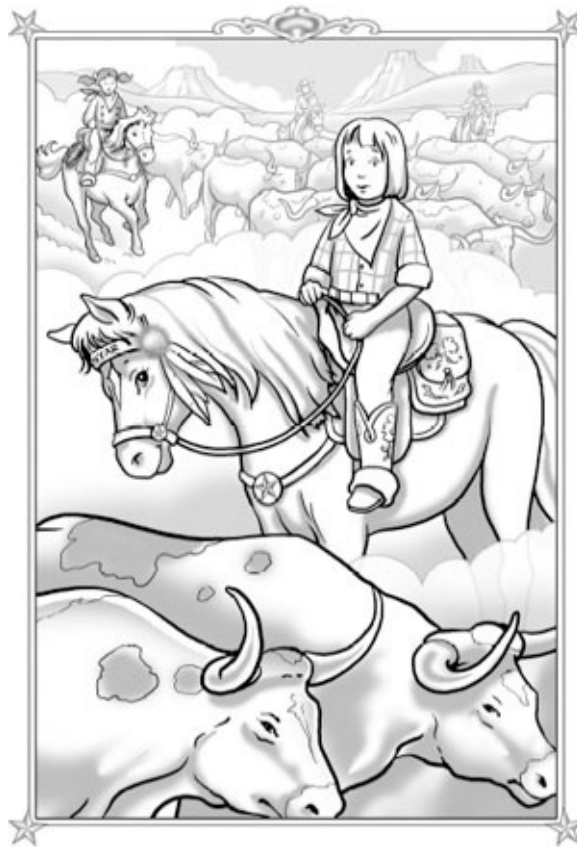
Laura shielded her eyes against the sun. She could see a river up ahead, and in the distance rocky mountains jutted into the sky. There were other riders cantering beside the cattle, too, wearing wide-brimmed hats and long leather chaps.

“Wow!” Laura exclaimed. “It’s a Wild West cattle drive!”

Chapter 2

Laura didn't have time to wonder how she'd gotten here. Some of the cattle were bellowing loudly, and she wanted to keep a close eye on those pointy horns! She concentrated on holding her reins. It was tricky having them in just one hand, but she remembered from watching Western movies that she had to rest the reins against the pony's neck to tell her which way to go.

Just as she was getting the hang of it, she heard a shout from behind her. Alarmed, she looked around. There was a girl galloping toward her on a brown-and-white pony, and she looked very cross. She was wearing a buttercup-yellow shirt, and her glossy black pigtails were tied with yellow ribbons.



Laura opened her mouth to speak, but she didn't get a chance.

“Rope that calf!” cried the girl, pointing past Laura. “What are you waiting for?”

Laura twisted around and saw a young calf bolting away from the rest of the herd. Its spindly legs were a blur as it raced off in a panic—straight toward the river!

Gripping her lasso tighter, Laura wheeled Star after the calf and kicked her into a gallop. She looked down at the rope in her right hand. It was much heavier than the lasso rope she played with at home. “I’m not sure I’m going to be able to catch the calf,” she muttered to herself.

“Swing...it around...a few times...” said a breathless voice, “before you throw it!”

Laura glanced around, but there was no one there. Just herself and Star, galloping after the calf.

“It’s me...Star!” puffed the voice, as the pony’s hooves thundered across the dry, hard ground. “We’ve come here by magic...from the carousel. We have something very important to do...before I take you back!”

Laura nearly fell out of the saddle in surprise. “Star!” she gasped. “You can talk!”

“Hurry up!” shouted the girl with pigtails. Laura looked over her shoulder and saw that the brown-and-white pony was catching up.

The calf was getting closer and closer to the river. Laura knew she didn’t have time to ask Star any questions about the carousel. Somehow, she had to get the hang of using her lasso. She leaned sideways out of the saddle and stretched her hand toward the calf. The rope felt even heavier now!

“Quick, or you’ll lose him!” called the girl.

“Ignore her,” panted Star. “Just concentrate on the rope.... It’s all about...timing. I’ll try not to frighten the calf.”

