

Benkeeragh

Jill Webb

Jess watched the green fields of Ireland roll past the car window. She sat on the wrong side of the car as her dad drove on the wrong side of the narrow road.

“More sheep. When will we see some horses?”

Her dad smiled and turned the car onto a side road. “You’ll see some soon. This is their road.”

She pressed her face to the window, scanning the stonewall enclosed field. “More sheep.”

“Their neighbors raise sheep. Look ahead.”

“Finally! Horses!” In a giant paddock beyond the sheep stood two glorious horses. A black and a bay. Both powerful and elegant. “Are all of theirs Irish Draughts?”

“That’s all Maggie and Brendan breed, but they have some retired Thoroughbred racehorses and some cobs they train and sell.”

“You know, I heard Mom tell you that if you brought back a horse for me, you were responsible for keeping it.”

“She did. You know, she tells me that every time I come on a buying trip.”

“You’re the one with the barn. I can’t keep a horse in Mom’s backyard. Was she serious about me getting a horse here? I’ve been too tall for Bonnie for months now.”

“Plenty of horses for sale at home. We don’t need to import one for you. You know what it costs to fly them home.”

“Isn’t it cheaper if you have the right number to fill the stalls? Getting one for me might save your clients money.”

“That all depends on whether I find horses for all four buyers or not.” He turned the car into a driveway opposite the paddock. “Here we are. Ogdaire Horse Farm.”

The two-story stone house looked properly Irish. Beside the house was a large stone barn, courtyard-style with stall doors just visible. The two horses she’d spotted ambled over to hang their heads over the fence.

Jess was two steps out of the car before Dad stopped her. “We have to let them know we’re here before you go off exploring.”

She reversed direction and followed Dad up to the house, turning every couple steps to watch the horses. “How many Irish Draughts is Donna looking to buy this time?”

“Just a stallion, but she’s being really particular about bloodlines.” He knocked on the door.

After a couple of moments, a woman in jeans and a sweater opened the door. “Alan. Glad you’ve made it. Come in. Did you have a good flight?”

Jess looked back at the horses as she followed them inside. They stopped in a comfy room with horse pictures on the walls. “Maggie, this is my daughter, Jess. Her first time here.”

Maggie nodded her head. “Glad to have you, Jess. I assume you ride?” She had the same lilting accent Jess heard from the airport and hotel staff last night.

“Yes, ma’am. As much as I can.”

She laughed. “You’ll fit in well here. I’ll get you the key to the cottage and let Brenden know you’re here.” From a desk under a window she grabbed a brass horseshoe keyring. “Here you go. I stocked the kitchen for breakfast and you’re to join us for dinner.”

Dad accepted the keys. “We’ll see you tonight then.”

Maggie led them to the door, tapping into her phone as they walked. “There. He’ll find you at the cottage.”

The two horses were grazing now. Jess started towards them when Dad called her to the car. “We’ll drive so we can leave the car at the cottage.”

She walked backwards so she could watch the horses. The black one lifted his head and watched her.

“Come on. We’ll be here long enough to see all the horses.”

Jess climbed into the car. “Thank you for bringing me this time.”

“You’re old enough now and you earned it by making honor roll this year.”

“And I’ll get to ride while we’re here?”

He backed the car out and drove past the barn. “Brenden said he’d have

something for you to ride around the farm. And I'm counting on you helping me try out at least some of the sale horses. The eventer for Jeanie for sure. Maybe the jumper Nelly wants. They both want horses well trained and ready to show."

Jess scanned the stalls as they passed the barn. All the stalls looked empty. Dad parked the car at a tiny square house just past the barn. It was made of the same stone as the barn and was probably as old.

"Grab your bags and change into boots and we'll go find Brendan and some horses."

Boots meant maybe riding. She hurried behind Dad into the cottage. The door opened onto a sitting room with a kitchen and breakfast table off to one side. Dad pointed out a bedroom for her. Wood panel halfway up the wall and horsey wallpaper above. She'd love a bedroom at home like this. After changing into comfy breeches and boots, she left the rest to unpack later -- there were horses to see now.

