

The Search for Misty



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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 16,800 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

Storm the grey horse has a secret: somewhere in the world, he has a twin sister. Her name is Misty, and she was sold as a tiny foal, long before anyone at Willow Creek Stables was even looking.

Now Emma, Jack, Sophie and Ben mean to find her. All they have is one old paper, a page in Sophie's notebook, and the little dark cloud mark that both foals were born with. The trail leads from a dusty farmhouse to a shed full of a dealer's books, from a wall of pony photographs to a windy beach beside the sea — and every kind stranger points them a little further on.

But finding Misty is only half the story. Can the children ever bring her home?

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Chapter 1 — The Page Marked Misty

The summer holidays had begun.

School was over for six long weeks. No bells, no lessons, no homework. Just the yard, and the horses, and long warm days ahead.

Emma loved the holidays best of all.

She woke early on the first Sunday. The sun was already up and bright. She could hear the horses moving in the paddock. Patch was barking at nothing down by the barn.

Emma got dressed fast and ran out to say good morning to Storm.

The grey horse lifted his head from the grass. He walked to the gate, easy and calm. He did not shake at all now, not even a little. Emma rubbed his soft nose.

“Six whole weeks,” she told him. “Just you and me and the summer.”

Storm blew warm air into her hair. Then he went back to his grass, his tail swishing at the flies.

Jack came out with two buckets. He was already talking.

“Six weeks,” he said. “Do you know what we can do in six weeks? Anything. Everything.”

“First we can do the water,” said Emma.

They filled the buckets at the tap. They forked fresh hay into the stalls. Old Biscuit watched them over his door and hoped for an apple. The morning smelled of hay and warm horse.

Then they went in to get ready, because it was Sunday. On Sunday the Hartleys went to church.

The little stone church was cool and quiet inside. The bells rang out across the green. Emma sat still and did not fidget. She had a lot to be thankful for. Summer had come. Storm was home. That was more than enough.

After church came the very best part of Sunday.

Lunch at Willow Creek — and Mr. Elliott.

Every Sunday now, Dad drove to Fairview and fetched the old man, wheelchair and all. Mr. Elliott was the grandad of the yard. There was always a chair for him at the long table.

Mum had cooked all morning. There was chicken and potatoes and warm bread, and apple cake for after. Sophie came up from the shop with the ginger kitten asleep in her arms. Ben came in from the farm next door. Patch lay under the table, hoping for scraps.

Before they ate, everyone went quiet. Dad said grace, the way he always did.

“Thank you for this food,” Dad said. “Thank you for the summer, and for good friends round our table. Amen.”

“Amen,” said Mr. Elliott. He gave Jack a peppermint from the bag in his pocket, and one to Sophie, and one to Emma. His pockets always had peppermints.

Then everyone talked at once and passed the potatoes.

Emma noticed that Mum did not eat much. She looked tired.

“Are you all right, Mum?” Emma asked.

Mum smiled. “Just busy. Too busy.” She put down her fork. “My waiting list is so long now.”

“What is a waiting list?” said Sophie.

“It is a list of children who want riding lessons,” said Mum. “But I have no room for them all. Every week the list grows longer, and I have to say no.”

She looked out of the window at the paddock. “And poor old Biscuit is slowing down. Look at his muzzle.”

Emma looked. Biscuit stood dozing by the fence. His muzzle — the soft end of his nose — had turned quite grey. Once it was brown. Now it was grey and grizzled with age.

“He is getting old,” Mum said gently. “He is a wonderful lesson pony, safe as a sofa. But he cannot work every day any more. I could use a second

quiet pony. One that is calm and kind with children.” She sighed. “But good ponies like that are very hard to find.”

Sophie put down her fork with a bump.

“That reminds me,” she said.

She had her London notebook with her, the one she used for clues. She turned the pages fast. Then she stopped, and turned the notebook round so everyone could see.

At the top of the page, in big letters, was one word.

MISTY.

The table went quiet.



“I have not forgotten,” said Sophie. “Six weeks of holidays. That is six weeks to find Storm’s sister.”

Emma looked at the word on the page. Something small and bright lit up inside her, the way it had at the show.

Mr. Elliott looked at the page for a long, long time. His old blue eyes went far away.

“Misty,” he said softly. “My little grey filly.”

“Do you remember anything?” Emma asked. “Anything about the man who bought her?”