Laura’s heart was pounding wildly. The calf looked so small and helpless, and she could hear him calling out in fear. He was only a few paces from the river now, which looked big and wide with swirling currents of fast-flowing, muddy water. Laura noticed a branch being swept along, until it smashed against a boulder. The calf wouldn’t stand a chance if he fell in!

“Please stop, little calf,” Laura pleaded. “Please!”

But the calf kept on running. Then, just as he was about to plunge into the river, he skidded to a halt on the muddy bank.

Star stopped at once. “I don’t want to startle him,” she whispered to Laura. “You should be able to rope him from here.”

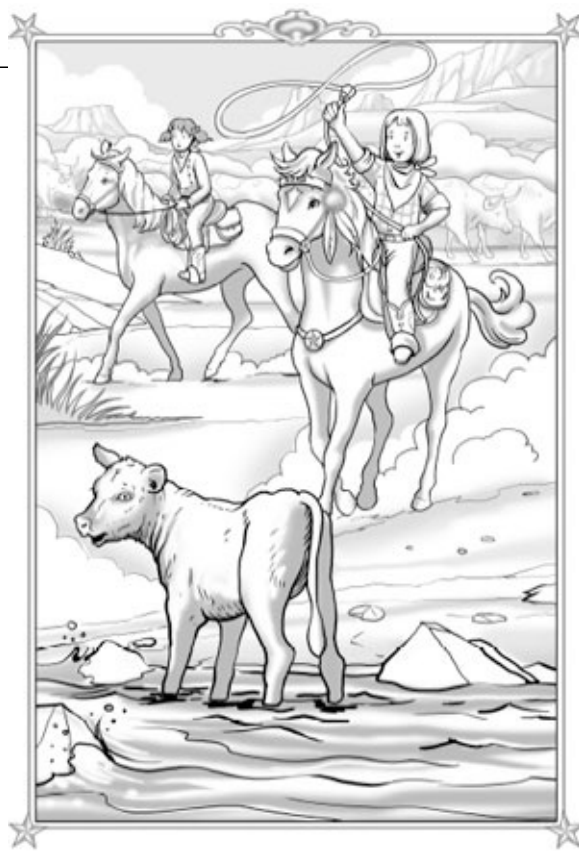
Laura glanced behind her. The brown-and-white pony had stopped, too, but he was stamping restlessly, tugging at the bit.

“I can’t come any closer!” called the girl. “If I do, I’ll frighten the calf even more. You’ll have to rope him yourself!”

Laura nodded. The calf stood with his tiny hooves sinking into the mud at the edge of the river. His big brown eyes were wide with fear.

“Stay there,” Laura murmured, lifting the lasso. “Just stay right there!”

She lifted the lasso and began to swing it around above her head, feeling the coil of rope spin faster and faster through the air. But just as she was about to throw it, the other girl’s pony kicked a stone and sent it clattering toward the river. With a bleat of panic, the calf plunged straight into the swirling water!



Laura kicked Star forward at once. The calf was already being swept downstream, his head only just above the surface. With a brave whinny, Star splashed into the river and Laura flung the lasso as hard as she could.

“I’ve got him!” she cried, as the rope slipped over the calf’s neck and shoulders.

“Now wind the rope around the saddle horn,” instructed Star. “I’ll try to dig my hooves into the mud while you pull him in.”

Beneath her, Laura could feel the pony struggling to keep her balance. The current was almost too strong for a sturdy cowgirl’s pony, never mind a calf! Laura heaved on the rope, winding it around the strong piece of leather at the front of Star’s saddle. The wet rope dug into her fingers, but she kept on pulling.

Suddenly Star slipped, and Laura lurched forward.

“Oh no!” she gasped, as the rope dragged through her fingers and the calf bobbed farther away.

“It’s okay,” muttered Star, through gritted teeth. “I’ve got my footing now. Don’t give up!”

Laura hauled on the rope again. It felt as though her arms were going to drop off, and the calf didn’t seem any nearer! She could hear shouts from behind her, but they were muffled by the roar of the river. Inch by inch, Star slowly stepped back toward the bank. At last she was wading out of the water onto dry land. Laura gave a few final tugs on the rope and the calf stumbled out of the river on trembling legs.