Jess pulled her hair into a ponytail with the elastic around her wrist and carried her riding helmet back to the living room.

Dad also wore riding gear. "Let's see what Brenden has planned to show us today."

Jess liked that he'd said 'us'. She might be just tagging along on his buying trip, but he made it sound like she was part of the team.

The black horse still stood at the fence, looking towards the barn until Jess skipped after Dad. Then the horse looked at them and tossed his head. "Does he think it's time to go in?"

"Maybe. He might see Brendan in the barn."

The barn was a three-sided courtyard ringed with stalls. A wide passageway in the back of the courtyard led through to the covered arena.

“Brendan?” Dad called.

“In the office,” a voice answered.

They crossed the floor of grey bricks towards the passageway. Where a stall door would be, there was a full door with an off-center ‘Office’ sign. Dad knocked once and pushed it open.

In most of the pictures Jess had seen of Brendan, he’d been on horseback and wearing a helmet. His grin was familiar, but the curly brown hair was a surprise.

“Alan! Glad you’re here.” Brendan stood up and shook Dad’s hand. He looked at Jess. Standing, he was just her height. “Jess, good to meet you, finally. I should have known that a daughter of his would be taller than the thirteen-year-olds I’m used to. I’m guessing you’re not riding ponies anymore.”

“Bonnie’s fourteen hands, but I have to ride with my stirrups extra short so I don’t knock the jumps down.” The wall behind Brendan had a series of framed pictures of horses and rosettes fastened to most of the frames. A large aerial photo of the farm had a prominent place on the wall.

“Guess I didn’t need to borrow extra ponies for you to ride while you’re here then. You’ll have to give them a look so I can tell their owner that the American with the rich clients saw them at least.” Brendan’s accent was more strongly Irish than Maggie’s. Listening to him, here in this barn of stone and brick surrounded by green fields make it feel like she was really in Ireland.

Dad shook his head. “No ponies needed this trip, but there will be sooner or later.”

“How many of mine will you be needing then?” Brenden’s eyes twinkled.

Dad chuckled. “Right to business then? You’ve been talking to Donna online. She’s the one looking for a stallion. She wants a proven breeder, going well under saddle, with Irish Draught bloodlines to complement her program.”

“Tall order, but I’ve one in the field across that meets her requirements. The pedigree isn’t exactly what she asked for, but includes several of the bloodlines. Like to try him out?”

“That’s why we came.”

Jess felt that thrill of inclusion again.

They crossed the driveway and Brendan whistled two notes. He handed Jess one of the halters from a hook on the rail. “Let’s have you ride the black while your dad tries the stallion.”

Brendan slipped into the field and haltered the bay before letting Jess in to get the beautiful black horse. “What’s his name?”

“Benkeeragh. He was a huge foal so I named him after one of our mountains. Never got taller than 16 and a half hands, but that’s plenty big enough for most. You have a client looking for an eventer? He’s done a bit at the small local courses.”

Benkeeragh stood quietly while she looped the halter over his nose and buckled the strap behind his ears. “Nice to meet you, boy.” She looked over at Brendan. “Okay if I call him Ben for short?”

Brendan chuckled. "We do." He swung the gate open and handed Dad the stallion's lead. In the stableyard, he pointed out their stalls. By the time she had Ben inside and the lower door latched, Brendan deposited a grooming kit and tack outside the stall.

Ben's coat was the soft kind of black, glowing from within. His star was a small lopsided diamond and his left forefoot had a band of white on the outside of his leg that didn't reach his pastern. He nosed into his hayrack while she brushed him and cleaned his hooves. His tail was tangle-free, but she wiped a stiff brush through it just to be sure.

He was taller than Bonnie, but she'd ridden horses his size and bigger at home before. She looked to see if Dad had the bay tacked up yet. He and Brendan were talking, catching up on old friends and favorite horses while Dad got the horse ready.

