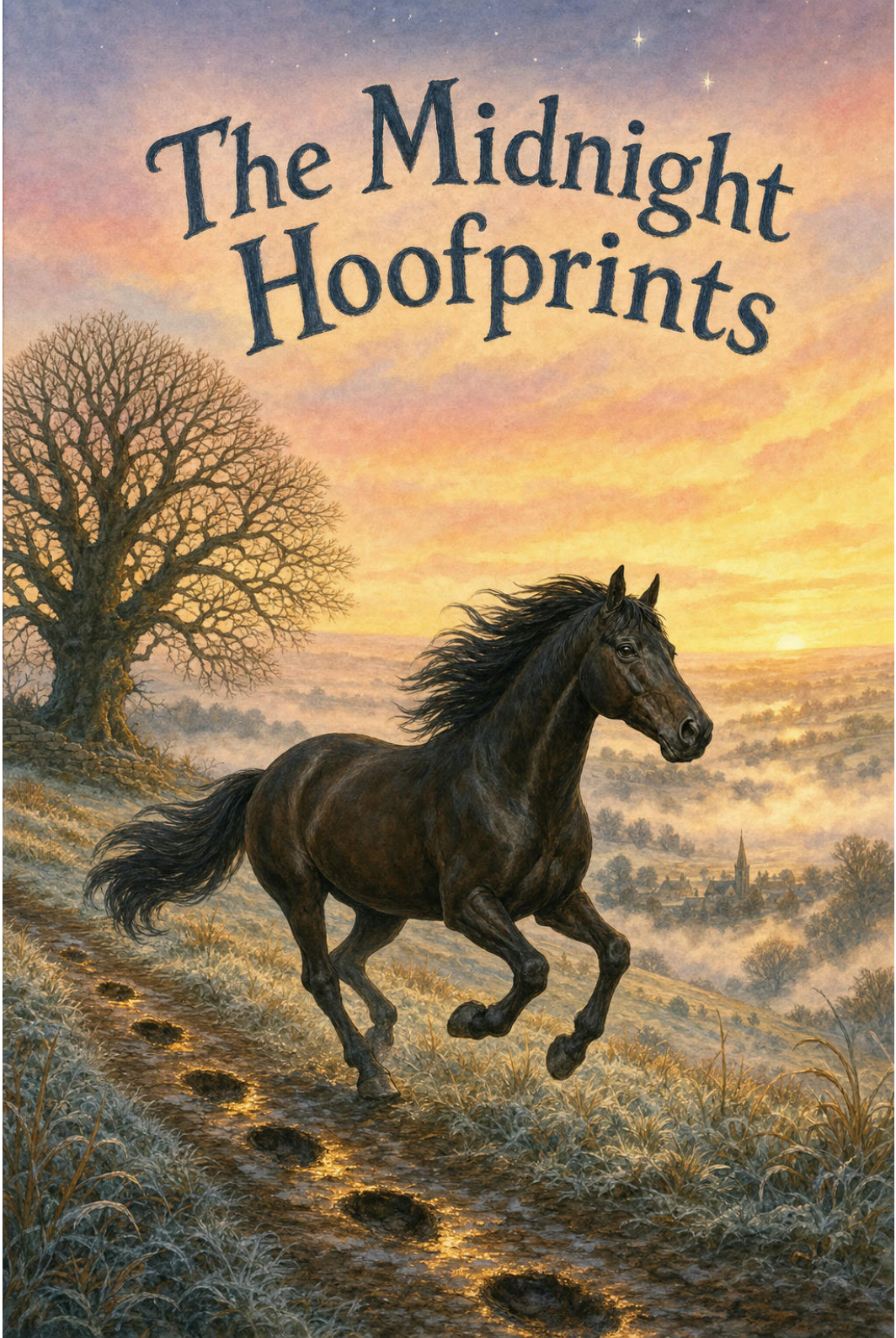

The Midnight Hoofprints

Contents

About This Book 2
About the Story 3
Chapter 1 — The Prints Come Back 4
Chapter 2 — Reading the Ground 9
Chapter 3 — What the Rain Told Them 15
Chapter 4 — First Light 21
Chapter 5 — The Horse at First Light 27
Chapter 6 — The Man at Highfield 33
Chapter 7 — An Invitation 39
Chapter 8 — Sheep on the Lane 45
Chapter 9 — The Latch Thief 51
Chapter 10 — The Wrong Grey Mare 57
Chapter 11 — New Shoes at First Light 63
Chapter 12 — Two Old Horsemen 69
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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 16,900 words

Edition

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Version	Date	Notes
1.0	July 2026	First edition
1.1	August 2026	Language corrections
1.2	September 2026	Illustration corrections.

About the Story

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

Every morning, fresh hoofprints appear on Miller's Hill. Big ones. Deep ones. A huge horse in iron shoes — out in the dark, all on his own. But none of the Willow Creek horses is that big, and none of them is shod.

Where does the horse come from? Who does he go home to? And why does no one ever see him — only his deep tracks in the morning mud?

Emma, Jack, Ben and Sophie mean to find out. It will take a clever trick with the rain, a cold watch at first light, and the courage to knock on a stranger's door. But some secrets are kept for a reason — and a few can only be solved with kindness. Can the friends reach the horse before his morning runs lead to trouble?

Chapter 1 — The Prints Come Back

The frost came in the night.

Emma opened the back door and stopped on the step. The whole yard was white. Frost lay on the gate. Frost lay on the fence posts and on every blade of grass. It was the first real frost of the autumn. Her breath came out in a small white cloud.

"October," she said, and smiled.

She loved the mornings best. School did not start for an hour yet. Until then the yard was hers.

She crossed to the stable and slid back the bolt. Warm horse-smell rolled out to meet her. There was a lot to do before breakfast. She fetched the feed. She broke the ice on the water trough. She worked fast. Her breath made little clouds in the cold air.

Down in the school, Mum was already teaching. A small girl sat up on Misty's broad grey back. It was Poppy, six years old, on her third lesson. Misty walked round slow and steady. Nothing ever hurried Misty. She had carried children up and down the beach for two whole summers. She loved a job to do.

"Sit tall, Poppy," called Mum. "Misty will look after you."

By the fence, in a patch of thin sun, old Biscuit stood dozing. His muzzle had gone grey. He rested one back leg and let his eyes fall half shut. Biscuit did not work every day now. Misty had taken over the daily lessons. Biscuit had earned his rest. He watched the new pony do his old job, happy as could be.

Emma carried a bucket down to the bottom paddock. At the gate, a grey horse lifted his head.

"Morning," said Emma.

It was Storm. He was her horse now — very nearly. He came straight to her across the frosty grass, ears forward. He pushed his soft nose into her hand and looked for the apple. He always knew when she had one.

"Song first," said Emma.

She began to hum. It was the old field song, Mr. Elliott's song, the one that calmed Storm anywhere. Emma sang it terribly. She always had. But Storm's ears turned to her. His eyes went soft. He stood very still and listened.

"You're the only one who likes my singing," she told him. Then she gave him the apple. He crunched it up and blew warm apple breath in her face.

Emma laughed. Then she thought of the hill. She stopped laughing.

Ben Fletcher was waiting at the bottom of Miller's Hill.

He lived on the farm next door. He was thirteen, tall and steady. He could fix or build almost anything. Patch, the black-and-white collie, ran circles round his feet.

"You're late," said Ben.

"Frost," said Emma. "The trough was frozen."

They climbed the hill together. Patch ran ahead, nose down, tail up. Mist lay thick across the fields below. Near the hilltop the old oak stood grey and bare.

They came up here most mornings now, to check the path. It had started at the end of September, on the first cold day of the autumn. That morning Emma and Ben had found hoofprints on the bridle path. Big ones. Deep ones. A horse wearing iron shoes. None of the Willow Creek horses wore iron. None of them was that big.

Since that day the prints had appeared again and again. Some mornings there were none at all. Then, when they had almost stopped looking, fresh prints would appear. Always on the same path. Always in the night. And always, by the next day, gone again — walked over, rained away, disappeared.

Sophie had written it in her notebook. She called it the midnight horse. A big horse, out on the hill at midnight. Nobody knew whose.

"Nothing yesterday," said Ben. "We checked. The path was clean."

"Maybe nothing today," said Emma.

But Patch had stopped.

He stood stiff in the middle of the path. The fur went up along his back. He sniffed the ground and gave a low little growl.

“He’s found something,” said Emma.

Then she saw them too.

Hoofprints. Fresh ones, pressed deep into the soft earth. But these were not like the others. These were huge.

Emma knelt down. She had grown up watching her father shoe horses. She knew the mark of iron in the mud when she saw it. Round each print ran the clear curved line of a horseshoe.

“Ben,” she said. “Look how big.”

Ben crouched beside her. He put his own boot next to one print. The print was far wider than his boot.



“That’s no pony,” he said. “Pepper’s whole foot would go inside this twice.”

Emma pressed a finger into the mud. It was still soft. Still fresh. The prints had appeared in the night. After they had gone home. After everyone was asleep.

"These weren't here yesterday," she said. "We only checked yesterday. The path was empty."

She looked up the hill. The prints went on ahead of them, deep and clear, one after another. They climbed towards the hilltop, past the fence posts, and disappeared into the mist.

"They always go up," said Ben. He put his hand on the last fence post by the path. "Up and over the hilltop. And then they disappear. Every time."

"We have to get Dad," said Emma.

They ran back down the hill. Patch flew ahead, barking. The frost was melting now, and the grass was wet and dark where the sun had touched it.

Dad was in the forge, lighting the fire. He was a big, calm man, and he never hurried. He was a farrier. He shod horses for a living. He had done it for twenty years. If anyone could read the marks of a strange horse, it was Dad.

"Slow down," he said. "What's all this?"

"On the hill," said Emma, out of breath. "The prints. The biggest ones yet. You have to come and see."

Dad looked at her face. Then he put down his hammer and reached for his cap.

"Show me," he said.

They went back up Miller's Hill, all three of them, with Patch running ahead. The mist was lifting now. The old oak stood dark against the pale sky.

Dad knelt down by the first print. He did not say a word. He leaned right down close, the way he did over a hoof in the forge. He put his finger in the print. He measured it with his hand, span by span. He followed the curve of the horseshoe with his thumb. He looked up the path at the long line of prints, then down again.

Emma waited. She knew better than to hurry him. Dad read a hoofprint slowly, and he read it right.

At last he sat back on his heels.

"Well?" said Emma.

Dad was quiet a moment longer.

