

*Mending
Horses*

Mending Horses

M. P. BARKER



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Summary: Free and on his own, Daniel Linnehan is nearly sixteen in 1839 when he joins Jonathan Stocking and Billy, a girl hiding from her abusive father, in peddling goods in New England.

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*This book is dedicated to
the memory of my father, Joseph A. Plourde,
who shared his love of books,
Gil Barons, who shared his love of horses,
and Ellen Levine, who shared her wisdom*

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I finish this thanks with trepidation, hoping I haven't left anybody out. If I have, please accept my abject apologies!

Chapter One



Wednesday, August 28, 1839, Chauncey, Connecticut

“Mark my words, Walter,” Jacob Fairley said to his apprentice. “That horse is stole, and some evil done to get her, too.”

The blacksmith jugged his chin at the handsome chestnut mare walking toward his shop. She moved so smoothly that a less observant smith might not have noticed the slight hitch in her gait. But Jacob Fairley had an eye for horses—an eye for people, too. A less observant man might have paid little attention to the red-haired boy leading the mare: a scrawny, half-grown fellow with a spotty complexion and enormous ears. But Jacob knew that the boy’s bottle-green jacket, black cravat, and boots were much too new and fine for him. Bare feet, tattered broadfalls, and a patched-at-the-elbows shirt would have suited him better. The horse suited him even less than the clothes. Certainly neither horse nor clothes belonged to him.

“Stole?” Walter’s swallow bounced his Adam’s apple into a fat lump. “What—what do we do?”

Jacob laid a finger alongside his nose. “We wait, boy. We watch and wait.”

The strange boy led the mare into the blacksmith’s yard. He nodded to Jacob and Walter and lifted his cap. “Good day, sir. May I?” He gestured toward the trough.

Jacob nodded back.

The mare slurped the water, the boy pulling her head away when she drank too greedily. “Slow, lass, slow,” he murmured.

“That’s a fine horse you got there, boy,” Jacob said. “Your father must’a paid a pretty penny for her.”

The stranger gave Jacob a narrow look with his gray-green

eyes, then shifted his glance away. He fidgeted with a buckle on the bridle. “She’s me—my master’s.”

“He must regard you highly, putting you in charge of a horse like that.”

“Oh, well. It’s only fer—for an errand. But her shoe’s come loose, see?” He lifted the mare’s right front hoof. “Can you mend it?”

“If you got cash money to pay. I don’t give credit to strangers.”

“Aye—yes. I can pay. I don’t want her lamed. My master’ll thrash me something fierce if I bring her back lame.”

Jacob doubted the boy planned to return to his master. A closer look at the boy confirmed his judgment. While the horse was impeccably groomed, the boy’s clothes were rumped, as if he’d slept out of doors. His hands were grimy, and his face was smudged with dirt and the sparse beard of a fair-haired boy who’d only just begun to shave.

The boy tethered the mare to the hitching post and unfastened her tack. Jacob nudged Walter. He tilted his chin toward the bulging valises. “He don’t have that load packed for no errand,” he whispered. “Help him put them bags someplace where you can have a look inside.” Louder, he said, “Give the fella a hand, Walter.”

Walter took the saddle from the stranger and hung it over one of the rails of the ox sling. The stranger shrugged out of his coat, folded it carefully, and laid it across the saddle. He did the same with the vest. He then unbuckled one bag and pulled out a brush and a halter, leaving the flap laid back. Walter rummaged through the open bag when the stranger turned his back to trade bridle for halter and brush the saddle marks from the mare’s hide. The stranger talked softly to the horse as he worked, grooming her with sure, rhythmic strokes. It was a pity the boy was a thief. For all his mean looks and shifty eyes, he did have a way with a horse.

“I’ll just get my tools so’s I can fix that shoe,” Jacob said. He jerked his chin toward Walter, signaling the apprentice to join him in the shop. “Well, boy, what did you find?”

