

The Horse Nobody Wanted



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About This Book

At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English, CEFR A2 (for children learning English)
- **Age:** 8 and up
- **Length:** 12 chapters, about 15,800 words

The Series

Willow Creek Stables is a small riding stable on the edge of Millbrook, a village in the English countryside. Emma and Jack Hartley live there with their mum and dad, the ponies, and one very special grey horse. Together with their friends Ben and Sophie, they care for the animals — and in every book there is a new adventure and a mystery to solve.

This Book

At a cold, muddy horse auction, nobody wants the thin grey horse in the last pen. He shakes with fear. He will not eat. But when the auctioneer calls him “the horse nobody wanted,” Emma’s dad lifts his hand — and just like that, the Hartley family has a new horse.

They call him Storm.

Storm is gentle and kind. He is not afraid of people. But the moment a rope comes near him, he panics. Emma and Jack must find out why — and they have only a few weeks before the summer show, or Storm cannot stay.

Can two children, a village full of friends, and a lot of patience help one frightened horse learn to trust again?

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Chapter 1 — The Auction

Emma Hartley loved horses more than anything in the world. So she was happy to be up early on a wet Saturday morning.

The auction was in a big muddy field outside town. It was a grey day in spring. Rain had fallen all night. Cars and trailers stood in long rows on the wet grass.

“Stay close,” Dad said. “It gets busy in there.”

Emma stayed close. Her little brother Jack did not. He walked fast, three steps ahead, looking at everything.

“We only need a wheelbarrow,” Dad said. “The old one has a hole. Maybe I’ll look at a quiet pony too. Nothing more.”

Emma smiled. Dad always said “nothing more”. But everyone knew he had a soft heart for animals.

Inside, the auction was loud. People pushed past with mugs of tea and mud on their boots. Somewhere a pony called out. Emma felt her heart lift. She could smell hay and horses.

Along one side stood the pens. Each pen was small, with a wooden gate. Ponies and horses waited inside them. A man walked from pen to pen, calling out prices very fast.

“That’s the auctioneer,” Dad said. “He sells them. When you want a horse, you lift your hand. That’s your bid.”

“How do you win?” Jack asked.

“You win with the biggest bid,” Dad said. “But no bidding today, Jack. We look. We do not buy.”

Jack pulled a face. Emma laughed.

They walked past the pens. In the first one stood a brown pony, fat and calm. In the next, two grey ponies ate from a bucket of feed. A little girl stroked their manes. Emma watched them and felt happy.

The auctioneer sold pony after pony. Hands went up all around. “Two hundred! Two hundred and fifty! Sold!” Each time, a family walked away smiling, leading a new pony.

Then they came to the last pen.

Emma stopped. She felt cold.

In the corner of the pen stood a thin grey horse. He was not fat and calm like the others. His ribs showed. His coat was dull. His long mane hung down in a tangle. And he was shaking. His whole body shook, again and again.

“Dad,” Emma said softly. “Look.”

Dad looked. He said nothing for a long time.

The horse’s eyes were white at the edges. He pressed himself into the far corner, as far from the people as he could go. When a man walked past the gate, the horse threw up his head and shook harder.



“He’s so nervous,” Emma whispered. “He’s really scared.”

“Yes,” Dad said quietly. “Poor thing.”

The auctioneer came to the last pen. He looked at the grey horse. He did not smile.

“Now this one,” he called. “A grey gelding. About eight years old. Not much to look at, is he?”

Some people laughed. Emma did not like that.

“Who will start me?” the auctioneer called. “Fifty pounds? Come on. Forty? Thirty?”

Nobody moved. Nobody lifted a hand. The grey horse shook in his corner. His feed was still in the bucket. He had not eaten.

“Anyone?” said the auctioneer. “Twenty pounds?”

Still nothing. People looked away. A woman near Emma spoke to her friend.

“That one’s trouble,” she said. “You can see it. Nobody wants a horse like that.”

The auctioneer sighed. “Come on, folks. Ten pounds? He’s the horse nobody wanted, this one. Won’t somebody take him?”

Emma felt her eyes go hot. She looked at the thin grey horse, alone in the corner. She looked at his sad, frightened eyes.

Then, next to her, Dad lifted his hand.

“Ten pounds,” Dad said.

Emma’s mouth fell open. Jack spun round. “Dad!”

The auctioneer looked surprised too. “Ten pounds from the gentleman! Any more? No? Sold, to the man with the two children!”

He banged his little hammer. It was done.

For a moment nobody said a word. Then Jack grinned from ear to ear.

“We bought a horse,” he said. “We actually bought a horse!”

“Your mother is going to have my head,” Dad said. But he was already walking to the pen.

Emma could not stop smiling. “Why did you bid?” she asked. “You said nothing more.”

Dad looked at the shaking grey horse. “Every creature needs a chance,” he said. “Nobody else was going to give him one.”

Getting the horse home was the hard part.

Dad backed the trailer up to the gate. The trailer was old and green, with a ramp at the back. “Right,” Dad said. “Now we load him.”

But the horse did not want to load. The moment Dad stepped into the pen, the horse pressed harder into the corner. His sides shook. His eyes rolled white.

“Easy,” Dad said in his low, calm voice. “Easy, boy. Nobody’s going to hurt you.”

A man from the auction came to help. He carried a halter and a long rope. “You’ll want this on him,” the man said. “Get the halter on his head, clip the rope, and lead him up the ramp.”

Dad took the halter. He stepped near the horse, slow and gentle.

Then the man lifted the rope.

The horse went wild.

He threw up his head. He kicked out. He crashed against the wooden gate. The whole pen shook. Emma jumped back with her hand over her mouth.

“The rope!” she cried. “It’s the rope! Take the rope away!”

The man stepped back fast. Dad held up his hand. “All right,” he said. “All right. No rope. Everybody, stand back.”

They stood back. Slowly, slowly, the grey horse stopped kicking. But he still shook. The nervous horse watched the rope on the ground as if it were a snake. His breath came fast and loud.

“He’s terrified of the rope,” Emma said. “Did you see, Dad? It’s the rope he’s scared of.”

“I saw,” Dad said. He rubbed his chin. “So. No rope.”

It took a long time. Dad sent Jack for a bucket of feed. He put the bucket on the ramp of the trailer, then a little higher, then higher still. Bit by bit, the hungry horse followed the feed. His nose reached for the bucket. His tangled mane fell over his eyes. His thin legs shook on the ramp. But he did not run.

“Good boy,” Emma whispered. “Good boy. Nearly there.”

The horse put one foot in the trailer. Then another. He smelled the feed. At last, all four feet were in. Dad had loaded the horse, and no one had used a rope.

Dad closed the ramp softly. He was sweating. Emma looked at the clock on the auction shed. A whole hour had passed. But the horse was in.

“Well,” Dad said. He let out a long breath. “That was not easy.”

They drove home slowly. The trailer rocked behind them. Rain ran down the windows. Nobody talked for a while. Emma kept turning round to look through the little window at the grey shape inside.

Then Jack asked the question Emma was thinking.

“Dad,” he said. “The rope. When the man lifted the rope, he went crazy. But he’s not scared of us. Only the rope. Why? Why is he so afraid?”

Dad was quiet. He watched the wet road.

“I don’t know, son,” he said at last. “I really don’t know.”

Emma looked back one more time. In the dark of the trailer, two nervous eyes looked back at her. The grey horse was calmer now, but he still watched everything.

Why? she thought. *What happened to you?*

Nobody in the car had an answer. Not yet.

Chapter 2 — The First Night

Jack Hartley could not sit still.

All the way home he watched the road. The trailer rocked behind the car. Inside stood their new horse — the thin grey horse nobody had wanted.

“There’s the sign!” Jack said. “We’re home!”

The car turned in at the gate. WILLOW CREEK STABLES, said the old wooden sign. Jack loved this place more than anywhere. The yard, the stables, the green fields down to the creek. It was all his.

Patch ran to meet them. Patch was the family dog, a black and white collie. He barked and jumped and ran round the car.

“Hello, Patch!” Jack said. He jumped out before the car had stopped.

Their mum came out of the house, drying her hands. Mum taught riding at the stables. She was warm and quick, and she saw everything.

She looked at the car. She looked at the trailer. Then she looked at Dad.

“David,” she said slowly. “You went to buy a wheelbarrow.”

Dad rubbed the back of his neck. “I did,” he said. “I didn’t buy the wheelbarrow.”

“So what did you buy?” Mum asked.

“A horse,” said Dad.

For a moment nobody spoke. Jack held his breath. Then Mum let out a long breath and shook her head. But she was almost smiling.

“Show me,” she said.

Dad opened the ramp of the trailer, slow and soft. The grey horse stood inside. His body shook. His eyes were wide and white at the edges. His mane hung down in a tangle.

Mum went very quiet. “Oh,” she said. “Oh, the poor thing. Look at him.”

“Nobody bid on him,” Emma said. “Nobody at all. Dad gave him ten pounds.”

“He’s scared of ropes,” Jack said. “But not of people. You’ll see.”

Slowly, with no rope, they led the horse down the ramp. Jack walked in front with a bucket of feed. At the bottom of the ramp the horse stopped. His feet would not move. His ears went back.

“It’s all right,” Jack said, low and soft, the way Dad did. “Come on. Just a little more.”

He shook the bucket. The horse smelled the feed. One foot came down, then the next. Step by step they went across the yard, past the other stables, to an empty stall.

The stall was clean and warm. That morning Dad had put down fresh straw, a thick yellow bed of it. A net of hay hung in the corner.

The grey horse walked in. He went straight to the far wall. He pressed his side to it and stood still.

“There’s good hay,” Emma said softly. “And clean straw. You’re safe now.”