"This is a big horse," he said. "Bigger than anything in our yard. And he's shod all round. Four iron shoes." He touched the print. "Good ones, too. Or they were once."

"But?" said Ben. "You've got a 'but' face."

"Two of them," said Dad. "First — I know every farrier for twenty miles. I know their work like I know their faces. I never shod this horse. And I don't know these shoes at all."

Emma felt a small cold feeling that had nothing to do with the frost.

"And the second?" she said.

Dad stood up. He looked all round. The empty hill. The lifting mist. The bare oak. The long line of deep prints, climbing up into nowhere.

"No horse of ours," he said. "And no horse I ever shod." He turned to them, and his kind face was serious. "Whoever this horse is — nobody I know is looking after him."

Chapter 2 — Reading the Ground

Jack Hartley hated to be left out.

He was mucking out Pepper's stall when he saw them run. Emma flew across the yard. Dad came behind her, pulling on his cap. They went out of the gate and up the lane.

Jack did not stop to ask. He dropped his fork and ran.

He caught up near the top of Miller's Hill. His chest was burning. Emma and Dad and Ben stood in a little circle on the bridle path. Patch sat close by, ears up. Nobody spoke. They were all staring at the ground.

"What is it?" said Jack. "What did you find?"

Then he saw.

Hoofprints. Not pony prints. These were huge. They went deep into the soft mud. Deep, because the horse was heavy. Round every one ran the clear line of an iron shoe. They marched up the path, one after another, and over the top of the hill.

"Whoa," said Jack.

Dad was down on one knee. His cap was pushed back. He was reading the ground the way other people read a letter.

"Come here, Jack," he said. "Tell me what you see."

Jack knelt beside him. He wanted to get it right. Dad was a farrier. He had shod horses for twenty years. He could read a hoofprint like handwriting.

"It's big," said Jack. "Really big."

"It is," said Dad. "Now look again. Look how far apart they are."

Jack looked. There was a long gap from one print to the next. A big gap.

"That gap is one stride," said Dad. "One step of the horse. From this print to that one is a single stride."

Dad measured it. He put one boot down, heel to toe, then the next, then the next. Three of Dad's boots, near enough.

Jack tried it too. He measured the stride with his own feet. It took him two whole steps to cross one gap.

"One stride is longer than me," he said.

"A horse only strides like that when he gallops," said Dad. "A walk is short. A gallop is long. Look how long these are." He ran his eye up the hill. "This horse was going fast. Very fast."

Jack looked up the path. He tried to picture it. A great horse, galloping up Miller's Hill in the pitch dark, all on his own.

"At night," said Jack. "Right in the middle of the night. Why would a horse gallop up here at midnight?"

Nobody had an answer.

Dad moved up to a clear, deep print. He set his thumb on the line of the shoe and went round it slow.



"Now this," he said. "This is the part I don't like."

"What part?" said Jack.

"The iron is worn," said Dad. "Worn thin. A good shoe is thick, here at the front." He held up his thumb. "This one is thin as a coin. It's worn right down."

"Is that bad?" said Jack.

"Look at the nails," said Dad. He pointed to little marks along the edge of the print. "Nails hold a shoe on. Small ones, right into the hoof. When the iron wears thin, the nails work loose. Then the shoe comes off."

"And that's bad," said Jack.

"On these paths? Very bad." Dad sat back on his heels. "These paths are full of stones. A loose shoe at a gallop, on stony ground — a horse can hurt his foot. Badly." He shook his head. "This horse needs a farrier. These shoes went on weeks ago. He's long past due."

Jack looked at the deep prints going up the hill. Somewhere out there was a big horse, running fast in the dark, on old worn shoes.

"Then we have to find him," said Jack. "Soon."

"We do," said Dad.

He stood and went to the front prints. He bent right down over one. Then he went very still.

"Well now," he said softly. "Look at that."

"What?" said Jack and Emma together.

Dad pointed. On one front shoe, on the outside edge, there was a tiny break in the line. A small nick. A little notch, worn into the iron.

"See that notch?" said Dad. "That little dent, right there. One front shoe has a notch in it."

Jack looked hard. Now he saw it. Every time that front foot came down, it pressed the same small notch into the mud.

"Is it broken?" said Jack.

"No. Just a little dent, worn in over time." Dad ran his finger down the path. "But look. It's the same in every print. Here. And here. And here."

"So?" said Ben.

"So it's a clue," said Dad.

"A clue?" said Jack.

"The best kind." Dad smiled. "Every horse is different. This one has a mark all his own. Say we find that same notch in a print somewhere else. Anywhere." He looked round at them all. "Then we know. It was this horse. Not some other horse. This one. The notch will prove it."

"So the notch proves it," said Jack. "We find that mark, we prove who it was."

Jack grinned. It felt like a proper mystery now. A horse with a secret mark.

Then Dad did something odd. He stood up straight and walked slowly up the path, then back down, looking hard at the ground on both sides. He went a long way. When he came back, his face was puzzled.

"That's the strangest thing yet," he said.

"What is?" said Jack.

"No boots," said Dad. "There's not one boot print up here. Not beside the horse. Not behind him. Nowhere."

Jack looked. He looked all along the path. He saw the great galloping prints. He saw Patch's little paw marks. He saw their own boot prints from that morning. But next to the huge prints — nothing.

"So no one led him," said Emma slowly.

"And no one rode him," said Dad. "A rider is heavy. A heavy rider leaves deep prints too, walking up after. There are none." He looked up the empty hill. "This big horse came up here on his own. In the dark. Nobody holding him. Nobody on his back."

For a moment nobody spoke. The wind moved in the bare oak.

"He's out here all by himself," said Jack. "Every night."

The autumn dark came early now. By the time they had finished their tea, the sky was black at the window.

All four of them sat round the kitchen table. Sophie had come straight up from the shop. She had her notebook — the fat one, full of every mystery they had ever had. She turned to a clean new page. At the top she wrote, in big letters:

THE MIDNIGHT HORSE.

"Right," she said. "From the start. Tell me everything."

So they did. Jack did most of the telling. He liked to tell a good story. Emma put him right when he got carried away.

Sophie wrote it all down. A big horse. Iron shoes, worn thin. One front shoe with a notch — their clue. A stride longer than Jack was tall. And no boots at all: no one leading, no one riding.

"So he's out there right now," said Sophie. She looked at the dark glass. "All on his own. On the hill."

"We should watch for him," said Jack. He had been waiting to say it. "Tonight. We go up with a torch. We hide by the old oak and we wait."

Mum was at the stove. She turned round.

"Not tonight," she said.

"But Mum—"

"Not on your own, not in the dark, and not on a school night," said Mum. "That's three noes, Jack."

Jack slumped down in his chair.

But Dad looked up from his tea.

"She didn't say never," he said.

Jack sat up again.

"You can watch," said Dad. "But not alone. We all go together, and I come too. And not this week." He lifted a hand before Jack could jump in. "One horse on a hill at night is one thing. Four children on a hill at night is another. We do it right, or we don't do it at all."

"When, then?" said Jack.

"Soon." Dad's eyes had a light in them. "But here's the thing. We might not need to sit up all night at all. There's a smarter way."

Jack frowned. Then he heard it — a soft tapping on the glass. He turned. The first drops were on the window. The sky had been low and grey all afternoon. Now it had begun.

His heart dropped.

"It's going to rain," said Jack. "Dad, it's going to rain all night. The prints will be gone by morning. The rain will wash them all away."

He had seen it happen before. One good downpour, and the path came up washed clean.

But Dad only smiled. It was a slow smile, and it spread wider and wider.

"Rain," said Dad. "Yes. Rain's coming." He set down his cup. "Jack — rain is exactly what we want."

Chapter 3 — What the Rain Told Them

The rain came all evening.

Emma lay in bed and listened to it. It fell soft on the roof and ran down the black glass. She thought about the big horse. Was he out on the hill? Was he running in all that rain? She did not like the thought. A horse alone, in the wet and the dark. She pulled the blanket up to her chin. She hoped he had a warm dry place. She hoped someone had shut him in for the night.

Somewhere in the night the rain stopped. Emma was asleep by then. She did not hear it end.

But Dad did.

Dad woke early every day. A farrier keeps early hours. He was up before first light, and he heard the last drops fall. Then the roof went quiet. He stood at the back door with his tea and looked at the sky. A slow smile spread over his face.

Then he came to wake the children.

"Boots on," he said. "Quiet now. Come and see."

Emma pulled on her boots in the dark yard. Ben was already there, and he had come over from the farm. Patch sat at Ben's feet with his wet nose in the air.

"Dad won't tell me why," said Ben. "He just says come and look."

They went up the lane together. The whole world was grey and dripping. Every gate ran with water. Their breath hung white in the cold. On top of Miller's Hill the mist sat low.

Dad stopped where the bridle path began.

"Now," he said. "Look at the ground. Tell me what's changed."

Emma looked, and she saw it at once.

The path was smooth, and all the old prints were gone. The rain had washed them clean away overnight. The mud lay flat and smooth and dark. Smooth as the top of a cake. Not one mark on it.

"It's all smooth," said Emma. "The rain washed it flat."

"Clean as a new page," said Dad. "Every old print gone."

Ben worked it out first. His dry voice was quiet.

"So anything up here now," he said, "came after the rain."

"After the rain," said Dad. "Good. Go on."

Emma's heart began to thump, and she looked up the smooth path. And there they were.

Hoofprints.

Big ones. Deep ones. Shod all round, the line of iron clear in each one. They marched up the fresh mud, one after another, new and sharp and clean.

"He came back," said Emma.

"He did." Dad knelt by the nearest print. "But work it out, Emma. When?"

Emma stood very still. She was good at this part. She wanted to work it out for herself. She let it come to her slowly.

The rain fell overnight and washed the whole path smooth. Then it stopped. And on top of the smooth mud — new prints.

"When did the rain stop?" she asked.

"Near first light," said Dad. "I was up. I heard it end."

"First light," said Emma. And then it came. Her eyes went wide. "The path was smooth first. Then he came. So he didn't come in the night at all. He came at first light. After the rain had gone."

"There it is," said Dad softly.

"Not midnight," said Emma. "We had it wrong. All this time we said midnight."

She looked at the fresh prints, then at the thin grey sky. All along they had called him the midnight horse. But he did not come at midnight. He came at dawn, in the first grey light, just before the world woke.

"That was clever," said Ben. "The rain trick. Let it wipe the page. Then read what comes next."

"Old trick," said Dad. "My grandad taught me. Rain tells you when, if you ask it right." He smiled. "Clever old rain."

Emma said it out loud, to hear how it sounded.