“Just like you said, Mr. Fairley. New goods. Clothes and things, all like they was just from the tailor or the store. Money, too. I heard it jingle in the bag. Stole, just like you said.”

Jacob nodded grimly and selected a hammer.

“And—and another thing,” Walter continued. “Did you hear him talking to that horse, sir?” His voice squeaked a little with excitement. “Strange words. Foreign-sounding.”

Foreign. That settled it. “Walt, you run and fetch Constable Ainesworth. Tell him we got a thief here. And who knows but he might be a murderer as well.”

“What town is this?” Daniel Linnehan asked the blacksmith.

“Chauncey,” the man replied. He bent to take a closer look at Ivy’s hoof.

“We’re here, lass,” Daniel murmured to the chestnut mare. After blundering around the hills of northwestern Connecticut for several days, at last he’d reached the town where the peddler Jonathan Stocking had claimed to have kin, a cousin who supplied the little man with the tinware that he carried in his wagon. If the fellow wasn’t in town now, he no doubt would be soon, at least if Daniel recalled their last conversation aright. He’d no idea, though, exactly what he’d say to the man, if the fellow even remembered him.

As he’d done a hundred times since leaving Farmington, he felt his pocket in vain for the wooden horse Da had made for him so many years ago. He’d always touched it for luck or turned to it for comfort the way Ma had turned to her rosary. As he’d done a hundred times, he regretted giving it away as a parting gift to his young friend Ethan.

It was foolish to feel so. He’d no need of toy horses and childish superstitions. He was a free man now, a man of property, no longer a bound boy indentured to work off his father’s debts to George Lyman. He had a pocketbook full of papers proclaiming his freedom and his right to all the goods in his possession. Including Ivy.

Especially Ivy. He touched his forehead to the mare’s and

rubbed her cheek as the blacksmith prized out the nails and removed her loose shoe.

He'd never dared hope to own the mare whose ears flicked to catch his every word, whose heart beat with the same pulse as his own. The only thing he'd wanted more than Ivy had been his freedom, which by all rights should have taken him five more years to earn. But now, two months shy of his seventeenth birthday, he had both freedom and Ivy. He should have felt...should have felt...

A crow let out a raucous cry and soared up from the field of Indian corn across the road from the smithy. The bird swooped and dived and rose again, laughing with its harsh voice, cutting through the air as if it owned it. Aye, he should have felt like that: noisy and glorious and exultant. It should have been a grand feeling in his breast, not a lost one.

He'd never imagined freedom would feel this way, that he'd be hesitant to meet a blacksmith's eye, that a simple business transaction would tie a knot in his throat. He'd thought he'd never be afraid again. But he was still the same boy inside, uncertain, wary of the next taunt or blow.

It was a relief to know that he'd soon see a familiar face. Maybe that was what had drawn him to seek the peddler. Even though Daniel had seen him only twice, the little man had known things about Daniel that he hadn't known himself. He'd known how it was with Ivy, and how Ethan would become his friend, even though Daniel hadn't thought he needed one.

The last time he'd seen the peddler, the fellow had a boy with him, a boy who spoke Da's language and sang Ma's songs. Back then, it had hurt to hear those words, those songs coming from that boy's lips. But now he thought it might feel good.

Walter slipped out of the blacksmith shop and cut around to the road. He glanced back. The foreign boy was bent over Mr. Fairley, watching him work. Walter shivered, seeing how easy it would be for the foreigner to take Mr. Fairley unawares, just like he must've taken the real owner of that horse.

But Mr. Fairley wasn't unawares. He'd been clever enough to see through the stranger's lies and was more than a match for the stranger in wits and strength. Hadn't Walter himself felt the weight of Mr. Fairley's striking arm when he'd dawdled about a chore the way he was dawdling now?

"*Run and fetch Constable Ainesworth,*" Mr. Fairley had told him, not stand and think. So run he did.

