

Chapter 1

Katy had read somewhere that if you imagine something happening, it never will. She couldn't seem to help herself though; she was always imagining things. She imagined that she was a great author, with strangers writing her fan mail every day. She imagined suddenly becoming the most popular girl in school, like Sandra Magill, with all the other kids hanging on her every word.

And she imagined she had a real mother and father.

"Katy Robinson!" Mrs Williams' loud bark, and the crash of her mathematics text book on the desk brought Katy back to reality.

"Yes, Mrs Williams," she squeaked.

"You will never learn Algebra if you sit there staring out the window every lesson," Mrs Williams said sternly.

"No, Mrs Williams." Katy's voice was a bit stronger than a squeak this time; more like a timid hedgehog than a mouse, she thought, and suppressed a giggle.

"I find nothing amusing about your constant day-dreaming."

Mrs Williams glared at her, and Katy swiftly turned the corner of her mouth down into a more appropriately serious expression.

As Mrs Williams turned to go back to the whiteboard, Katy sighed inwardly. Algebra was going to confuse her whether she paid attention in class or not, but she didn't suppose it would do much good trying to explain that to Mrs Williams. The lesson droned on, and Katy tried at least to look as if she was paying attention.

Fallon School was the fifth school in short succession that Katy had attended. It was no better, and not really any worse than any of the others. It was just once again somewhere different; somewhere that she had to endure without her family.

The changes in schools had been because of the many changes in foster families. Katy wondered if her parents would ever resolve their problems, (of which she was only dimly aware) so that she could go home.

School break followed on from the Algebra lesson, but for Katy this was not the welcome respite it was to some of the other, more popular kids. Katy recognised that it was not just because she was the “newbie” at the school that she was having problems making friends. Her bright red hair, spectacularly unfashionable glasses and general gawky shyness all drove Katy to stand in a corner somewhere during a break, trying to look inconspicuous.

She was standing in just such a corner five minutes later when a group of boys passed by. Katy recognised Roger, the largest boy in the group, who was a well-known bully and leader of his gang, and tried to shrink back into the wall.

“Hey, Carrots!”

Oh bother, Katy thought, *this is just what I need*. She took a book out of her satchel and ostentatiously opened it in front of her face, trying to ignore Roger’s leering grin.

“I’ve never before seen a carrot with four eyes. Have you?” Roger asked one of his gang members. The other boy responded with a smirk.

Katy buried her nose further into her book, which ironically was her Algebra textbook, and therefore largely meaningless to her.

A large hand reached over the top of the book and pulled it down.

“How did you get to be so ugly, then?” Roger tried a mock conversational tone, but his glaring eyes showed his true feelings.

Katy looked at the grey linoleum floor and tried not to cry, not to feel afraid, and not to show them her fear. She knew from past experience that those things only made situations worse.

“Don’t know,” she whispered. “Born that way, I guess.”

A nasty chuckle escaped Roger's mouth. "Then your mother must have been a tomato and your father a four-eyed frog."

The boys all fell about laughing, but Katy felt her face get hot. Not from fear this time, but from anger.

"And *your* mother must have been a... a..." Katy struggled to think of a truly insulting adjective.

The boys went suddenly quiet, and Roger's expression turned to something an astronaut might look like when discovering a new and rather unpleasant life form.

"A toad," spurted Katy, coming up with the worst thing she could think of on the spur of the moment. She looked up from the floor defiantly, and then instantly wished that she hadn't. Roger always looked vaguely threatening, in a casual way. Now he bent his arms at the elbow and held his fists clenched in front of him, turning his body slightly at an angle to Katy's.

Now the threat was anything but vague.

Katy immediately regretted her outburst, as she always did whenever she opened her big mouth and said something stupid, but it was too late to take it back now.

"You *will* regret that." Roger's voice was almost a whisper, but Katy heard it. One arm came out and grabbed the end of Katy's hair. "Not here, where you can call for help, but soon. I'm going to get you for that, you pathetic little worm." He gave a yank on Katy's hair in farewell, turned and pushed his way back through the group, striding off down the corridor. The other boys all poked, prodded, yanked and sneered at her as they set off after him.