"Not the midnight horse," she said. "The first-light horse." She looked down the empty hill. "Clever horse, too. Out and home before the village wakes."

Then Emma saw something else.

An old wire fence ran along the path. On the top wire, up near a post, something moved in the wind. She went closer and reached up.

Hairs. Long dark hairs, caught fast on the wire.

"Dad," she said. "There's hair on the wire."

Dad came over. He took the hairs in his big fingers and held them to the light.

"Tail hair," he said. "Look how long it is. The wire caught it as he went past."

"It's dark," said Emma.

"Nearly black." Dad rubbed the tail hairs between finger and thumb. "Now think. Our horses are grey. Storm, Misty, Daisy — all grey. This one is dark. Dark brown, near black."

Emma held the tail hairs in her own hand. A big dark horse. She could almost see him now. He came galloping up in the half-dark. His tail brushed the wire as he went by. And it left this behind. Caught on the wire, waiting for her.



"He told us he was dark," she said. "Same as he told us when he comes."

Emma wanted to know one more thing. Where did he come from?

She walked up the smooth path, reading the prints as she went. They climbed right over the top of the hill. She followed them to the crown and looked down the far side.

The land dropped away. Away from the village. Away from the yard. Down towards the old lane behind the hill.

"He comes up the far side," she called back. "Not our side. From over there." She pointed down, away from Millbrook. "And he goes home the same way. Back towards the old lane."

Ben came up beside her and looked down the far side.

"Nothing over there but fields," he said. "The old lane. A farm or two, right off on their own."

"Somewhere down there," said Emma. "That's where he lives."

She looked a moment longer. The mist hid it all. But the horse was down there, and she was sure of it.

The sky was growing light. Dad looked at his watch.

"Breakfast," he said. "Come on. We've learned plenty for one morning."

That evening they told Sophie everything.

She came up from the shop straight after tea. Her notebook was under her arm — the fat one, full of clues. She opened it flat on the kitchen table. THE MIDNIGHT HORSE, it said at the top, in big letters.

"Right," she said. "What did the rain tell you? All of it."

So they told her, and Emma told most of it this time. Ben put in a word here and there. Sophie wrote and wrote, her tongue between her teeth.

She wrote: rain fell overnight, washed the path smooth. She wrote: fresh prints on top — so he came AFTER the rain. She wrote: rain stopped at first light. NOT midnight. She wrote: long dark tail hairs — a dark horse, near black. She wrote: comes up the far side, goes back towards the old lane.

Then she stopped and tapped her pen on the words at the top.

"That was clever of your dad," she said. "The rain trick." Then she frowned. "But this bit's wrong now. The Midnight Horse. He doesn't come at midnight. We had the name wrong."

"We did," said Emma.

But Sophie did not cross it out. She sat back and read the whole page again, slow, right from the top. And as she read, the warm kitchen went quiet.

"A big dark horse," she read. "Nearly black. All on his own. Nobody leading him. Nobody on his back. Up the hill at first light, every morning — and gone." She looked up. "So where does he come from? And who does he go home to?"

Nobody had an answer.

Outside, the last light was going. Somewhere over the hill lay a farm they had never seen. And on the far side, in the dark, a big dark horse stood all alone.

And nobody at that table knew his name.

Chapter 4 — First Light

Sunday came grey and still.

In the morning the family walked to church. The little stone church stood by the green. Its one bell rang out across the wet fields. Jack liked the walk home best of all. The air was cold and clean. Brown leaves lay thick on the lane.

After church, Dad drove into town. He came back with Mr. Elliott. Dad fetched the old man every Sunday. Lunch first, then the horses — that was always the way.

Jack helped lift the wheelchair down from the van. Mr. Elliott had a paper bag in his coat pocket. He always did.

"Peppermint, young Jack?" he said.

"After lunch," said Jack. "I can smell the roast from here."

Mr. Elliott laughed. "A wise lad."

Mum's roast was on the table. Beef, carrots, hot brown gravy. The kitchen was warm and thick with steam. They all found a chair. Patch lay under the table and hoped for a dropped bit.

Dad folded his big hands.

"For what we are about to eat," he said, "we thank You. Amen."

Then the plates went round, and the room was all clinks and please-pass-the-carrots.

But nobody could hold it in for long. Jack got there first.

"Mr. Elliott," he said. "We've got a mystery. A big one."

"Have you, now." The old man cut a potato in two. "Tell me, then."

So they told him. They all told him at once, until Mum had to slow them down. Jack told the best bits. Emma told the careful bits.

A big horse on Miller's Hill. Shod all round. Out on the hill alone, morning after morning. Then Emma told the clever part — the rain trick, and what it proved.

"He doesn't come at midnight," she said. "We were sure he did. But the rain showed us. He comes at first light. At dawn, just before the sun."

Mr. Elliott put down his fork.

He went very still.

"Say that again," he said. "When does he come?"

"At dawn," said Emma. "First light. Every single morning."

Mr. Elliott looked at the window a long moment. Then he looked back at them.

"That's no lost horse," he said. "A lost horse runs any old time. Day or night, it's all the same to him." He tapped the table. "But a horse that works at dawn — every dawn, like a job of work? That's a racehorse."

"A racehorse?" said Jack.

"A racehorse." The old eyes were bright now. "I remember them well. When I was a boy, there was a racing stable near our farm. A big one. And every morning, at first light, out they all came."

"Out where?" asked Jack.

"Up on the downs. The high green hills." His old hands moved as he spoke. "A whole string of them. Ten, twenty horses in a line, nose to tail. A rider up on each one. Out for their morning exercise."



"A string," said Emma softly. "Like our ponies."

"That's the word. A string." Mr. Elliott smiled. "Racehorses don't lie in late. Out they go at dawn, rain or shine. They gallop the long hill for their exercise, then home again for breakfast. I used to sit on the fence and watch. All those hooves beating in the half-dark. I've never once forgotten it."

Jack could see it in his head. A line of dark horses in the grey. Their breath like smoke. The thunder of them on the wet grass.

"So our horse," he said slowly, "he used to be a racehorse. Out at dawn for his exercise, every day."

"Sure as I'm sitting here," said Mr. Elliott. "He works at first light because it's all he has ever known. Nobody ever taught him to stop."

There was apple crumble after that. Jack was halfway through his when a knock came at the door.

It was Sophie, pink wellies and all. Ben came in behind her.

"You'll never guess," said Sophie. She was quite out of breath. "I ran the whole way up. Mum and Dad have got news. Proper news."

Sophie's mum and dad ran the village shop. The shop was the post office as well. Any news in Millbrook came through that door first. Word from every farm and every lane crossed that counter. Sophie's parents heard it all.

"Sit down first," said Mum. "Catch your breath. There's crumble."

Sophie sat, but the words would not wait.

"Highfield Farm," she said. "Do you know it? Over the hill. The far side."

Ben nodded. "Old place. Right off on its own. It's stood empty for years."

"Not any more," said Sophie. "Somebody's bought it. Back in the summer."

Jack and Emma looked at each other. Over the hill. The far side. The old lane behind the hill.

That was it. That was where the prints went home.

"Who bought it?" asked Emma.

"That's the strange thing," said Sophie. "Nobody knows." She leaned in close. "A horsebox came up the lane one evening in August. Late, nearly dark. Old Mr. Pike saw it go by. A horsebox — one of those big lorries for a horse. And it turned in at Highfield."

"A horsebox brings a horse," said Jack.

"One horse, Mr. Pike thought. One big horse in the back."

Ben gave a low whistle. "A horse came to Highfield in August. And the prints started end of September."

"But here's the oddest bit," said Sophie. "This new owner has never once come to the shop. Not one single time. The whole village comes to the shop. For their bread, their stamps, a bit of a chat. But not him. He keeps to himself. Nobody's met him. Nobody even knows his name."

"A stranger," said Mr. Elliott, quietly. "A stranger who keeps to himself."

The words hung in the warm kitchen. A stranger, over the hill. No one had seen his face. No one knew his name. And out on the dark hill his horse ran alone at dawn.

Dad had sat quiet through all of it. Now he spoke.

"So," he said. "A horse that works at dawn. A man who hides away. Over the hill, on the far side." He looked round at them all. "I think it's time we saw this horse with our own eyes."

Jack shot up. "A watch! Can we, Dad? A proper watch?"

"A watch," said Dad. "But we do it my way, with my permission. We go together. All of us, and me with you. Before first light, up to the old oak. We wait there, and we watch, and we see him come."

Jack remembered the last time he had wanted to watch. There had been no permission then. Mum had said no — not alone, not in the dark, not on a school night. But this was not the same. This time they had permission. Dad himself was coming. He had planned it all.

"Saturday," said Mum. "Not a school morning. And thick warm coats, the lot of you."

"Saturday, then," said Dad.

Jack could have cheered out loud. A dawn watch, from the old oak. At last they would meet the horse for real.

"It'll be cold," said Dad. "It'll be long. You'll need patience. And he might not come at all."

"I can wait," said Jack. And he meant it. Storm had taught him how.

Later, Dad brought the van round to take Mr. Elliott home. Jack pushed the chair out to the step. The old man had gone quiet again. He had been quiet ever since lunch.

At the door he took hold of Jack's arm. His hand was thin, but strong.

"Jack," he said. "One thing before I go."

"Yes, Mr. Elliott?"

"This man over the hill. This stranger." The old eyes were kind, but he was not smiling now. "Go careful with him. Be gentle."

"Why gentle?" said Jack.

Mr. Elliott looked out at the hill, where the last light was going.

"A man who hides himself away from the whole world," he said slowly, "is a man who's hurting somewhere. You remember that. People don't shut themselves off unless something's gone wrong."

Then he patted Jack's arm, and Dad wheeled him out to the van.

Jack stood in the open doorway. The cold crept in around him. Over the hill the last light was almost gone. And out there in the dark, a stranger sat alone in an empty farmhouse — with a big dark horse that ran at first light, and came home to nobody at all.

Jack did not know it yet. But every word Mr. Elliott had said was true.

Chapter 5 — The Horse at First Light

The alarm buzzed in the black dark.

Emma opened her eyes. For a moment she did not know why. Then she knew. Saturday. The watch. The horse.

She dressed fast in the cold. Two jumpers. Thick socks. Her warmest coat. Down in the kitchen a light was on. Dad stood by the kettle. Jack sat at the table, half asleep over his cocoa.

"Drink up," said Dad. "We walk in ten minutes."

Outside, the world was black and still. The stars were out. White frost lay on the grass. Emma's breath came out in clouds of steam.