Tilda Fowler took a wet shirt from the laundry basket and shook it out smartly. The sleeves made a sharp snapping noise as they grabbed at the air. She jabbed a clothes-peg in each end of the hem and stooped for another garment.

"Mama, look! There's Walter Sackett running up the road like the devil's chasing him."

"Sally, tend your chores and don't be dithering about the blacksmith's boy," Tilda scolded her daughter. Lately Sally had nothing in her head but boys, boys, boys. Just the same, Tilda tugged the clothesline down below her nose and peeked over the laundry toward the road.

Walter Sackett looked like a plucked chicken when he ran, all flapping elbows and flailing legs and pimply skin. He caught his toe on a rut and sprawled face-first in the dirt. Tilda ducked under the shirts, headed out to the road, and hauled the boy to his feet.

"What's your hurry, boy? You set Mr. Fairley's shop afire?"

"No, ma'am." He bounced on the balls of his feet as though he needed to find an outhouse quick. "It's robbers—a robber, I mean—I got to get Mr. Ainesworth."

"Someone robbed Mr. Fairley?" Tilda asked.

"No, ma'am. Not yet, I mean, that is—"

Tilda grabbed Walter's shoulders and gave him a little shake. "Spit it out, boy. What do you mean?"

The boy stopped bouncing. "There's this fella came to the shop—a foreign fella, all slicked up in new clothes on a fancy horse and valises full of goods"—he bent close to Tilda's ear and lowered his voice—"all stolen. He tried to make out like they was

his, but Mr. Fairley, he knew, but he didn't let on, just so's this foreigner wouldn't get suspicious and bolt. He's keeping this fella busy down at the shop while I fetch the constable."

"Who'd he rob?" Sally asked.

"His master," Walter said before Tilda could scold Sally back to her chores. "Robbed him and murdered him, most likely. Prob'ly lying in the woods with his throat slit from ear to ear."

"Oh!" Sally gasped, her eyes saucer-wide, her hands clasped tight at her breast.

Tilda wasn't sure which disturbed her more: the idea of a robber and possibly a murderer at the blacksmith's, or the way Walter Sackett's eyes latched on to Sally's clasped hands. Or rather, what was beneath them.

"Well," Tilda said, rubbing her hands on her apron, "we'd best not keep you. Run along and fetch the constable."

The boy ran down the road as if the dust cloud at his heels pursued him. "Sally, get inside," Tilda said. She turned toward her daughter, but Sally was already gone, not toward the house, but across the east pasture and halfway to the Wolcotts' place.

"...and there was still blood on his hands." Sally gasped, breathless.

Beulah Wolcott squealed with terror. At least Sally guessed it was terror, though in truth, it might have only been envy that Sally had gotten a juicy story before she did.

"...and his horse's feet were red with it," Sally continued. "Trampled him down after he was dead, you see, so nobody would recognize the body."

"What body?" Beulah's papa poked his head out of the barn doorway.

"The dead man's. The one this foreigner killed," Sally said.

"What foreigner?"

"The one down at the blacksmith's."

There was a clatter of tools, and Mr. Wolcott came out of the barn with an ax in his hand. "There's been a killing down to Jake Fairley's?"

“Oh, no, sir.” But Sally’s heart doubled its pace. It would be exciting if there was a killing, something to talk about for weeks and weeks. “But there is a killer. He killed his master and who knows how many others, and Mr. Fairley is keeping him there, waiting for Walter to fetch the constable.”

“A foreigner, you say?”

“Oh, yes. Speaks nothing but gibberish. Probably a Papist on top of it.”

Mr. Wolcott hefted his ax. “And Jake all alone with him? Good God!”

The excited flutter in Sally’s heart landed in her stomach and turned into a lump of granite. Mr. Wolcott was a slight, even-tempered man. Sally couldn’t see him standing against a murderer. Another lump of granite lodged in Sally’s throat as Mr. Wolcott kissed the top of Beulah’s head. “Tell your mother I’m going to Mr. Fairley’s. But don’t tell her why,” he said. His fingers brushed his daughter’s cheek, as if he feared he might not see her again.