Laura swung herself out of the saddle and flung her arms around Star’s neck. The mare was still out of breath and her nostrils were flaring, but her eyes were friendly and calm.

“Thank you so much!” Laura whispered. Then she turned to the calf and hugged him, too. The calf gave a grateful lick to the back of Laura’s hand. His coat was soaked and muddy but she didn’t care. He was safe, thanks to Laura and Star, and that was all that mattered!

Chapter 3

“Well done!” cried a voice, and Laura looked up. A cowboy was walking toward her wearing a big gray hat and dusty, well-worn jeans. He was leading his horse, which was a strong-looking bay with a stripe down his face. “We saw what happened,” he said. “You were really brave to go into the river!”

Laura hugged the small calf one last time. He had stopped shivering, and his big brown eyes no longer looked afraid. She stood up and placed her hand on Star’s warm chestnut neck. Six or seven other men followed the cowboy in the gray hat. They looked like characters from the Western movies that Laura watched with her brothers, with their tanned faces, brown leather cowboy boots, and long chaps.

“You’ve made a great start,” Star whispered in Laura’s ear.

Laura grinned. But Star’s words reminded her that no one knew who she was. How was she going to explain where she’d come from?

“We’ll take this little fella to join the others,” said the first cowboy. “Then we’ll all rest up over there before we move off.” He nodded down-river, and Laura saw a huddle of wooden buildings not far away.

He held Star’s reins while Laura climbed back into the saddle. “My name’s Luke,” he said. “I don’t think we’ve met before.”

“Er...no,” stammered Laura. “I—I live over there.” She pointed toward the wooden houses, and heard Star snort in approval.

“Well, I’m the head cowboy,” said Luke. “You’ve already met my daughter Jolene.” He nodded toward the girl in the yellow shirt.

“My name’s Laura,” she said. She smiled at Jolene, but to her surprise, Jolene just scowled and turned her pony away.

With the calf trotting beside them, Laura and Star followed the other cowboys back to the slow-moving line of cattle. The calf was already looking much happier! An older cowboy rode up on a pretty dun-colored mustang.

“Well done,” he said warmly. “You did really well to save that calf.”

Laura jumped. He sounded just like Mr. Barker from the fairground! She stared up at him curiously. He had wisps of white hair showing underneath his wide-brimmed felt hat and twinkling blue eyes. He *looked* just like Mr. Barker, too!

She was about to ask him what his name was when the cowboy touched the brim of his hat in farewell and rode ahead to join Luke and Jolene at the front of the drive.

Laura turned to another cowboy riding nearby. He was wearing a blue-check shirt and had a wisp of dry grass sticking out of his mouth. “Who was that?” she asked.

The cowboy stopped chewing the grass for a moment. “Oh, that’s just old Red. He hasn’t been on a cattle drive for ages, but he sure knows how to ride.”

He didn’t seem surprised that Laura had appeared out of nowhere to join the drive. “What’s your name?” she asked the cowboy boldly.

“I’m Hank,” said the man. Just then, one of the cows began to stray out of line, and he rode off to herd it back.

Laura watched him as he neck-reined his pony to and fro, guiding the cow back to the others without upsetting her. Hank made it look so easy! Laura felt a thrill of delight. She was on a real-life

cattle drive with her own magic pony!

~~“We’d better stay in the background here,” Star said quietly as they drew closer to the wooden buildings.~~

“Okay,” whispered Laura. She leaned forward to stroke Star’s neck. “Can anyone else hear you speak?” she asked.

Star shook her mane as though she was shaking off flies. “No,” she replied. “To everyone else, it just sounds like neighs and whinnies. It’s a special part of the carousel’s magic—you picked the tickle with my name on it, and now we can understand each other!”

Laura grinned. What a fantastic secret! “So what’s the important thing that we have to do?” she said, remembering what the pony had said earlier. “Was it saving the calf?”

“I don’t think so,” said Star. “If it was, the Magic Carousel would have taken us back to the fairground by now. I expect it’s a bigger task than that. We’ll find out what it is together.”