Ben stood waiting at the gate. Sophie came up the lane, a torch bobbing in her hand.

"Torches off past this gate," said Dad. "We don't want him to see us. We watch, and we keep still."

They walked up Miller's Hill in the dark. Nobody said much. Patch trotted at Ben's knee, quiet and low. The cold bit at Emma's cheeks. Her breath made little clouds of steam in the cold air.

At the top stood the old oak. Its bare branches were black against the sky. Dad found them a spot behind the hedge.

"Now we wait," he said softly. "Down you get. And keep still."

They ducked down behind the hedge.

The wait was long.

The cold crept in all over. It found Emma's toes first. Then her fingers. Then her nose. The sky was still black. Nothing moved on the hill.

Emma looked at Jack. She knew her brother. Jack could not sit still. Not ever. Not in church, not at school. Ten minutes was a long time for Jack.

But Jack sat still.

He had his knees up under his chin. He watched the dark path and made no sound. Once he began to jiggle his foot. Then he made it stop. Emma nearly smiled. Storm had taught him this. A nervous horse needs a calm, still hand. You learn to wait. You learn to be quiet.

"All right?" Emma breathed.

"I can wait," Jack said, low. "I can wait all night."

Slowly the sky went from black to grey. Not light yet. But not full dark any more. Far down the valley a cock crowed.

Then Patch lifted his head.

Emma heard it before she saw a thing.

A soft sound, far off. A drumming. It came up through the cold ground and into her knees.

Hoofbeats.

"There," said Ben, low. "Listen."

The hoofbeats grew. Louder. Closer. Faster. Emma's heart began to thump in time. Patch went stiff. Dad put one hand on the dog's back.

And then, out of the grey half-dark, came the horse.

He came up the path at a gallop. He was big. He was dark — almost black in the grey light. His mane flew out behind him. His long legs reached and reached. His hoofbeats drummed on the hard ground. There was no saddle on his back. There was no rider. No rope, no halter, no one at all.

He was riderless, and he ran free.

Emma forgot the cold. She forgot to breathe. She had never seen a horse so fine. A riderless horse, running the hilltop all alone.

The big horse reached the flat top of the hill. He did not stop. He turned and ran the long crown of the hill. Round he went, one great sweep — a lap, like a lap of a racecourse.



"Look at him," said Sophie. "Just look."

And then Emma knew.

"He isn't running away," she said, low. "Look at him. He's not lost. He's not afraid. He's running like it's his job."

And it was his job. Mr. Elliott had said so. A racehorse works at first light. Round the long green hills, lap after lap. Nobody had to tell this horse. It was all he had ever known.

He ran his lap of the hilltop. Then he came back down towards the oak.

The horse slowed. He came down the hill towards them. Emma pressed back into the hedge. Closer he came. She could hear him breathe now — great deep breaths, in and out.

He pulled up not far from the oak. He stood tall in the grey light. His sides went in and out. Steam rose off his back. He lifted his head and snorted — one great snort, and two clouds of steam went up into the cold.

Then he looked down the valley. He stood very still. He looked and looked. He was looking for someone.

The horse snorted again. He shook his mane. And then he turned, easy and slow, and trotted back down the hill.

In a moment he was gone over the brow of the hill.

For a while nobody moved. Then Dad let out a long breath of steam.

"Well," he said softly. "There he is."

"Where's he going?" whispered Jack.

"Home," said Dad. "Same as always. Come on. Slow and quiet. And we keep to the path."

They came out from behind the hedge. Emma's legs were stiff with cold. They followed the horse's prints along the bridle path — the deep, huge prints they knew so well. The prints ran right to the brow of the hill.

"This is our path," said Dad. "The public path. We don't go one step past the hedge. That land over the hill is not ours."

They came to the brow. They looked down the far side.

Below them, in the grey light, lay a small farm. One house. One barn. A yard, a field, and a gate onto the lane. It stood all alone on the far side of the hill.

That was Highfield.

And there, down at the gate, stood the horse.

He waited by the gate with his head high. He was looking back up the hill. Then a door opened at the house.

A man came out. He came fast across the yard. He was small — a small, thin man with quick feet. His cap sat crooked on his head. He had a halter in his hand.

"Look," said Emma. "Someone's there. There is someone."

Something warm rushed through her. The horse was not alone in the world after all. Someone had come for him. The riderless horse had a man of his own.

Emma felt relieved.

The man went up to the horse. He did not shout. He did not wave his arms. He went up soft and slow, and he slipped the halter over the horse's nose. The big horse dropped his head and let him. He knew this man. He loved this man. Emma could see it plain.

The man led the horse in through the gate.

Emma was so relieved she could have laughed. The horse had someone. A man had come running at first light. A man the horse loved.

Emma had never felt so relieved. But then the man did a strange thing.

He shut the gate. He led the horse a few steps. Then he stopped. And he looked up.

He looked all round him. Up the hill. Down the lane. Left, then right, then back over his shoulder. He looked afraid. Afraid that someone had seen him.

"Duck!" breathed Dad. "Down, all of you."

They ducked down behind the hedge. Quick and low. Emma's heart banged. Had he seen them? She held her breath.

After a moment Dad lifted his head, just a little. Emma lifted hers beside him.

Down at the farm the man was leading the horse to the barn. His head was down. His shoulders were up. He looked back one more time as he went.

Emma knew that look. It was not really fear. It was shame.

The man looked ashamed.

He was not cross that the horse had got out. He was not glad, either. He looked ashamed — deep-down ashamed — that anyone might know.

Then the barn door shut behind them. The yard lay empty and grey.

For a long moment nobody spoke.

Emma stared down at the shut barn door. She thought of Mr. Elliott's words. A man who hides himself away is hurting somewhere.

Now she had seen it for herself.

"He knows," she whispered.

"Knows what?" whispered Sophie.

"He knows the horse gets out." Emma could not take her eyes off the farm. "Did you see him look round? He knows. The horse gets out at first light, every morning. And he doesn't want a soul to know."

Dad was quiet for a long time.

"Then we have a hard job," he said at last. "How do you help a man who won't ask for help?"

The sun came up cold and pink over Miller's Hill. Down at Highfield the barn door stayed shut. And nobody had an answer. Not yet.

Chapter 6 — The Man at Highfield

Jack could not stop thinking about the horse.

All through breakfast he thought about it. The big dark horse, running the hill alone. The small man with the crooked cap. The man's face at the barn door.

"We have to help him," Jack said. "The man and the horse. We have to."

Dad put down his mug. "Yes," he said. "We do."

"But he doesn't want help," said Emma. "You saw him. He doesn't want a soul to know."

"I know." Dad was quiet for a moment. "But a man with a horse out on the dark hill needs help. Whether he asks for it or not." He stood up. "So we go and see him, kindly, like good neighbours do."

Mum was already at the table with her big bowl.

"Then you take a cake," she said. "Nobody shuts the door on a warm cake."

By the afternoon Mum had baked the cake and wrapped it in a cloth. It was still warm, and Jack held it flat on both hands all the way, very carefully.

They went the long way round, by the lane. Ben met them at the corner, and Patch stayed home this time.

"You can't go visiting with a dog," said Dad. "Not the first time."

The lane went up and over the far side of the hill. And there, at the bottom, sat Highfield. One house. One barn. One field. It looked smaller in the daylight than at dawn.

At the field fence, the big dark horse lifted his head and watched them come.

Dad knocked on the door.

For a long moment nothing happened. Jack was sure the man had seen them come. Then the door opened, just a crack.

The man looked out. He was small and thin — a wiry little man, all bone and quick hands. His cap sat crooked, the same as at dawn, and his eyes went from face to face.

"Yes?" he said.

"Good afternoon," said Dad. "I'm David Hartley, from Willow Creek Stables over the hill. These are my children, and this is Ben from the farm. We came to say hello."

"We're your neighbours now," said Jack. He held out the cake. "My mum made this. It's still warm."

The man looked at the cake. He did not take it.

"That's kind of you," he said. His voice was polite, but stiff too. "You didn't need to. We manage here. We manage very well, thank you."

And that was all. He did not open the door one inch more. He was polite, and he was cold, and he wanted them gone.

Then something changed.

Down at the field fence, the big horse gave a long, low call. He had watched them all this time. Now he pushed his chest against the top rail and stretched his neck out towards them.

He was looking at Emma.

Emma did not run to him. She did not call out. She walked, slow and easy, across the yard to the fence. She stopped an arm's length away, stood still, and let the horse come to her.

The horse reached out his nose and breathed on her hand. Then he dropped his big dark head and let her rub his cheek.



The wiry little man stared, and stepped out of the doorway.

"He doesn't do that," he said. "Not with strangers. He never trusts strangers. Never."

"She's good with quiet horses," said Jack. "Our Storm was afraid of ropes. Emma just sat with him, day after day, till he trusted her."

Mr. Shaw watched Emma and the horse for a long time. The horse trusted her already. Something in the man's face went soft.

"Well," he said at last. "You'd best come off the yard, then. Just for a minute."

He did not ask them into the house. But he came out to the fence and stood with them by the horse. And slowly, bit by bit, he began to talk.

His name was Mr. Shaw. Danny Shaw.

"I was a groom," he said. "Forty years. A racing groom, up north, at a big racing stable." The wiry man rubbed the horse's neck. "Sixty horses in that

yard. Forty years a groom, and I looked after this one from the day he was two."

"Forty years," said Ben. "That's a long time."

"It's a whole life," said Mr. Shaw.

He told them the horse had run races. Good races. Fast and brave. But no horse can race for ever. Every horse must retire one day.

"His racing days ended last winter," said Mr. Shaw. "And when a horse's racing days are over, the racing stable sells him on. To someone new." His hands went still on the horse's neck. "I couldn't let him go to a stranger. Not this one. Not after all those years."

So Mr. Shaw had done a bold thing. He had spent his savings. All his savings — every penny he had put by, his whole life long. And he had bought the horse himself.

"Then I needed a field to keep him in," he said. "His racing days are behind him now. All he wants is a quiet field. So I bought the cheapest little farm I could find with a bit of grass." He looked round at the small yard, the one barn, the one field. "And here we are. The two of us. We manage."

There was that word again. We manage.

"What's he called?" asked Emma. She was still rubbing the horse's cheek.

"Midnight," said Mr. Shaw. "His name on the racecard was longer. But in the yard he was always Midnight. From a foal."

Jack started to laugh. He could not help it.

Everyone looked at him.

"Sorry," said Jack. "It's just — we called him the Midnight Horse. In Sophie's notebook. We thought he came in the dark, at midnight." He grinned. "We got the time all wrong. But not the name. They really were Midnight's hoofprints. All along."