Beulah’s chin quivered as her father walked away. “What do we do?” Beulah’s whisper rose to a mousy squeak.

To the west, Sally saw Mr. Gilbert and his sons digging potatoes. To the south, Mr. Finch gathered windfall apples. When Sally turned back to her friend, Beulah met her eyes and nodded. “We have to hurry.”

“Killed them all, and they never had a chance, and now Papa’s gone to help catch him.” Beulah’s voice faded into a series of hiccuping sobs.

Seth Gilbert gave the girl his handkerchief. Poor thing, practically in hysterics, and no wonder, too. “There, dear. We’ll go, won’t we?” He wondered if there was time to go home for his musket. The only weapons he and his sons, Levi and Noah, had to hand were their shovels and pocketknives, but there was safety in numbers, and with Jacob Fairley and Enos Wolcott, they’d be five—no, four. Best to go now and not waste any time. He frowned at Noah, his youngest. “You’re not coming,” Seth said abruptly.

Noah opened his mouth to protest, but Seth continued. “Find whoever you can and tell them to join us.”

“But I want to go, too,” Noah said.

Seth grabbed the boy’s shoulder and shook him. “This is important, son.”

“You can be like William Dawes and Paul Revere,” Levi added.

Seth threw Levi a grateful glance. “Yes, just like them.”

Noah puffed out his chest and nodded. “Yes, sir,” the boy said, and was gone.

Chapter Two



Constable Chester Ainesworth was having a very bad day. A weasel had gotten into the henhouse during the night and ravaged the flock, leaving only a trio of tough, scrawny hens behind. Of the prized chickens Amelia had fattened and primped for next month's agricultural fair, not a one was left. Cleaning up the blood, feathers, and torn bodies with their stench of tainted meat had been a joy compared to facing Amelia's distress over her lost flock.

After a scorched and dismal breakfast, Chester had discovered a leak in the barn roof that had ruined a good quantity of hay. In the process of mending the damage, he'd spilled a box of nails and hammered his thumb.

In the afternoon, he'd found the cattle placidly grazing among his pumpkins, having broken down their pasture fence and forsaken the tough August grass for the cornstalks standing sentry over the pumpkins. It seemed that everything he wanted to keep in was bound and determined to get out, and everything he wanted to keep out was equally set on getting in.

He returned to the house to find a babble of frantic women, excited children, and agitated men blocking his front door, all of them vexed because Chester had been out when they thought he should have been in. He caught snatches of conversation that made him wish he'd stayed out.

"... he killed them in their beds, the whole family," said Caroline Dunbar in her grating squeal of a voice. "Slit their throats one by one and robbed 'em and then set the house on fire..."

Chester circumnavigated the group, hoping to slip into the

kitchen and fortify himself with a glass of rum before facing the horde. Walter Sackett stood on the doorstep talking to Amelia, his hair sweat-plastered to his forehead. The blather of the crowd kept Chester from catching any of his words.

“...ain’t nobody safe in their homes anymore,” said a man on Chester’s left. “He bashed in their brains while they slept, and then made off with a thousand dollars in silver and gold...”

“...assaulted the women and girls, then chopped them to pieces with an ax...”

Chester told himself that his neighbors were probably stirred up over some newspaper story about a faraway crime. Nothing sensational ever happened here. Chauncey was so tiny, it merited only three sentences in the gazetteer.

“...a gruesome sight as you’d ever want to see,” someone grumbled in harsh bass tones. “He cut off their heads with a scythe, as easy as mowing hay...”

Or perhaps the tale of the chicken massacre had circulated through town and returned transmogrified into something more ghastly.

“...and when the constable came for him, he shot him dead,” said a voice at Chester’s elbow.

Then again, perhaps not.

Daniel stood with his cheek pressed to Ivy’s, overseeing the blacksmith’s ritual of fitting, nailing, and filing. The familiar task was almost a comfort when set against the uncertainty and bewilderment that had been his lot for the past several days.

