

1st Chapter



THE LEGEND OF THE GREAT HORSE trilogy *Eclipsed by Shadow • The Golden Spark • Into the Dark*

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*The travels in this story are fiction,
but the intention is to present historical accuracy.
Where license is taken, it is to portray the spirit of the times.*

*Disclaimer: According to observation
and science, horses cannot fly.*

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HOME

MEAGAN AWOKE WITH a start and sat upright in bed. The dream had come again. The dream of the flying horse.

Early light was outlining the window blinds. Meagan threw back her sheets and dressed quietly, as it was summer vacation and her parents preferred to sleep through dawn. She tiptoed out of her room and down the hardwood stairs to the kitchen. Closing the back door gently, she slipped through the pasture fence and raced into the backyard.

Auburn-haired and with a streak of tomboy, Meagan Roberts was not an unusual girl of twelve—except for the lucky fact that her family kept horses. (Actually, they only kept *one* horse, an aged mare, but very soon it would be two.) Hay and pine shavings greeted her at the backyard stable's entrance, in her opinion the best smells in the world.

“Moose?” Meagan turned on the barn’s dim lights. The cool morning air was silent. Of course, she did not *really* believe the foal had come in the night: the veterinarian said it was still too soon. As with all the other mornings, she expected to find Moose munching her hay contentedly, enormous and alone in her stall.

The pregnant mare’s formal name was *Bright Lights*, but she was called Moose for her bay coat and rambling gait. Meagan had loved the huge mare since her second birthday, when she had been held up on Moose’s wide back, terrified and grabbing fistfuls of mane, crying to be taken off immediately and put back on forever.

Peering over the stall door in the quiet pre-dawn, Meagan tensed. The evening hay lay untouched. She opened the door to see the floor dug into mounds. Her beloved Moose lay in the wrecked bedding, dark with sweat, her sides rising and falling in fast breaths. A violent kick sent a spray of bedding against the wall. Meagan bolted for the house, crying, “Mom, Dad! Hurry! Moose is sick!”

Her mother was down first, tying her robe as she came. “Stop shouting, Meagan. We can hear you.”

“Moose is *sick*. She’s lying down and she’s kicking!”

Jennifer Roberts frowned and called upstairs. “Tom, I’m going to check on the mare.” She addressed her daughter calmly. “Meagan, some broodmares lie down before they foal. It is only natural.”

“I know, but Moose didn’t eat her hay and she’s *sweating*. Please, Mom, *please* hurry!”

“We’ll go see, Meagan. Just don’t let Moose know you’re upset. She is probably resting.”

But Jennifer paled at the sight of the dark mare groaning in the straw. Meagan hung back in the doorway, watching her mother enter the stall and kneel beside Moose. Meagan could see the whites of the mare’s eyes, something only a frightened horse would show.

“Tell your father to call Dr. Parker,” Jennifer said quietly, “and bring back some towels.” She stroked the mare’s head. “Good girl, Moose, easy now. Everything is going to be fine.” One large ear flicked as the mare listened.

Meagan was not the only one who held Moose as a constant in her life. As a teenager, Jennifer had watched the birth of the bay filly that was to be her companion through school, boys, marriage and children. She had watched Moose grow from a gawky foal into sleek prime, and now into the matronly shape of a broodmare.

Jennifer forced herself to keep talking. This was Moose’s first foal and complications could happen. “Rest now, that’s a good girl.” Moose must have been in labor for hours, an alarming sign—mares usually foal quickly, within thirty minutes of labor’s onset. The horse’s coat was covered in dried sweat and caked with bedding. “You’ll be all right, girl, you have to be. No one else knows all my secrets.” Jennifer smoothed a sudden wet spot on the mare’s muzzle.

Her husband, Tom, came to stand outside the stall door. "They're paging Dr. Parker. Don't worry, Jen. She'll be okay." Meagan stood silently behind, holding the towels.

Moose groaned and lifted her head. The horse's normally full flanks were drawn and soaked in sweat. Heaving herself up, the mare began circling the stall.

"Meagan, would you bring the halter?" Jennifer made herself keep the words calm. "I don't understand. Last night everything was fine."

The distended mare stopped and lowered herself onto the spoiled bedding, diving into the throes of a contraction. Jennifer took a towel and the halter from her daughter and knelt beside the mare again. Gently holding the mare's head down to prevent her from rising, she stroked a towel over the sweat-soaked coat, murmuring, until a surge of pain drove the mare to paw violently and wrench herself from Jennifer's grip. After a few circuits around the stall the mare lowered herself again to begin futile straining.

"Where *is* he?" Jennifer asked, her voice tight. Moose half-rose and buckled back to the floor, thrashing in the bedding. Jennifer retreated to the doorway to watch helplessly. Mother and daughter listened to the sounds of car engines, closing their eyes when each passed. The eastern edges of the sky were showing blue when a vehicle finally slowed and turned into the driveway.

Dr. Parker was a short, grizzled man with a face too weathered and creased to reveal his age. With a glance at the mare, the veterinarian set his black bag down. "I need one of you to help," he said matter-of-factly, and was surprised as Jennifer stepped forward. He had expected the husband but no matter. With horses, experience mattered more than a strong arm.

