

And Sometimes Y

by Leslie Schultz and JJM Braulick

Chapter One “Unexpected in April”

We rolled along the road, up and over a gently sloping hill. The little white car’s broken bumper rattled incessantly.

“You know, Ursula,” I said thoughtfully, “I’m glad you got to come back early from Ireland. Though I’m sorry that Danielle’s got laryngitis,” I added. Ursula’s mom, Danielle, was an actress who had taken Ursula to Ireland with her for almost a year. Ursula was one of my four best friends. Truthfully, I worried that she might not ever come back. She had started to write about friends over there... But she had come back, wearing a green enameled shamrock on a short gold chain, just like the ones she’d started to doodle on her letters.

Ursula nodded. “Yeah. I was missing Sundog. And the Vowels.” She grinned.

I laughed. “Not to mention Harriet!” Harriet was the horse Ursula always rode at Sunset Stables, the riding school where we were headed.

“And not to mention me!” came the cheerful, front-seat voice of Ursula’s dad, Mike. He was a lighting specialist for the famous Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, and he knew a lot about stage makeup, too. Ursula had mostly lived with him since he and Danielle had divorced. He didn’t say so, but I could tell how hard it had been to have Ursula away for almost all of seventh grade. Now he smiled every time he looked at her.

“Of course, Dad. I missed your cooking.” Ursula rolled her eyes jestingly. Mike’s idea of haute cuisine was adding a little Parmesan

cheese to the top of a frozen pizza. “Hey, look! We’re here!” Ursula snapped open the seatbelt buckle before the car had completely stopped, so eager was she to visit Harriet.

I perked up and cranked hard to open the sticky window so I could wave to our teacher, ignoring the fact that mid-April in Minnesota meant the air was distinctly brisk. “Hi, Meifeng!”

Meifeng waved back. She was giving Jenny, her most experienced horse, a brisk grooming. I assumed she’d just ridden.

We pulled into the gravel parking lot and Ursula and I hopped out. “Bye, Mike!” I said. Ursula waved to her dad and he drove off. We could have walked through the Birchwood College campus from my house to the barn, but Mike wanted to spend every moment he could with Ursula. He had found it a very long ten months without her, he said frequently.

“Good to see you again, girls,” said Meifeng in her precise British English. “It has been a long winter, eh, Alexa?” She paused to scrutinize Ursula, whom she hadn’t seen since the previous August. “You are both so tall, but especially Ursula!”

We waited for instructions, quivering like well-schooled horses.

Meifeng smiled. “Ursula, Harriet is in the pasture. I shall get her. Alexa, Salsa’s in her stall. You may start grooming her.”

“Okay!” I got the bag with Salsa’s grooming equipment and set off for her stall. The Spanish mustang was chomping on some hay. Her dark brown markings always reminded me of tortoise shell.

“Hi,” I said to her, quietly, so as not to spook her. As I began the soothing ritual of brushing her, I began to think. Ursula really was tall now... That long stay in Ireland had changed her. She even had a slight Irish accent. I had missed her so much while she was away, but now that she had returned I realized that in some ways I had gotten used to her absence. Now that we’d caught up on everything that had happened during those months apart, sometimes it seemed like we didn’t know what to say to each other next. It made me wonder if she found me changed, too. But, I thought with satisfaction as I gave Salsa a rub on her pretty white and brown nose, we’d have all summer together.

With a smile, I remembered the late afternoon scene, just six days ago, when my close group of friends and I had been reunited

with her on the sidewalk in front of my house. Although it was greening up now, last week there had still been crusty patches of old snow here and there. Sundog was named for an atmospheric effect due to ice crystals—have you ever seen little rainbow parentheses near the sun on a very cold day? those are sundogs—but I think the spirit of the town shines most brightly in the spring. On the day of Ursula’s return, the sky had been a bright blue with puffy white clouds. In the garden beds, sturdy daffodil stalks had risen already, higher than my ankles.