But the horse did not eat the hay. He did not lie down in the straw. He just stood in the corner of the stall and shook.

Jack did not like that. “Why won’t he eat, Dad?” he asked. “He must be hungry.”

“He’s had a big day,” Dad said. “A new place. New people. Give him time, son. A horse needs time.” Dad put his hand on Jack’s head. “We can’t fix him tonight. We just have to be here.”

The other horses watched from their stalls. Pepper put his head over his door. Pepper was a quick bay pony, and he was Jack’s favourite. Daisy, the grey mare, gave a soft call. Old Biscuit just went on eating.

“That’s Pepper,” Jack told the new horse. “And Daisy. And Biscuit. This is your home now. You’ll like it here.”

The horse did not move.

Evening came to the yard. There was work to do, like every night. Jack filled the water buckets. Emma gave each pony fresh hay. Dad checked every stall door. Jack tried to be brave and calm, so the new horse would feel safe too.

Marmalade, the ginger stable cat, walked along the top of the doors. She looked down at the new horse for a while. Then she went off to hunt mice in the hay barn.

Little by little the stables grew quiet and dark. In every stall a pony was warm and full. Only the grey horse stood awake in his corner. Jack looked back at him one more time before he went in.

“Come on!” Mum called from the house. “Supper’s ready. Wash your hands.”

Supper was hot and good. There was pie and potatoes, and the kitchen was warm and bright. Everyone was hungry after the long day.

They sat down. They held hands round the table, the way they always did.

“Thank you for this food,” Dad said. “And thank you for the grey horse. Help us to help him. Amen.”

“Amen,” said Jack. He was already reaching for the potatoes.

After supper, nobody wanted to leave the table. They talked about the horse.

“He needs a name,” Emma said.

Everyone thought hard.

“Smoky,” said Jack. “Because he’s grey. Like smoke.”

“Or Ash,” said Emma.

Mum looked out of the window. The wind had come up. Rain ran down the dark glass. It had rained all day, from the auction to the yard.

“He came to us out of the wind and the rain,” Mum said. “Out of a hard, grey day.”

Emma sat up. “Storm,” she said. “His name is Storm.”

Jack said it out loud. “Storm.” It felt right at once. “That’s it. That’s his name.”

Even Dad smiled. “Storm it is, then,” he said.

That night Jack could not sleep.

He lay in bed and listened to the rain on the window. He thought about Storm, alone in the dark stall. Was Storm afraid of the dark? Was he still shaking out there?

Jack wished he could make him brave. Emma was better at horses than he was. She was quiet, and horses liked quiet. Jack was not quiet. But he wanted to help too.

“You’re safe now, Storm,” he whispered into the dark. “Be brave.”

At last the house went still. Jack’s eyes closed.

Then — BANG.

Jack sat up straight. His heart jumped.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

It came from the yard. It was loud and hard, like something big kicking wood. A kick, then another kick, then another. The whole night shook with it.

Jack looked at his clock. It was nearly midnight. The house was dark and still. Everyone else was fast asleep.

For one second he thought about calling Dad. But there was no time. Storm needed someone now.

He did not wait. He grabbed his torch from beside his bed and ran.

Down the stairs he went, out the door, into the cold night in his pyjamas. The rain had stopped now. The stone of the yard was wet and cold under his bare feet. His torch made one small round light in the dark.



BANG. BANG.

It was Storm's stall.

Jack ran to it. He lifted his torch to the door.

The stall door was shaking. It banged and shook as Storm kicked it from inside, hard, again and again. Jack pointed his torch through the bars.

Storm stood in the middle of the stall. His eyes were huge and white. His sides went in and out, fast. And his grey coat was dark and wet all over — not from rain, but from sweat. Storm was soaked in sweat, from his neck right down to his legs.

"Storm!" Jack said. "Storm, what's wrong?"

But the frightened horse only kicked the door again, hard. And Jack, standing alone in the cold yard at midnight, did not know what to do at all.

Chapter 3 — Sophie's First Lesson

Emma woke to the banging too.

BANG. BANG. It came from the yard, loud and hard in the night.

She sat up in the dark. She knew that sound at once. A horse was kicking a door.

Her window looked down on the yard. She pulled the curtain back. Below her, a small round light moved in the dark. A torch. And a boy in pyjamas.

"Jack," Emma said.

She ran downstairs and out into the cold. The stone was hard under her bare feet.

Jack stood at Storm's stall. His face was white in the torchlight.

"Emma!" he said. "He won't stop. He kicks and kicks. And look — he's all wet."

Emma looked through the bars. Storm stood in the middle of the stall. His eyes were huge and white. His grey coat was dark with sweat. He kicked the door again, hard.

Emma's heart went fast. She wanted to open the door and go to him. But she did not. A frightened horse can hurt you without meaning to.

"We can't do this on our own," she said. "It's too big for us. Go and wake Dad."

For once, Jack did not argue. He turned and ran for the house.

Emma stood a little way from the door. She kept her voice soft.

"It's all right, Storm," she said. "We're here. Help is coming."

Soon there were feet on the path. Dad came out in his big coat. Behind him, Mum's light went on in the house.

"Good lad, Jack," Dad said. "You did right to come and get me."

Dad did not rush. He never rushed. He stood by the stall and spoke low and slow. He did not pick up a rope. He just let Storm hear his voice in the dark.

Little by little, the kicking stopped. Storm's sides still went in and out. But he stood still now.

"He had a bad fright," Dad said softly. "First night in a strange place. Come on, you two. Back to bed."

Emma looked back once. Storm watched her with one dark eye.

In the morning the yard was full of sun.

Emma went out before breakfast. Storm stood quiet in his stall, dry now. Some of his hay was gone. Not much. But some. That was good.

Mum came to look at him.

"He's calmer today," Emma said. "Why was he so scared last night?"

"A night fright," Mum said. "It happens. Think about it, Emma. Everything here is new to him. New stall. New sounds. New smells. He woke in the dark and did not know where he was."

"Will he do it again?" Emma asked.

"Maybe. But less and less." Mum smiled. "He'll learn this is home. It just takes time." Then she said, "Now — don't forget. Sophie is coming for her first lesson this morning. Will you help me teach her?"

Emma grinned. "Of course."

Sophie Turner came at ten o'clock.

Sophie was new in Millbrook. Her mum and dad ran the village shop now. She had lived in London all her life, and she had never been near a horse. This was her very first riding lesson.

She came in shiny pink boots, far too clean for a stable.

"Hello!" Sophie said. She talked very fast. "I'm so excited! Which one is mine? Is it hard? What do I do first? Do I just get on?"

Emma laughed. "One thing at a time," she said. "First, meet Biscuit."

Biscuit was the old brown pony. He was fat and slow and as safe as a sofa. Nothing in the world scared Biscuit.

"First you need a helmet," Emma said. "You never ride without a helmet. Never." She found one that fit and put it on Sophie's head.

The helmet slid down over Sophie's eyes.

"How do I look?" Sophie asked.

"Like a mushroom," said Jack.

Sophie pushed the helmet up and laughed.

"Now we groom him," Emma said. "Before you ride, you always groom your pony. You brush him clean."

She gave Sophie a soft brush. Sophie brushed Biscuit's fat side. Dust flew up in the sun. Biscuit half shut his eyes.

"He likes it!" Sophie said.

"He loves it," said Emma. "Brush his back too. It must be clean for the saddle."

Next Emma lifted the saddle. "Watch," she said. "Slow and soft. You put the saddle on his back, like this." She set it down gently and did up the strap under his tummy.

Then came the bridle. "This goes on his head," Emma said. "The bit goes in his mouth, behind his teeth. These long straps are the reins. You hold the reins to steer him."

Sophie tried to slip the bridle on. Biscuit opened his mouth and gave a big yawn. The bridle went half on, half off. Sophie giggled.

"He's helping!" she said.

At last Biscuit was ready — groomed, saddle on, bridle on.

"Now you get on," Emma said. "We use the mounting block. It's much easier."

Sophie climbed onto the mounting block. She put one foot in the stirrup. She wobbled. She hopped. Then, all at once, she was up.

"I'm on a horse!" Sophie shouted. "Emma, look! I'm on a horse!"

She sat as stiff as a board. She gripped the reins like the handle of a bike.

“Soft hands,” Emma said. “Sit up tall. Heels down. Let the reins be soft.”

Sophie tried. Slowly her back grew tall and her hands grew soft. Mum took the front and led Biscuit round the school at a walk. Sophie’s whole face was one big smile.



“I love this,” she said. “I love it. Can I come every day?”

Emma smiled. Sophie learned fast. One day she would be a real rider.

While Sophie rode round the school, Dad decided to move Storm to the paddock. The paddock was green and sunny. Fresh grass and space would do the horse good.

Dad opened the stall. With no rope, just his hand and his low voice, he walked Storm out into the yard. The horse stepped slowly. His ears turned this way and that.

Then Ben Fletcher came round the corner.

Ben was thirteen. He lived on the farm next door, and he could carry or fix almost anything. He had a rope over his shoulder.

"Dad says you want the grey one in the paddock," Ben said. "I'll give you a hand. I brought a rope."

"Ben, no!" Emma cried. "Drop the rope!"

But Storm had already seen it.

His head flew up. His eyes went white. And then he reared. Up he went, high, his front legs in the air. He came down and pulled back, hard, away from the rope. His feet clattered on the stone. For one moment he was almost loose.

"Whoa," Dad said, low and calm. "Whoa, now. Easy."

Ben dropped the rope and stepped back fast. Dad stayed close to Storm, quiet as a rock, until the horse stopped shaking. Then, slow and soft, he led him back into his stall.

