

*Before long the horses were saddled and they mounted up. Will stayed behind, explaining he had work to do. Laura rode a young buckskin gelding she called Fred.*

*"He's Miss Mollie's son," she explained. "He was a young foal at her side when we adopted them two years ago. I think he'll turn out to be a fine horse, but he still has some rough edges to work out."*

*Laura led them away from the barn and onto a narrow trail leading through a lush meadow. Gillian couldn't get over the sheer beauty of it. The aspen trees were turning gold.*

*"When I first came here, I was an ex-housewife who didn't know one end of a horse from the other," explained Laura. "I was originally hired as a bookkeeper for Will's veterinary practice. The next thing I knew I was writing grants, planning fund-raisers, and doing everything else I could think of to keep money flowing in the door for the foundation to help care for these animals. Back then, I was living in the cottage, that's what we call the fifth-wheel trailer, and I soon became friends with Will. He taught me, and both of my boys, how to ride. He also taught me how to help take care of the horses. Along the way I've been kicked, bitten, and occasionally stepped on, but I've learned to cope with it. Horses are easy. Two sons aren't."*

*"Thanks, Mom," said Jeremy.*

*"Anytime," she replied. "Some of the ones we get are simply neglected or have owners who, for whatever reason, are no longer able to care for them. Those are the easy cases, and we can usually get them to new owners right away. Others arrive abandoned, injured or starving. They need some TLC, and we're often pretty successful with them as well. But we also get the occasional hard-luck cases. Those are the ones that have suffered some serious abuse, and it never ceases to amaze me just how cruel some human beings can be. They usually need complete rehabilitation, but we're not always successful. There've also been a few that we've had to put down as soon as they arrived. Those are the ones that really break your heart."*

*They continued across the meadow and began working their way toward the ridge. Laura went on with her story.*

*"This ranch used to be called The Flying M, and it's been in Will's family for over a century. When Will's father inherited it from his great-uncle, it was still a working cattle ranch. Will's dad was also a veterinarian. He started up the veterinary clinic, and he started taking in injured and abandoned horses. By the time Will finished veterinary school, they decided to stop raising cattle and add a horse sanctuary to the clinic. They sold about half the acreage, and the name, to that big dude ranch resort next door. Will renamed the place St. Eligius, since he's the patron saint of horses and those who work with them. That pretty much sums it up. The foundation survives mostly on grant money and donor support. We also do a number of fundraisers throughout the year. One is coming up soon, and that's the haunted hayride that we do every year with the Flying M. It's the last Saturday in October and we always have a lot of fun while we're at it. We have volunteers of all ages who come and participate, and the boys always come to help out as well."*

*"Isn't it snowing up here by then?" asked Gillian.*

*"A little bit, sometimes, but the snow doesn't really start accumulating until around Thanksgiving. Our big event, however, is our gala and auction in Denver, in February."*

*Fred started acting up. Miss Mollie got agitated as well, but Gillian pulled the rein tight and got her under control.*

*"You okay, Mom?"*

*"Yeah. He's just being the equine adolescent that he is. I'm going to run him back in to let him get it out of his system. I've got some work to do as well. You two take your time."*

*Laura turned Fred around and he took off in a dead gallop. Gillian and Jeremy watched as she raced across the meadow.*

*"You know, she's really not so bad," said Gillian.*

*"Well, I would certainly hope not."*

*"Our first meeting didn't go so well." Gillian turned Miss Mollie toward the ridge. "She meant well, but she showed up, unexpectedly, at the gallery one day and really threw me for a loop. Maybe having Ian out of the picture makes a difference."*

*"You and I didn't get off to the best start either, if you recall."*

*"Yeah, but you were just looking out for your dad. You wanted to make sure I wasn't some manipulating tramp."*

*They rode for another couple of hours, stopping occasionally for Gillian to snap a few photos. By the time they were ready to head back, she decided that not only would she be happy to donate a painting, she would create one exclusively for their auction. Jeremy was pleased. He couldn't wait to give his mother, and Will, the news. They rode back down the hillside and into the meadow.*

*"Sometimes, on the way back in, we like to run the horses through the meadow," explained Jeremy, "but I think maybe we'll skip it this time. I don't know if you're up to it or not."*

*Gillian turned to face Jeremy. "You're right."*

*She spurred Miss Mollie forward and the mare took off like a rocket. Just like her son, Fred, Miss Mollie was a good runner.*

*"Well, how 'bout that?" A big smile broke across Jeremy's face. "You're going to need that head start, Missy."*

*He spurred Pretty Boy forward and raced after her. His mount was a bigger, faster horse, and he soon caught up to her. They were in a virtual tie by the time they reached the barn.*

*"Okay, Miss Smarty-Pants, I stand corrected," shouted Jeremy as they slowed their mounts down.*