Katy was left huddled in the corner, battered and bruised and shaken, and wondering what sort of trouble she had landed herself in now. Picking up her books, she could only hope that the current foster placement, and thus the school, would last only a short time, and that social services would whisk her away to a new place before Roger and his bullyboys could make good on their threat.

Getting up from the floor with a pile of books in her hands, Katy saw Sandra Magill and her group of female followers heading down the hall from the direction the boys had taken.

With blonde hair, an elfish face, hazel eyes and a blossoming figure, Sandra's physical appearance was a huge asset in the

unspoken popularity contest. Her self-confidence, winsome smile and athletic prowess only served to cement her position as the most popular girl in the school.

Katy tried to rub a rogue tear from her face before the other girls saw it, whilst shoving books back into her bag. Several of the books squeezed out of her grasp and slithered across the hall in front of the group of approaching girls. Sandra stooped to pick them up and hand them to Katy, who kept her gaze on the floor in embarrassment.

"Hi! You're Katy aren't you? The new girl?" Sandra asked as she passed Katy the books.

"Mmm," muttered Katy in vague agreement, desperately trying to squash the books into her bag, each of which seemed determined to make a new bid for freedom.

Sandra picked up a book that had escaped across the corridor, and handed it to Katy as well.

"Have you just moved here with your parents?" Sandra asked.

"Sort of." Katy really didn't want to go into that right then, groveling on the floor like some sort of animal at Sandra's feet.

"I bet you don't know many people in the area, then?"

Sandra seemed unaware of Katy's reluctance to talk, and crouched down next to her, helping her to put the books back in the bag. The books, of course, were all instantly obedient to Sandra's presence, and slid easily into their compartments.

"Uh-huh." Katy wondered if she could possibly sound more ignorant if she tried really hard. She stood up and hung the book bag over her shoulder.

"Have you got anywhere to hang out this weekend?" Sandra seemed undeterred.

Katy thought about her new foster home. It was okay as foster homes went. She didn't have her own TV or anything, but she was pretty sure she could watch the TV in the sitting room any time she wanted. Her foster parents seemed to spend all their time out of the house, and so far she had been left mostly to her own devices. Then again, spending the whole weekend watching TV wasn't exactly appealing, and there certainly wasn't a computer anywhere she'd seen.

"Not really," she replied finally.

"Great! Why don't you come and hang out with us at the horse show then?"

Sandra actually sounded genuine in her invitation, and Katy had a sudden vision of being invited to ride a horse that nobody else had ever been able to ride, and winning the whole show.

There's my imagination running away again, she thought. I don't even know how to ride, so that one certainly isn't going to come true!

"Uh, yeah, sure. Where is it?"

"It's on the manor field, the one just behind the old manor at the bottom of the lane by the woods. You know where I mean?"

"Um, yeah, I think so. When?"

"Saturday. We'll be getting there early 'cos I've got my pony to ride in one of the first events, but it's on all day so get there whenever."

Sandra started up the stairs towards the next class. Katy followed behind Sandra, but ahead of the rest of the girls. She was so deep in thought about what Sandra had said, and the fact that she had spoken to her at all, that she missed the first step. She went down in a shower of books, pens and papers right in front of the whole crowd.

"Hey, what the...?"

"What happened?"

"Arrgh, watch out!"

The exclamations flew around above Katy's head, but all she could think of was that now she'd made a complete fool of herself in front of Sandra, and pretty much the entire school.

Sandra's face appeared in front of hers.

"You okay?"

There were sniggers in the background, but Sandra's face showed only concern.

"Yeah, sure." Katy picked up herself, her books and her scattered papers as quickly as she could, and followed on in the trail of students now climbing the stairs.

"Real cool," she muttered to herself.

Still, Sandra had actually talked to her, *and* invited her to the show this weekend.

Well okay, so maybe everyone was going to be at the show, but at least it was somewhere to go. Something different to do.