Jess nudged Ben's head out of his hay and slipped his bridle on.

Brendan noticed her standing there. "Go ahead on down to the arena. Just past the office and through the new barn."

She thanked him and led Ben off. The 'new barn' was a mirror of the one they'd been in. From above, the two courtyards with stalls would look like a giant letter H. These stalls were empty, too. Ahead, the arena loomed, fully enclosed, with a wide doorway open facing the stables. Inside, she passed a galley area with seats, then into the arena proper. Skylights along the tops of the walls and open doors on all four sides gave plenty of light.

Brendan hadn't said she could mount up yet, so she led Ben around and looked out each of the doors. Out the end to the left was Brendan and Maggie's house and tidy garden, across from the entrance three pastures were visible, each with horses that must belong to the empty

stalls. The other end door was the best. A huge grass jumping field with logs, ditches, a bank, and scattered show jumps.

“Go on then, get up.” Brendan said as he and Dad entered. “Mounting block’s in the corner.”

She hoped he wasn’t implying she couldn’t mount from the ground, but it was better for the horse’s back to use the block. She stood Ben beside the block and checked the stirrup length. They were close enough and Dad was waiting so she mounted and rode to the middle of the arena to check them again and tighten the girth.

Ben’s walk was lovely, forward and smooth, and he listened to the rider well. Dad said you could always tell when a horse had only been ridden by riders he could trust.

Brendan stayed in the gallery, leaning on the arena wall. “Just warm up and try them out before we go into the jump field. I’ll film.”

Knowing he was filming made Jess check her posture and push her heels down. Of course, they’d want video of horses for buyers. Most of Dad’s clients this time wanted Irish Sport Horses with some Thoroughbred blood. He’d keep records of all the horses he tried in case a future client was interested. Maybe Ben would be the eventer Jeanie wanted.

Ben was a dream to ride, powerful trot and steady canter. Light in the bridle and responsive to her legs. She’d recommend him to anyone, but she kept thinking about their conversation in the car about how she was ready to move up from short little Bonnie.

Brendan kept up a commentary of pedigree and training and show experience while they rode. All to be caught on camera. The stallion was called Laird, short for Ogdair’s Laird of the

Grove. He and Ben had the same sire and grew up together. Both eight years old, they'd been backed at three and started real work under saddle at four and jumping at five. Laird's oldest foal crop started training this year and they'd be able to see several years' worth of his foals.

With only two of them in the arena, Jess didn't worry about going the same direction as Dad and Laird. She tried out circles, lateral work, and serpentines. She brought him down to a walk and stroked his neck. Walking well off the rail, she watched Dad ride. He was doing the same, trying out everything the horse could do.

When Dad slowed to a walk and let Laird stretch out and relax, Brendan swung into the arena. "Ready to try some fences?" Jess tried not to sound too eager as she answered. Dad caught up and winked as he rode alongside.

She blinked in the sunshine as they rode into the grassy field. They rode together around the jumps – some solid cross-country jumps and some portable show jumping fences.

Brendan waved them back over to a nice little log. "They've both jumped everything out here before. Let me know if you need anything lowered or changed."

Dad studied the jumps. "Maybe lower one of the oxers."

As Brendan walked to the closer oxer and adjusted the cups holding the green and white rails, Dad edged Laird closer to Jess and Ben. "Don't jump outside your comfort zone. Just enjoy yourself."

Enjoying herself was easy on a wonderful horse in a field full of jumps on a beautiful day. Jess just grinned back at Dad. "I'll start with the log here." The log wasn't any bigger than

two feet and she let Ben pick up a steady canter towards it. He flew softly over it. They circled around and jumped it from the other side.

She watched Dad jump the same log then she and Ben jumped a green vertical that led to the lowered oxer. Ben didn't put a foot wrong. They clicked as well as she and Bonnie did and right away. To be fair to Bonnie, Jess hadn't been this good a rider when their partnership had started.