Emma began to laugh too.

Even Mr. Shaw's mouth twitched, just a little.

Then Dad spoke, gentle and slow.

"Mr. Shaw," he said. "We've seen those prints. Up on the hill. Midnight gets out at first light, and he gallops the top of Miller's Hill, all on his own. Every morning."

The soft look went out of Mr. Shaw's face.

"I know my own horse," he said.

"I'm a farrier," said Dad. "I read his prints. His shoes are worn thin. On the stony paths, that's not safe — not for him. I'd be glad to help. There'd be no—"

"My fences are my own business," said Mr. Shaw. His voice was flat now, stiff and hard. "I'll thank you for the cake. But I manage my own farm."

He took the cake from Jack and gave one short, polite nod. Then he turned and walked back to the house — quick and straight, a proud little man with his back very stiff.

The door shut.

They walked back up the lane. Nobody said much at first.

But Ben kept looking back at the field fence. Ben had builder's eyes, and he saw how things went together.

"Did you see that fence?" he said.

"What about it?" said Jack.

"Look." Ben stopped and pointed. "The posts are old. Grey and cracked, years old. But the rails are new — bright new wood."

Jack looked. Ben was right. Old posts, new rails.

"He's built it up," said Ben. "Rail on top of rail. Look, you can see it. First he made it this high." Ben held his hand at his chest. "Then this high." His

shoulder. "Then this high." Right over his head. "Higher and higher. He keeps building it higher."

"The horse keeps getting out," said Emma softly.

"A proud man," said Dad, half to himself. "He spent all his savings on that horse. And now he builds his fence higher and higher — all on his own, too proud to ask a soul for help."

"My fences are my own business," said Jack, low, in Mr. Shaw's flat voice.

"But it's not his business alone now," said Emma. "Not with Midnight out on the roads."

Jack thought about it all the way home.

He thought about the fence. Old posts, new rails, higher and higher. He thought about the shut gate at dawn — the man had shut it himself. They had all seen him do it.

And still, every single morning, the horse got out.

Jack stopped in the lane.

"Wait," he said. "That doesn't add up."

"What doesn't?" said Emma.

"The fence is good. It gets higher every week." Jack turned round and looked back at the hill. "And the gate. We saw the gate. It was shut. Mr. Shaw shut it himself." He frowned. "So how does Midnight get OUT?"

Nobody had an answer. And behind them, over the hill, the fence at Highfield stood higher than a horse's back — and waited for the morning.

Chapter 7 — An Invitation

The light was going when Emma finished in the yard.

She filled the last hay net. She checked the bolts, one by one. At the bottom gate, Storm pushed his grey nose over the top rail. He blew a soft, warm breath at her.

"I know," Emma said. She rubbed his cheek. "I'm thinking about him too."

Storm was safe. Storm was warm. He had a dry stall, and Misty beside him, and good hay for the night. But somewhere over the hill, out in the cold, a big dark horse had none of that.

Emma gave Storm a last pat. Then she went in to supper.

Supper was quiet that night.

Emma pushed her peas round her plate. Her mind kept going back to Mr. Shaw. His stiff, straight back. The way the door had shut in their faces.

"He was so cold to us," she said. "But he wasn't really cold. Was he?"

Mum passed the potatoes. "No," she said. "I don't think he was."

"He wanted us gone," said Jack. "He said it three times. We manage. We manage."

Mum was quiet for a moment. She looked round the table at all of them.

"Some people think asking for help is the same as failing," she said. "They think a good man does everything alone." She set down the spoon. "Mr. Shaw looked after other people's horses his whole life. Forty years. Now he can't manage his own horse, and it hurts him. So he hides it away."

Nobody spoke. Emma turned the thought over.

"That's sad," she said at last.

"Yes," said Mum. "It is."

"Then let's just help him," said Jack. "Go over and fix his fence for him."

Mum shook her head. "You can't help a man who won't let you, Jack. Not like that. He has to let you in first."

Emma stayed thoughtful all evening. Mum's words stayed with her.

Then Dad put down his fork. His face was serious now.

"There's something you all need to hear," he said. "It's about those shoes."

Emma looked up.

"I saw Midnight's prints up close," said Dad. "Those iron shoes have worn right down. Far too thin. They should have come off weeks ago." He held up two fingers, close together. "A shoe that thin goes loose. And a loose shoe, at a gallop, on stony ground—" He stopped.

"What happens?" asked Jack.

"The horse can go lame," said Dad.

"Lame?" said Sophie.

"It means he can't walk right," said Dad. "A stone works under the shoe. Or the shoe twists off and tears the foot. Then every step hurts him." He shook his head. "A lame horse can't run. He can't work. He can't even play. And Midnight gallops those stony paths every single morning."

The table went very still.

"So we can't just wait," said Emma. "We can't wait for him to ask."

"No," said Dad. "We can't. Those shoes have to come off soon."

The next day was Sunday, and Mr. Elliott came for lunch.

Emma told him the whole story. The visit. The cold door. The worn, thin shoes. Mr. Elliott listened with his old hands folded, and his eyes went far away.

"Don't push the man," he said. "A proud man digs his heels in. Push him, and he shuts the door for good." He smiled slowly. "Don't push him. Invite him."

"Invite him?" said Emma.

"To Sunday lunch. Right here at this table." Mr. Elliott's eyes were bright now. "Tell him another old horseman wants to talk racing. One groom to another." He tapped the wood. "A man won't take help. But he might take a cup of tea."

Dad smiled. "An invitation," he said. "We ask him kindly. We don't push."

"Just so," said Mr. Elliott.

He was quiet for a moment.

"I knew men like him," he said. "Good men. The best. They'd carry the whole yard on their backs before they'd ask for a hand." He nodded slowly. "But everyone needs a hand in the end. Even the best of them."

Emma thought about it. An invitation was a gentle thing. It asked for nothing. It only opened a door.

"I'll come with you, Dad," she said. "We can deliver it together."

So that afternoon Emma and Dad walked over the hill again.

The wind was picking up as they climbed. Grey clouds sat low on the hill.

They took no cake this time. They took a small white card. On the card, in Mum's best hand, it said: Please come to Sunday lunch at Willow Creek. Under that: An old horseman would love to talk racing with you.

At the Highfield gate, Emma's heart beat fast. Midnight stood in his field. He saw Emma and gave his low, glad call.

Emma looked down at his feet. She knew what to look for now. The iron shoes were thin and old. They had worn down to almost nothing. Her heart pulled tight.

Dad knocked. The door opened a crack. The same stiff face looked out.

"Us again," said Dad. "We won't come in. We only came to give you this."

Mr. Shaw looked at the card. He did not take it. His face closed up, hard and proud.

"I told you," he said. "We manage. I don't need—"

And then Emma spoke.

She was not good at speaking up. All her life she had kept her thoughts inside. But she thought of Midnight on the stony hill, and the words came out.

"Our Storm was afraid of ropes," she said.

Mr. Shaw stopped.

"We didn't know why. For weeks and weeks we didn't know. We tried everything, and we couldn't work it out on our own." Emma held the card out. "In the end, Mr. Elliott had to tell us. An old man we had never even met. We couldn't do it by ourselves." She looked him in the eye. "We needed help too, Mr. Shaw. Asking isn't failing. Everybody needs help sometime."



The yard was very quiet. The wind moved in the grass.

Mr. Shaw looked at Emma for a long, long time. He did not say yes.

But he did not say no.

He hesitated. Then, slowly, he reached out and took the little white card. He held it in his rough hand and looked down at it.

"I'll think on it," he said. Only that.

But it was not a no. It was a start.

That night the wind rose wild.

It came in off the hills and pushed at the house. It rattled the windows. It cried in the chimney. Emma lay in her warm bed and listened to it howl.

The house was warm and safe. But the wind did not sound safe. It banged a loose gate somewhere out in the dark. Bang. Bang. On and on.

She thought of Midnight. Out there in the dark, in that small field, behind a fence too low to hold him. She thought of the black roads and the stony paths.

Emma closed her eyes.

"Please keep him safe," she whispered. "Out on the dark roads. Keep him safe tonight."

Then she pulled the blankets up. At last, she slept.

A fist pounded on the kitchen door.

Emma sat up in the black dark. It was not morning yet. It was long before first light.

Bang, bang, bang. Hard and fast.

She heard Dad's feet on the stairs. She heard the bolt slide back. Cold air rushed into the house.

Emma ran to the top of the stairs and looked down.

Mr. Fletcher stood in the doorway. He held a lantern high, and his face was white in its light. His coat hung open and crooked. He was out of breath.

"David," he said. "Sheep. My sheep. They're all out — every last one — out on the lane in the dark." He gripped the door frame. "Somebody opened my gate in the night."

Chapter 8 — Sheep on the Lane

Jack was down the stairs in ten seconds.

He pulled on his boots and grabbed his coat. Emma came running down behind him. Mr. Fletcher still stood in the open door, his lantern high.

"All hands," said Dad. He had his coat on already. "Come on."

Mum was up too, lighting the fire. "Go," she said. "I'll have hot tea for you after."

They ran out into the grey. A thin, cold light lay along the top of the hill. The wild wind of the night had died. The world was very still.

Then Jack heard them.

"Baa. Baa. Baaa."

Sheep. All along the lane.

The whole flock was out. They pushed at the hedge. Little clouds of breath rose in the cold.

"Every last one," said Mr. Fletcher. "Out on the road."

Jack looked at them all. They went every way at once. How could anyone round up so many?

Then Ben came running from the farm. Patch ran at his side, low and quick.

"Dad!" Ben called. "I've got Patch!"

"Then round them up," said the farmer. "Before they reach the main road."

Ben stopped and looked at the sheep. His face went still and calm — the way it did for a real job.

Then Ben whistled.

It was one long, high note. Patch's ears shot up. The collie dropped flat to the grass. And then he ran.

Jack had seen Patch chase a ball. He had seen him herd the ponies for a game. But he had never seen this.

Patch ran wide. He swung right out round the flock in a great, low arc. He did not rush them. He did not bark. He crept in behind them, his eyes locked on the sheep.



Ben whistled again — two short notes this time.

Patch turned. He pushed the back sheep forward. The flock began to move. They flowed up the lane like water.

"Look at him go," said Jack.

"That's a real sheepdog," said Emma, beside him. "That's the whole point of him."

Every whistle was a word.

Ben spoke, and Patch heard. Go wide. Steady. Hold them. Boy and dog worked like a single animal.

"Spread out!" Dad called. "Fill the gaps. Don't let them past you."

