

The Horse
who Came
Home

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For Lou and Katy



The page is framed by dark silhouettes of trees. The top corners are filled with the intricate branches and leaves of trees, while the bottom edge features a row of various wildflowers and plants. The central area is white, providing a stark contrast for the text.

Prologue

Yet another lorry. Rough hands, rough words. The pony was loaded up a rickety wooden ramp and recoiled at the strange smell radiating from inside. Beneath the acrid stink of the dank and rotten straw that lined the floor, it smelled of danger – of something dark and unseen. It was a smell that instantly drove fear into the pony's heart.

She went in quietly, as she always did, resigned to whatever fate lay ahead. She


had no fight left in her. There had once been smart lorries with leather head collars and fleece rugs. But that had been a long time ago, alongside a distant memory of a girl who had loved her.

The pony trembled as the lorry shuddered into gear, taking a little comfort from the equally frightened pony tied next to her. Through the crack in the metal slats, glimpses of blue sky and a wildflower-strewn hedgerow reminded the pony of sunny hacks and pony shows, experiences she would have enjoyed in a different world, a world far away from wherever she was heading now. Somehow it felt like her journey was over, that her story would cease wherever she was unloaded when they stopped. It felt different this time. This was the end.



Chapter One

Hannah placed her arms round the bay pony's neck as she slipped his bridle off, allowing her cheek to press against his soft mane. The little pony's coat was warm after his session in the outdoor arena and his biscuity smell was heaven. Hannah closed her eyes as the pony nestled into her. For a few seconds she allowed herself to believe he was her very own. Everything else slipped away as they stood in silence, their breathing mirroring each other's.



It was the way she used to stand with Wispa: her face pressed against the mare's warm neck, looking down at her perfect white socks. She shook her head. The memory was still too raw and painful.

"Wolfie," she whispered, stroking his mane. His arrival had started to heal her broken heart.

Suddenly the pony pricked up his ears and lifted his head, and the moment was lost.

"How's the morning gone?" asked her dad. The rolling burr of his voice, so soft here, could fill a stadium and silence an audience. Henry Boland, showjumping Olympic champion.

"Getting there," another voice answered, and involuntarily Hannah's lip curled at the flat, clipped tones of Ashley the yard groom. He was the son of Johno, who'd worked for Hannah's family since before she was even born. But now Johno was retiring and Ashley was taking over, and Hannah *hated* him.

"Hannah's just ridden that bay," Ashley continued. "It's going well."

"Your name is Wolfie," Hannah whispered fiercely, and the little pony gazed at her. "And you're not an *it*."

To Ashley the ponies weren't Lennie or Silver or Bertie or any of the other names that came and went

through Hannah's family yard. They were "the bay" or "that grey" or even "the useless chestnut". They were never a mare or a gelding; they were all referred to as "it".

Hannah had never understood why her parents, who professed to love horses, let Ashley talk like that. She'd asked them about it once, and they'd told Hannah not to overthink things.

"Oh, great!" Hannah's dad sounded pleased. "You know we've almost certainly got a buyer for him. That young showjumper."

As the two men walked away discussing the potential sale, Hannah slumped against Wolfie's neck. She knew a girl had visited recently to try him out. He was a beautiful pony, and super talented too, and Hannah knew he would fetch her dad an excellent price.

The Bolands took in ponies to train and sell, but only the *very* best. Henry bought ponies from all over Europe, taking a chance on their breeding or potential. Heartwood Stables was in such demand that often all twenty of their stables were full, and they were always under pressure to sell as quickly as possible so that they could begin training their next potential star. Prospective buyers would gaze in awe at the immaculate courtyard, the smart hunter-green

stable doors, the pale sand of the arena flanked by a neat box hedge, and, at the end of their tour, the post and rail paddocks where glossy ponies grazed on lush grass. The Boland yard was the height of luxury, and nothing was better than a Boland pony.

If Henry Boland had time, and was in a charming mood, visitors would even be treated to tea in the tack room. Sitting opposite the top-of-the-range washing machine and a beautiful old Rayburn, Henry would talk his visitors through the highlights of his long and glittering career, gesturing to the ribbons and medals that covered every centimetre of the wall.

Wolfie nudged Hannah softly. It was his polite way of asking for a treat, which she always gave him after a ride. Smiling, she rooted through the pockets of her jodhs and dug out a Polo. He snuffled it from her hand and crunched it up, his sweet pony breath hitting her face with a minty tang.

“Hannah!” a bright, cheery voice called out, and Hannah rolled her eyes. Millie. And she knew that tone; Millie was clearly after something. Hannah gave Wolfie a pat and checked he had enough hay before reluctantly opening the stable door to see her sister, arms folded, tapping one leather-booted foot. Millie was the polar opposite to Hannah, who’d inherited

her dad's dark hair, hazel eyes and short stature. Millie was tall and willowy, with flaxen hair that she mostly wore in a high ponytail. Her bright-blue eyes were beady as she looked over the stable door.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Millie's tinkly voice had an edge to it now. "I told you I needed to finish off Wolfie's video. Tack him back up. The light's gorgeous at the moment."

Hannah glowered at her sister. She had been right. Millie was *always* after something.

"I just put him away," she said. "It's not fair to get him back out. He's been a really good boy and he deserves to chill out." She didn't add that the thought of being filmed made her stomach tie itself in a knot.

"It will only be for five minutes." Millie was insistent. "Just get back on him. You know I'd ride him myself if I was as short as you. Dad's got that buyer almost ready to pay the deposit. I want to film as much as we can, especially as he's a big sale." She looked Hannah up and down with a pained expression. "Could you change?"