The yard went quiet. Even Sophie had stopped, high on Biscuit's back.

"I'm sorry," Ben said. "I didn't know."

"You couldn't know," Dad said. But his face was serious now.

He looked at them all — Emma, Jack, Ben, Sophie.

"Listen to me," he said. "A horse this frightened is dangerous. Not because he is bad. Because he is scared. When he rears like that, someone can get hurt."

He turned and looked at Storm in the dark stall.

"We keep horses we can lead," Dad said. "That is the truth of it. The summer show is in six weeks. If we can't lead him safely by then — calm, on a rope, like any other horse — then Storm can't stay here. I'm sorry. But that's how it has to be."

Nobody spoke.

Emma looked at Storm through the bars. Six weeks. Six weeks to teach a horse that a rope could not hurt him.

And Dad's word stayed in her head. *Dangerous.*

Right now, nobody knew how.

Chapter 4 — Small Steps

Jack was not good at sitting still.

But that was the whole plan, and the plan was Emma's. Emma was clever about horses.

"No ropes," she said. "Not one. We don't touch him. We don't chase him. We just sit."

"And then what?" Jack asked.

"And then we wait. We let Storm come to us."

So there they were in the paddock, on two old buckets turned upside down. The morning was cool and grey. Patch the collie lay in the grass by the gate. And far off in the corner stood Storm, watching them with one dark eye.

It was slow. So slow.

Emma had a plan for the food too. She held out her hand, flat and open, with a piece of carrot on it. She did not push it at Storm. She just held it there and waited.

"Come on," she said softly. "Come and see."

Storm did not come. Not that day.

But the next day he took one step. Just one. Then he stopped and stared. Later, he took one more.

Jack counted every step. It was like watching grass grow.

Day by day, the small steps added up. By the end of the week Storm would come halfway across the paddock. He would stand a little way off and watch Emma's flat hand.

Then, one morning, it happened. Storm stretched out his nose and took the carrot right from her hand. His lips were soft as velvet. Up close, Emma saw a small dark mark on his forehead, like a little cloud. She did not move a muscle.



“Good boy,” she breathed. “Good, good boy.”

Jack was proud. He was also bored out of his mind.

“It’s too slow,” he said that evening. “The show is in five weeks now. Five! At this rate he’ll take a carrot by Christmas.”

“You can’t rush it,” Emma said. “You have to build trust. And trust is slow.”

“You sound like Dad,” Jack said.

The next morning Emma had to help Mum with Sophie’s lesson.

“Watch him for me,” she told Jack. “Just sit. Don’t do anything. Promise?”

“I know, I know,” Jack said.

But sitting alone was even harder than sitting with Emma.

Storm came closer, the way he did now. He took a piece of carrot from Jack’s hand. His warm breath tickled Jack’s fingers.

And Jack thought: he trusts me. He isn't scared of me at all. Maybe Emma is too careful. Maybe I could slip a rope on him, nice and easy, right now – and show everyone.

A lead rope hung on the paddock gate. Jack looked at it.

He knew he should not. He really did know. But five weeks was not long, and Jack always acted first and thought later.

He got up slowly. He took the rope off the gate and held it behind his back. One soft step at a time, he came to Storm.

“Easy,” he said, just like Dad. “Easy, boy. It’s only me.”

Storm took another bit of carrot. Jack lifted the rope, slow, slow, up toward the grey neck.

For half a second, nothing happened.

Then Storm saw the rope.

His head shot up. His eyes went white all round. He spun away so fast that his shoulder hit Jack in the chest. Jack flew back and landed flat in the wet mud.

He landed hard. For a moment he could not breathe.

By the time he sat up, Storm was in the far corner again, shaking, as far from the rope as he could get.

Jack was not hurt. He was just muddy, and out of breath, and stupid. The rope lay in the mud beside him.

Emma came running back across the yard.

“Jack! What happened? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Jack said. He looked at the rope in the mud. His face went hot.

Emma looked at the rope too. She did not say a word. She did not have to.

“I have to tell Dad,” Jack said.

“Yes,” said Emma. “You do.”

He could have said he slipped. He could have said a bird spooked the horse. But that would be a lie, and a lie would sit in his stomach like a cold stone. So Jack walked to the forge, muddy from head to foot, and told Dad the truth.

Dad put down his hammer and listened. He did not shout. He never shouted.

“You put a rope on him,” Dad said. “Behind Emma’s back. After everything I told you.”

“Yes,” Jack said. “I’m sorry, Dad. I thought he trusted me. I thought I could be quick.”

“And how is Storm now?”

Jack looked at his boots. “Scared. Back in the corner.”

Dad was quiet for a long moment.

“You didn’t just fall in the mud, Jack,” he said. “You set that horse back. A week, maybe more. He let a hand come near him. Then a hand brought a rope. Now he has to learn all over again.”

That was worse than any telling-off.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said again. And he meant it.

“I know you are,” Dad said. His voice was softer now. “And thank you for telling me straight. That wasn’t easy.” He wiped his hands. “But there’s a cost. You’ll muck out the whole yard on your own. Every stall. For a week.”

“On my own?” Jack said. Mucking out was the worst job of all. Emma always helped.

“On your own,” said Dad. “You had a fast idea. This is a slow lesson. Off you go.”

So Jack mucked out alone.

It was hard, dull work. Fork up the dirty straw. Push the heavy barrow. Lay down fresh straw. One stall, then the next, then the next.

But a strange thing happened while he worked. Jack learned to watch.

When your hands are busy and your mouth is shut, you see things you never saw before. Each time he pushed the barrow past the gate, Jack watched Storm out in the paddock.

Then, on the fourth day, he saw it.

It was a grey afternoon and the wind was up. It pulled at the trees and banged the barn door. A lead rope hung on the paddock gate, and the wind lifted it and made it flap and dance.

And far away, right at the other end of the paddock, Storm went still.

Not calm-still. Frozen. Every muscle hard as wood. His head was high, his ears locked forward, his eyes fixed on that one flapping rope.

Nobody was near him. Nobody was chasing him. No hand held the rope. It was only the wind and the gate.

But Storm stared at it like it was the most frightening thing in the world.

Jack put down his fork.

“Emma!” he called. “Emma, come here. Quick.”

Emma came. Jack pointed across the paddock.

“Look at him,” Jack said. “There’s nobody there. It’s only the wind. It’s only a rope on the gate. But look at his face.”

Emma looked for a long time. The wind flapped the rope again, and Storm flinched all down his body.

“You’re right,” she said slowly. Something changed in her eyes. “Jack, you’re right. It’s not us. It was never us.”

“What do you mean?”

“He isn’t afraid of people,” Emma said. “He takes food from our hands. He’s afraid of ropes. Just ropes, all on their own.”

The rope danced. Storm stood frozen by the far gate.

“But why?” Emma said softly. “Why would a horse be so scared of a rope? Something happened to him, Jack. Something with a rope. I’d give anything to know what.”

The wind blew. The rope flapped on the gate. And far across the paddock, Storm watched it, and did not move at all.

Chapter 5 — The Night Watch

Jack was still mucking out alone.

It was the last day of his week. His arms ached and his back hurt. But he did not mind so much now. While he worked, he watched. And lately there was something to watch.

Tomorrow the yard would be Emma's job again too. Jack could not wait. But he was glad about one thing. This hard, quiet week had taught him to watch. And a good watcher sees things that other people miss.

For three days, things in the yard were odd.

It started with the hay. Every morning Jack forked hay in the barn. And every morning some of it looked different. Pushed about. There was a soft dip in the pile, like a small bed.

At first Jack thought a pony had got loose in the night. But all the ponies were in their stalls. Nothing was missing. Only the hay was different.

"Did you move the hay?" he asked Emma.

"No," she said. "Why would I?"

"Something did," said Jack.

Then there were the noises. Late at night, when the yard was black, Jack heard sounds from the barn. Not loud. Not scary. Just small, soft noises in the dark.

He told Emma. The next night she heard them too.

"What do you think it is?" Jack asked.

"I don't know," said Emma. "But I want to find out."

"It's a secret," Jack whispered. "The barn is keeping a secret."

Emma loved a secret even more than Jack did.

"Then let's find out," she whispered back. "Let's keep a night watch."

At supper they asked. This was the important part. In the Hartley house, you did not sneak out in the dark. You asked.

“Mum, Dad,” Jack said. “Can we keep a night watch?”

Dad put down his fork. “A night watch,” he said slowly.

“From the kitchen window,” Emma said quickly. “We won’t go outside. We’ll just watch the barn. Something is in there, and we want to know what.”

Mum looked at Dad. Dad looked at Mum. Something passed between them, the way it did with parents.

“Please,” said Jack.

Dad rubbed his chin. He looked out at the dark yard.

“When I was a boy,” he said, “I kept a night watch once. A fox was after the hens.” He almost smiled. “A night watch is a fine thing. But you do it right.”

“All right,” said Dad. “But nobody goes out in the dark alone. I’ll watch with you. And Patch.”

“Yes!” said Jack.

“Hot chocolate?” asked Mum, smiling.

“Yes please!” said Jack and Emma at once.

So that night they kept their night watch.

Mum made hot chocolate in three big mugs. The kitchen was warm and yellow. Outside, the yard was dark and cold. Jack pulled a blanket round his shoulders. Emma had a blanket too. Patch the collie lay under the table with his nose on his paws.

They turned off the kitchen light. Now they could see out. The moon was up. It made the barn shine silver.

“Now we wait,” Emma whispered.

“You sound like Dad,” Jack whispered back. She grinned.

They drank their hot chocolate. It was hot and sweet. The steam went up soft in the dark kitchen. They waited. And waited.

Jack was not good at waiting. But this time it was different. This time it was fun.