Mike had phoned my mom to say that Ursula was arriving on Flight 426, and he would bring Ursula straight from the airport to our house. My mom is big on parties and she is very fond of Ursula. We’d all missed her, not having seen her for nearly a year. (Skyping is great, but it doesn’t really count as ‘seeing’ a person in my book.) Combine these three facts in the super-collider that is my mom’s mind, and wham! Of course she would cook up a surprise party. I had alerted the whole gang, and shortly before Mike and Ursula pulled up Isabelle and I had just finished hanging “Welcome Back, Ursula!” signs.

Isabelle had tossed colorful yarn bombs over the limbs of the walnut tree and even over the shrubs. The forsythia, lilac, and bridal veil bushes might not have had leaves yet, but they looked as brilliant as circus wagons from their draping of turquoise, fuchsia, goldenrod, chartreuse, and lavender yarns.

“What do you think?” asked Isabelle as she hopped about, fiddling with the details. Her cheeks had turned red with cold and excitement. Isabelle is my age but still so small that people sometimes call her “Leprechaun.” When I first met her, she had worn her curly blonde hair short. Back then, it had floated around her head like a cloud. Now, three years later, she’s grown it out so it is past her shoulders and has more waves than curls.

“I love it! It looks as though April showers brought the May flowers a whole month early!”

Isabelle giggled and nodded. “I hope Ursula likes it, too.”

Isabelle is a poet with her hands an avid knitter and seamstress. She is especially fond of making doll clothes and gifts. She makes half of her own wardrobe, too. She hates waste, so she

keeps even small pieces of material left over from projects. That comes in handy sometimes, because whenever anyone needs scraps of fabric, ribbon, or yarn, Isabelle is generous with her treasure trove.

I was so excited that while we worked I chattered. “You see, Isabelle, I am so right about thirteen being a lucky number! Here it is, Friday the thirteenth, and one of our very best friends is arriving from another continent! And this is the year we are all turning thirteen! How can anyone think such a fine prime number is unlucky?”

Isabelle glanced at me and smiled her sweet smile as she went on arranging. “Wasn’t it on April thirteenth that you got your award letter for Everyday Magic three years ago? That was pretty lucky for all of us. We got to go with you to Rockefeller Center to see the film screening and see you receive the Young Filmmakers Award.”

“You’re right!” I remembered how much fun we had had when my new friends from Minnesota had seen my old home, New York City, for the first time. I smiled and hummed and thought how wonderful it would be to see Ursula.

Just as we were finishing up, Otto arrived from across the street. Otto never merely walks when he can be more inventive. His curly pitch-black hair bounced as he tap-danced the shuffle-hop down the path, carrying some hot chocolate that his mother, Brigid, had made from scratch. Knowing her son, Brigid had screwed the big insulated bottle’s lid down tightly.

“You won’t believe how much chocolate my mom melted into this thermos! Can we try it now?” He wiggled the container at us and did a pirouette like an Olympic figure skater. Like Isabelle, Otto isn’t very big for his age, but all his gestures are enormous.

“Otto,” Isabelle reproved, “you know we are going to wait for Ursula.” She walked over to him and took the insulated bottle into her custody.

“Oh, right,” Otto had grinned. While Isabelle put the bottle on the porch next to mugs and napkins and plates of apple crisp, Otto leaped about like a springbok. Sometimes I think he has actual springs in his heels.

“Down, boy,” I said, as if I were speaking to one of my dogs. One of the best things about Otto is that he is so easy-going

temperamentally and so hyperactive physically. He just grinned bigger.

“Where’s Eddie?” he asked.

As I was about to answer, Eduardo loped up the walk, his magician’s cape fluttering about his shoulders. “Right there!” I said. Otto twirled around to see. In Sundog, everyone knows about Eduardo’s alter ego, ‘Zorro Zoliath.’ He’s the town’s best magician. Seeing him in his cape, I guessed that he had been practicing a new trick to show Ursula.

Otto cried, “Hey, Ed! Need an assistant? I’m only ten bucks an hour!”

Eduardo smiled and shook his head. He moved close enough that I could see a mischievous glint in his green eyes.