A bigger task! thought Laura. *Wow!* Now Laura had something to use her detective skills on—she would keep a sharp eye out for whoever it was needed their help. But then she thought about her brothers, and suddenly felt worried. “But how long will it take?” she asked. “Won’t my brothers notice I’ve gone?”

Star twitched one ear. “You don’t need to worry,” she said reassuringly. “When you go back, no time will have passed at all!”

Laura was thrilled. She wondered what her brothers would say if they could see her. It felt as if she was in a cowboy movie all her own!

Chapter 4

They reached the little cluster of wooden houses, and Laura tried to look as though she rode down the main street every day. But there was so much to look at! There were a few houses, a general store, and a saloon bar—but not a single car! Laura could hardly imagine riding on a pony to get everywhere all the time. Near the bar, a young woman in a long dress was pumping water from a long-handled tap into a bucket. Laura watched the woman dip a tin mug into the bucket, then offer it to Hank as he rode past.

Hank thanked her and gulped down the water as if he was very thirsty. Laura saw Luke and Red ride up to the hitching rail by the saloon and dismount. She watched them carefully. Instead of taking both feet out of the stirrups at once, they swung themselves out of the saddle with their left foot still in place. Laura copied them, trying to look as casual as possible—but as she stepped down, she stumbled backward and bumped into Jolene's pony.

"Careful!" snapped Jolene. "Smoky's jumpy enough today, thanks all the same!"

"I'm sorry," said Laura.

Jolene looped Smoky's reins over the rail. "It was your fault that the calf jumped into the river," she told Laura over her shoulder.

Laura looked at Star in surprise. The calf had been startled when Smoky kicked the stone! Star gave a tiny shake of her head that only Laura could see. Laura knew she shouldn't quarrel with Jolene—the Magic Carousel hadn't brought her here to argue! She decided not to say anything about Smoky's mistake.

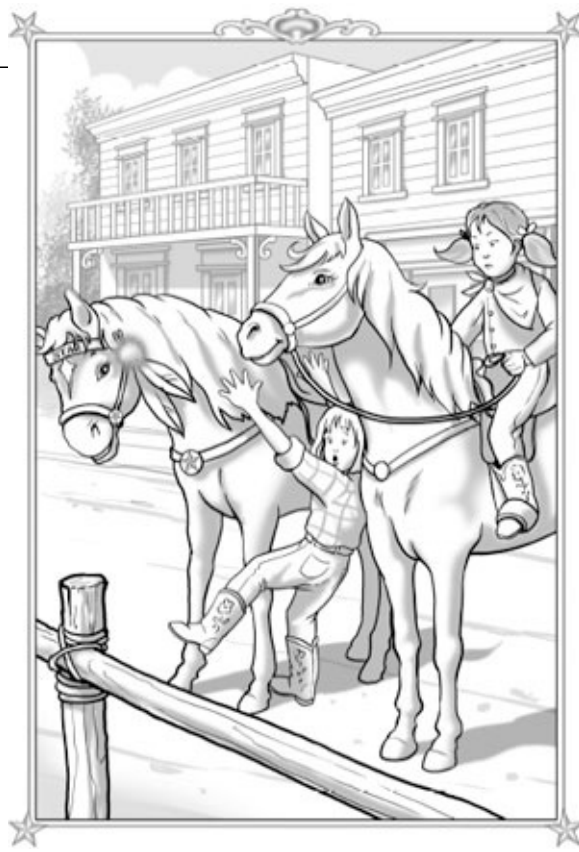
"You should have roped the calf as soon as he left the herd," Jolene added. She finished tying Smoky's reins and walked off toward the water pump.

Laura sighed. It looked like Jolene was determined not to make friends. She stroked Star's soft muzzle, then reached up and rubbed the little white star on her forehead.

"Don't worry about Jolene," said Star. "She's probably just jealous because you rescued the calf and not her."

"What do you think I should do now?" Laura asked, feeling slightly nervous.

"You'll be fine," said Star. "Just get a quick drink and come back here. You'll be thirsty later if you don't."



Laura walked over to the water pump. The other cowboys had finished drinking. Laura drank a mug of refreshing water, then skipped back to Star.

All around her, the cowboys were climbing back onto their ponies.