An hour went by. Jack's eyes grew heavy. The mug was warm in his hands. Under the table, Patch let out a long, sleepy sigh.

"Maybe there's nothing," Jack whispered.

"Wait," said Emma.

"There," breathed Dad.

Something moved by the barn door.

Jack sat up straight. His heart went fast.

A small shape crossed the yard in the moonlight. It was low and quiet. It slipped through the gap in the barn door and was gone.

"A fox?" whispered Jack.

"No," whispered Emma. "Look at the tail."

The shape came out again for a moment. Jack saw it now. A round ginger tail, held up high.

"Marmalade!" he whispered.

Dad smiled in the dark. "So that's our secret," he said. "Come on. Quietly. Bring the torch."

They wrapped their blankets tight and went out. The yard was cold. The grass was wet with dew. Above them the stars were bright and sharp. Their breath made little clouds in the cold air. Nobody spoke. Patch came too, soft on his paws. Dad opened the barn door with no noise at all.

Marmalade sat in the hay. Her eyes shone green in the torchlight. And there, tucked into the soft dip in the pile — the very dip Jack had found each morning — lay four tiny kittens.

Four! Jack forgot to breathe.

They were very small. Their eyes were still shut. One was ginger like Marmalade. One was black. Two were black and white. They lay in a warm little heap and made soft, soft sounds.



“Kittens,” whispered Emma. “Four kittens.”

The smallest one opened its mouth and gave a tiny cry. It sounded like a squeaky door.

Jack laughed, very quietly.

“So that was it,” said Jack. “That was the soft noise. That was our monster in the barn. Kittens all along.”

Marmalade watched them, calm and proud.

“She made her bed in the hay,” Dad said softly. “Warm and safe. Clever cat.”

Jack wanted to pick one up. He knew he must not. Not yet. You must leave new kittens alone. But he crouched down and watched them for a long, happy time.

Marmalade began to wash the smallest kitten. Her rough tongue went over its tiny head, again and again. The kitten squeaked and pushed close to her warm side.

Then, in the quiet, a new sound came. Not from the barn. From the stable, across the yard.

It was Storm.

They went to his stall. Dad held the torch low and soft, so the light would not scare him.

Storm was lying down in his straw. His eyes were shut. He was fast asleep. But he was not still.

His legs moved. They kicked out, small and fast, like a dog that runs in its sleep. His breath came quick. And then he cried out – a low, sad sound, deep in his chest.

Jack had never heard a horse cry out like that. It was a small, lost sound. It did not belong to a big, strong horse at all.

“Is he hurt?” Jack whispered. He held Dad’s arm.

“No,” Dad said quietly. “He’s asleep. He’s dreaming.”

“A dream?” said Jack.

“A bad dream,” said Dad.

Storm’s legs kicked again. He cried out once more, soft and afraid. Then, slowly, he grew calm. His breath went slow. His legs went still. The bad dream let him go.

Nobody said a word.

Emma knelt down by the stall. She put her hand flat on the cold door and looked at the sleeping horse for a long time.

“Look at his legs,” she whispered. “He’s running in his dream. He’s running away from something. Something he remembers.”

Jack felt cold all down his back. It was not the night air. It was the thought of it. Something had frightened Storm so badly that he still ran from it in his sleep.

“So it’s real,” he whispered. “Whatever scares him. It really happened to him.”

Emma leaned close to the bars. Her voice was the softest whisper of all.

“What happened to you, Storm?” she said. “What happened?”

The horse slept on. Outside, the moon went behind a cloud. And behind them in the barn, four kittens lay warm in the hay, keeping their own soft secret safe.

Chapter 6 — The Name on the Paper

Emma could not stop thinking about the bad dream.

All week she thought about it. In class. In the yard. In bed at night. Storm had cried out in his sleep. His legs had kicked. Her own words came back to her again and again. *He's running away from something. Something he remembers.*

Something bad had happened to Storm. Something real. But what?

The summer show was four weeks away now. Only four weeks. And Storm still could not wear a rope.

"We have to find out his story," Emma said one morning, her voice low. "If we know what scared him, maybe we can help him."

Jack was forking hay into Pepper's stall. "But how?" he said. "He can't tell us."

Emma did not answer. She was thinking hard.

At the gate she stopped and looked at Storm in the paddock. He lifted his head and watched her. His grey coat was cleaner now. His eyes were softer than before.

"I wish you could talk," Emma said, in a soft voice. "I wish you could tell me what happened."

Storm blew air through his nose. He came two steps closer, then stopped. That was all he could give her. It was not enough.

That afternoon the answer came to her. Papers. Every horse at the auction came with a paper. Maybe Storm's paper could tell them something.

She found Dad in the tack room, cleaning a bridle.

"Dad," she said. "When you buy a horse, do you get a paper?"

Dad looked up. "A paper?"

"Papers about the horse," Emma said. "Where he came from. Who his old owner was."

Dad nodded slowly. “There was a paper,” he said. “Not much on it. But yes. It’s in the house, in the drawer.”

Emma’s heart jumped. “Can I see it?”

Dad wiped his hands. “Come on, then.”

They went into the house. Dad opened the kitchen drawer and dug about. He took out a thin, grey paper and gave it to her.

“Here,” he said. “Not much, like I told you.”

Emma held the paper carefully. It felt like a real clue.

But Dad was right. The paper was almost empty. Most of it was blank. There was no name for the horse. There was no name for the owner.

Emma’s heart sank. Empty. All this way, and the paper was empty.

Then she saw it.

At the bottom of the paper was a stamp. Blue ink, a little smudged. She held it up to the light.

“Greystone Farm,” she read.

“A stamp,” said Jack, leaning close.

“Greystone Farm,” Emma said again. It was the name of a place. The place Storm came from.

“Where’s that?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know,” said Emma. “But we can find out.”

They took the paper to Dad. He looked at the blue stamp for a long time.

“Greystone,” he said. “Yes. I know it. It’s a little village. Two villages over, past Miller’s Hill. Not far.”

Emma looked at the stamp again. Somewhere in that village, someone knew Storm. Someone knew why he was afraid.

At supper that night, Emma told them her plan.

“I want to go to Greystone Farm,” she said. “I want to find Storm’s old owner. If we find the owner, maybe we find his story.”

Mum put down her spoon. “That’s a good plan,” she said.

“You can’t go alone,” said Dad. “It’s too far to ride.”

“I’ll drive you,” said Mum. “Saturday morning. We’ll all go together.”

Jack cheered and nearly knocked over his milk.

“Somebody at Greystone will remember an old grey horse,” Dad said. “Ask kind questions. Be polite. And if there’s no one home, we come straight back. Is that a deal?”

“It’s a deal,” said Emma.

She could hardly wait for Saturday. At last there was a plan. At last they were doing something for Storm, and not just waiting.

“Real detectives always have a plan,” said Mum, smiling. “So make a good one.”

The next day Sophie came for her lesson on Biscuit. Emma told her everything — the paper, the stamp, and the name Greystone Farm.

Sophie’s eyes went wide. “So we’re going to find his owner?” she said. “Like real detectives?”

“Detectives?” said Jack.

“Yes!” said Sophie. “A horse with a secret. A missing owner. A stamp on an old paper. It’s a real mystery!” She grinned. “In London I read detective books all the time. And detectives always write things down. I’ll bring my notebook.”

“Your notebook?” said Emma.

“My best notebook,” said Sophie. “It’s from London. I’ve never even used it. It’s too nice for school.” She laughed. “But it’s perfect for a detective.”

Saturday came bright and clear. Mum drove them in the car. Sophie sat in the front with her notebook on her knees. Emma and Jack sat in the back.

They drove past Miller's Hill. They drove through one small village, then out again, along a narrow road with high green hedges.

"Are we detectives now?" Jack asked.

"We're detectives now," said Sophie. She opened her notebook and wrote the date at the top.

"Clue one," she said as she wrote. "A grey horse who is afraid of ropes." She looked up. "Clue two. An old paper with a stamp on it. Clue three. A farm we have never seen." She tapped her pen on the notebook. "That is how detectives do it. You write down what you know. Then you look for what you don't know."

Jack leaned over the seat. "You've got neat writing," he said.

"The best writing," said Sophie.

At last they came to another village. A church, a few stone houses, a little shop. A wooden sign by the road said GREYSTONE.

"This is it," said Mum. "Now, where is the farm?"

They stopped at the shop to ask. An old man behind the counter pointed down a lane. "Greystone Farm?" he said. "Right at the end. You can't miss it."

They drove down the lane. It was long and bumpy. Then they saw it.

Greystone Farm.

Emma knew at once that something was wrong.

The gate was locked. A heavy chain and a big lock held it shut. Behind the gate stood an old stone house. The windows were dark. No smoke came from the chimney. No dog barked. Nothing moved at all.

And the grass. The grass was everywhere. It grew long and wild in the yard, up past Emma's knees. Grass grew in the flower beds. Grass grew between the stones of the path. No one had cut this grass for a long, long time.



“It’s empty,” Emma said softly.

The farm was empty. No people. No animals. Only the wind in the long grass.

Sophie held her notebook, but she did not write. Even Jack was quiet.

“Nobody lives here,” Jack said. “Where did they all go?”

Emma looked through the locked gate at the dark, empty house. Her heart felt heavy. They had come all this way. And the farm was empty. The owner was gone. Storm’s story felt gone too.

She wrapped her fingers round the cold, locked chain.

Jack shook the gate. It did not move. The chain held it fast.

“What do we do now?” said Jack.

Nobody had an answer. The wind moved the long grass, soft and slow. Sophie shut her notebook. Even the detectives did not know what to do.

Then a voice spoke behind them.