After a few larger logs and a coop and a table, she even jumped a ditch and up and down the bank. Ben certainly knew what he was doing. She let him walk on a loose rein and watched Dad and the stallion. They looked like they were having as much fun as she was. After a couple more times over a bigger oxer, Dad rode over to Brendan and Jess followed.

Dad patted the big bay's shoulder. "As always, you've done a great job training them. You said they've grown up together. Any herd-bound issues?"

Brendan shook his head. "They've been separated plenty of times. Jess, you see the tree up the hill there?"

She looked where he pointed – off to the right, away from the barns, the field sloped steadily upwards to a lone oak tree. She nodded.

"Feel like having a nice canter up there?"

She grinned and glanced at Dad for permission.

"Go ahead then." Dad did rest a hand on Laird's neck to brace against any attempt to follow.

Jess turned away from them and waited until she was several yards away before asking for the canter. Rising up out of the saddle, she gave Ben his head and let him set the speed. His stride lengthened and the wind pulled tears from the corners of her eyes. His giant strides had them at the tree in no time and she pulled him up to a slow trot, then halted and looked down the hill.

The farm was spread out below, Dad and Laird and Brendan tiny doll-like figures. It didn't look like Laird had moved. She stroked Ben's neck. Good training all around. She walked him back down the hill, taking the route with the easiest slope, and followed the others back into the arena.

Brendan fell into step at her side as she led Ben up through the new barn. "If he suits you, you're welcome to ride him while you're here. Plenty of room to explore. If my riders are hacking out, you can join them."

"Really? Thank you. Yes, he suits me very well. Thank you."

She bounced as she walked. They might not be buying her a new horse in Ireland, but at least she had one to ride while she was here.

She and Dad returned the horses to the field across the driveway and went with Brendan to see the foals and young horses so Dad could get video of Laird's offspring. They passed riders coming in with more of Brendan's horses. The stable's staff preparing for an upcoming show.

After dinner, Dad wrote up reports on Laird to send to his client. "What do you think about Ben?"

Before she could ask, "For me?" he continued,

“As an eventer for Jeanie? He hasn’t competed to the level she’s looking for, but the price might be better.”

Oh, for his client. “He jumped everything today really well. He’s well trained on the flat and feels like a good enough mover for dressage.”

“Thanks. I’ll send her his info on your recommendation.”

She swallowed any comment she wanted to make. They were here to find horses for Dad’s clients.

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Next morning after a breakfast of bacon, eggs, and soda bread, they drove off to look at young show jumpers. Dad’s client, Jimmy, wanted young horses with the potential for grand prix jumping. He didn’t need them to be started under saddle yet.

The farm was beautiful, all white board fences and green fields. They watched young horses trot and canter around a ring and through a jump chute along one long side. Slightly older horses were shown under riders and jumped a few small fences. Dad took video and entrusted Jess to take notes. He chose six of the horses for additional pictures. None of the horses here had the experience his other buyer Nelly was looking for, but that didn’t stop the farm manager from bringing out three jumpers to show off over a course of fences, even letting Jess take two of them for a round. They jumped like a dream, but hadn’t the experience Nelly wanted.

Back at Brendan’s, Dad had to make reports on today’s horses and Jess got to take Ben out for a ride. She warmed up in the arena and then went for a long walk around the outside jump

field. Away from the barn, trails led into the woods and out into another field. More cross country jumps stood between trees along the trail and dotted this field.

After a circuit of trails, she returned to the arena where Brendan was coaching two of his riders. They invited her to stay for what turned out to be part dressage lesson and part riding on her own. She was honored to be included.

After dinner, Dad reported to Brendan on his clients' interest. "She definitely likes Laird, but there are two more stallions she wants me to look at, so I won't know more until I send her information on them. My event rider is interested in Ben. She wants more details on his show experience."