“Let’s go!” said Luke. “There’s some wild country to get through before we reach the next camp.”

Laura climbed into Star’s saddle. “Shall we follow them?” she whispered. It was hard to know if they needed to go with the cowboys to find out their special task, or if they should stay behind in the little town.

Star scraped her front hoof on the ground as if she was thinking. “I think we should go with them,” she said. “After all, I am a cowgirl’s pony!”

Laura and Star cantered after the others. They soon caught up with the long line of cattle stretching into the distance. Up ahead, the rolling grassy plain ended in a line of rocky hills. Laura felt a flicker of excitement. That must be the wild country that Luke had mentioned!

But as Laura joined the back of the drive, Luke cantered over to her, frowning. “Hey, Laura!” he called. “You’ll have to go back to the village now.”

Laura’s heart sank into her cowboy boots.

“We have a long way to go with these cows,” Luke went on. “And I only take the most experienced cowboys and cowgirls on my cattle drives.”

Laura thought quickly. She had to persuade Luke somehow! “My mom and dad said I could join the next drive that passed through,” she said. She gave Luke a pleading look. “*Please* let me come.”

Just then, there was the sound of hooves as another cowboy rode up. “What’s going on here?” asked Red in a friendly voice.

Luke explained, and Red smiled. “I think you should let her stay,” he said. Laura’s heart flipped over hopefully. “She saved the calf, remember?” Red reminded Luke. “She’s obviously a good rider, and she could be company for Jolene, too.”

There was a tiny moo from beside Star, and Laura looked down to see the little calf trotting along close to Star’s flank.

Red chuckled. "You see, Luke, you can't send her back. That calf has adopted Laura as his new mother. She'll have to keep an eye on him from now on."

Luke watched the calf for a moment, then smiled. "You're right, Red. I can't send her back now."

"Thanks, Luke," said Laura. "I won't let you down, I promise."

She looked at the calf. He stared back with big, adoring eyes, then mooed again. Laura smiled. He might not know it, but this time the calf had saved *her*! Now she had a special calf as well as a magic pony. She couldn't believe her luck!

As Red rode on ahead with Luke, the old cowboy turned and gave her a big wink.

On they rode, across the plains, with the rocky hills slowly drawing closer. The cowboys spread out along the line of cattle, keeping them from straying too far off the trail. It was hard work, because the cattle kept wandering off to graze on any tasty bit of grass they saw!

The land began to change. Instead of swaying grass, Laura noticed prickly pear cactuses and boulders and bright yellow desert flowers. As they rode through a rocky canyon, she saw a lizard slither between some stones and a hawk fly overhead on the hunt for jackrabbits. And all the time, the calf trotted along close to Star. Laura smiled at her loyal new friend.

"I think we should give the calf a name," she said to Star. "What do you think we should call him?"

Star arched her neck and blew gently on the calf's ears. The calf twitched his ears happily. "Something to do with how you saved him?" she suggested.

"How we saved him," Laura corrected her, laughing. "How about River?"

"Perfect!" agreed Star.

As daylight faded the men set about making a camp. The cattle were allowed to stop and graze, and Laura made sure that River was settled among them. A young cow with a white patch on her nose sniffed at River, then let the little calf graze next to her. Feeling relieved, Laura rode off to join the rest of the cowboys. As she dismounted, she couldn't believe how stiff she felt! She had never spent so long on a pony before, and traveling across country was very different from trotting around a field in riding school. But she wouldn't have missed a moment of the amazing adventure she'd had so far.

Star nuzzled her, and Laura wrapped her arms around her pony's neck.