“There’s been no one there for two years.”

They all spun round.

Chapter 7 — Greystone Farm

They all spun round.

An old woman stood behind them. She was small, with white hair and kind eyes. She wore green boots and held a basket of eggs. A fat brown hen walked by her feet.

Jack's heart was still banging from the fright. But the woman smiled, and he felt better.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I did not mean to scare you. I live in the next house, just there." She pointed down the lane. "I'm Mrs. Bell. I've been the neighbour here for forty years."

"We're the Hartleys," said Mum. She put a hand on Jack's shoulder. "I hope we're not doing anything wrong. We came to ask about the farm."

"You're doing nothing wrong, my dear," said Mrs. Bell. She looked at the locked gate and the long grass. Her smile went soft and sad. "There's been no one here for two years. Not since old Mr. Elliott went away."

"Mr. Elliott?" said Emma.

"The farmer," said Mrs. Bell. "He lived here all his life." She looked at the four of them, standing by the empty farm. "But why are you asking, my dears? What do you want with Greystone?"

Jack could not wait any longer. The words burst out of him.

"We've got his horse!" he said. "A grey one! He's afraid of ropes, and nobody wanted him, and Dad bought him for ten pounds, and we don't know why he's so scared!"

Mrs. Bell went very still.

"A grey horse," she said softly. "You have the grey horse."

"You know him?" said Emma.

Mrs. Bell did not answer that. Not yet. She looked at the children for a long moment. Then she smiled again.

“You’ve come a long way,” she said. “And it’s a warm day. Come to my house. I’ll make you some lemonade, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

Mrs. Bell’s house was small and warm. A cat slept on a chair. The kitchen smelled of fresh bread. She sat them all down at a big wooden table.

She poured cold lemonade into five glasses. Jack drank his fast. It was sweet and cold and good. The neighbour filled his glass again without a word.



“Now,” she said, sitting down. “The grey horse. And Mr. Elliott.”

The children leaned close. Sophie had her notebook open and her pen ready. Even Mum was quiet.

“Mr. Elliott lived at Greystone all his life,” said Mrs. Bell. “Nearly eighty years. As a boy he helped his father on the farm. Later he farmed it himself, all alone. But he was never really alone, you see. He had his horses.”

“His horses?” said Emma.

“He loved them more than anything,” said Mrs. Bell. “They were his family. He talked to them. He sang to them, out in the field, morning and night. A kind man. The kindest man I ever knew.”

Jack thought of Storm’s soft grey nose. He tried to picture an old man singing to him in a field.

“Then, two years ago, he got ill,” said Mrs. Bell. Her voice went quiet. “His legs. One day he could walk. The next, he could hardly stand. The doctor came and came again. But he could not farm any more. He could not even feed his own horses.”

“How ill?” Jack asked. “Did he get better?”

Mrs. Bell shook her head slowly. “No, my dear. When you are as old as Mr. Elliott, some things do not get better. His legs stayed bad. He is still ill now.” She looked down at her hands. “It came so fast. That is the sad part. One month he was out in the field with his horses. The next month he was gone.”

Jack looked out of the window at the empty house and the long, wild grass. It made him feel sad.

“What happened to him?” Emma asked softly.

“They took him to a care home,” said Mrs. Bell. “Fairview, it’s called. In the town. It’s a good place, with kind people to look after him. He’s still there now.”

“And the horses?” said Jack.

Mrs. Bell let out a long breath. “He could not keep them, poor man. A man who cannot walk cannot keep horses. So they sold them. Every one. They sold them all at the auction.” She shook her head slowly. “It broke his heart. Those horses were the only family he had.”

Jack felt something cold in his chest.

Storm. Storm had stood in that muddy auction field, thin and shaking. Nobody had wanted him. And two villages away, an old man sat in a care

home, missing him. All this time, Storm had an owner. An owner who loved him. An owner who never wanted to let him go.

“So Storm is one of his horses,” said Emma slowly. “Mr. Elliott is Storm’s owner.”

“Storm?” said Mrs. Bell.

“That’s his name now,” said Jack. “The grey horse. We call him Storm.”

Mrs. Bell smiled, but her eyes were bright and wet. “Storm,” she said. “Yes. That is a good name for a grey horse.”

For a moment nobody spoke. Sophie wrote fast in her notebook. Jack could hear the cat purring on the chair.

Then Mum spoke, in a gentle voice. “Mrs. Bell,” she said. “Do you think the children could visit him? At the care home?”

Mrs. Bell nodded slowly. “I think that would be a fine thing,” she said. “He gets few visitors, poor man. A visit would do him good. He would love to know that his grey horse is safe.”

Emma’s face lit up like a lamp.

“We’ll go,” she said. “We’ll visit him. Won’t we, Mum?”

“We can try,” said Mum, smiling. “If the care home says yes.”

Sophie put up her hand, like she was in school. “I have a question,” she said. “If Mr. Elliott loved his horses so much, why is Storm afraid of ropes? Mr. Elliott was kind. He would never hurt him.”

It was a good question. Jack had not thought of that. He looked at Mrs. Bell. But Mrs. Bell only shook her head. “That,” she said, “I cannot tell you. I don’t know the whole story. But he does. Mr. Elliott knows everything about that horse.”

She stood up and walked them to the door. The brown hen was still outside, pecking at the path. At the gate, the old woman took Emma’s hand. Her face was kind, but serious now.

“Go and see him,” she said. “It will mean the world to him. But be gentle, my dear.”

“Gentle?” said Emma.

“When you ask about the grey one,” said Mrs. Bell. She held Emma’s hand a little tighter. “He talks about all his old horses. Every one of them. He’ll tell you a hundred stories. But not the grey one.” Her eyes filled with tears. “He never talks about the grey one without tears.”

Then she let go, and stepped back, and gave them a small wave.

Nobody spoke on the way to the car. Jack climbed into the back seat and stared out at the long grass and the empty farm. Sophie held her notebook, but for once she did not write.

Jack thought about Storm, back home in his stall. He wished he could tell him. *We found your farm. We know your name now. And we’re going to find out the rest.* But horses could not understand words like that. All Jack could do was find the answer, and bring it home.

Jack looked at Emma. Emma looked at Jack.

Why? Jack thought. Why did the grey horse make the old man cry, when all the other horses did not?

He did not know. But now they had a name. Mr. Elliott. And a place — a care home called Fairview, in the town.

There was only one way to learn the rest.

They had to go and visit him.

Chapter 8 — Mr. Elliott's Story

Fairview care home stood at the end of a quiet street in town. It was a big white house with a green door.

Emma held her flowers tight in both hands. She had picked them that morning — yellow ones and white ones from the garden. Mum said flowers were a kind thing to bring.

“What if he doesn't want to see us?” Emma said.

“Then we say hello and leave the flowers,” said Mum. “I think he'll be glad.”

Jack pushed the doorbell. A kind woman in a blue dress opened it. Inside, the care home was warm and quiet. It smelled of soup and clean sheets.

“You've come to see Mr. Elliott?” she said, and smiled. “He'll like that. He doesn't get many visitors.”

She took them down a hall to a bright room. There, by the window, sat an old man in a big soft chair.

Mr. Elliott was small. His hair was white and his eyes were bright blue. His hands lay on his knees like two pieces of old leather. When he saw the children, his whole face lit up.

“Well!” he said. “Visitors! And young ones too. Come in, come in.”

Emma held out the flowers. “These are for you,” she said. “I picked them this morning.”

Mr. Elliott took the flowers in his old hands. He held them to his face and smelled them.

“Flowers,” he said softly. “Nobody has brought me flowers in years. Thank you, my dear.”

They sat down. Mum told him their names, and where they lived — Willow Creek Stables, in Millbrook.

“A stables!” said Mr. Elliott. His eyes went bright. “So you have horses.”

“Lots,” said Jack. “Ponies too. And a dog, and a cat, and four kittens.”

The old man laughed. He pulled a paper bag from his pocket. "Peppermint?" he said. "I always keep peppermints. I had horses all my life, out at Grey-stone Farm."

He talked with his hands, story after story. Emma could have listened all day.



But she remembered what Mrs. Bell had said. *Be gentle when you ask about the grey one.*

Emma took a breath.

"Mr. Elliott," she said. "We came to tell you something. About one of your horses." She paused. "The grey one."

The room went quiet.

Mr. Elliott went still. The bright light in his eyes went soft and far away.

"The grey one," he said.

"His name is Storm now," said Emma gently. "We have him. He's safe."

The old man did not speak. Emma was afraid she had said something wrong.

Then he said, "Tell me about him."

"He's grey, with little dapples," said Emma. "He's about eight. He was thin when we got him. But he's better now." She did not know how to say the next part.

Jack said it for her. "He's afraid of ropes," he said. "Really afraid. If a rope comes near him, he panics. Mrs. Bell said you were kind to your horses. So why is he so scared?"

Mr. Elliott closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were wet.

"Sit down," he said. "I'll tell you. I've never told a soul. But you look after him now. You should know."

"That grey horse was born on my farm," he began. "Right there in the barn, on a spring morning. His mother was my best mare. He was one of the last foals I ever had." He smiled a small, sad smile. "He was my favourite. My favourite little horse from the very first day. My favourite of all the horses I ever knew."

"He was clever. Brave. I sang to him in the field, morning and night. He knew all my songs." The old man's voice shook. "I was going to train him myself. The halter, the rope, the saddle — all of it. Slowly, the right way."

"But then I got ill," he said. "My legs. It came so fast. One month I was walking in the field. The next, I could hardly stand. So the young horse just stood there, season after season. He grew big and strong, but he learned nothing. Nobody put a halter on him. Nobody taught him that a rope was safe."