The more time and distance he put between himself and Farmington and the Lymans, the more he discovered how ill-prepared he’d been for the journey. The number of simple things he didn’t know seemed unending. Finding a night’s lodging should have been easy enough. At first glance, landladies and tavern-keepers would greet him with fair and smiling faces. But their smiles faded when he opened his mouth and his Irishness showed itself—that Irish turn to his words he’d fought so hard to keep ever since that horrific day six years ago, when fire had

taken his parents, his baby brother, and his home. Now he tried to flatten his vowels like a native-born New Englander. Even so, asking for food or lodging, or a barn to stable Ivy for the night, was a challenge. Perhaps it was because he couldn't remember ever asking for anything where the answer hadn't been no.

Finding his way was another problem. A line on a map and a road on the ground were different things entirely. He might blunder about until winter, trying to puzzle out where to go, where to stay, how to speak, and how not to get robbed. Finding the peddler had quickly turned from a whim to a necessity.

"There, that should do it." The blacksmith released Ivy's foot and straightened.

Daniel blinked out of his fog. "Yes, thank you, sir," he said. At least he remembered to say *yes* instead of *aye* and *thank you* instead of *ta*. He stooped to check the smith's work, then glanced up to ask about the peddler.

The blacksmith wasn't looking at Daniel or at Ivy, but at something behind them.

Releasing Ivy's hoof, Daniel rose and turned. A little sandy-haired man stood at the edge of the blacksmith's yard, an ax in his hand. Another next to him held a pitchfork, and another a spade. There were more behind them and coming up the road. Others carried weapons rather than tools: a rusted sword, a twisted bayonet, battered muskets. Daniel wondered if he'd arrived in town on training day. Perhaps the blacksmith was captain of the militia and...

But the men weren't looking at the blacksmith. Their dark, cold gazes were fixed on Daniel.

The constable's parlor was jammed with people, some standing on chairs to get a better view, some trying to shove their way in from the hall. Those out in the yard jostled at the open windows, trying to thrust their heads and shoulders into the room.

Daniel felt as if he stood outside himself, seeing himself as one of the spectators might: a stranger with nothing to say in his own defense. The contents of his bags lay in an untidy sprawl

across the constable's table. Funny how quickly he'd attached himself to those bits of cloth and leather and metal and paper. It felt as if his guts were laid out there, instead of only his goods.

"What's the charge, Chester?" snapped a sharp-nosed, silver-haired man who sat in an upholstered chair behind the table. He held a candlestick, which he periodically rapped on the table to silence the crowd. From the man's attitude and the deference everyone showed him, Daniel guessed him to be the justice of the peace.

The constable showed none of the older man's poise. Dressed in sweat-dampened work clothes, he slouched in a wooden chair next to the justice. He stared balefully at the goods strewn across his table. He rubbed his eyes and seemed disappointed that neither goods nor crowd had disappeared when he put his hands down. "Damned if I know," he muttered. "So what is it, Jake?" he said, a little louder. "This fella's stolen something from you?"

"Not yet." The blacksmith stepped forward and crossed his burly arms over his chest. "I never gave him the chance." The crowd mumbled its approval.

"Then why in blazes did you haul all these people into my parlor?" the constable demanded.

"He stole these goods from someone, that's why." The smith grabbed a shirt and waved it under Daniel's nose. "Now tell me how a boy like you comes to have goods like this?"

The justice's and the constable's stares felt like an ox yoke across Daniel's shoulders. "Th-they're mine," was all the answer he could blurt out.

The blacksmith picked up the books: the fat little volume of Shakespeare the peddler had given him and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*—a parting gift from Lizzie, the Lyman's dairymaid. Daniel cringed at the sooty marks the blacksmith made on *Ivanhoe*'s pages as he riffled through them. "I suppose these are his, too?" The blacksmith sniffed. "I doubt the brute can even read."