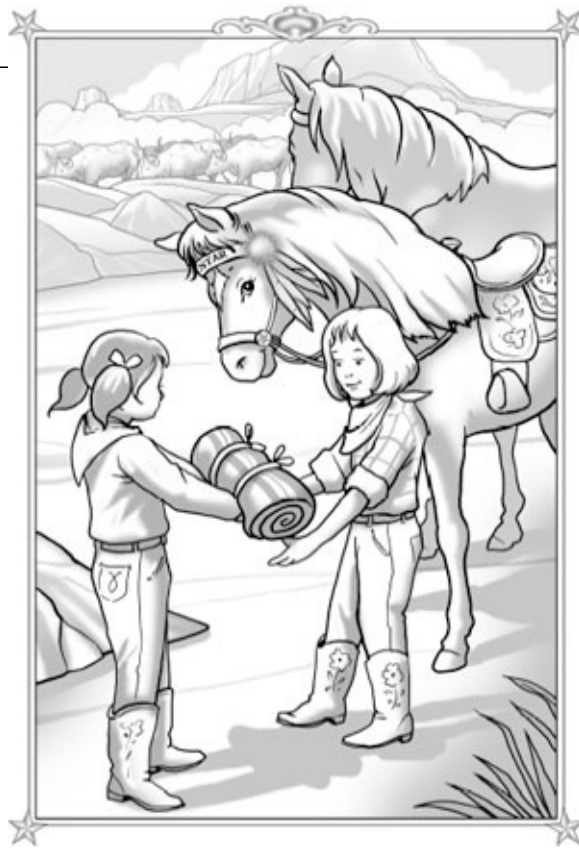
"Thank you, Star," she whispered. "This has been the best day of my life."

Star gave a happy whinny, then butted her with her nose. "You need to rest," she told Laura. "It'll be another long day tomorrow."

But Laura was too excited to sit down. She watched as some of the others unbuckled bedrolls from the backs of their saddles and laid them out on the ground. But Star didn't have a bedroll behind his saddle—what would Laura do? The ground looked very hard and uncomfortable. Then she saw Luke pass Jolene a bedroll and nod in Laura's direction. Jolene didn't look very happy, but she started to walk over to Laura.

"Here. You can borrow this one," Jolene said in a quiet voice, handing the bedroll over to Laura. It was a beautiful striped red, yellow, and blue blanket.

"Thank you!" Laura said, hoping that Jolene might be feeling more friendly. Jolene gave a thin smile and walked away. Laura watched her leave, then laid her blanket out near the horses, so that she could sleep close to Star. Then, after making sure that Star had plenty of food and water, she set off to explore the camp. She had learned the names of all the cowboys during the long ride, and already she felt as if she was part of the team.



Luke and Red were slowly riding around the cattle, keeping an eye on them, while Carlos the cook was unloading cooking equipment from the back of a pack mule. Tex and Mark were making a fire, with Jolene helping them. It was quickly getting cold now that the sun had set, and some of the cowboys wrapped themselves in colorful blankets when they sat down. Carlos began stirring a big pot of beef and bean stew on a smaller fire. It smelled delicious and Laura suddenly realized how hungry she was. She offered to help, and Carlos produced a stack of tin plates from one of his saddlebags.

“You can help me dish out,” he said.

Laura gave Jolene a plate of stew first.

“Thanks,” said Jolene without looking up.

“What about Luke and Red?” Laura asked Carlos, when everyone had some food.

“Don’t worry about them,” Carlos told her. “I’ll leave some stew in the pot and they’ll eat when their shift’s finished.”

Laura felt a bit sorry for them—they must be really hungry! She sat down to eat her stew, thinking that being a cowboy was very hard work.

After a while, Laura noticed Jolene slip away to lie down in the shadows. Leaving the other cowboys sitting around the fire, Laura went over to her bedroll and snuggled down wrapped in her warm blanket.

“Good night, Star,” she whispered.

“Sleep tight,” her magic pony replied softly.

As Laura dozed off, she heard the sound of singing. At first, she thought it must be the men around the fire, but then she realized that it was coming from where the cattle were grazing. It was Luke and Red, singing to them as they rode around! Laura smiled and began to drift deeper into sleep.

Suddenly, a voice nearby jolted her awake.

“...prices will be good enough,” she heard.

Laura opened her eyes. The singing had stopped. She had no idea how long she’d been asleep. Perhaps Luke and Red had finished their shift by now.

“It will be easy money,” said a muffled voice.

Laura felt her skin begin to prickle. There were definitely men talking nearby. And they weren't casually chatting—they were talking in urgent whispers, as though they were making a plan.

Laura lay as still as she could under her blanket, listening.

