

## 2016 Maryland State Level 1 Winning Letter by Margaret Kato

January 8, 2016

Dear Kathryn Lasky,

When I was younger, about 9 or 10, I begged my parents for horse riding lessons. Every day. For about a year. It didn't matter that there were no stables nearby, or that I was allergic to hay. I loved horses, and I wanted to ride them because they seemed so graceful, so powerful and majestic. I had read other stories like Misty of Chincoteague by Marguerite Henry, and seen videos with horse racing or cowboys in the "Wild West", and these were the foundations of my opinions; I saw how fast, how amazing it was to ride and knew that I wanted to be a part of it. So I wished. And asked. And pestered. Until finally, after months of pleading and hoping, my dream came true. The lessons were scheduled for one week, at a farm near my grandparent's house. I was absolutely elated—I was going to get to ride! The week went great; it was so fun sitting high up on the horse, guiding it with tugs of the reins, and squeezing with my knees to urge it on. The days went too fast and I couldn't wait for some more. And the chance came the next summer, with another week of lessons that was just as good. However, through all this happiness and haze of excitement, I never really stopped to think about how the *horse* might be feeling.

I first read your "Horses of the Dawn" series about a year ago (I'm 12 now). As I thought about what Hold On said near the end of The Escape in chapter 17, about how the horses didn't have their own brain, their own thoughts, with a bit in their mouth, how the human had complete power and control over the animal, it made me remember back to my own horse riding lessons. I had demanded absolute obedience from Tessa (the horse I rode). Nothing else was acceptable; and the instructor encouraged it. If my mount walked too slow, I squeezed with my knees harder until she sped up. If she didn't go into a trot when I signaled I tapped her with a crop until she obeyed. If she went too fast I'd yank on the reins and lean back, to stop her from going at her own pace. Even while not riding, we controlled Tessa—while tacking her up (getting the riding gear on), if she tossed her head while we put on the bridle, someone would hold her to make sure that we had absolute command. I didn't realize it at the time, but what we were doing was stopping the horse from having any independent thought, just like Hold On said. Reading "Horses of the Dawn" made me realize just how much we govern the horses we ride.

When I got to the part when Estrella's herd is captured by the Seeker and have conflicting feelings about it, I felt conflicted too. Hold On and Estrella were right in the sense that they shouldn't be enslaved and broken by the men, but if Angela wished to be taken care of by humans, then why shouldn't she be allowed to take the opportunity when it came? I mean, it probably wouldn't be *good* for her, but in a way being free was burdening her even more than if she was just a riding horse and thought of as a god. This really got me thinking about whether or not someone is required to live up to their fullest potential, or if they are allowed to settle in their comfort zone instead. Angela could have been so happy back in the hands of men, much happier than she could have been free. Before reading this book, I was kind of like "do the right thing" but after, I now think the "right thing" is different for everyone, and they should find it, much like Estrella knew that being free and wild was the right destiny for her.

In all, this book made me think differently about the way animals feel, and where you should be allowed to go with your life. Before I had a very closed mind in terms of how others might be feeling, both animals and humans, but now that I've read it I believe more in the freedom of individuals to do what they want, if it's what is best for them. Thanks to your book, "Horses of the Dawn": *The Escape*, I'm a more considerate person.

Sincerely,  
M.K.