Katy had never been to a horse show in her life. Her real home, with her parents, was in a large town, and they'd never had enough money for expensive extras like riding lessons. In fact, they'd never had enough money for expensive things like new clothes and nice food either, but Katy thought they'd been okay.

That is, until the night when the social services woman had arrived and had taken her from her bed to stay with strangers. Katy could still hear her mother screaming, her father shouting. The police light on the car outside had flashed blue, colouring the whole scene and making it seem unreal. But it had been very real.

It still was very real.

Katy shook her head to clear the images. English class was next, and the last one of the day. She really didn't want a detention for day-dreaming last thing on Friday. She walked into the room and sat at the only available desk. At the front, of course.

Katy sighed. Maybe everything really would change for the better this weekend. She would make friends with the other girls. She would have a "gang" of her own as protection against the gang of boys. She would get to like her foster parents, and stop being so clumsy that she fell *up* the stairs.

Probably not, but she could always hope.

That night, Katy looked out her bedroom window at the starry sky and picked out her three "home" stars amongst the various constellations. She had noted these particular three stars, all in a line, on her way home - her true home, with her parents - from school one night. They had seemed to encourage her on, and almost to point to her house.

Ever since that night, Katy had thought of them as her "home" stars. It gave her a sense of continuity, and of her place in the universe, to find them still there, still permanent, in what had become a very impermanent world.

Chapter 2

Katy found she didn't sleep very well any more. Maybe it was the strange beds, the strange houses or the strange people. Or maybe it was the images of the night she had been taken from her real home that came to haunt her in her dreams. Dreams about her mother and father being in trouble, and Katy helpless to save them.

It was funny, Katy mused as she got up that Saturday morning, how in her daydreams she was always the heroine, the one who made good, but in her night dreams she was always powerless.

She flipped through her clothes, looking for something suitable to wear to the horse show that day. There wasn't much to choose from, in any event. It was a choice between her one pair of jeans and her one pair of shorts, with either a T-shirt or a sweater.

Katy peeked through the curtains at the blue sky outside. It was probably going to be hot and sunny if the morning sky was anything to go by, but Katy hated her legs. They were so long and gangly, and her knees stuck out like door knobs.

It would have to be the jeans and the T-shirt, even if she ended up hot and sweaty. A shower and lots of deodorant might at least prevent her from smelling like a pig. She picked out her favourite green T-shirt, and went to get ready.

Down in the kitchen, Katy found that her new foster parents were already up and having breakfast. They were early birds then, not like the last lot that spent all day, every day in bed.

"Good morning, Katy, did you sleep well?" Mr Charles looked up from his bowl of cereal enquiringly.

"Yes, thanks," Katy lied.

"What do you want for breakfast? There's toast, cereal, tea, juice? We don't normally have a cooked breakfast but I'm shopping today, so I could get some eggs if you like a cooked breakfast at the weekend?"

Mrs Charles was round enough to have eaten a cooked breakfast herself every day of her life, Katy thought, then chided herself for responding to the Charles' welcome so uncharitably. It was hardly their fault that she was a stranger in their house.

"Um, just juice and cereal is great, thanks." Katy sat at the table and pulled a box of cereal towards her, noticing only as she poured it into a bowl that it was some sort of bran and muesli concoction.

"You don't really want that one, do you, dear?" asked Mrs Charles. "Here, we have some others in the cupboard. Put that back in the box and you can have one of these."

With relief, Katy poured the revolting looking cereal back in its box. Maybe these foster parents weren't going to be so bad.

"Now," said Mrs Charles, "would you like to come shopping with me today, or stay here with Mr Charles?"

"Actually, I've been invited to the horse show by some of the girls at school." She was only slightly exaggerating by saying *some* of the girls. Even though it had actually only been one girl, the others had been there.

"Well, isn't that nice. Making friends already are you?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess."

"I'll tell you what then. I'll drop you at the field when I go to the shops. It isn't far, but at least then you'll know where it is and can make your own way back. Or do you want me to come and pick you up later?"

"No, that's okay."