“Hola, Señor Solo!” I said.

“Buenos dias!” he returned amiably.

“So, what is it this time?” I continued. “Something with silk scarves or cards? Or maybe you’ll make Otto disappear?”

“Dos periquitos,” he whispered mysteriously in my ear as a rusty, white car pulled to the curb.

I was pulled back to the present moment when Salsa butted me with her muzzle, causing me to fall into the wood shavings on the floor.

“Salsa!” I said. “Cut it out!” For the thousandth time, I thought how apt her name was because her temperament was anything but bland.

Using a pick, I cleaned out Salsa’s hooves, then I brushed her mane and tail. After tacking up—putting the bridle, pads, and saddle on Salsa and getting my helmet and crop—I led her out into the arena. Ursula was already out there with Harriet and Meifeng.

“Very well, then,” our teacher said with a little cough. “Stirrups, side-reins, girth! Don’t just stand there!”

Quickly, we did the assigned tasks.

Meifeng gave Salsa a quick check all over, and, finding no problems, told me, “You may mount.”

I did so with a bit of difficulty, because Salsa was eager to go and kept moving while I had only one foot in the stirrup. I must have looked funny hopping about with one leg on the ground! But

eventually I got on. Meanwhile, Ursula seemed to leap up in one fluid movement, despite her months out of the saddle. She was a natural athlete.

We began walking around the arena with Ursula and Harriet in front. We stretched our arms and legs and worked on our balance. I had to rub my tummy and pat my head while posting the trot! It was fun. Then, we trotted over ground poles while doing two-point position, which is a way of sitting, commonly used for jumping, where the rider's weight is in his or her heels and on the mane of the horse.

"Meifeng!" Ursula called. "Will we be able to do real jumps soon?"

I could see that Ursula's daredevil nature had not changed.

"That's a bit in the future, Ursula. Now, squeeze the wings of your shoulder blades together. That's it. Flat back. Nice."

I loved the way Meifeng gave precise instructions.

After these exercises, Meifeng directed the horses to canter. I couldn't ask Salsa for the canter yet, but I was finding my balance in it. After about ten minutes, we gave the horses a break. When they had cooled off, we guided them through some familiar figures, such as circles and half-voltes. Some people might think this is training for the horse, but with these experienced school horses the training is designed to teach the rider how to give precise instructions. When we had completed this part of the lesson, we stopped on the center line.

"That was great!" I called to Ursula.

"Yeah," she said. "But my legs are a bit sore after that long time without riding." Ursula used to be ahead of me as a rider, but I'd caught up while she was away.

"Good girl, Harriet." Ursula reached down and patted her horse's chestnut-colored shoulder.

It was so good to have Ursula back at the barn. It hadn't been nearly as fun without her. But it wasn't exactly the same as it had been. Ursula now wore black steampunk-style boots, having grown out of both her ankle boots and her half chaps. Her hair was six inches longer, too; that Irish mist must accelerate hair growth. I'll have to look into that, I thought. I love odd facts.

Salsa, newly back in her stall, munched on her hay keenly while I removed her saddle and other tack. I cleaned the bit and put the tack away, then proceeded to give Salsa a quick grooming. I thought how glad I was that she would have plenty of hay to supplement what she grazed today. I knew that many horses wouldn't. The ones at the horse rescue shelters, what with the drought and all the economic uncertainty, might not have enough to eat. That worried me.

Ursula and I finished our tasks. We were just standing about outside the main area when I noticed someone who I thought was probably a college student standing in the shadowy under-hang near the tack room. He had something in his hand, but I couldn't tell what it was. When he noticed that I was looking at him, he turned and put his hand behind his back.

"Ursula," I said quietly, "do you know that guy?"

Ursula shook her head.

"What do you think that is in his hand?" I asked. "A package of Smarties?"

Quietly, Ursula wrinkled her nose and replied, "No. I think it is something truly dumb. I bet it's a cigarette."

"Ewww!" I was disgusted. Then, I caught a whiff. I whispered, "I can smell it, too. That's just gross, and it's probably illegal around a barn."

