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# CHAPTER 1

The sounds around her: birds twittering in the trees, bees buzzing gently in the clumps of flowers nearby, pine boughs rushing in the breeze, and the stream gurgling softly. *Ah, the sounds of early spring*, Zoey thought as she sighed.

Leaving the little grove of trees close to her home, Zoey smiled as she strolled down the narrow asphalt lane. *I miss the crunch of*  gravel, she thought. But I love how easy it is for Mrs. Bastian to come over and visit now without having to drive her van here. She can just come right over in her wheelchair.

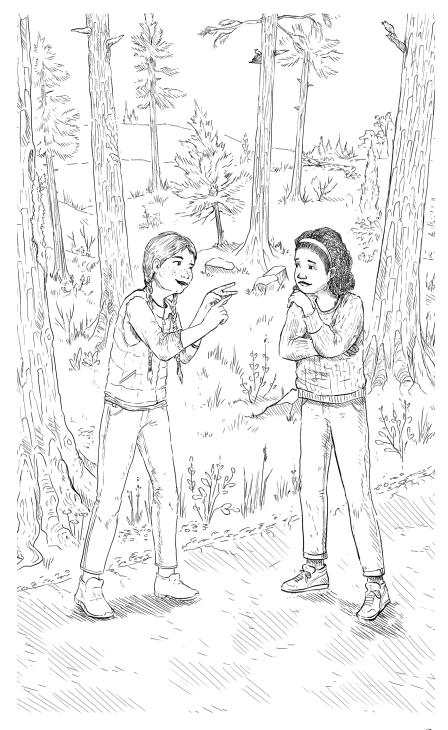
"Zoey! Zoey!" Jessica's voice rang out from down the road. "I have a question!"

"What is it?" Zoey asked when Jessica reached her.

"Volleyball!" Jessica burst out. "My club volleyball team needs another player. Twin sisters on our team are suddenly moving, and another girl on our team broke a finger. We can't play unless we have one more person. We are in the championships and only have two games left. We really need you!"

Zoey frowned. "Well, thanks for thinking of me, but I don't play volleyball. In fact, I'm

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not the sporty type at all!"

"Oh, you really should do it," Jessica pleaded. "We practice every Tuesday and Thursday at seven and have games Saturday mornings, so you would get two practices in before the first game. I'm sure you would learn quickly. I've told you before how much I love volleyball. It's so fun! You don't have to be amazing; all you have to do is try. And besides, we'd get to see each other even more often!"

Zoey laughed. "I don't think you took a breath between all those sentences. You're quite convincing. But I need to think about it. Can I let you know tomorrow?"

"Sure," Jessica said. "Have your mom text my mom with your answer. I have to run. I've got to babysit tonight." And with that, Jessica was off, her braids swinging as she jogged back down the lane.

Continuing down the road, Zoey pondered the last few months. The fence around the farm was finished, and it was as beautiful as her family had hoped it would be. It also made Badger Hills Farm feel safe and secure against trespassers. *I hope it will help keep the animals safer too*, Zoey thought. Last month, before the fence was finished, a badger had been hit by a car on the street next to the farm.

In happier news, Sammy had successfully graduated from his dog training school and now obeyed Timothy's commands. The boy and dog were the best of friends. They had also rejoiced when Nanna Bell had returned home after caring for her injured brother.

Zoey's smile changed to a frown when she turned the corner and saw the barn looming before her. Once, she had been so excited for the barn to be finished so that she could bring Misty Toes and her foal from Mrs. Bastian's barn to her own barn. But now, the barn just reminded her that she was too scared to ride Misty Toes since she had fallen off.

Secretly, Zoey had felt angry at her horse—betrayed, even—since the fall. Yes, falling off the horse had hurt her body, and the staples in her head had been painful too, but her feelings were hurt more, and she didn't really understand why. She still did her duty every day: She fed Misty Toes and took care of her. But she didn't talk to and hug her horse like she used to.

A swirl of sadness moved through Zoey's heart as she shuffled into the barn and took care of the horses. She stood close to the stalls for a moment, watching Misty Toes's foal, who was quite big now.

I need to name her, Zoey thought. It's way past time. I just can't think of a name!

The foal cocked her head slightly and gazed into Zoey's eyes. In that moment, time seemed to stand still. Zoey felt a deep longing to connect with a horse again. She took a step forward and gently stretched her hand toward the foal.

Without warning, the walls began to rattle, and the earth rolled beneath her feet. Zoey fell hard.

It's an earthquake, she realized as a deep

grumble vibrated through the ground. Zoey quickly got out of the stall. Glass shattered. Zoey dropped to the ground, rolled to the side of the barn, and curled up with her hands over her head. All around were the terrible creaking and rattling of wood, the crashes of things falling to the ground, and the loud whinnies and neighs of the frightened horses. Zoey squeezed her eyes closed and tried to remain calm.

Thirty seconds seemed like an eternity.

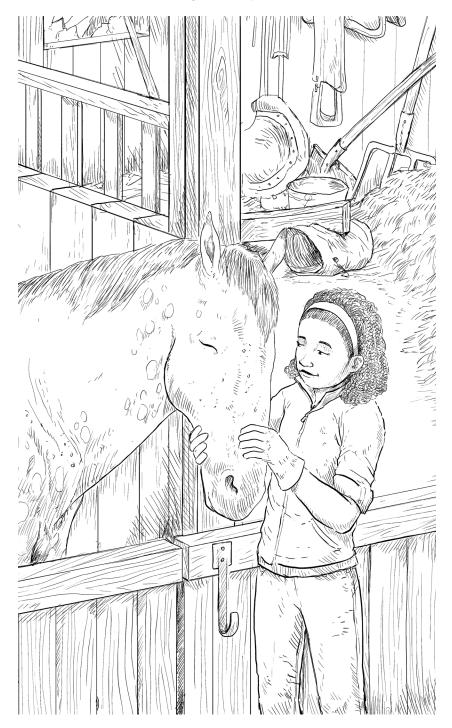
Finally, the ground became still, and the earthquake was over. Zoey uncurled herself and slowly stood up on shaking legs. Scanning her surroundings, she noticed that a window in the barn had broken and some wooden boards had fallen from the ceiling. Metal pails and

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saddles that had been hanging on the wall were now scattered on the floor.

Misty Toes pranced in her stall, eyes rolling. Poor girl! She hadn't understood what was happening in the earthquake and must have been very scared. Zoey rushed to the horse and calmed her down with soft words and strokes. After a few moments, Misty Toes nuzzled Zoey's arm in a show of love. Zoey realized that the horse still trusted her and that she hadn't meant to hurt her before. With a full heart, Zoey threw her arms around her beloved horse. At that moment, she knew she had completely forgiven Misty Toes.





### >>> Oak Tree Mystery -----

Spring has come to Badger Hills Farm, and with it, new mysteries for the family to solve! But while they decipher another series of clues on the farm, Zoey encounters a few mysteries of her own. Join Zoey, Timothy, and their family as they unravel more surprises from the farm—and from life.



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