He looked out of the window. "Then came the night of the storm."

His voice went low.

"It was the worst storm in years. Wind and rain. Thunder all night long. I lay awake and heard the thunder, and I thought of my horses out in the field."

"In the dark, a great branch broke off the old tree. The heavy branch fell right on the rope fence. And the young horse stood there." He shut his eyes.

"The branch came down, and the ropes came with it. And he got tangled. Tangled in the ropes, in the dark, in the thunder."

"Oh," Emma whispered.

"He fought," said Mr. Elliott. "All night, he fought. The more he pulled, the more the ropes tangled round his legs. And me?" His hands shook. "I heard him crying out. But I could not walk out to free him. I tried to stand, and I fell. An old man on the floor — and his horse caught in the fence, with no way to reach him."

Nobody spoke. Emma felt tears on her own face.

"In the morning the storm passed," said Mr. Elliott. "Mr. Bell came from the next farm. He found the poor horse still tangled in the fence, and set him free. Hours, it had been. Hours in the ropes, alone and afraid." He wiped his eyes. "The ropes never hurt his body. But something in him broke that night. After that, a rope near him — any rope at all — and he was back in that storm."

He looked at Emma.

"Ropes, you see," he said quietly. "It was never people. He loved people. It was only the ropes. And I was too ill to teach him they were safe. That is the thing I could never forgive. I could not free him from it. I could not undo that one terrible night."

Emma wiped her face. "It wasn't your fault," she said. "You were ill. You couldn't help it."

"We're helping him now," said Jack. "Emma sits with him every day. He takes carrots from her hand. He's not so thin any more."

Mr. Elliott looked at them both. "And what did you say you call him?"

"Storm," said Emma.

The old man made a strange sound. It was half a laugh and half a cry. He laughed and cried at the same time, and tears ran down his old face.

"Storm," he said. "Storm! After the night of the storm. You named him right, my dears. You named him right, and you didn't even know."

He laughed and cried, and Emma laughed and cried too, and even Mum wiped her eyes.

Then Mr. Elliott took Emma's hand. It was warm and dry, like old leather.

"Will you do one thing for me?" he said.

"Anything," said Emma.

"When you work with him, sing to him," said Mr. Elliott. "I always sang while I worked. He liked that. Sing him a song. Any song at all. He'll feel safe. It's the only thing I have left to give him."

"I will," said Emma. "I promise. I'll sing to him every day."

"A promise is a promise," said the old man, and he patted her hand.

They stayed longer. Mr. Elliott told them more about the grey horse. He loved apples. He would follow you round the field like a big grey dog. Emma kept every word like a gift.

At last Mum said it was time to go. Mr. Elliott looked tired but happy. He held his flowers on his lap.

"Come again," he said. "Come and tell me how he's doing. Promise me that."

"We promise," said Emma.

And then Jack, who could never hold anything in, said the thing that made Emma's heart stop.

"Come to the village show!" said Jack. "It's in three weeks! Storm will be there — you can see him! You have to come!"

The room went quiet.

Mr. Elliott's eyes lit up like two small candles. "The show," he breathed. "I could see my grey horse again..."

"Yes!" said Jack. "It's a promise!"

Emma opened her mouth. No words came out.

Because in three weeks, Storm had to walk on a lead rope. Right through the show, in front of the whole crowd.

And right now, Storm still could not wear a halter. He could not have a rope anywhere near him.

Jack had made a promise to a kind old man. And Emma had no idea how they would keep it.

Chapter 9 — The Song That Worked

Jack could not stop talking about Mr. Elliott.

“He sang to Storm,” he told Dad at breakfast. “Every day. Morning and night. That’s the secret. We have to sing.”

Dad put down his tea. “Sing,” he said.

“Sing,” said Emma. “Mr. Elliott said it made Storm feel safe.”

Dad looked at them for a long time. Then he nodded.

“Three weeks,” he said. “That’s all we have. If Storm can walk on a rope by the show, he stays. If not...” He did not finish. He did not need to.

“He’ll do it,” said Jack.

So that afternoon, Emma began to sing.

It was terrible.

Emma could not sing at all. She sang an old song about a boat, and every note was wrong. Jack put his hands over his ears.

“You sound like Patch when he steps on a thorn,” he said.

“Be quiet,” said Emma. But she went pink and laughed.

Then something strange happened. Storm was far away in the paddock. But when Emma sang, his grey ears turned. Both ears, right at her. He lifted his head. He looked.

“Look at his ears,” Jack whispered.

Emma kept singing her terrible song. And Storm took one step closer. Then another. He walked all the way across the paddock, straight to Emma, and stood in front of her.

Then the big grey horse let out a long, slow breath. He breathed out through his nose, soft and warm.

“He remembers,” Emma said. Her eyes were wet. “Jack, he remembers the songs.”

After that, they sang every day. Emma sang, and Storm came. His ears turned, he breathed out, and he followed her round the paddock like a big grey dog, just as Mr. Elliott had said.

But singing was only the start. Now came the hard part.

The next step was cloth. Just a soft cloth — an old grey rag, no rope at all. Emma sang. She held the cloth flat on her hand. Storm smelled it. He jumped back. Emma waited. She sang again. Day by day, Storm let the cloth come closer.

At the end of the week, Emma laid the soft cloth on his neck. It sat there, light as a leaf. Storm shook, but he did not run. He breathed out.



“Good boy,” said Emma softly. “Good, brave boy. Just breathe.”

And Storm did. He let his warm breath out, slow and long, and the fear went out of him with it. Jack watched his sister sing to the big grey neck, and he thought he had never seen anything so patient in his life.

Jack wanted to rush. He always wanted to rush. His hands wanted to grab the halter and get it over with.

“Slow,” Emma kept saying. “Slow, Jack. We can’t push him.”

It was the hardest thing Jack had ever done. To stand still. To wait. To move so slowly it hurt.

But he did it. Every afternoon, Jack sat on the bucket beside his sister. He learned to move one inch at a time. He learned to be patient.

One evening Dad watched them from the gate. Jack held out a carrot and waited, still as a stone, while Storm made up his mind.

“Well,” said Dad, and he rubbed his chin. “I never thought I’d see it. Jack Hartley, being patient.”

Jack grinned. But he did not move. He kept still, and he kept his voice low, and Storm took the carrot from his hand.

Then Jack tried to sing too.

That was a mistake. Jack sang even worse than Emma. Storm’s ears went flat and he backed away fast.

“Stop!” laughed Emma. “You’ll scare him back to Greystone!”

“Fine,” said Jack. “You sing. I’ll be patient. That’s the deal.”

Meanwhile, Sophie came for her lessons three times a week. Her riding was growing too.

“Watch this!” she called one morning. She sat up tall on old Biscuit. Mum stood in the middle of the school.

“Squeeze,” said Mum. “Sit up. And... trot on.”

Biscuit began to trot. It was slow and bouncy. Sophie went up and down like a jumping bean. Her helmet slipped over her eyes.

“I’m trotting!” she shouted. “Look at me! I’m actually trotting!”

“You’re brilliant,” Jack called. “Now steer! Steer, Sophie!”

Sophie and Biscuit trotted right through a puddle and stopped by the gate. Sophie was laughing so hard she nearly fell off.

“That,” she said, “was the best thing I have ever done.”

The days went by. Two weeks now, until the show.

Storm let the soft cloth rest on his neck. Then, at last, the halter. Emma held it low. She sang. She slipped it over his nose, so gently, and did up the strap. Storm stood and shook and breathed. But the halter stayed on.

“He’s wearing it,” Jack breathed. “Emma, he’s wearing the halter!”

Last of all came the rope.

Emma clipped a soft lead rope to the halter. She did not pull. She let it hang loose, down to the ground. A loose rope, going nowhere. Storm looked at it. His whole body went stiff.

“Easy,” Emma sang. “Easy now. It’s only a rope. A nice, loose rope.”

For three days the rope just hung there, loose and quiet. Then Storm took a step, and the loose rope came with him, and nothing bad happened. He took another step. Emma walked, and Storm walked beside her, the rope soft in her hand.

Dad watched, and he did not say a word. But he took off his cap and held it against his chest.

That night, Jack lay in bed. Through the thin wall, he heard Emma. She was saying her prayers, soft and low, the way she always did.

He heard the end of it.

“...and please help Storm,” Emma said. “He’s been so brave. Help him not to be afraid any more. Amen.”

Jack smiled in the dark. Then he shut his eyes and went to sleep.

Ten days to the show. Nine. Eight.

Every day Storm walked on the loose rope, a little further, a little braver. Emma sang her terrible songs. Storm’s ears turned to her, and he breathed out, and he followed. He was going to do it. Jack was sure of it now. They were going to keep Jack’s promise to the old man.

Then, one grey afternoon, everything went wrong.

Jack heard it first — a big engine, rattling up the lane. A delivery lorry turned into the yard. It was bringing the new load of hay for the show.

The lorry was old and loud. And on its back, tied over the load, were ropes. The wind caught them. The ropes came loose. They began to flap.

Jack turned cold.

“Emma,” he said. “Emma, the ropes.”

Storm stood by the paddock gate. His head shot up. His eyes went white at the edges. He saw the ropes flapping in the wind — flap, flap, flap — and Jack knew, in one terrible second, what the horse was seeing.

The storm. The branch. The night in the ropes.

Storm reared. He went straight up, huge and grey against the sky, and he screamed.

His front feet came down hard on the gate. The catch broke. The paddock gate swung wide open.

And Storm was through it.

He came out of the gate like a grey wind. His feet hit the yard, then the lane. He was in a full gallop, ropes and hay and children all behind him, and he was heading straight for the open road.

“STORM!” Jack shouted. “STORM, NO!”

