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Bright Star

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For Lola, Jude and Evan
– three bright stars in my sky

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Chapter 1

City Girl

Morgan sat in the car and waited for her mom.

She looked up at the apartment on the 12th floor where she'd lived for 13 years.

Those 13 years were all of Morgan's life so far – a life of listening to her mom and dad fight like cat and dog, of watching daytime TV and of standing on the tiny balcony to hear the rattle and roll of trains 12 floors below.

Morgan held her bag on her lap. She watched the wind blow litter across the parking lot – a blue plastic bag, an empty beer can.



At last Morgan's mom showed up. Her name was Lacey and that's what she liked Morgan to call her.

"OK, let's go," Lacey said.

Lacey drove Morgan along the early morning streets between the tower blocks. Soon they were out of Chicago and heading to O'Hare airport.

"Did you say goodbye to Gayla?" Lacey asked.

"Nope," Morgan mumbled.

"Brooke?" Lacey asked.

"Nope."

Lacey rolled her eyes. "Didn't you tell any of your friends you were leaving?"

"No, I didn't," Morgan said. "What would be the point?" She stared out of the window.

There was silence until they came to the airport.

"You got everything you need?" Lacey asked, when they had parked.

"Yep," Morgan said.

"Your phone?"

"Yep."

"Aunt Anne Marie's number?"

"Yep."

"Call me as soon as you land," Lacey said. "And give me a smile, why don't you?"

Morgan sighed. She was leaving the city for who knew how long, to live in some god-awful ranch in the Rocky Mountains with her aunt, Anne Marie. What was there to smile about?



Lacey came with Morgan to the check-in desk. "Hug?" she asked.

Morgan hugged her. Then she showed her ticket to the woman behind the American Airlines desk.

"Bye!" Lacey called as Morgan headed for her Departure Gate.

All of a sudden, Morgan felt scared. She turned and waved, hoping her mom would still be there.

Her mom waved back.

Morgan waved again. Then she turned and walked on down a long, shiny walkway past long lines of passengers waiting to board their planes. She was alone and on her way.

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In the plane at 30,000 feet, clouds spread below Morgan like a fluffy cream blanket.

The cabin crew served peanuts and Diet Coke. The fat guy in the seat next to her snoozed and snored.

At last, the Fasten Seatbelts sign came on.

"We'll have you on the ground in Denver in around ten minutes," the pilot informed them as the plane began to dip down past the clouds. Morgan felt a bump when the plane hit the ground, then she heard the sharp whine of brakes. Out of the window, she could see mountains in the distance. It was late June, but the peaks were still white with snow.

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A tall guy in a dusty cowboy hat stepped forward to greet Morgan at Baggage Reclaim.



"Anne Marie couldn't make it," he said. "Sunday means new guests arrive at the ranch. She's busy, so she sent me instead. I'm Ryan. Hi."



A cowboy hat! No kidding – he was wearing a real live Stetson and cowboy boots. Morgan had only ever seen them on TV. When she shook his hand, it felt rough.

"Morgan," she said. She felt herself blush bright red.

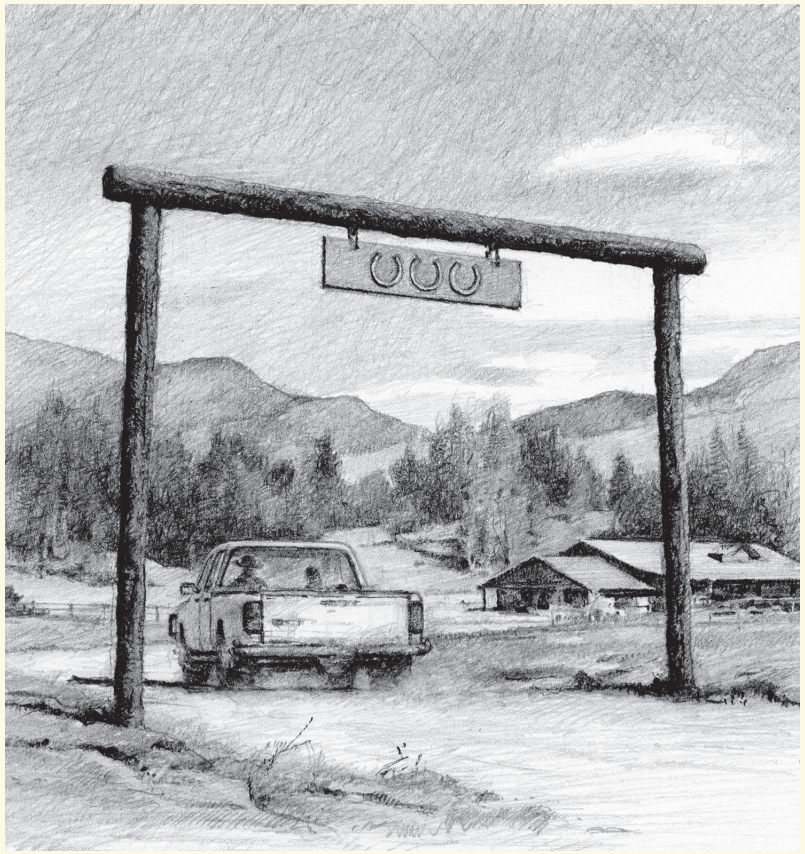
"Let's go." Ryan took Morgan's bag and led her to an old Ford truck. He waited for Morgan to climb into the front, then they set off for the ranch. Along the way, Ryan played country and western music, stopped for gas, and bought Morgan a bag of spicy corn chips and a bottle of water.

After an hour and a half, the road rose out of the flat Denver plains up into the mountains. "We're halfway there," Ryan told her.

Morgan saw a dead deer by the side of the road, a few trailer homes just off the highway, and miles of pine forest. The highway was

empty except for huge, rumbling trucks and the odd car now and then.

After three long hours, Ryan turned left onto a dirt track. They drove under a rough wooden arch. There was a sign showing a row of three horseshoes. The ends pointed up.



"Welcome to Three Horseshoes Ranch," Ryan said.

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Morgan's Aunt Anne Marie was carrying a horse's saddle across a crowded horse pen.

"Did you call your mom?" she yelled at Morgan when she spotted her on the porch of the ranch house.

"Yeah!" Morgan yelled back.

"Cool," Anne Marie said. "Go into the kitchen, grab a cheese sandwich."

There was no "Hi, how are you?" No guided tour of the ranch. Morgan's aunt was far too busy with her new guests all afternoon and evening.

"See those boots?" Anne Marie asked a while later. She had swung by the porch with a sack of grain pellets. "The ones by the door?"

Morgan saw a pair of battered cowboy boots and nodded.

"My old ones – try them on," her aunt told her.

"What?"

"Take off your sneakers and try on the boots. See if they fit."

"They fit," Morgan said. It was true, but the pointed toes squeezed her feet.

"Cool," said Anne Marie. "After you finish your sandwich, I could use some help with the horses."

Cowboy boots, Stetsons, heavy saddles, grain pellets, plus 20 horses lined up outside …

It was too much for Morgan to take in. And the smells! She breathed in wild flowers from the meadow, sweat and pee from the horses, coffee from the kitchen.

"Quit just standing there like a city girl, Morgan," Anne Marie yelled as she disappeared into the barn. "Ask Ryan – he'll tell you what to do!"