Katy thought about her daydream of winning the show, and even though she knew *that* wasn't going to happen, there was still a chance someone might invite her back to their house afterwards. Or maybe not, but she preferred her independence anyway.

"I don't know when it's going to end," she said, "so it's probably better if I just make my own way back."

"Okay. Well, why don't we say to be back here by 6 o'clock then? Do you have a watch?"

Katy thought about replying that she barely had any clothes, let alone a watch, but Mrs Charles' kindness prevented her from her usual snappy reply. She shook her head instead.

"I'm sure I've got a spare one somewhere," Mrs Charles said, rooting around in one of the kitchen drawers. "Yes, here we go." She shook the watch and held it to her ear, then wound it up and held it to her ear again. Satisfied that it was ticking, she peered at her own watch and adjusted the one from the drawer. "That should be okay now," she said, handing it to Katy.

"Thanks," Katy mumbled, trying to figure out how to do up the watchstrap one-handed.

"Here, let me help you dear. You get used to it eventually."

Mrs Charles deftly buckled the strap and gave Katy a little pat on the head. It made Katy feel a bit like the house dog, but she thought it was probably meant kindly so she once again, said nothing.

"Now, finish your breakfast dear and then we'll go. I'll just get my things ready." With that, Mrs Charles hurried out of the kitchen, leaving Katy and Mr Charles munching their cereals.

Katy bent over her bowl, feeling awkward at being alone with Mr Charles. She didn't know what to say, and hoped that she could just finish her cereal and go. She raised her spoon to her mouth, and found that along with her cereal, she had a large chunk of her hair in the spoon. She looked up quickly to see if Mr Charles had noticed, but he wasn't looking at her. She lifted the lock of hair off the spoon and tried to surreptitiously shake the milk from it. Drops splattered across the table and landed in Mr Charles' bowl. He looked up at her.

"Do you have something to tie your hair back with, Katy?"

She shook her head numbly.

"I'm sure Mrs Charles will have something. Dora!" he bellowed out the door.

"What is it?" came a faint voice from upstairs.

"Have you anything Katy can use to tie her hair back with?"

"Look in the drawer to the left of the sink, second one down."

Mr Charles got up and rummaged in the drawer, from

which he extracted a pink elastic hair band.

"Ah, here we go."

He handed the hair band to Katy at the same time as sitting back down to finish his cereal. Katy looked at it in horror. Pink? Pink was the very worst colour with her hair.

She took the hair band reluctantly. Mr Charles did not seem to notice anything amiss, so Katy mumbled something about going to get ready and left the room, the hairband clutched in her fist. As soon as she got to the hallway she stuffed it into her pocket and hoped Mrs Charles wouldn't notice she didn't have it on.

She stood by the front door but did not have long to wait, as Mrs Charles barreled along at that moment, and propelled her out the door, into the waiting car.

As they set off down the road, Mrs Charles glanced over at Katy.

"Did Mr Charles not find you a hairband, then?"

Katy's heart sank. "Um, yes, he did," she replied, and produced the dreaded item from the depths of her pocket.

Mrs Charles tutted.

"Silly man, he hasn't got a clue about colour coordination, does he? That will never go with your beautiful red hair!"

Katy doubted that anyone could describe her hair as 'beautiful' and chose to make no response.

"Never mind," went on Mrs Charles, oblivious to Katy's silence. "It's not very windy today, I expect you'll manage without one?"

"Yes, I'll be fine," replied Katy gratefully. At the last foster home, the foster parents had decided that Katy's hair should be confined to plaits, and fixed in a bun at the back of her head. She was sure this had contributed to the merciless teasing she had received at her last school, although she suspected that she would probably have been teased anyway, with or without the ridiculous bun.

Mrs Charles pulled the car over to the side of the road.

"There's a lane over there." Mrs Charles pointed with one finger just ahead of where she had stopped the car. "You walk down that lane to the end, and you'll probably see signs for the horse show. Are you sure you'll be all right?"