Brendan glanced at Jess before answering. "He did a few local events a couple of years ago. I can look up his dressage scores, but remember him jumping clean. I can see if there's space to enter him in the event we're going to weekend after next. Not sure I have a rider available. Maybe Jess would like the job?"

*Yes, I would!* Jess squealed internally but watched Dad's face for his answer.

"Well, if she's interested. She'll need to borrow a show coat and a cross country vest."

Jess nodded violently.

"Maggie should have clothes to fit."

Dad held out his hands. "Okay then. If you can enter them this late, let's do it. Jeanie's seen Jess ride enough times that it'll be a good way to show her what Ben can do."

By lunch time the next day, they had their answer and Jess was entered to ride Ben in the division that most closely resembled the highest level she'd ridden with Bonnie at home. Jumps around a meter high and a dressage test she knew Ben could manage easily.

From then on, Jess divided her time between traveling to different farms with Dad and riding with Brendan's staff preparing for the event. They taught her the dressage test, first on paper, then on foot, then riding it on Ben.

Jess and Ben jumped every reasonable cross country jump on Brendan's farm, and a few that were higher than the ones for the event. They hacked to a neighboring stable one day to jump other people's jumps.

Out with Dad, she got to ride more Irish Sport Horse jumpers and eventers for him to video for clients. They narrowed choices for the young prospects and for the experienced jumper and sent the complete list to those clients. The other two Irish Draught stallions weren't quite as nice as Laird to Jess's eye, but they had enough good qualities that Dad couldn't rule either out and sent their details along to Donna.

Finally, they also found three other event horses for Jeanie to choose from. All had extensive competition records and video from recent shows that Dad sent to her.

Two days before the event, Dad read Jeanie's latest email to Brendan at dinner. "She says she's having a hard time deciding, that I've given her too many good horses to choose from. But, even though the others are more experienced, she says 'every kid at some point wants Black Beauty. I'm waiting to decide until I see the video from the event Benkeeragh is entered in.'" Dad winked at Jess. "No pressure, kid."

Not funny. If Ben did brilliantly, Jeanie would buy him, if he did poorly, she wouldn't and Jess would feel terrible for letting Ben down. But, if Jeanie didn't buy him, there was always the chance that Jess could get him for her own. If not now, maybe next time Dad visited.

Morning of the event, the four horses from Ogdairé were braided and loaded into the stable's large van and driven to the showgrounds. Jess and Dad followed in their car and she reviewed the dressage test the whole way.

She barely had time to settle Ben in a temporary stall before she was hurried off to collect her number and walk the course with Brendan and his riders. Luckily, they were all riding the same course, Jess in the division for junior riders and the rest in the adult division. The wide mown path in the grass between jumps helped her remember the way. Numbered jumps, just like at home, also helped. Brenden and Dad pointed out the best approaches to the jumps, including a tricky one with a downhill approach, followed several strides later by a ditch and then an up-bank.

She had time to walk the course alone one time before warming up for dressage. Dad gave her a leg up and wished her good luck. She patted Ben's neck. "I've got the luck of the Irish with me today."

The usual flutter of butterflies tickled in her stomach when it was her turn and the judge rang the starting bell. Two deep breaths and she trotted Ben up the center line, well aware that Dad was filming from the side. Their halt was square and still, he trotted off just a bit crooked but straightened before the end of the arena. His canter was strong and powerful, always soft in the bridle. She almost missed the transition back to the trot because the canter was so nice. At the final halt, she was pleased. He'd been good and she'd been riding him for less than three weeks.

There wouldn't be time to watch the video yet. Back to the stall, she'd just have time to change saddles for jumping and walk the show jumping course. Two other Ogdaire horses walked with them to the showjumping field, to join the one already there.

Dad and Brendan held the horses while Jess walked the course with the others. They reminded her about the start and finish markers with a story about the time Brendan was going so fast, he missed the finish markers and lost enough time turning back to them that he got time penalties.