Jack ran to a hole in the line. He held his arms out wide. A big fat sheep came straight at him, then turned back to the flock. Jack laughed out loud.

The children made a wall of arms and coats. Every time a sheep tried to break away, somebody waved it back. Patch did the rest.

Little by little the flock moved down the lane. Ahead of them stood the open gateway of the field.

"Nearly there," said Ben. "Steady now."

The flock funnelled in. Ben gave one last whistle. Patch pushed the last sheep through, and the whole flock poured into the field.

Mr. Fletcher stood at the gate and counted.

He counted fast, under his breath, one hand moving. Jack tried to count too. He lost count at thirty.

"…forty. Forty-one. Forty-two." Mr. Fletcher stopped. He counted the last few again. "Forty-three."

He let out a long breath.

"All here," he said. "Every one. Safe and sound."

Patch flopped down in the wet grass, pleased with himself. Ben knelt and rubbed his ears.

"Good dog," said Ben. "Good, good dog."

But the farmer was not smiling.

He shut the gate hard. His face was dark. Jack had never seen him so cross.

"Safe now," he said. "But they were out half the night. On the road. In the dark. A lorry could have come." His hands were shaking, and not with cold. He pointed at the gateway. "Somebody opened that gate. My good gate. The gate I shut myself, before dark."

He looked round at all of them.

"If I find the fool who let my sheep out—"

He did not finish. He did not need to.

"Steady, John," said Dad, low. "Nobody here did it."

Then Emma touched Jack's arm.

"Look," she said softly. "On the hill."

Jack looked up.

A man was coming down the far side of Miller's Hill. He came slowly, his eyes on the ground. He was small and thin. His cap sat crooked on his head. In one hand he carried a halter.

It was Mr. Shaw.

Jack knew at once. Mr. Shaw was on the trail. Midnight had got out again in the night. And this time the tracks had led him here — down the hill, to the open gate and the sheep on the lane.

Mr. Shaw stopped at the top of the field. He saw the crowd. He saw the flock safe inside. He saw the farmer's angry face.

Then he looked down at the mud of the gateway.

Jack looked too. And there it was.

In the soft mud by the gatepost sat a print. A big, deep hoofprint, twice the size of any pony's foot. And on one edge of it sat a small notch — the little nick in the iron they had followed for weeks.

Jack's breath caught.

Midnight. Midnight had opened the gate.

Mr. Shaw saw the notched print too. The man knew. He knew what his horse had done.

For a moment nobody moved.

Mr. Shaw stood very still at the top of the field. He could have turned round. He could have walked back up the hill. Nobody would ever have known.

He did not turn.

He came down to the gate. He walked straight up to Mr. Fletcher. He took off his crooked cap and held it in both hands. Then he stood up tall and looked the farmer in the eye.

"It was my horse," said Mr. Shaw.

The lane went quiet.

"He opens gates. He's clever with his mouth — always has been. This wasn't the first time he'd got out." His voice was steady, but it was not easy. "I should have told you. Weeks ago. I knew, and I said nothing, and now your sheep have paid for it." He did not look away. "I'm sorry, Mr. Fletcher. It was my horse, and it was my fault."

It was the hardest thing Jack had ever seen a grown man do.

Mr. Shaw stood there and owned up, in front of them all. He did not make an excuse. He did not put the blame on the wind, or the dark, or the gate. He just admitted it, plain and simple.

Nobody spoke. Jack held his breath. He waited for the farmer to shout.

But there was no shout.

Mr. Fletcher looked at Mr. Shaw for a long time. His jaw was tight. Then, slowly, the anger went out of his face.

"You came over the hill," he said. "You followed him down. You could have stayed home and said nothing to a soul." He gave a short nod. "It takes a man to say so to my face."

He held out his big hand.

Mr. Shaw looked at it. Then he took it, and the two men shook hands across the gate.

Dad stepped forward.

"Right," he said. "So that's that." He put a hand on Mr. Shaw's thin shoulder. "But we're done with you mending that fence alone, Danny. It's too much for one man and a clever horse."

Mr. Shaw began to speak. "I don't want to be any—"

"No arguing," said Dad. He smiled, but his voice meant it. "Saturday. We all come up to Highfield. We sort that fence out together, once and for all."

Mr. Shaw opened his mouth. Then he shut it again. He looked round at them all. At Dad. At Emma and Jack. At Ben and the tired dog. At old Mr. Fletcher, who was not cross any more.

"I—" His voice was rough. "Thank you."

That was all he could get out. But Jack thought it was enough.

The sky was pink now over the hill. The worst was over. The sheep were in.

While the others talked, Jack walked over to the gate on his own.

He looked at it hard. It was a good gate. Strong wood. Iron hinges. And on the top rail sat the latch — a heavy iron latch that dropped into a slot to hold the gate shut.

Jack lifted it. Then he let it fall. Clack. It dropped into the slot and held fast.

His mind began to turn.

The wind last night had been wild. But wind did not open a latch like this. You had to lift it up and swing the gate clear. And the farmer had shut this gate himself, before dark. He had dropped the latch.

So the gate had not blown open. Somebody had opened it.

But there were no boot prints in the mud. Only hoofprints. Only Midnight.

Jack turned round.

"Ben," he said slowly. "The gate wasn't open. It was latched. Mr. Fletcher latched it himself, before dark." He pointed at the heavy iron latch. "So how does a horse open a latch?"

Chapter 9 — The Latch Thief

Saturday came bright and cold.

Emma walked up Miller's Hill with the others. She could hardly believe it. Half of Millbrook was walking with them.

Dad drove the van up the lane. It was full of posts and rails. Mr. Fletcher walked beside it. A big roll of wire hung on his back.

Ben came next with his toolbox. It banged on his knee at every step. Jack carried a bag of nails. Sophie had her notebook. Patch trotted at the front, a proper sheepdog with no sheep to herd today.

Mum came last of all. She held a big basket. Emma could smell the fresh bread inside it.

"Look at us," said Jack. "A whole army."

They came down the far side of the hill to Highfield.

Mr. Shaw stood in his yard. He watched them come down the lane. He did not move at all.

Emma saw his face. He looked lost.

Dad climbed down from the van. "Morning, Danny," he said. "Where do you want us to start?"

Mr. Shaw opened his mouth. Then he shut it again.

"You came," he said at last. His voice was rough. "I said Saturday. And you all came."

"Of course we came," said Mum. She lifted her basket. "And I've brought lunch. Where's your kitchen?"

Mr. Shaw looked from face to face. At Dad. At the wire on Mr. Fletcher's back. At Ben and his tools. At the children.

For a moment Emma thought the old groom might cry.

Then he turned and rubbed his eyes. "This way," he said. "I'll show you the fence."

They set to work.

Dad and Mr. Fletcher dug new holes for the posts. Ben went along the old fence. He found every loose rail and mended it. Jack passed him nails. Sophie wrote it all down.

Emma had her own job. One of them had to keep Midnight out of the way. She was glad it was her.

She led the big dark horse into the yard and shut the gate. He was happy to stay near her. He rested his head on her arm. He had liked her from the very first day.

The work went well. By the middle of the morning the new posts stood in a neat row. They all stopped for a rest. Mum poured tea from a big flask.

And then Midnight showed them his secret.

The horse stood alone in the yard. He had nothing to do. He walked up and down. He looked over the gate at all the people and the food.

Then he did something.

He put his nose to the gate. He felt along the top of it with his lips. Emma watched. She held her breath.

Midnight found the latch. He took it in his lips, soft and careful, like a hand. He lifted it up. Then he leaned on the gate.



It swung open.

Midnight walked out, calm as you like, and came straight over for the bread.

"There!" cried Emma. "Look! Look what he did!"

They all turned. They had seen it too.

For a second no one spoke.

Then Jack laughed out loud. And once Jack started, they all started. Sophie laughed. Ben laughed. Even Mr. Fletcher laughed, deep and slow.

"Well, I never," said Dad. "He let himself out. Right in front of us."

And then — best of all — Mr. Shaw laughed too. Emma had never heard him laugh before. It changed his whole face.

"That's my boy," he said. He shook his head. "Clever with his mouth. Always has been."

Midnight took a big bite of Mum's bread and looked very pleased.

Emma saw it all now.

"That's how he opened your gate," she said to Mr. Fletcher. "The night the sheep got out. He just lifted the latch."

"Just like that," said the farmer. He was still smiling. "A sheep can't do it. A cow can't do it. But that horse can."

It did not matter how high the fence was. It did not matter how strong the gate was. Midnight simply lipped the latch and let himself go free.

Ben was not laughing any more.

He stood by the gate, quiet and still. Emma knew that look. It was his builder's look. His hands were about to solve something.

"It's no good going higher," he said.

They all looked at him.

"You can't build a fence higher than clever," said Ben. "Mr. Shaw's been building higher for weeks. But Midnight doesn't jump out. He opens the gate." He nodded slowly. "He doesn't need a higher fence. He needs a latch he can't lip."

Dad smiled. "Go on, then," he said. "You're the builder."

Ben knelt down and opened his toolbox. He took out a short bit of chain and a small metal clip. He worked away, his tongue between his teeth.

When he stood up, the clip sat over the latch. It held the latch down tight.

"To open the gate now, you press the clip and lift," said Ben. "Two things at once." He looked at the horse. "A horse has clever lips. But he hasn't got a thumb."

They let Midnight try. He came to the gate. He felt for the latch. He lipped it and lipped it. But the clip held fast. In the end Midnight gave up and went to look for more bread.

Dad picked up the clip and turned it in his hand.

"That's a good design, Ben," he said. "Simple. Strong. It'll last." He clapped him on the back. "You didn't get that out of a school book."

Ben's ears went a little red. But he looked pleased.

Dad turned to Mr. Shaw. "No more mending this fence alone, Danny," he said. "One good clip, and the job's done."

Later, near the end of the morning, Emma found Mr. Shaw by the far fence.

He stood on his own. He was watching Midnight.

Emma came and stood beside him. She did not say anything. She had learned that from horses. Sometimes you just wait.

At last Mr. Shaw spoke.

"You want to know why he does it?" he said. "Why he gets out?"

Emma nodded.

"It's not the gate. It's not the field." He looked out over the hill. "This horse never lived alone. Not one day. Not since he was two years old."

"A racing yard is a busy place," he went on. "Sixty horses all round him. Someone with him every morning before light. Always work to do. A job." His voice went quiet. "Then he retired. I brought him here. A nice green field. Peace and rest."

He shook his head slowly.

"I gave him rest," he said. "But horses don't want rest. They want company. They want a job."