Katy jumped out of the car, calling back over her shoulder, "Yes, I'll be fine. Thanks, Mrs Charles," and ran off in the direction of the lane before Mrs Charles could change her mind and accompany her all the way. Much as Katy was starting to like the Charleses, she still didn't want to be seen being escorted about the place like a small child.

As Katy walked down the lane, she looked around her with interest. Her experiences to date had mostly been large towns, and Fallon seemed very rural to her, with lots of trees and fields. Some of the fields had sheep and cows in them, and a few had horses. Katy didn't have a lot of experience with any animals, as they had never been able to afford pets at home.

The large cows in particular had made her feel a bit nervous when she had to walk by one of their fields, so she hoped that she wasn't going to have problems in a field full of horses. She wished she had considered that before agreeing to Sandra's invitation, but at the time she had just been so grateful to be included in something, that she hadn't really thought about it.

She paused at the open gate that was obviously the entrance to the show, and looked around. It all looked very confused and disorganised to Katy's inexperienced eyes. Horses and horses and people milled and moved about the field in a seemingly random manner. Several areas had been roped off, some of which had individual horses and riders jumping over fences. Others had groups of horses and riders walking around the outside of the enclosure, whilst other people stood and looked at them.

Loud speakers bellowed out a clatter of sound that was incomprehensible to her ears from this distance. Katy wondered what it all meant, and how she was supposed to find Sandra amongst the crowd. Just as she was debating whether to leave and spend the day wandering around Fallon instead, she spotted Sandra on a pony in one of the enclosures. Deciding she probably had nothing to lose, Katy set off purposefully in that direction.

As Katy got to the gap in the enclosure where presumably the horses and riders went in and came out, she could see that Sandra had finished whatever she had been doing and was approaching the same gap. Katy stood to one side, wondering whether Sandra would notice her and, if not, whether she would

have enough nerve to call out. Thankfully, Sandra paused just outside the gap and jumped off her pony, pulling the reins over its head as she turned towards where Katy was waiting apprehensively.

"Hi, Katy, you got here early! I don't think any of the others are here yet, I'm afraid."

Katy was delighted to have Sandra to herself, even for a short time, but muttered something about it being okay.

"I have to take Tommy back to the horsebox," Sandra went on, pointing to her pony. "Do you want to come with me?"

"Uh, sure. Yeah."

Katy wished she hadn't sounded so ungracious as she followed Sandra and the pony towards the far side of the field, where she could see there were a number of cars, land rovers, trailers and horseboxes lined up in neat rows.

"So have you done much riding yourself?" Sandra enquired.

"No, not much." Even as she said it, Katy wondered why she didn't have the courage to just admit she'd done none at all.

"Well you'll have to come over some time and have a ride on Tommy. He's great; a really safe pony. I've kind of outgrown him now, but mum and dad can't afford to buy me a new one."

Katy mumbled something incoherent, whilst trying desperately to think how she could now explain she had actually never sat on a horse. Fortunately Sandra didn't notice, as they had reached the horseboxes and she was busily taking things off her pony after tying him to a bit of string that hung on the side.

"I'll just see if he wants a drink, and then we'll go and have a look at some of the other classes, shall we?"

Katy nodded and stood to one side as Sandra tended to her pony. When Tommy had drunk some water and was nodding his head sleepily in the shade of the horsebox, Sandra turned and set off again back across the field.

"Come on, there's a hunter's class over here that should be interesting."

Wondering what a hunter's class was, Katy followed behind Sandra, desperately wishing she could think of witty and intelligent things to say. The two girls approached an

enclosure and stopped at the rope. Inside, several people were riding very large horses around the edge, while a man stood in the middle watching them. Katy wondered when the hunting was going to happen, and what they were planning to hunt.

She searched her memory for any little thing she knew about hunting. Foxes! That was it! People hunted foxes on horseback; she remembered overhearing something about it. At last she could contribute something intelligent to the conversation.

"Where do they keep the foxes, then?" she asked Sandra.

Sandra looked at her enquiringly. "Foxes?" she asked.

"Yes, to hunt."

Sandra's brow furrowed and she scratched at her head. Then her face cleared and to Katy's horror she looked mildly amused instead.