The old man was quiet. He was searching his memory now, deep and slow. It was like looking in a dark drawer for something very small.

“It was autumn,” he said at last. “The leaves were down. I took her to the Longmarket fair.”

“What is a fair?” said Sophie, writing fast.

“A market,” said Dad. “A big country market where farmers buy and sell animals. Horses and sheep and cows. There is one at Longmarket every autumn.”

Mr. Elliott nodded. “A dealer bought her there. I did not know his name, not then. I wanted it over fast, before I changed my mind.” He shook his head slowly. “I have tried to see his face for eight years. I cannot.”

Emma’s heart sank. If Mr. Elliott could not remember, how would they ever find her?

But then the old man lifted his head.

“The papers,” he said.

“What papers?” said Jack, leaning forward.

“When you sell a horse, you get a paper. A sale paper. It says who bought her, and when, and where.” His voice grew stronger. “And I kept every paper from the farm. Every single one. They are still there.”

“Where?” said Emma.

“At Greystone. In the kitchen. In the old dresser.”

Emma knew Greystone. It was Mr. Elliott’s farm, shut up and empty for two years now. She had never once been inside.

“What is a dresser?” asked Sophie.

“A big wooden cupboard,” said Mum. “It stands against the kitchen wall. Shelves on the top, drawers down below. Every old farm kitchen has one.”

“The papers are in the bottom drawer,” said Mr. Elliott. He closed his eyes. “I can see them now. All of them, tied up with string.” He looked round the table, and his eyes were bright. “The dealer’s name will be written on that sale paper. I am sure of it.”

For a moment nobody spoke. Then Jack could not hold it in.

“Then let’s go! Now! Today!”

“Easy, Jack,” said Dad, smiling. “The house is locked. It has been locked a long time.”

“Mrs. Bell has a key,” said Mr. Elliott.

Emma knew Mrs. Bell too. She was Mr. Elliott’s old neighbour at Greystone. She fed the hens and kept an eye on the empty house.

“She holds the key,” the old man said. “She will let you in. Tell her I sent you.”

He reached across the table and took Emma’s hand in his. His hand was thin and warm and shook a little.

“Go and look,” he said. “Search the dresser. Open every drawer if you have to. You have my blessing.”

“Your blessing?” said Sophie.

“It means yes,” said Mum. “It means, go, and go with my whole heart.”

Emma looked at the notebook again. At the one word on the open page. MISTY.

Eight years. A grey filly, gone into the wide world. And now, at last, a place to begin.

Mum stood up and started to gather the plates. The tired look had gone from her face. She was smiling.

“Well,” she said. “There is no time to waste, then.”

She looked round at all of them, at the bright eyes and the open notebook.

“Tomorrow,” said Mum, “we open the farmhouse.”

Chapter 2 — The Kitchen Dresser

Jack could not sit still.

He had been ready since seven. He ate his breakfast in about four minutes. Now he sat in the back of the car, drumming his hands on his knees.

“How much longer?” he asked.

“Ten minutes,” said Mum. “The same as when you asked before.”

Emma sat beside him with Sophie’s notebook on her lap. Sophie could not come. She was helping in the shop. But she had made Jack promise one thing.

“Write down everything,” she had said. “Even the boring bits.”

Jack did not plan on boring bits. Today they were going into a locked, empty farmhouse. A house nobody had opened for two years. His whole body buzzed with it.

The car turned off the road and up a bumpy track. And there it was.

Greystone.

The old farmhouse stood grey and quiet under the trees. The windows were dark. Long grass grew right up to the door. It looked like a house holding its breath.

A small woman came round the side, wiping her hands. She wore green boots and had white hair. A few brown hens ran after her.

“That’s Mrs. Bell,” said Mum.

“Well now,” said Mrs. Bell. “Mr. Elliott telephoned. He told me you’d come.” She reached into her apron and pulled out a big iron key. “Here it is. I feed the hens, but I never go inside. It feels wrong, somehow.”

She led them to the door. The key turned with a loud clunk.

“Off you go, then,” said Mrs. Bell. “I’ll be with my hens.”

Mum pushed the door open. It creaked.

Inside, the house was dim and still. The air smelled of dust and old wood. Nobody spoke. It felt like a place that had been asleep for a very long time.

“Look,” Emma whispered.

Big white cloths lay over the chairs and the table. They looked like tall white shapes, asleep in the grey light.

