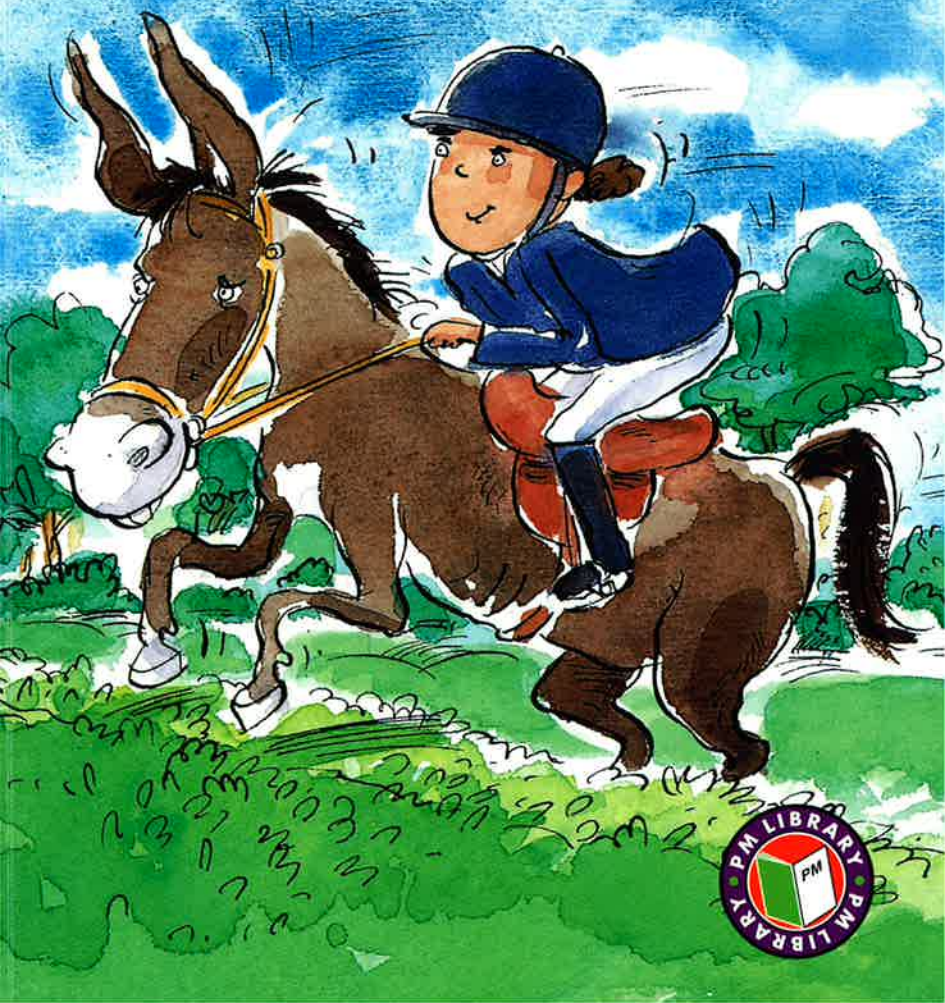
Skeeter

Story by Heather Hammonds
Illustrated by Mitch Vane



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Chapter 1

A Free Horse!



Carmen sat on the fence and watched the other kids ride their horses around the riding school yard. Usually she felt sad that she couldn't join in, but not today. Today she was waiting for her very own horse to arrive!

Carmen loved ponies and horses. She did odd jobs at the riding school and Mr Lee, the owner, let her ride some of his horses and have lessons in exchange. Carmen's dearest wish was to have a horse of her own, but her parents couldn't afford to buy her one. Then just a few days ago, her dad had told her that he had a surprise for her.

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"How would you like a free horse, Carmen?" he smiled. "I met a man who is moving house, and he can't keep his horse any more. He's looking for a good home for it and he said you can have it. Mr Lee has agreed to let you keep the horse at the riding school, for just a small fee."

Carmen could hardly believe her luck.

"I would love a free horse!" she exclaimed. "What does it look like?"

Her dad wasn't sure, but Carmen didn't mind. Any sort of horse was better than no horse at all...



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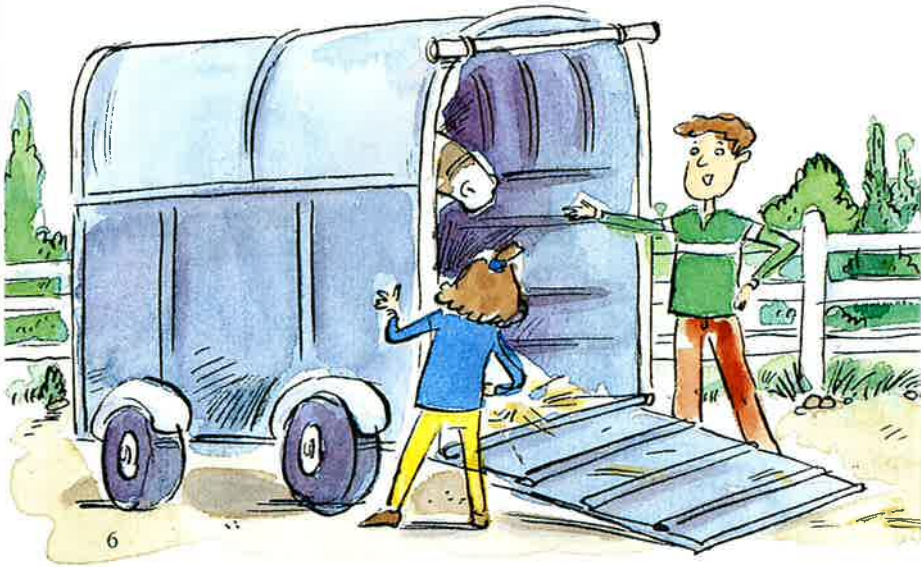
"Hey, Carmen, here comes your horse," said Lisa, the riding school stable-hand.

A big truck pulled up and Carmen's dad got out. Behind the truck was a horse float.

"Here we are, Carmen," he smiled, opening up the back of the float.

Carmen could hardly wait. All her dreams had come true at last! What would her horse look like? Would it be grey, or chestnut? How tall would it be? She ran to the float and peered inside.

"What do you think of him?" asked her dad. "His name's Skeeter."



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Carmen stared at Skeeter in dismay. He was thin, and his chestnut coat was really dirty. He had great big ears, and a strange dark stripe ran along his spine.

"Er... he's great, Dad," she mumbled.

Carmen's dad frowned at her.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked.

"You don't know much about horses, do you, Mr Rodriguez?" sighed Lisa.

"Not really," he said.

"Skeeter isn't a horse," whispered Carmen, trying not to cry. "He's a mule — a cross between a horse and a donkey!"



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Chapter 2

The Big Mistake



"Oh dear," said Carmen's dad, looking upset. "I can't take him back — the man who gave him to me was moving today. He'll be gone by now."

"That's okay, Mr Rodriguez," said a kind voice from behind them.

It was Mr Lee. He walked up to Skeeter and took a closer look.

"Skeeter is rather thin, but if Carmen looks after him, he'll be as good as a horse in no time."

Carmen's dad sighed with relief.

"Cheer up, Carmen," he said. "If Mr Lee says Skeeter is okay, then he is."