"Ah, they won't be hunting today," she said. "This is something called 'Show Hunters'. They're judging them for their conformation... um... how they look and how they're put together, to see if they would be good at hunting or not. You haven't had a lot to do with horses before, have you?"

Katy could feel her face getting red, and was sure that by now it must be clashing violently with her hair. She shook her head miserably. Now she'd probably blown the only chance of friendship since she left home. Why couldn't she just keep her stupid mouth shut?

"Well, hey. Not everyone can be as crazy about horses as I am, I guess." Sandra was saying.

Katy looked at Sandra, and was relieved to see only a friendly smile on her face, not the pitying scorn she was so used to when she stuck her foot in it. Katy smiled back tentatively.

Sandra started to talk about the horses in the enclosure, and which ones she liked the best and why. Katy gratefully nodded and smiled, relieved of the necessity to talk. She enjoyed listening to Sandra discuss the various merits of the horses. So absorbed was she that she didn't notice the other girls approach from across the field.

"Hi Sandra, there you are!"

"Hey Babs, you lazy layabout! We've been here for hours."

Sandra turned to the other girls, and Katy felt her heart

sink. She had so much enjoyed having Sandra to herself that she had forgotten about the other girls coming. She hadn't even managed one sensible comment in the whole time they'd been alone together; only that stupid gaffe about the hunters.

She backed away from the group a step or two, feeling an outsider once again. The other girls bantered back and forth, and Katy was left standing on the edge, wondering whether she should try to join in or just stand there looking like she might belong. In the end, lacking anything to say and not wishing to make even more of a fool of herself, she opted for the latter.

"How'd you get on this morning with Tommy, then?" Babs asked Sandra.

"Oh, he was okay. We got a clear round so we'll get another rosette for that, but I'm not sure whether to go in for the turn-out class or not. I've got so many of those rosettes, there really isn't much point in more. I keep telling Mum and Dad I need a bigger horse - I've outgrown Tommy now, and I could move up into the bigger classes if I had something better. But they keep saying they just can't afford it."

"Yeah, well at least your mum and dad bought you Tommy. I keep having to borrow one from the stables, and they haven't got one for me today, so I'll just have to watch," Babs grumbled back. "Anyway, let's go and get a bacon butty. I'm starving!"

"Babs, you're always starving." Sandra looked at the girl severely.

"Yeah, well, I'm a growing girl!"

"Huh! You'll be growing outwards instead of just upwards if you don't watch yourself."

Sandra prodded Babs in her stomach. Babs stretched her small frame to its full height, and looked down her nose at Sandra.

"I'm a growing girl," she repeated. "And my mum says that at 13 you have to eat loads for your growing bones and stuff."

"I bet she doesn't mean bacon butties," Rona said. Rona was the tallest of the group, topping Babs by at least three inches. Her lithe frame, long legs and straight brown hair made her a striking figure wherever she went.

The girls nevertheless turned as one towards the refreshment caravans on the side of the field and set off, bickering

amicably amongst themselves as to whether bacon butties did, or did not, constitute healthy food for growing 13-year olds.

Katy stood for a moment where she was, then decided to tag along. After all, what else did she have to do? At least she could pretend she was part of a crowd if she followed the other girls.

They arrived at the caravan where a list displaying hamburgers, hot dogs, and bacon butties, amongst other things, was tacked on one edge of the large opening in the side. The other girls all studied the list while Babs went ahead and ordered. In the end, they all decided to have bacon butties, which caused Babs to guffaw loudly at their hypocrisy for teasing her about her unhealthy diet.

"Yeah, well, we're just keeping you company," Toni said, handing over her money to Rona so that she could make payment for them all. Katy noticed that Toni bit her nails, and was quite surprised since Toni was otherwise very trim with her short black hair, and even a bit of make up on.

"Uh, what about you, um...?" Rona paused, and Katy realised with embarrassment that she had been so unremarkable that week, probably most of the girls hadn't remembered her name.

"Katy. You know Katy," interjected Sandra.

"Oh, yeah - Katy. You want one?"