But the grey horse did not stop. He galloped down the lane, faster and faster, toward the road, toward the cars — and nobody could catch him.

Chapter 10 — The Open Gate

Storm was on the road.

Emma ran down the lane after him. Her heart banged. The grey horse was a fast shape against the green hedges. His hooves hit the hard road. Too fast. Way too fast.

“Storm!” Jack shouted. “Storm, come back!”

He started to run past Emma. She caught his arm.

“Don’t chase him!” she said. “Jack, stop. Don’t chase.”

Jack pulled against her. His face was white. “We can’t just let him go!”

“If we chase him, he runs faster.” Emma held on tight. “He’s not running from us. He’s running from the ropes. We can’t chase the fear away. We have to be calm.”

It was the hardest thing she had ever said. Everything in her wanted to run and grab him. But she knew Storm. Chasing would only make it worse.

Jack stopped pulling. “Okay,” he breathed. “Okay. Calm.”

Then Emma saw Dad.

Dad was already in the truck. The old green trailer stood hitched behind it, still there from the hay. Dad drove down the lane, quick but calm, and swung across the bottom of the road. The truck and the trailer blocked the way like a wall.

Storm slowed. The trailer blocked his path. He turned in a wide, frightened circle, ears back, sides heaving.

“Now,” said Dad, out of the truck window. His voice was low and slow. “Nice and easy. Nobody move fast.”

Emma’s legs shook. But she started to walk. Not straight at Storm — she walked slowly, the way she always did in the paddock. She kept her hands soft and open.

And then she sang.

Her voice came out thin and shaky. It was the old boat song, the same terrible one, every note wrong. But she sang it anyway, soft and low, the way she did every morning.

Storm's ears turned.

Both grey ears, right at her. He stopped circling. He stood on the road, shaking, his breath coming fast. But he was listening.

"That's it," Emma sang, into the tune. "It's only me. It's only your song."

She held out her flat hand. She took one step, then another. She did not hurry. She just sang.

The whole world went quiet. Even the wind seemed to wait.

Storm took a step toward her.

Then another.

And then the big grey horse walked across the road, straight to Emma, and pushed his warm nose into her hand. She could feel him shaking. But he had come. He remembered her song, and he had come back to her.



“Good boy,” Emma whispered. Her eyes were wet. “Good, brave boy. I’ve got you.”

She laid her hand on his neck. Very slowly, she took hold of the loose rope. Storm let her. He breathed out, long and slow, and the fear went out of him.

Dad came up behind, quiet as a shadow. “Well,” he said softly. “Would you look at that.”

Then Emma saw the blood.

There was a cut on Storm’s front leg. A long red line, just above the hoof. Blood dripped onto the road.

“He’s hurt,” Emma said. Her voice went tight. “Dad, he’s got a cut.”

Dad knelt down. He looked, but he did not touch. “The gate, most like. When he broke through.” He stood up. “It’s not deep. But we’ll call the vet, to be safe.”

They walked Storm home together, slowly. Emma sang the whole way. Storm limped a little, but he stayed beside her, the loose rope soft in her hand.

The vet came that afternoon. Her name was Miss Okafor, and she had kind hands. Storm did not like the stranger at first. So Emma stood at his head and sang, and Jack held a bucket of feed, and Storm let the vet look at the cut.

“A clean cut,” said the vet. “Not deep. He’s a lucky horse.” She washed it and wound a white bandage round his leg, neat and tidy. “Keep the bandage clean and dry. Change it every day. And he needs rest. No work, no walking far. Just rest, for a week or so.”

“Rest,” said Emma. She looked at the white bandage. Then she counted the days in her head.

The show was in six days.

That night, nobody said much at supper. Dad said grace, and they ate. But Emma kept thinking about the bandage and the six days.

At last she said it. “He can’t do the show now. Can he?”

Nobody answered.

“The vet said rest,” said Jack. He pushed his peas around his plate. “No work. No walking far.”

“And he’s still scared of ropes,” Emma said. “One flap of a rope and he’s gone. We all saw it.” She put down her fork. “Maybe the whole show was a silly idea. Maybe we should just give up.”

The words sat there on the table. Give up.

Mum put down her cup.

“Emma,” she said. “Look at me.”

Emma looked up.

“What was the show ever for?” Mum asked. Her voice was gentle. “A rosette? A ribbon on the wall? None of that matters.” She reached across and took Emma’s hand. “The show doesn’t matter. Storm matters. Every creature needs someone who doesn’t give up on it. That’s the whole thing.”

Emma thought of Storm in the last pen at the auction. The horse nobody wanted. The horse Dad had not walked away from.

“Dad said something like that,” she said slowly. “At the auction. Every creature needs a chance.”

“He did,” said Mum, and she smiled. “And you gave Storm one. You didn’t give up on him. Don’t start now.”

Emma felt something warm rise up in her. She was not going to give up. Not on Storm.

“Then what do we do?” said Jack. “He can’t be in a class. He can’t jump. He can’t even trot.”

Emma sat up. An idea was growing.

“He doesn’t have to be in a class,” she said. “He doesn’t have to win anything. What if we just... walk him?”

They all looked at her.

“The show is here in the village,” Emma said, faster now. “It’s only down the road. We don’t need the trailer. We could walk him there, on the loose rope. Right through the village. Right through the crowd.”

“With all those people?” said Jack. “All that noise?”

“His leg has to heal first. We’ll ask the vet,” Emma said. “But the village is close. A short, slow walk.” She looked round the table. “He doesn’t need a rosette. Just to walk through the crowd, calm — for Storm, that’s the biggest thing in the world. That would be his victory.”

Dad was quiet for a moment. Then a slow smile.

“A quiet victory,” he said. “No prize. Just a horse who walks through his own fear.” He nodded. “I like it.”

The next day, Dad phoned the vet. A short, slow walk would be fine, she said, if the cut healed well. So that was that. Storm was going to the show — his own way.

“There’s one more thing,” said Emma. “Mr. Elliott. We have to ask him to come. We promised.”

“Jack promised,” said Mum, with a look at Jack.

Jack went a bit pink. “I did,” he said. “I told him Storm would be at the show.”

“Then let’s ask him properly,” said Mum. “Write him a letter.”

So that evening they wrote a letter to Fairview care home. Emma wrote it out in her best hand. She wrote that Storm was well now, and brave, and that he would walk in the village show on Saturday. Jack drew a small grey horse in the corner. At the bottom Emma wrote: *Please come. We would love to see you.*

Dad put a stamp on the letter, and in the morning they posted it at Sophie’s shop.

Then they waited.

Three days later, the reply came. Sophie was at the yard for her lesson when the post arrived. Mum walked across the yard with a letter in her hand. A letter from Fairview.

“Open it,” said Jack. “Open it, Mum!”

Mum opened the letter and read it. Then she smiled.

“He’s coming,” she said. “Mr. Elliott is coming to the show.”

Jack cheered. Emma’s heart jumped. Out in the paddock Storm lifted his head at the noise, his white bandage bright in the afternoon sun.

Then Sophie said the thing that no one had thought of.

She was looking at Storm across the yard. “Wait,” she said slowly. “It’s been two years. Two whole years since Mr. Elliott last saw him.” She turned to Emma. “Will Storm even remember him?”

Emma opened her mouth. Then she shut it again.

Because nobody knew.

Chapter 11 — Show Day

Saturday came at last. Show day.

Jack woke before the sun. He jumped out of bed and looked out of the window. The sky was blue. Not one cloud. It was a perfect day for the Millbrook show.

Down on the village green, everyone was busy already. Men put up white tents. Someone hung long lines of bunting between the trees. The little flags were red and blue and yellow. They flapped in the soft wind.

There was a cake tent and a tea tent. In the middle of the green was a big ring for the pony games. Ben Fletcher was there, carrying poles. He was strong as ever.

“Morning!” Ben called. “I’m helping the steward today. Come and set up the flags for the race?”

Jack ran to help. Together they put six flags around the ring, one at each turn. Jack could hardly wait. The flag race was his best game in the whole show.

By ten o’clock the green was full. A big crowd walked between the tents. Children ate cake. Dogs barked. Ponies whinnied. It was the biggest crowd Jack had ever seen in Millbrook.

Sophie found them by the ring. She wore her helmet and her shiny pink boots. Old Biscuit stood beside her, brushed until he shone.

“I feel sick,” Sophie said. “Jack, I really feel sick.”

“You’ll be fine,” Jack said. “Biscuit could do this in his sleep.”

Sophie’s class was first. It was a beginner class, for riders in their very first year. Six children rode round the ring on their ponies. The crowd clapped. Sophie sat up tall on Biscuit. She had come a long way from her stiff first lesson.

The judge was a lady in a green coat. She watched every rider. She looked at their hands, their backs, and the way they turned. Then she called them all into the middle.

Jack held his breath.

“Third place,” the judge said, “goes to Sophie Turner, on Biscuit.”

Sophie’s mouth fell open. Then she whooped. She whooped like she had won a gold cup at a great show. The judge pinned a rosette on Biscuit’s bridle. It was a bright rosette with a long tail, for third place.

“Third place!” Sophie shouted, riding out. “Jack, I got a rosette! Look! Third place!”

“You’d think she won the whole show,” Jack said to Ben. But he was grinning. Sophie waved her rosette at the crowd, and the crowd smiled back.

Then it was time for the flag race.

Jack rode Pepper into the ring. Pepper was quick and clever, his favourite pony in the world. Four other children lined up beside them. Jack gathered his reins and leaned forward.

“Steady,” he told himself. “Wait for it.” A year ago he would have gone too soon. Not now. Storm had taught him to wait.

The whistle blew.

