

Staring out the window of her second story bedroom Sibyl zoned out listening to the rain. Ticking sounds on the metal roof lulled her to sleep. The computer had gone to screen saver mode several minutes ago. A buzzing noise startled her. Yawning she picked up her phone and checked the text. Melissa checking up on her. All her friends were having a great time in Cancun on spring break while she stayed home studying like a good college student. Boards were in eight months. This one test determined her entire future. Would she be a doctor, or would she be a failure? This was no time to party. Plus, her heart wasn't in it anyway.

Closing the screen, she massaged her temples attempting to relieve the headache that squeezed her skull. When she looked out the window again, a large bay horse stood at the edge of the woods. Her heart skipped a beat. This mysterious horse had popped in and out of her dreams for most of her life. Deep mahogany fur covered his body, not a spec of white on the red body. Jet-black mane and tail and matching black irises that currently stared at her unblinking made him mystically beautiful. Swallowing down a ball of anxiety Sibyl stared back afraid to move lest he spook and run away like he usually did. In the last several months he'd started showing up not just in her dreams but in reality as well. Her therapist said it was just stress hallucinations like it was no big deal. It was a big deal. She was hallucinating. But it seemed so real. Hands tingling, she grabbed a pill bottle from the desk and dumped one into the palm of her shaking hand. Looking back out the window the horse was still watching her. Sometimes she felt like he was trying to tell her something, but she never got close enough to find out. He wasn't like the other monsters she sometimes saw in her dreams. The ones that scared her to the point she'd wake up screaming in a sweaty panic. Heinous beasts that brutally maimed and killed people right in front of her. It felt so real. She could smell the rancid decay of their breath, feel the pain and terror of their victims as they futilely fought for their lives. After the monsters

dispatched whoever the poor soul was, they'd turn their attentions to her. But before they could ever get close to her, she'd wake up. So far none had ever entered reality so that was a relief. But this horse. He was in the real world. Or was he?

Sibyl took a deep breath and put a hand on her desk and rubbed along the grains. *Real.* She walked to her bed and rubbed one of the pillows, feeling the fabric beneath her fingertips. *Real.* The therapist called it grounding. It helped orient her into the here and now so she could easily identify things that aren't real like a giant horse staring at her from the edge of the woods. If it's always out of reach or doesn't feel as expected, then it's not real. After she felt confident she was lucid she looked back out the window again. Still there, alert yet relaxed. One of his ears twitched. She could practically read his thoughts.

*What are you doing? Come out here.* Unlike the beasts from her nightmares this horse made her feel calm, peaceful, a beacon of serenity within the center of her mental turmoil. But was he real or was she insane? That was the question she needed to know an answer to.

Shoving the pill into her pocket she grabbed a coat, dashed down the stairs and out the front door. Approaching the edge of the woods the horse trotted off. Sibyl followed cautiously. The rain was coming to an end leaving behind a thick blanket of mist that enhanced the pine and oak scents of the forest. The mist so thick she could almost reach out and grab ahold of it. Her blonde wispy hair turned to a mousy brown as it slowly soaked up the water in the air. The horse stayed far enough away that she had to jog to keep up. He snorted excitedly like he was playing a game of tag. Her fingers tingled with nervous anticipation. Criss crossing them on top of themselves she continued to follow the jubilant horse deeper into the woods.