Jess mounted Ben and focused on the jumps again, reminding herself of the course. Getting Ben eliminated because she got the course wrong would just be embarrassing. Brendan shouted instructions as they warmed up. Ben knew his job and locked onto jumps once he knew which one they were trying to jump. She just had to steer him to the right ones.

Adults went first, so Jess was able to watch them all ride the course to help her memorize it. One had a rail down and the other two went clean. When the announcer called for junior riders, she checked in. She was fifth to go and smiled at the girl ahead of her and wished her luck. So many beautiful horses and ponies here. Half of the junior riders were on large ponies or chunky cobs and many of the rest were on Thoroughbreds or half-breds.

They called her number and she settled into the saddle and asked Ben to walk into the ring. She saluted the judge and trotted off when he blew the whistle to start. Ben locked onto the first jump he saw, a red-and-white striped oxer, but it wasn't the first jump, Jess pulled his head around to see the green rails with brush filler that was number one. He flew around the course, hooves pounding the ground and snapping up to clear the jumps. They nearly missed the turn to the last fence and were off-balance enough to knock it down.

The loudspeaker crackled. “That’s four faults for our American rider with no time penalties. Next up is number forty-seven.”

Four faults added to their dressage score. At least they’d showed that Ben knew his job. Earning a ribbon would be a bonus. She stroked his neck as they walked away from the jumping ring. “Not your fault, you were great.”

Dad and Brendan offered congratulations as they walked back to the stalls. One Ogdaire horse was in the lead in the senior division and another was only a few places lower. They’d seen her dressage score, but Jess didn’t want to know. Too good a score and she’d feel worse about the rail down, too bad a score and she’d feel bad about that.

Jess gave Ben a good grooming while he enjoyed a light lunch. The pep talk she gave him was more for her than for him, but he didn’t complain. Her own lunch was sandwiches and crisps eaten while she walked the cross country course one more time with the other Ogdaire riders. She walked ahead of them to make sure she knew the path and waited at each jump to listen to their strategy.

Finally, one clapped her on the back. “Don’t worry, you’re on old Ben. He’ll take care of you. Just keep him balanced and steer. And maybe trot that downhill log if it’s muddy by the time you go.”

That should have helped. A voice in the back of her head reminded her instead that it really meant any mistakes would be her fault. If Jeanie really wanted to buy Ben, she’d make allowances for rider error. Jess hadn’t thought to check if the other horses Jeanie was considering were at this event.

She watched some of the senior riders go and heard reports back of how certain jumps rode. That log after the hill was causing problems already. Jumping it badly meant getting a wrong stride to the stride at the ditch, or missing it entirely.

Ben was dozing in his stall when she went to saddle him for cross country. Stepping out of the stall, his coat gleamed in the sunshine and he gave her a nudge with his nose. Dad hurried up just in time to give her a leg up.

“You know your course? Have a plan?”

She took a deep breath and released it. “Yep. Balanced and steady.”

“Good girl. Brendan’s at the warm-up. I’ll be filming where I can. Have a good ride. Love you.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

She let Ben walk on a loose rein as Dad jogged off towards the course. The warmup ring already had six horses and ponies trotting and cantering over the three jumps provided. Brendan walked over. “You’re doing great today. I wish I could ask your dad if you could stay and ride for me, but I think I’m supposed to wait until you’re eighteen. If you want a job then, you let me know. Go ahead and trot a lap, then canter. When there’s room, jump the crossbar.”

Jess followed instructions. Ben took the warmup fence easily, and two more. “That’s enough,” Brendan said after they jumped the oxer. “You’re ready. Walk until they call you.”

As she walked, she watched rider after rider leave the start box and gallop to and over the first three jumps on course before they went out of sight in the woods. She wouldn’t see them

again until they came around a hill off to her left and galloped back into the same field where they'd started.

When the starter called her number, she walked to the box and took two deep breaths to quiet the butterflies and steady her nerves.