Pepper shot forward. Jack leaned low over his neck. He grabbed the first flag, swung round the turn, and dropped it in the bucket. One. He was fast, but he was not wild. Two. Three. The crowd was shouting now, but Jack only heard Pepper’s hooves.

He grabbed the last flag and flew over the line first.

“And the flag race goes to Jack Hartley, on Pepper!” called the steward.

The crowd cheered. Jack lifted the flag high. His face was hot and happy. Ben thumped him on the back.

But the best part of the day had not come yet.

At midday, Dad found Jack by the ring. “It’s time,” Dad said. “Go and help your sister.”

Jack's heart began to beat fast. This was the real thing. This was why they had come.

Emma was waiting at the top of the lane with Storm. The bandage was off now. The cut had healed to a small grey line, and the vet had said a short walk was fine. Storm stood tall and calm. His coat was brushed until the dapples shone. He looked nothing like the thin, shaking horse from the auction.

"Ready?" Emma asked. Her hand held the lead rope — loose and soft, the way Storm liked it.

"Ready," said Jack.

They walked him down toward the green. Toward the crowd. Toward all that noise.

Jack watched Storm's ears. If Storm was going to be afraid, it would be now. But Emma began to hum.

It was the old boat song, the terrible one, but soft and low, just under her breath. She did not sing it out loud in front of all those people. She only hummed. Storm's grey ears turned back to listen. He breathed out, long and slow.

He walked into the crowd like a king.

People stepped back to let him through. They went quiet. A big grey horse, walking slow and proud on a loose rope, with a girl humming beside him. Nobody had to be told the story. You could see it.

"That's the horse nobody wanted," someone whispered.

"Look at him now," said someone else.

Jack walked on Storm's other side, ready to help. But Storm did not need help. He walked past the tents. He walked past the bunting and the flapping flags. He did not shake at all. Emma just kept humming.

Dad stood at the edge of the crowd. He did not say a word. But he took off his cap and held it against his chest. Jack knew what that meant. Storm was

leading, safe on a rope, right through the middle of the village. The thing Dad had asked for, all those weeks ago, had come true.

Then Jack saw the gate.

By the gate, in the shade of the big tree, sat an old man in a wheelchair. Small. White hair. A blanket over his knees.

“Mr. Elliott,” Jack breathed.

Emma stopped humming. Storm stopped walking.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Storm stood still in the middle of the green. His head came up. His ears went forward. His nostrils opened wide, and he took a long breath of the air.

Jack held his breath too. Two years. Would Storm remember? Nobody knew.

Mr. Elliott leaned forward in his wheelchair. His old hands shook. Then, in his soft cracked voice, he began to sing. The same song. The song from the field. The song Emma had hummed all wrong for weeks.

Storm’s whole body changed.

He gave a deep, happy whinny. It was a great sound, from deep in his chest. Then he walked straight to the old man. The crowd made way. Emma let the rope run soft through her fingers.

Storm dropped his head. He rested his warm nose on Mr. Elliott’s shoulder, gentle as anything. And he stood there, and he breathed.

Mr. Elliott put his arms around the grey neck. He laid his cheek against the warm shoulder.

“There you are,” he said. “There you are, my boy.”

He was crying. So was Emma. Jack’s own eyes were hot and wet. When he looked around, half the crowd was wiping their faces too. There was not a dry eye at the whole show.



Storm remembered. Of course he remembered. Some things you never forget.

At last Mr. Elliott lifted his head. He kept one hand on Storm's neck. With the other, he reached into his coat.

"You children gave me back my horse," he said. "So now I have something for you." He drew out an old photo. It was soft and worn at the edges. His blue eyes were shining.

"There's something I never told you," he said.

And he turned the photo round for them to see.

Chapter 12 — Where Storm Belongs

Emma looked at the photo.

It was old and soft, worn thin at the edges. A man stood in the middle of it. He was younger than the Mr. Elliott in the wheelchair. He stood tall and straight, on his own two legs, in a green field. He was smiling.

But Emma did not look at the man for long.

On each side of him stood a foal. Two little grey foals. They had the same soft ears. They had the same long legs. They had the same dark, wise eyes. They were alike as two drops of water.

“Two foals,” Emma said softly.

“Twins,” said Mr. Elliott. “Real twins. My best mare had them both, one spring, and that almost never happens. A gift from God, I always said.”

Emma looked from the photo to Storm. The foal on the left had a small dark mark on his face, like a little cloud. She knew that mark. She had brushed it a hundred times.

“This one is Storm,” she said.

“Yes.” The old hand shook as it pointed. “And this one, here, is his sister. Her name is Misty.”

Emma stared. Storm had a sister.

“A sister?” said Jack. “Storm has a sister?”

“He did.” Mr. Elliott was quiet for a moment. “They grew up in my top field. Two grey shadows, always side by side. You never saw one without the other.”

“Where is she now?” Emma asked.

The old man shook his head slowly. “The hard years came. I could not keep them all. A dealer came to the farm one autumn.” He looked at the children. “A dealer buys young horses and sells them on. He bought Misty as a foal and took her away in his lorry.”

Emma’s heart hurt. “You had to sell her?”

"I had no choice, child. I stood at the gate and watched them go. Storm called and called after her." Mr. Elliott's voice went low. "I never saw Misty again."

"But where did the dealer take her?" said Emma.

"I never knew. A dealer does not write to tell you. He buys, he sells, he moves on." Mr. Elliott's blue eyes went far away. "Somewhere out there is a grey mare called Misty. Storm's own twin sister. But the world is wide, and that was years ago."

Emma held the photo close. It did not feel finished. It felt like a door left open.

"Could we find her?" she said. "Could we look?"

Mr. Elliott smiled his soft, tired smile. "Perhaps. Perhaps some things you only find when you are not looking." He patted Storm's grey neck. "You found this one, didn't you? And nobody was looking for him at all."

The next day was Sunday.

The Hartleys walked to the little stone church, the way they did every week. Emma liked the church. It was small and old and cool inside. The bells rang out across the green. After the show and all its noise, it was good to sit still.

Emma did not hear every word. She thought about Storm. She thought about the walk through the crowd, and the old man's song, and the two grey foals in the photo. So much had happened in six short weeks.

When it was time to say thank you, Emma said thank you too. She was thankful for Storm. She was thankful he had somewhere to belong now.

After church, there was a big lunch at Willow Creek. Mr. Elliott came too. He was the guest of honour. Dad had driven to Fairview and fetched him, wheelchair and all, and set him at the head of the long table.

Mum had cooked all morning. There was chicken and potatoes and warm bread. There was apple cake for after. The kitchen smelled wonderful.

Sophie came with her mum and dad from the shop. Ben came from the farm next door. Patch lay under the table, hoping for scraps. It was a full, warm, happy table.

Before they ate, everyone went quiet. Dad said grace, the way he always did. “Thank you for this food,” Dad said. “Thank you for good friends round our table. And thank you for the grey horse — and for the man who loved him first.”

“Amen,” said Mr. Elliott, and his voice was not quite steady.

Emma felt thankful, right down to her toes. Then everyone talked at once, and passed the potatoes, and the quiet moment turned warm again.

Mr. Elliott ate well. He told horse stories all through lunch. He gave Jack a peppermint from the paper bag in his pocket, and one to Sophie, and one to Emma. His pockets always had peppermints.

“And how are the kittens?” he asked.

“Their eyes are open now,” Emma said. “All four of them.”

“The ginger one is mine,” said Sophie quickly. “Mum said yes at last. And Ben is taking one for the farm.”

“Good homes,” said Mr. Elliott, nodding. “Every small thing needs a good home.”

Sophie leaned across the table. She had her London notebook with her, the one she used for clues.

“I wrote a new page last night,” she said. She turned it round to show them. At the top, in big letters, it said one word: MISTY.

“You never know,” said Sophie. “Detectives find people. Maybe we can find a horse.”

Emma looked at the word. She did not say anything. But something small and bright lit up inside her.

After lunch, Emma pushed the wheelchair out to the paddock. The others came too. The afternoon was soft and golden.

Storm stood in the paddock with the ponies. He was grazing, pulling at the green grass, his tail swishing at the flies. Daisy grazed on one side of him. Pepper grazed on the other. Old Biscuit dozed in the sun.

Storm lifted his head when he heard them. He walked to the gate, easy and calm, and he did not shake at all. He put his nose over the top bar to say hello.

“Look at him,” Mr. Elliott said softly. “He grazes with the others like he has always been here.”

“He belongs now,” Emma said.

“He does.” The old man reached up and stroked the grey nose. “This is where Storm belongs.”

Dad came and stood beside them. “You should come every Sunday, Mr. Elliott,” he said. “Lunch, and then out to see the horses. There is always a chair for you at our table.”

Mr. Elliott’s eyes filled up. “I would like that,” he said. “I would like that more than anything.”

And so it began. Every week, the grandad of the yard would come to Willow Creek.

Later, when everyone had gone home and the evening came, Emma sat on the paddock gate on her own. Storm grazed nearby. The sky turned pink and gold behind the hills.



Emma thought about next spring. Storm was strong now, and calm, and brave. Next spring, when the days grew long, she would put a saddle on his back for the very first time. His first saddle. She would do it the way he liked — slow, and soft, and gentle. She could already see it. One day, with the saddle on, she would climb up and ride him.

Storm lifted his head and looked at her. Then he went back to his grass.

“You’re home,” Emma told him. “You’re really home.”

But she thought about the photo too. Two grey foals, side by side, alike as two drops of water. Somewhere in the wide world was a mare called Misty — Storm’s own sister — and nobody knew where.

Some things you only find when you are not looking.

Emma smiled in the last of the light. Perhaps, one day, they would find Misty too.