Daniel choked back a retort. Whether dealing with powerful men like George Lyman, his former master, or schoolyard bullies like Joshua Ward and his mates, it had always been safest to

be mute and passive. But now it was time to say something, anything, and he didn't know what to say. "They're m-mine, too," he stammered.

The room burst into contemptuous laughter. "Yours?" the blacksmith said, echoed by half a dozen others. "*Yours?*"

His mind began to retreat into that safe place inside himself that he'd built when he'd learned that the way to end trouble was to submit and endure. The rapping of the justice's candlestick pulled him away from the temptation to withdraw and give up.

He cursed himself for an idiot. His defense was right there in front of him. He'd just been too daft with panic to tell them about the papers Lyman's son Silas had given him. "I got papers." He gestured toward the table. "Bills of sale. References. They're all there in that pocketbook."

The blacksmith grabbed the small leather case. He let the papers spill to the floor and trod on them. "Forged, no doubt."

Daniel felt as if the blacksmith's boot heel had ground into his chest. "And how would I be forging 'em, then, if I can't read?"

A corner of the constable's mouth twitched up before the man hid it behind his hand. The blacksmith's face flushed, and he looked as if he wanted to strike Daniel. "Stolen, then," the blacksmith said. "How do we know you haven't killed this fellow and stole his goods and his papers?"

"Of course I didn't kill him. He's me."

"And what proof do you have?" the justice of the peace demanded, rapping the candlestick against the table. The constable winced as the metal knocked the polished surface.

"Is there anyone who can vouch for you, boy?" The constable's voice was almost gentle. The justice of the peace looked disgruntled that the constable had taken over the hearing—if the hubbub could be called a hearing—but the constable continued, "Anyone at all who knows you?"

Daniel shook his head. Ivy was the only one who knew him. She could show them all she pleased that nobody else had a right to her, but they'd only see her as stolen goods.

The constable massaged his forehead, then his temples. He

looked almost as miserable as Daniel felt. “So you have no proof you’re who you say you are. And you, Jacob”—he pointed to the blacksmith—“have no proof he isn’t. And I have no grounds for a warrant.”

Somebody at the back of the room shouted, “But we know he’s a thief!”

Daniel stared at the papers at the blacksmith’s feet—the papers Silas had worked so hard to gather. If they wouldn’t believe Silas’s papers, surely they’d believe the man himself. “Send word to Silas Lyman in Farmington—Farmington, Massachusetts, that is. He’ll speak for me. I used to work for his father, George Lyman.”

“And how will he do that with his throat cut?” snarled the blacksmith.

“C-Cut?” Daniel clutched at his own neck. It couldn’t be true, and yet it made all too much sense. It must have been an unforgivable betrayal for Silas to turn against his father and help Daniel to freedom. It wasn’t hard to imagine the elder Lyman slitting Silas’s throat in revenge. What better vengeance than to place all the blame on the Irish lad who’d just left town?

“What—what’s become of himself, then?” He barely managed to choke out the question.

“Himself?”

“His da. Silas’s da, I mean. George Lyman.”

The slight man stepped forward, shoving at Daniel’s shoulder. “Don’t pretend you don’t know. You’re the one that killed them all.”

“All? They’re all of ’em dead?” Lyman had seemed subdued and shaken the last time Daniel had seen him, but mad? Insane enough to kill his whole family and himself?

“All—killed in their sleep,” called a voice from the crowd.

The accusations grew louder around him. The justice of the peace and constable shouted for order, and the justice rapped the table, but everything melted into a sea of angry faces, a whirlwind of frenzied voices confirming the death of every last Lyman.

Daniel’s knees gave way underneath him. His stomach

rolled and pushed up into his throat. He cradled his head in his arms. “Oh, God, oh, God. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.”

A massive hand grabbed his collar and hauled him upright. “There, you see?” The blacksmith’s voice boomed in his ear. “There’s guilt written all over him.”