Waiting for the right moment to avoid being kicked, the veterinarian quickly knelt and haltered the mare. He pushed her lips back to see the gums: they were a pale, deadly white. He pinched a bit of skin on her neck and it stood stiffly instead of springing back. Dehydration. Handing the lead rope to Jennifer, he moved to palpate the mare, reaching inside to feel the unborn foal. The canal was dry; the water had broken hours before. When finished, his face was grim. He went to his bag.

"You have to make a decision. The mare or the foal." He said it gruffly, plunging a hypodermic into a bottle and inverting it. "She won't deliver a live foal without a cesarean, but the operation will kill her. If I don't the foal will smother." In silence he finished preparing the injection, and then looked squarely at Jennifer. It was not a cold look, or even without concern. It was the look of a man who knew the pain of the answer but required it.

"She was fine." Jennifer turned frightened eyes to her daughter. "Can't..."

"I need a decision, or it will be too late for either."

Jennifer stared at the towel in her hand, hearing Moose's uneven breathing. "It's her first foal ... she doesn't know what's happening."

The vet began to dab alcohol into a sweat-soaked spot on the mare's throat. He spoke more softly, "Mrs. Roberts, there's a chance we can save the momma.

A small chance, but we might. Send your daughter out and let me try to save your mare."

"Is the foal alive?" Jennifer asked in a small voice.

"Right now, yes."

"If we waited for another foal..."

The man hesitated. "I know you want this for your little girl, Mrs. Roberts, but your mare won't have another foal, even if she makes it. You should know that. She won't have another."

Jennifer looked up at Meagan, a tiny shadow behind her father. Huddled, a new generation waited. *No*. It was too soon for this horrific calculation. A long moment passed as the two mothers communed silently. If Moose's time was over, hers too was passing. It was too soon ... it would always be too soon.

"Save the foal," she whispered.

The vet almost protested but instead gritted his teeth and returned to his bag. He quickly pulled a narcotic into a new syringe. *A shame, a damn shame*, he thought. He handed Jennifer the slack lead as she stroked Moose's once sleek neck.

The mare barely flinched at the needle. Jennifer felt something inside herself drift away. "Please take Meagan outside, Tom." She watched them leave, trying not to think, not to feel. There would be time enough to grieve.

A cesarean on a horse is graphic, but Jennifer watched impassively. This was no longer her mare but something slack and lifeless. It took all of the veterinarian's experience to deliver the foal, and it was several minutes before the limp, crooked creature, bathed in blood, began to respond to the doctor's efforts. The vet covered Moose with a blanket and called for Meagan and her father.

Meagan came in apprehensively, eyes large at the spindly newborn. Tom started towards Jennifer, who was kneeling beside the blanket, staring. He hesitated.

The vet was talking quickly. "It's a filly, a big one and with good reflexes too. She's going to be fine." He spoke in relief. Delivering a dead foal was bleak business and the Roberts need never know how close it had been. He looked at Meagan standing by the door with shining eyes. "I need some help rubbing down the baby. Any volunteers?"

Meagan's eyes jumped to her mother.

"Go ahead," Jennifer nodded. "Let Dr. Parker show you."

The vet held the foal and demonstrated how to rub the wet coat to mimic a mare's tongue. Meagan touched the foal tentatively at first, but was soon rubbing as the doctor showed her, stimulating the newborn's circulation.

Meagan's eyes fixed on the still form under the blanket. "When will Moose..."

Dr. Parker stood up stiffly, futilely brushing his pants. "I'll fix up a bottle and leave a feeding schedule. The foal needs to be fed every two hours the first few

days. It will be easier if you can get her to drink from a bucket, and safer—we don't want milk down her lungs. It's going to be a lot of work, I'm afraid."

"I'll do it!" Meagan said quickly.

"We can manage, Doctor." Jennifer looked at the lead rope she still held and dropped it. She watched the newborn struggle to keep her head above Meagan's aggressive toweling and suddenly realized a strangeness about the foal. She looked at the vet in shock.

He smiled wryly. "I was wondering when you'd notice."

Jennifer went to the corner and looked closely at the foal. "But, *how?* She has Moose's head and her nose ... maybe her ears." Stroking the filly's nose, Jennifer traced the swirl of white in the center of the golden forehead. "But a palomino? It can't be." She shook her head. The stud fee had been large and hard to raise—she and Tom had justified it by telling themselves a poorly bred horse cost the same to feed as a good one.

"What are you saying?" Tom asked. "Is there something wrong with the baby? What is a 'pal-meeno?'"

"It means the golden color." Jennifer ran a hand down the filly's blond coat. "It's not a defect, except you don't see many palomino thoroughbreds. It's pretty doubtful we got the sire we chose."

Tom was puzzled. "Are you saying Moose didn't agree with our choice?"

"Looks like Moose needed a chaperon." Dr. Parker said it kindly. "I can write something so you can get your stud fee back."

"No," Jennifer said immediately. "She's a thoroughbred and should be registered as one. We will talk to the stud farm."

The vet nodded. "I'll see what I can do, Mrs. Roberts."

"Please." Without spirit, drained, she went to Tom. He circled an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, ignoring the dirt. Together they watched the new arrival wriggle in Meagan's grasp. It is normal for a foal to stand, splayed and wobbly, within an hour of birth. The newcomer seemed determined to be timely.

Jennifer avoided her childhood companion lying under the blanket. She would not let herself wonder if it had been the right decision.

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