Hannah glanced down. Her faded band T-shirt and her old navy jodhs looked just fine. Out of nowhere, Millie produced a base layer and jodhs in an alarmingly bright shade of pink. "Ponydazzle's

newest shade,” she said in a triumphant voice. “It’s so nice, isn’t it? You know I helped design it?”

“It’s gross,” Hannah groaned. “I’ll look like a giant raspberry. And, yes, you’ve only mentioned it a million times.”

“It will suit you,” said Millie. “Come on, go and get changed. This is Ponydazzle’s biggest campaign yet. And they’ve chosen us – well, me – to front it.”

“So you can then get hundreds of girls to buy it.” Hannah rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t look that different to the last pink one.”

“Hundreds of *thousands* of girls, thank you,” Millie said, preening herself. “My subs are at their highest ever. And it’s completely different if you actually look.”

As if she wasn’t aware she was doing it, Millie looked around the yard, her gaze falling on the newly acquired show jumps in the arena, the top-spec wash bay and the waffle rugs hanging on a bar beside each pony stable. Hannah followed her gaze too and sighed. She didn’t exactly know how it worked, but she knew Millie was behind a lot of the upkeep of the yard. There was *always* something to pay for.

“Well then, if I do this,” Hannah said, “can you look at Jenson’s newest video for me? He’s made one about

skateboarding tricks and he'd like your opinion."

Millie burst out laughing and Hannah winced, thinking about the way Jenson had asked her so earnestly to show it to Millie. He'd never have had the courage to ask Millie himself.

"Really?" Millie said. "He's got, like, fourteen followers."

"Over fifty now," Hannah muttered, but she knew it was no use.

Millie flicked her ponytail over her shoulder. "No, and why would I be interested anyway?" She shook her head, tapping a foot impatiently. "Tell him to get a decent camera to start with."

Hannah knew it was no use. Millie never had time for anything or anyone, let alone one of Hannah's friends. It didn't matter that Hannah and Jenson had grown up together; he was insignificant to Millie.

"So then why should I do this?" said Hannah, but then her dad appeared.

"Come on, girls," Henry said. "Hannah, don't argue – you know the deal. It's only a quick shoot."

"I'll tack Wolfie up." Millie moved forward, and Hannah sighed, the argument lost.

Wriggling into the clothes in the tack room a couple of minutes later, she watched as Millie led the pony

out. She'd really miss Wolfie when he was gone. Once again, she felt the familiar stab to her heart. It felt extra cruel this time so soon after Wispa.



Wolfie looked confused about going back into the arena, but like the polite and well-schooled pony he was he didn't put up a fuss. Hannah trotted and then cantered him, trying not to look at Freddie, who did Millie's filming, as his camera followed her every move. Her hands felt all wrong, and she was already sweaty in the new outfit. She kept her heels rammed down; she dreaded being criticised online for her position. But Wolfie took care of her, flying over the jumps beautifully.

"Smile, Han," Freddie reminded her gently. "It is an advert."

Hannah adjusted her position and tried to relax her features into a smile, though she felt sure it would look like she was gritting her teeth. She hated being in the spotlight.

Freddie gave her a thumbs up as she passed him. He was always kind and patient.

He was studying media at college but had ridden as a child, and Hannah had to admit he did an amazing job on Millie's videos. He would often record really

random things, like a hoof being picked out or a head collar hanging on a hook, but then he'd set it to music, adjust the speed and the lighting, and create something gorgeous. Millie's films stood head and shoulders above the others. But Hannah just didn't see the point. She'd rather be with ponies in real life than make a show with them for the screen. But then Hannah and Millie had always been different.

Seven years ago, when Henry had jumped his last competitive classes at the London International Horse Show, the whole family had been invited to join him in the ring at the end. Mum walked Hannah and Millie out into the arena to stand by their dad and his top horse Mistral.

Millie had worn a pretty velvet dress, her long blonde hair in a plait, and had waved and smiled at the crowd. Hannah had worn dungarees and tried to bury her face in her mum's sleeve. But in the centre of the arena she had found herself next to Mistral, who was also retiring. She'd wrapped her arms round him and could still remember the way his soft muzzle had felt as he stood so gallantly and quietly despite the noise and atmosphere.

The following day at school, while Hannah was hanging around in the playground before register

with her best friends Gaby and Jenson, a teacher she didn't have for classes had approached her and asked her to sign a programme from the London International Horse Show.

Hannah had just looked at her. "Shall I take it home for my dad?" she'd asked, but the teacher had only beamed at her.

"If it's OK, can you sign it?" she said. "My daughter is your age and saw you in the ring. I didn't realise we had showjumping royalty in the school; she was so excited when I told her!" And as Gaby and Jenson had stared, Hannah had scrawled awkwardly on the programme, lingering on Mistral's beautiful face on the front cover, feeling utterly odd and wishing she was with him instead.

Mistral was gone now. He'd died a couple of years ago peacefully out in his field. He'd gone to sleep and just never woken up. Johnno had told her it was the nicest way he could have gone, patting her shoulder as she'd gulped down huge wracking sobs. The beautiful horse was buried up by the woods with a simple wooden cross marking his resting place. Johnno had cried when he'd dug the hole with the JCB. He'd tried to hide it, but Hannah had seen the tears rolling down his weathered cheeks. She couldn't imagine Ashley

ever crying over a horse. For a long time afterwards Hannah had joined Johnno and her dad in taking flowers to Mistral's grave. But gradually Johnno had found the walk too difficult, and once he'd stopped going Hannah's dad stopped too.