



FROM THE AUTHOR OF *ESPERANZA RISING*
PAM MUÑOZ RYAN

RIDING
FREEDOM

DRAWINGS BY
BRIAN SELZNICK



SCHOLASTIC

IN THE MID-EIGHTEEN HUNDREDS, when the East was young and the West was yet to be settled, a baby was born, named Charlotte. When she was nothing more than a bundle, she surprised her parents and puzzled the doctor by surviving several fevers. Folks said that any other baby would have died, but Charlotte was already strong. She walked before most babies crawled. She talked before most babies babbled, and she never cried. Unless someone took something away from her.

A few months after Charlotte's second birthday, on a blustery evening, she rode with her parents toward their small farm in the New Hampshire countryside. Their horse-drawn wagon was rickety and swayed back and forth with each gust of wind. Thunder made the horses skittish, and they reared and struggled in their harnesses. Charlotte sat up straight in her mother's lap, watching the trees waving in the wind and listening to the horses' loud whinnies. Her father tried to settle the team, and her mother held Charlotte snugly and sang a song to comfort her. But Charlotte wasn't afraid.

A crack of lightning lit up the countryside and

the horses lurched forward, reeling down the road out of control.

"Hold on!" yelled her father.

"Stop!" screamed her mother. "Keep them straight! Keep them straight!"

Charlotte's mother clutched her closer and tried to hold on as the frantic horses dragged the wagon over the bumpy road.

Her father hollered, "Whoa! Whoa!" but the horses had already lunged down a steep hill crowded with trees and boulders. Tree limbs smacked the horses, frightening them even more. The wagon followed, plunging over the side and smashing into tree trunks before it overturned on a rocky ledge. Charlotte was thrown free of the splintered wagon and landed in a bed of tall grass. Her father and mother were killed instantly.

Unharméd, Charlotte waved to the snuffling horses who were now free of the wagon. Like nursemaids, they hovered around her. At times, they whinnied as if calling for help. Rain drenched the countryside and Charlotte shivered through the night, but the horses stood close by, protecting her from the rain and nuzzling her with their warm breath.

The horses were still keeping watch over Charlotte when neighbors found her the next morning. She was holding so tight to one of the horses' reins that they didn't dare pry it out of her hand.

The old doctor, who had known Charlotte since she was born, wasn't at all surprised that she survived the crash. Instead of taking the horse's rein out of Charlotte's hand, he cut the leather well above her grip.

"She might as well have something to hold on to," he said. "She hasn't got much else. There's no other family to speak of."

The doctor looked up at the people who had found her.

"We got enough mouths to feed," said the man. And he and his wife turned away.

"I hate to think you'll grow up in an orphanage," the doctor said as he carried Charlotte. "But if anybody can make it alone in this world, it's you. Since the day you were born, you've been determined as a mule and tough as a rawhide bone."

She had the courage to follow her dreams . . .

Charlotte Parkhurst was raised in an orphanage for boys, which suited her just fine. She didn't like playing with dolls, she could hold her own in a fight, and she loved to work in the stable. Charlotte had a special way with horses and wanted to spend her life training and riding them on a ranch of her own.

The problem was, as a girl in the mid-1800s, Charlotte was expected to live a much different life — one without the freedoms she dreamed of. But Charlotte was smart and determined, and she figured out a way to live her life the way she wanted.

Charlotte became an expert horse rider, a legendary stagecoach driver, and the first woman ever to vote. And she did these things at a time when they were outlawed for women. How? With a plan so clever and so secret — almost no one figured it out.

Winner of the California Young Reader Medal
Winner of the *Parenting* Reading Magic Award 1998

★ “[An] ebullient and tautly structured novel . . . that moves along at a gallop.”
— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“[Readers] who appreciate an atmospheric blend of grit, horses, and history will want to take a ride with Charley.” — BCCB

“This fictionalized biography . . . is fascinating.” — *School Library Journal*

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