He patted the big dark neck.

"He wasn't running away, all those mornings," he said. "He was looking for the others. He was going out to work. It's a habit now. Every day, before light."

Emma felt something turn over inside her.

She thought of Midnight alone in his field. Galloping the hill at first light. Looking for the string of horses. It was not there. Coming home to an empty yard.

It was a sad thing to hear.

The others were packing up now. Dad loaded his tools into the van. Mum folded the cloth over her basket. The farmer rolled up his wire.

Emma stood very still.

An idea had come to her. A big one. It sat in her chest like a bird that wanted out.

Midnight needed company. He needed another horse. A friend to share the field.

And Emma knew a horse with no home of her own. A kind grey mare. The wrong one, they had called her, back in the summer. The wrong grey mare.

But maybe she was not the wrong one at all. Maybe she was exactly right — for the right horse.

Emma's heart beat fast. To say it, she would have to speak up. In front of them all. In front of the farmer and Mr. Shaw and all of them.

She took a breath.

"Wait," she said. "Everyone. I've got an idea."

They all turned to look at her. Emma felt her face go hot. For a moment she wanted to stare at her boots and say nothing at all.

Then she thought of Midnight, alone in his field.

She lifted her chin.

"I know a pony who needs company too," she said. Her voice came out clear and steady. "The wrong grey mare."

Chapter 10 — The Wrong Grey Mare

They all turned to look at Emma.

"The wrong grey mare?" said Jack. "What do you mean?"

Emma's face was red, but her voice stayed steady.

"Think back," she said. "To the summer. When we looked for Misty."

Jack thought back, and he knew the day now.

Sophie was already turning the pages of her notebook, and she found the right page and held it up.

"I wrote it all down," she said. "Listen."

She read it out loud, so Mr. Shaw could hear too.

"In the summer we drove a long way to Longmarket," Sophie read. "It's a big horse market. A man in a cap was selling a grey mare. Her name was Bonnie. She was fifteen years old. She was kind and gentle and calm."

Sophie looked up from the page.

"We hoped she was Misty," she said. "Storm's lost sister — but she wasn't. Misty has a dark cloud mark on her cheek. Bonnie had no mark at all. She was the wrong grey mare."

"We were so sad," said Jack. "We really wanted her to be the one."

"She had an owner already," said Emma. "So we drove home, and we found Misty later, at the beach."

Mr. Shaw said nothing. He took in every word.

"A kind grey mare," he said at last. "Fifteen years old."

"She needs a home," said Emma. "And Midnight needs a friend. Maybe she's the right horse after all. Right for him."

That evening Dad made a phone call.

"Tom Reed will know," he said. "Tom works all the markets. He knows every horse for miles."

Tom Reed was Dad's old friend, and they learned to shoe horses together, twenty years back.

Jack sat on the stairs to listen.

Dad talked for a long time, and then he came in with a grin.

"Good news," he said. "Bonnie never sold that day. Nobody bought her."

"So where is she now?" asked Jack.

"She went home," said Dad. "The man in the cap sold horses for other people. He was selling Bonnie for an old farmer. Up the valley. When nobody bought her, she went back to the farm."

Emma jumped up. "Can we see her?"

"I phoned the farmer too," said Dad. "He's a kind old man. He's too old to ride her now. But he won't sell her to just anyone."

Dad's grin grew wide.

"He likes the sound of Midnight," he said. "A lonely horse in need of a friend. We can drive up on Saturday."

At supper, Mum told them how it would work.

"The farmer won't sell Bonnie," she said. "And Mr. Shaw can't buy her. There's no money in this at all."

"Then how does Midnight get his friend?" asked Jack.

"It's a loan," said Mum. "The old farmer will lend her. Mr. Shaw will borrow her. Bonnie stays the farmer's horse. But she lives at Highfield."

Jack chewed his bread and thought.

"So we borrow her," said Jack. "The way you borrow a book."

Mum laughed. "Just like that. The farmer keeps her for his own. But Bonnie gets a home and a friend. And Midnight gets his company."

"A loan," said Jack. He liked the word. "We're going to borrow a horse."

Saturday came. First they drove to Highfield and left the van there. Then Mr. Shaw took them up the valley in his old horsebox. Dad sat in front with him. Jack and Emma climbed in the back.

The valley farm was small and tidy. The old farmer waited at the gate, and there, in the field, was Bonnie.

She stood with her head down, grazing in the soft grass. She was a pale soft grey, and she had no mark on her face. She was just as Jack knew her.

"There she is," said Emma. Her voice went soft. "The wrong grey mare."

A green van stood by the barn. Miss Okafor was there. She had come to check Bonnie before the move.

She ran her hands down each leg, and looked in the mare's mouth. She put her ear to the mare's chest.

"Well?" said Mr. Shaw. He held very still.

"Sound as a bell," said Miss Okafor. "Fifteen years old, and sound as a bell. She has many good years left in her."

Mr. Shaw let out a long breath.

The old farmer came to the gate. He looked at Mr. Shaw for a long moment.

"I won't sell her," he said. "I've had her since she was a foal. I can't ride her now. But I won't send her off to another market."

"I know," said Mr. Shaw softly.

"They tell me you have a lonely horse," said the farmer. "A big fellow in need of a friend."

"I have," said Mr. Shaw.

The old man gave a slow nod.

"Then take her," he said. "Not to keep. To borrow. She stays my Bonnie. But she lives with you and your big horse."

"And what do I owe you?" asked Mr. Shaw.

The farmer held out his hand.

"She winters warm and loved," he said. "That's my price."

Mr. Shaw took the hand. The two men shook hands over the gate, and agreed there and then.

Jack watched. No money passed. No papers. Just two horsemen and a promise.

"That's a good deal," said Dad. "The best kind."

They drove back over the hill. They came to Highfield just before dark.

Mr. Shaw led Bonnie down the ramp. She stepped out slow and calm, and looked round at her new home. She did not fuss at all.

Then Midnight saw her.

His head shot up high, and his ears went stiff and forward. He gave a great, loud call, and raced along the fence, then back again. He tossed his mane. He was tall and grand and full of fire.

"Look at him," laughed Jack. "He's showing off. He wants her to think he's grand."

Bonnie looked at the big dark horse, then put her head back down and went on grazing.

She was not worried one bit.

Midnight called again, but Bonnie did not even look up.

"She doesn't care at all," said Emma. She was smiling. "And that's just right. He's all fire. She's all calm."

Mr. Shaw opened the field gate. He let Bonnie in with Midnight.

The big horse came straight over, still high and proud. He walked round the grey mare, sniffed her neck, and gave a snort.

Bonnie stood quiet. She let him look, and she let him sniff. She was gentle and slow with the young horse.

Little by little, Midnight began to settle. His head came down, his breath grew soft, and the fire went out of him.

By the time the sun sat low, the two horses stood side by side under the big tree.

And then Jack saw the best thing of all.

Bonnie began to nibble along Midnight's back with her lips, grooming him. Midnight turned and did the very same for her. They stood nose to tail in the last of the light, and cleaned each other, calm and happy.



Jack had seen this before — Storm and Misty did the very same thing at their gate. It was how horses said a thing without words. "I trust you. We are friends now."

"They've settled already," said Emma softly.

Midnight had a companion now — a real one, in his own field. His dawn runs were just a habit now, from all the days alone, and maybe that habit would fade. A horse with a friend has less need to roam.

Mr. Shaw stood at the fence, and said not one word. But Jack saw him wipe his eye with the back of his hand.

Soon it was time to go home.

Dad walked to the van, and began to pack away his tools. Jack watched him lift each one and lay it down.

"Well," said Jack. "Bonnie's here. Ben's clip is on the gate. The fence holds now. Is it all done, Dad?"

Dad shut the toolbox. He looked up the hill, towards home and the forge.

"Not quite," he said. "One thing left. And it's mine."

"What's left?" asked Jack.

Dad nodded down at Midnight's feet. At the old shoes, worn thin and loose.

"Those old shoes," he said. "Monday they come off. Every one." A slow smile spread over his face. "Midnight gets new iron. New shoes, from my own forge."

Chapter 11 — New Shoes at First Light

Monday came grey and cold. Emma pulled on her coat before breakfast. She wanted to see the hill one more time.

Patch trotted at her side. The frost lay white on the grass. Emma's breath made small clouds in the air.

She came to the bridle path and stopped.

The path was smooth and empty. No prints. Not one.

Emma stood very still. For weeks the big prints had come here. Deep and huge, morning after morning. She and Ben had found the very first ones in the autumn. Now the mud lay flat and clean.

The mystery was over. Midnight had a friend now. Soon he would have new shoes as well. He had no need to run the dark hill any more.

Emma was glad. And yet a small sadness sat in her chest.

She would miss it. She would miss the wild gallop at first light. She would miss the big dark shape up on the hilltop.

"Silly," she said to Patch. "It's a good thing. The best thing."

But she stood on the empty path a moment longer. Then she turned for home. There was a big day ahead.

That afternoon Dad drove them over to Highfield. Emma and Jack sat in the back of the van, in with the tools. The light was already going soft and low.

Dad had brought his own small forge. He set it up in the yard. Mr. Shaw led Midnight out and tied him by the fence. Bonnie watched from the field, calm as ever.

"Now then," said Dad. "Let's see these old shoes."

He ran his hand down the horse's leg. He lifted each foot in turn. One by one, he pulled the old shoes off.

They had worn down to almost nothing. Dad laid them in a row on the ground.

Then he picked one up. He held it to the light and turned it round.

"There," he said. "See that?"

Emma looked close. A small notch. A little nick in the iron.

"There's our clue," said Dad. He smiled. "This is the very foot. The foot that left the notch on the hill."

Mr. Shaw took the old shoe in his hand. He said nothing, but he held it a long time.

Next Dad worked on the feet. He took his sharp knife and trimmed each hoof. He cut away the old, long horn, neat and clean.

"A hoof grows all the time, same as your nails," he told Jack. "So we trim it back. Nice and level. Then the new shoe can sit flat."

Emma loved to watch her father work. His hands were slow and sure. He never once rushed.

The forge began to glow. The little fire went from red to deep orange. Dad laid a new shoe right in the heart of the glow.

Soon the iron glowed too, red and then bright. Dad lifted it with his long tongs. He set it on the anvil.

Then he swung his hammer.

Clang. Clang. Sparks flew off the anvil. Bright little sparks, up into the cold air.

Jack jumped back and laughed. "Look at the sparks!"



“Hot iron bends,” said Dad. He shaped the shoe on the anvil, blow by blow. “Cold iron won’t bend at all. That’s why we heat it first.”