“Just need to wait for half the cattle to go into the ravine,” said one of the men.

“The secret valley near that ravine is going to be really useful!” said another. “We'd never be able to steal the cattle without it.”



Laura's heart began to pound. Had she just overheard a plot to steal some of Luke's cattle?

Chapter 5

Laura heard the men walk back toward the fire. They passed close to where she was lying, and she held her breath. Suddenly one of them muttered crossly.

“What’s wrong?” asked a companion.

“Nothing,” replied the man. “Just a stupid cactus scratching my hand.”

As the footsteps went past, crunching on the dry earth, Laura heard the rattling chink of a spur. She thought there were three men, but it could have been four. Her mind was racing. The men’s voices had been muffled by her blanket, which was tucked up around her ears, so she hadn’t recognized any of the speakers. All she had were two tiny clues—one of the men had scratched his hand, and another was wearing a loose, jangling spur.

She heard the sound of one man mounting a horse, or maybe two. It was so annoying not to be sure! Laura wondered if Star was listening, too, but she didn’t dare call out to her. Soon, the sound of singing started again, drifting on the night air. The rest of the camp grew quiet, and Laura peered out from underneath her blanket. She’d have to wait until morning to talk to Star. She stared up at the millions of stars stretching across the clear night sky. Only one thing was sure: all three or four speakers had been men.

At last, Laura drifted off to sleep again. When she woke up the gray-pink light of dawn streaked the sky. There was a chill in the air, and she shivered. Sitting up, she pushed aside her blanket and tiptoed over to Star.

The cow pony was dozing, resting one hind leg, but she woke up as Laura approached and whickered a friendly hello.

“Star!” whispered Laura, stroking her nose. “Last night I heard some of the men talking. I think they’re planning to steal some of the cattle. Did you hear anything?”

Star pricked her ears. “No, not a thing. What happened?”

Quickly Laura told her everything. Star listened, her nostrils flaring.

“I think I know which ravine they’re talking about,” she said. “I overheard some of them talking about the route ahead yesterday. There’s one place where the trail gets really narrow.”

“That must be it,” agreed Laura. “What can we do? I don’t know who was talking about the plot—though they were all men, so that rules out Jolene.”

Star tossed her head. “Well, maybe you should talk to her.”

“But I don’t think she likes me very much,” Laura pointed out.

Star blew softly into Laura’s blond hair. “She was the only girl before you came along,” Star reminded her. “Maybe she just needs some time to get used to you.”

“We don’t *have* time,” said Laura. The camp was already beginning to stir. She could see that Carlos was lighting his fire to cook breakfast. “We’ll get to the ravine today, and that’s when the cowboys are planning to steal the cattle!”

“Well,” said Star, “we’ll just have to hope that’s enough time for you to make friends with Jolene.”

When the cowboys had finished their breakfasts, they packed up the camp and saddled their horses. Laura tried to strap her bedroll into place behind Star’s saddle. It was difficult, because the buckles were stiff.

“Do you need a hand there, Laura?” asked a kindly voice.

Laura looked around. Jesse was smiling down at her from his mustang. She yanked on the stiff buckle, and the leather strap slipped into place.

“I’m fine, thanks.” She smiled back at him.

“Well, you let me know if you need help with anything,” he said.

He sounded so nice and friendly, and Laura hesitated. Surely he couldn’t be one of the thieves? She needed to tell *someone*, and Jesse was just the sort of person she’d willingly trust! But just as she opened her mouth to speak, another of the cowboys rode close by and gave Jesse a friendly slap on the shoulder. Laura snapped her mouth shut again. She knew the slap might not mean anything, but all the same, it reminded her that *any* of the men could be thieves—even Jesse!

Laura swung herself into Star’s saddle. River trotted over and greeted Laura with a friendly mood. Laura really wanted to check all the cowboys’ spurs and whether any of them had a scratch on his hand, but it was impossible. The men quickly spread out around the herd, and with all the dust it was difficult to see anything clearly.

“You’re right,” Laura said to Star, patting the pony’s neck. “I can’t stop the thieves on my own. I’ll have to speak to Jolene.”

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