"Yeah."

"Could he be a Birchwood student?"

"Maybe. He's pretty tall."

"Do you think we should tell Meifeng?"

Ursula looked as uncomfortable as I felt. "Well," she said in a low voice, "Meifeng doesn't tolerate any funny business. But if he is here, she most likely knows him. Oh, look: he's leaving anyway."

We looked at each other with relief and shrugged.

"Guess we can talk normally now, Trixie," I said. I call her that to tease her sometimes. Ursula loves the old series of mysteries about Trixie Belden, the girl detective, and wants to imitate her. I remembered how excited she had gotten a couple of years back, when I first knew her, to discover that our basement had a tiny sub-basement, really an old cistern that had been made into a root cellar. She thought it would be a perfect hiding place for treasure or

pirates. I had to talk her out of sleeping down there with the spiders and just a flashlight.

We walked over to the gravel parking lot just as my family's red Subaru pulled in. Mom waved from the front window.

"Guess what, girls?" she said, and pointed to the passenger's seat, where Walnut was barking happily from his kennel. "He seemed so sad when I started to leave that I just brought him along."

"Walnut!" Ursula and I cried.

I never get tired of cuddling Walnut, our eight-pound brownish-red poodle. Though he is a purebred, there is something foreshortened about his muzzle. In addition, he has a barrel chest, muscular haunches, and was, at that moment, extremely wooly. People who don't know him often ask us, "What kind of dog is he?" Sometimes they say "she." Mom calls him, "Scruff-Boy," "Menelaus," or "Napoleon," because he is very determined and he doesn't seem to know how small he really is. He frequently challenges or loudly greets other dogs, even those who out-weigh him by a factor of ten.

Ursula got to the car first and opened the kennel door. Walnut leaped into her arms, then wriggled until she put him down. He ran over to me, wagging his stub tail as though it would fall off and barking his startlingly deep woof.

"Buddy Boy!" I crouched down and allowed him to lick my face. Next to horses, dolphins, cranes, microscopic rotifers, and cats, dogs are my favorite animals. I especially adore poodles (the first circus dogs); corgis, because they are so intelligent and funny; and golden retrievers, because they are so silky and gentle.

"Would you girls like a snack?" asked Mom. "I have trail mix and apple slices at home."

"You bet!" we chorused. On riding days, we'd arranged with Mike to pick up Ursula after supper at our house. Supper wouldn't be served for a couple of hours, but Mom knew that riding left us starving. I poured Walnut back into his kennel, latched his door, and closed the front door before joining Ursula in the backseat.

Mom said, as she always did, "Is everyone buckled?" before putting the car in gear. As she maneuvered over the sharp gravel, she asked, "Who is that?"

I looked out the window. That tall, skinny stranger guy was standing with his shoulder close to the old burr oak whose canopy arched over the driveway. He was intent on the trunk of the tree.

“I don’t know, Mom,” I started to say. Then I gasped quietly and tapped Ursula on the shoulder. She leaned over me so she could see, too. We exchanged glances. She’d seen what I had seen—and what Mom had not noticed. There was a silver-colored knife blade in that strange guy’s hand.

L'Etranger

Yves Lagrange didn't notice the red Subaru crunching along the gravel behind him. He was intent on his task: removing the outer layer of bark, revealing the smooth surface of the inner tree. He worked methodically until he had cleared a spot as large as his hand. Then he stepped back for a moment, considering.

Decisively, he leaned again toward the wounded oak. With all the skill of a tattoo artist he cut two block letters: Y and L. When he was satisfied with the outlines, he carefully filled each in with cross-hatched lines. Done, he wiped the steel knife blade on his jeans, folded it into the red handle, and slid it into his front pocket. Then, stooping a moment, he scooped up a handful of dry black dirt and rubbed it into the carved initials before brushing the crumbs away.

Smiling faintly, aware now that his wrist ached and that it was getting cooler as the sun sank in the west, he backed away, turned, and, whistling a scrap of a tune, headed into the heart of Sundog.