"I'll count you down from ten," the starter said. "We're all chuffed we can brag about hosting an international event now that you're here. 30 seconds."

Jess smiled at him and walked a small circle. She entered the box when he called "ten seconds". When the starter said "Go", she clucked to Ben and he cantered out of the box, accelerating into a nice gallop and locking onto the first jump. One, two, and three went by in a flash, then they were in the woods. The path was wide and firm, up a nice slope to a wooden coop that Ben easily jumped. As the path turned left, she steadied his canter, looking at the footing ahead.

Long, sliding tracks where horses had already slipped lined the path. She asked Ben back to the trot and kept her weight back to let him find his balance. The opening ahead was a bright light in the woodsy shadow. She aimed for the log centered in the light and wrapped her legs against Ben's sides.

He cantered the last stride to the log and over it, jumping so big that she dropped a rein. Jess spotted the ditch and scrambled at the reins to get them back. Ben locked onto the ditch and carried her over before she had the reins where they should be. Four more strides to the up bank and she had her reins back. A long gallop to enjoy before the next three jumps, a table, a coop, and stacked logs, then back into another patch of woods for a twisting path with two more logs to jump.

The rest of the course was a breeze. They flew through the finish and she flung her arms around his neck. “You’re the best horse ever.”

Dad jogged up to meet her as she let Ben walk on a loose rein to catch his breath. “Great job. Want to know your scores now?”

“Sure.” After that ride, nothing would bother her.

“You were fifth after dressage, then dropped to seventh after the rail. As long as you didn’t have time penalties, you won’t place any lower than that.”

“He was amazing. Just perfect. Did you get the video you needed?”

Dad nodded. “Another horse Jeanie likes is here too, so I have both. Good for her to compare side by side.”

They relaxed at the stalls with the rest of the Ogdair team until they were told to mount up for the awards ceremony in the show jumping ring. The senior division went first and Ogdair horses were awarded first, fourth, and fifth. Jess cheered as they cantered a victory lap with ribbons streaming from their bridles.

Jess lined Ben up with the other juniors when the senior riders cleared the ring. They’d moved up to fifth place and a green rosette – the fifth place color at Irish horse shows - was fastened to his bridle. The bay pony who won the class set a fast pace for their lap of honor. Jess was more worried about running over the little boy and grey pony just ahead of her in fourth place, but Ben was steady amid the excitement.

When they returned to the stables, all four horses were settled in their boxes and riders all up to the house for dinner. The courses were recounted from memory by all the riders. Dad showed the video he'd gotten of each of them. Ben was the best of them all.

"I'll send the video to Jeanie tonight and see how soon she can decide. Donna emailed me earlier today and would like to buy Laird. Can we start the paperwork tomorrow on him?"

"Happy to," Brendan answered. He winked at Jess. "Be nice if Laird could have a friendly travelling companion for his flight overseas, wouldn't it?"

After breakfast the next morning, Jess groomed Ben and went to watch the foals while Dad talked to clients and did paperwork with Brendan. She wandered through the barn at lunchtime and they called her into the office.

"Everyone made their final decisions," Dad said as she entered.

She swallowed hard. Who was Jeanie buying?

"Jeanie was impressed with your ride yesterday, but the grey that took second in the senior division was another from her list and she's going to buy him."

Brendan cleared his throat. "That means I'm still in need of a buyer for Ben. Know anyone who might be interested?" He smiled at her. "I could offer a very good price to the right rider."

Dad patted her knee. "I think her grin is a yes. We'll just have to buy him for her. I've got to keep my best rider happy."

“Really? Thank you! Can I go tell Ben now?” The words ran out her mouth without pause. They waved her out of the office, the expressions on their faces making her wonder if they’d planned this all along.

Ben strolled over to the fence when she sat on the top rail. She told him all about the farm at home, and about Bonnie, who’d be getting a new rider now with shorter legs. He listened patiently, dozing at her side, eyes half-closed as she stroked his neck.