"No thanks, I've had breakfast."

"Since when did that stop anyone?" asked Babs.

"Well, it certainly never stopped you," Rona teased.

"No really, that's okay." Katy didn't want to admit that she didn't have any money; all the other girls had come out with five- and ten-pound notes. She thought that there might be about ten pence in coppers in her pocket, but even that she wasn't sure about.

The other girls picked up their food and wandered over to sit on the grass under a nearby tree. Katy once again trailed along behind them, feeling even more out of place now she was the only one not eating. She was about to sit down on the edge of the group when Sandra called out to her.

"Come and sit over here, Katy," she said through a mouthful of bacon.

Katy gratefully went and sat near Sandra, crossing her long legs underneath her, all the better to hide her knobbly knees.

"So where did you live before?" Sandra asked.

"Um, in a town called Statton." Katy replied.

"Hmm, never heard of it. Is it far from here?"

"Not that far."

Katy really had no idea just how far it was. She had been to so many different foster homes in between that she had lost track of exactly where she was in relation to her own home.

"Come on Sandra, finish up. We want to go and see the jumping." Rona had gobbled down her own food at the speed of light, and was already standing up and peering around the field in search of excitement.

"Okay, okay." Sandra shoved the rest of her own food in quickly and stood up, reaching down to offer Katy a hand. Katy looked at it dumbfounded. Nobody had paid her such individual attention before, and as she placed her hand in Sandra she felt a warm glow inside.

The girls spent the rest of the day wandering around the horse show, arguing about the various merits of individual horses and famous riders that Katy had never heard of. For the most part, she let their conversation wash over her, and followed along wherever they went. Sandra continuously made a point to include her in the conversation where she could, and Katy thought to herself that she hadn't been so happy for a long time.

Finally, the horse show seemed to be coming to an end as the sun was sinking below the tops of the trees. One by one, the girls sloped off towards their homes, until once again Sandra and Katy were on their own.

"Where do you live?" Sandra asked. "Maybe we can give you a lift home."

By now, Katy was regarding Sandra with something close to adoration, mingled with pure gratitude. She would do almost anything to spend more time in the other girl's company. On the other hand, she really didn't want her to know that she was a foster child. Katy didn't stop to think about this; she just felt instinctively that she wanted to keep it secret.

"No, that's okay. It's not far from here. I can walk." She

glanced at the watch Mrs Charles had given her as she said this, and realised it was already past six o'clock. "I'd better go. I'm late as it is."

"Sure, okay. Well, see you in school Monday then."

Sandra was busy loading things into her horsebox, and Katy felt obscurely disappointed that she hadn't been invited to spend time with her on the Sunday. Then she chided herself for being ungrateful.

"Yeah, Monday. Okay, see you then!"

She tried to sound chirpy, but it came out a little strangled. Sandra glanced over at her with a frown, but carried on with her work. Katy walked off towards the gate, telling herself as she went that she would have to learn to be less demanding.

At the entrance to the field, several horseboxes and cars were jammed into the gateway. Although the day had been warm and sunny, recent rains had made the ground very wet. The continuous stream of traffic in and out of the field had turned the entrance into a bog.

The vehicles were now stuck in various stages of immobility within this bog. An important-looking man in a hat was waving his arms at the drivers, and shouting. Some of the drivers were shouting back, and some of the vehicles seemed to be missing drivers. Presumably they had gone in search of someone more helpful than the hatted, shouting man.

Looking at the scene of chaos, Katy decided that she probably wasn't going to get through the gateway any time soon. She looked at her watch. After such a good start that morning, she really didn't want to upset things with Mr and Mrs Charles.

She had better get home quickly.

Near the gate, a little way along the fence, she spied a thing that looked like a series of wooden steps leading over the fence and into the woods. She went over and saw that there was a path leading in the general direction she wanted to go, and that if she climbed the steps over the fence she could reach this path. Deciding she couldn't get too lost in a place as small as Fallon, Katy made the decision that was to change her life.

She climbed what she hadn't recognised as a stile, and set off through the woods.