He held the hot shoe to Midnight’s foot. A puff of smoke went up, and a warm, sharp smell. Then he cooled the shoe in a bucket. It hissed.

He set it on the foot once more.

“A good fit,” said Dad. “That’s what we want. Each shoe must fit its own foot, and no other.”

He fitted them one by one. Heat it, shape it, cool it, fit it. Four brand-new shoes, all shaped for Midnight alone.

At last he nailed them on, soft and careful. Midnight stood still and let him. The horse had stood for this a thousand times.

“There,” said Dad. He stood up and rubbed his back. “Brand-new iron. He can gallop all he likes now. No stones, no loose shoes. No lame foot.”

Mr. Shaw put a hand on the horse’s neck. For a moment he could not speak.

Mr. Shaw still had the old notched shoe. He looked at it. Then he looked at Midnight's stable door.

"Wait there," he said.

He went and fetched a hammer and one nail. He held the old shoe up over the door. Then he nailed it up, firm and true.

The old worn shoe hung there now, nailed up over the door.

"The first shoe he's worn since he came to me here," said Mr. Shaw. "It can hang there now. His racing days are done."

"A keepsake," said Emma softly.

"A keepsake." Mr. Shaw gave a small nod. "To help me remember the road that brought him home."

Emma looked at the old shoe over the door. It was the right place for a keepsake.

They did not have to wait long for the best part.

That evening Dad and Mr. Shaw arranged it all. There would be a proper ride. The next Saturday, at first light, Mr. Shaw would ride Midnight on the hill. Not in secret this time. This time they would all come and watch.

They all agreed at once. Sophie would bring Mum's camera.

So on Saturday, long before light, they went up to the old oak. Dad and the four children, all in their warmest coats. Their breath made clouds in the dark.

The sky went from black to soft grey. A bird began to sing. And then they heard it — hoofbeats on the hill.

Up the path came Midnight. But not alone this time. Mr. Shaw sat up on his back, in an old worn saddle.

"His exercise saddle," Emma whispered. "From the racing days."

Midnight came up over the brow and onto the flat top of the hill. There Mr. Shaw let him go.

Away he went. He ran the crown of the hill in one long sweep. His mane flew. His brand-new shoes rang on the hard ground. Mr. Shaw sat still and light, and let him run.

It was the same wild gallop as before. But now there was a rider. Now it was no secret. Now it was pure joy, out in the open, for all to see.

Emma felt the sadness lift right off her chest.

"Go on!" shouted Jack. "Go on, Midnight!"

They all began to cheer. Emma cheered. Ben cheered. Sophie cheered too, and lifted the camera, and got the picture — the big dark horse and the small proud man, up on the hilltop in the first light.

Midnight pulled up by the oak, blowing steam. Mr. Shaw was grinning. His cap sat crooked. His eyes were bright and wet.

"Now that," he said, "is how a morning should start."

Mr. Shaw turned the horse for home. They went back down the far side, easy and slow now. The children followed to the brow and looked down at Highfield.

Bonnie stood at the field gate. Her grey head was up. She had heard them come.

She gave a long, glad whinny, right across the yard. Her companion was home.

Midnight lifted his head and called back to her. Mr. Shaw rode him in through the gate and slipped down. The two horses touched noses over the rail.

"She missed him," said Emma. "One short hour, and she missed him."

"That's what a companion is for," said Dad. "Now he never runs alone."

They walked home cold and happy. The kitchen was warm. It smelled of toast and eggs.

Mum had the food on the table. She looked up as they came in — red cheeks, cold hands, all talking at once.

"Well?" she said. "How was he?"

"Grand," said Jack. "You should have seen him, Mum. Brand-new shoes and all."

They sat down to eat. Then Mum went quiet. She looked round the table, and she began to count the chairs.

She counted under her breath. One, two, three, four, five, six.

"Sunday tomorrow," she said. "Set two extra places."

Jack looked up from his toast. "Two?"

Emma looked at Mum. Two extra places. Two guests for Sunday lunch.

She thought she knew who. And slowly, she began to smile.

Chapter 12 — Two Old Horsemen

Sunday came bright and cold. After church the family drove home to Willow Creek. Then Dad went to fetch Mr. Elliott, as he did every Sunday.

Jack ran out to the field first. Storm and Misty stood at the gate. Their grey coats shone in the low autumn sun.

Emma sang the old field song. She sang it badly, the way she always did. Jack joined in, and he was even worse.

Storm did not mind one bit. He came to the gate for his apple. Misty came close behind him.

"Best day of the week," said Jack. He rubbed Storm's soft nose.

Then the van came up the lane. Mr. Elliott sat in the front, cap on, eyes bright.

"Peppermint?" he called out. He held up the old paper bag. Jack took one. Some things never changed.

Soon a second man came over the hill. It was Mr. Shaw. He had walked the bridle path all the way from Highfield. His cap sat crooked, as it always did.

Jack watched the two old men meet in the yard. Mr. Elliott held out his hand. Mr. Shaw took it and shook it.

"So you're the racing man," said Mr. Elliott.

"And you're the man who watched the strings," said Mr. Shaw.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Then they both smiled. Jack could tell at once. These two were going to get on.

Mum called them all in to lunch. The table was full. She had set two extra places — one for Mr. Elliott, one for Mr. Shaw.

Dad said grace. Everyone went quiet and still.

"For this food, we thank You," said Dad. "And thank You for help asked, and help given. Amen."

"Amen," said Mr. Shaw, soft and low.

Then the food went round, and the stories began.

Mr. Elliott started it. "I grew up by a racing yard," he said. "When I was a boy. I watched the strings on the downs. First light, every day. Twenty horses, nose to tail."

Mr. Shaw's eyes lit up. "Forty years I did that," he said. "Up north. Out before the sun. Frost on your cap. Steam coming off the horses."

And they were off. They swapped one story for another, right across the table. The downs at first light. The long strings on the gallops. Good horses, bold horses, and lazy ones too.

They named horses from fifty years back. Old names, long gone — but bright and clear in their heads still. Mr. Elliott remembered every one. So did Mr. Shaw.

"There was a big bay we called Rocket," said Mr. Shaw. "Fast? You never saw the like. But soft as a lamb in his stable."

"We had a grey mare once," said Mr. Elliott. "Star, we called her. Kind old thing. Fifty years, and I can see her yet."

Jack ate and listened. He had never heard so many horse stories in all his life. The bag of peppermints went round the table twice.



And before the pudding was even on the table, Jack heard it.

"Pass the salt, Danny," said Mr. Elliott.

Danny. Jack looked up quick. Dad had called Mr. Shaw "Danny" for weeks now. But this was the old man. One horseman to another. Now he said Danny too.

Two old horsemen. First names, and firm friends. All in one lunch.

Jack looked round the full table. He felt thankful, right down to his boots.

After the pudding Mr. Shaw reached into his coat. He drew out an old photo. It was soft and worn at the corners.

He set it down on the table. Jack leaned in to see.

It was Midnight — a younger Midnight, dark and shining. He stood in a ring of people. He had just won his race. And there at his head, holding him, stood a small man in a flat cap.

"That's me," said Mr. Shaw. "And that's my Midnight. The day he won, up north."

"Did you ride him?" asked Jack.

Mr. Shaw shook his head. "No," he said. "I never rode him in a race. I just loved him first."

The table went quiet. Emma reached over and touched the old photo.

"He looks proud," she said.

"He was," said Mr. Shaw. "And so was I."

Then Mr. Shaw turned his cap round and round in his hands. He looked at Mum. He looked almost shy.

"Mrs. Hartley," he said. "I've been thinking. On your busy days. When the lessons are all full up. Could the yard use a spare pair of hands?"

Mum smiled at him. "Our list gets longer every week," she said. "We could use a helping hand. Yes, Mr. Shaw. We could."

"Danny," he said.

"Danny, then," said Mum.

And so they arranged it. On busy lesson days, Mr. Shaw would come and help. Forty years with horses — he knew them inside out. He was their neighbour now, and their friend.

After lunch they all went out to the horses. Mr. Elliott went first, in his chair. Jack pushed him across the yard.

Mr. Elliott stopped at the field gate. He looked at Storm and Misty a long time. Then he began to sing.

It was the old field song — the real one, slow and low. Storm's head came up at once. He walked straight over. Misty came at his shoulder.

"There's my pair," said Mr. Elliott softly. "Then and now."

Mr. Shaw watched, and he understood. "You raised them," he said. "It's the same for me and Midnight. You never forget your own."

"Never," said Mr. Elliott. "Not in a hundred years."

"He's happy now," said Mr. Shaw. "A field, a friend, and a job to do. Bonnie by his side. A horse wants a companion, same as we do."

Jack stood between the two old men. Two horsemen, two grey horses, one dark one over the hill. Every one of them cared for and loved.

That afternoon Ben and Sophie came over. The sky had turned low and grey. Sophie had her notebook under her arm.

They all went out to see the horses. Then Sophie opened the notebook to her page. THE MIDNIGHT HORSE, it said at the top. Below that came every clue they had found.

The big deep prints. The worn shoes. The notch in the iron. The dark tail hairs. First light, not midnight at all. Highfield Farm. Mr. Shaw and Midnight. The clever latch. Bonnie the companion.

Sophie read it all through, from the top. Then she took her pen. Under the last line she ruled one neat line, firm and straight. And below that she wrote one word.

SOLVED.

"There," she said. "The Midnight Horse. Solved."

Jack grinned. "We really did solve it," he said.

"We did," said Emma. "Every last bit."

By late afternoon it began to rain. Soft at first, then harder. Real November rain, cold and grey.

The children set off to walk Sophie home. They pulled their hoods up. The rain drummed on the lane.

Their way home crossed Willow Creek. There was a little footbridge there, and below it the old stepping stones.

They stopped on the bridge. Jack looked down, and his mouth fell open.

Willow Creek had risen. The water ran high and fast and brown. It was full, right up to the top of the banks. The stepping stones were gone — clean under the water.

"I've never seen it so high," said Sophie.

Ben stood still. He looked up at the low grey sky, the way his father did.

"That's a wet winter coming," he said. "If this rain keeps on, the low fields will flood."

Nobody spoke for a moment. The creek rushed on below them, high and brown.

Then Jack shook the rain off his hood. "Come on," he said. "Race you to the shop!"

And they ran, laughing, through the rain — home to warm rooms and dry socks and a good Sunday done.

But Jack remembered Ben's words. A wet winter coming. He looked back once at the creek.

It was still rising.

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