“Those are dust sheets,” said Mum. “You put them over the furniture when you shut up a house. They keep the dust off.” She lifted one corner. Underneath was a good wooden chair, clean and dry.

On the wall a clock hung silent. Its hands did not move. The clock had stopped at ten past four, long ago, when nobody was left to wind it.

Grey cobwebs hung in every corner. One brushed Jack’s hair, soft and sticky.

“Cobwebs everywhere,” he said, and wiped his head. “Two years of spiders.”

“Two years of silence,” said Mum softly.

They went through to the kitchen. And there, against the far wall, stood the dresser.

It was tall and dark and wide. Shelves ran along the top. Old plates still stood on them, on their edges. Below the shelves were drawers, one, two, three, four.

“The bottom drawer,” said Jack. “He said the bottom drawer.”

He knelt down and pulled. The drawer stuck fast. He pulled harder. It came open with a groan.

Inside was a bundle of papers, tied up with string. Just as Mr. Elliott had said.



“That’s it,” breathed Emma. “That’s it.”

Jack lifted the bundle out, very carefully. It was heavier than he thought. He set it on the kitchen table and undid the string.

The papers slid apart. There were dozens of them. Some were letters. Some were lists. All of them were old, and the edges had gone soft and brown.

“We need the sale papers,” said Emma. “The ones about the horses.”

They looked, one by one. Mum read the ones with small writing. Jack held each paper to the window to catch the light. The ink was faded. On the oldest papers it had faded to a pale grey, almost gone.

“Here’s a sheep list,” said Mum. “Here’s a bill for hay.”

Jack was turning them fast now. Too fast, maybe. But he could not help it.

“Gently, Jack,” said Mum. “They are old. They tear like dry leaves.” She put her hand over his and slowed him down. “We will find it. But we must go slowly, or we may miss it.”

Jack took a long breath. Going slowly was the hardest thing in the world. He made his hands calm, and turned the next paper as if it might break.

Then Emma put her hand flat on a paper and went very still.

“Jack,” she said. “Look.”

It was a small yellow sheet. At the top it said one word in old letters: SALE. Below it was a short record of a horse. A record was a note of what had happened — who sold, who bought, and when. Emma read it out loud, slowly.

“Grey filly, dark cloud mark on right cheek — sold to T. Dunn, dealer, Barleyford.”

Nobody moved.

A filly was a young girl horse, Jack knew that. And a mark was a patch of different colour on a horse’s coat. He knew all about that. He knew one mark very well.

“A cloud mark,” he said. His voice had gone strange. “On her cheek. Emma — Storm has one too. A little dark cloud, right on his face.”

“I know,” said Emma. Her eyes were shining. “It’s her. It has to be her. It’s Misty.”

Jack read the line again himself, to be sure. The ink was pale but he could still make out every word. *Grey filly. Dark cloud mark on right cheek.* The two grey foals had worn the same little cloud, like a family name written on their skin.

“Sold to T. Dunn,” Emma read again. “A dealer. In a place called Barleyford.”

“A name,” Jack said. He grinned so wide it hurt. “We’ve got a name!”

Mum took the paper and read it carefully. Then she smiled, and folded it with great care, and put it safe in her bag.

“Well done, both of you,” she said. “That is a real clue. Sophie will be pleased.”

They tied up the rest of the papers again. But before they left, Emma found one more thing at the back of the drawer.

It was a book with a soft cover — an album. An album was a book for keeping photographs. Emma opened it, and they all leaned in.

There, on the very first page, were two little grey foals in a green field. Two foals, side by side, so alike you could hardly tell them apart. And between them stood a man with white hair and a wide, happy smile — standing tall and straight, on his own two legs.

“That’s Mr. Elliott,” Emma whispered. “Before his legs went.”

“And two grey babies,” said Jack. “Storm and Misty. Both of them.”

“He must think of this house every day,” said Mum quietly. “Come. Let us take it to him.”

They locked the door behind them. Mrs. Bell waved from among her hens.

Fairview was on the far side of the town. Dad met them there. He had come to shoe a horse nearby, and finished early. He was waiting in the sunny garden when they arrived.

Mr. Elliott sat in his chair by the window. When he saw the album his old hands began to shake.

Emma laid it open on his knees. She turned to the first page.

For a long moment the old man said nothing at all. He looked at the two grey foals, and at his own young face between them. Then his eyes filled up, and one tear ran down into the lines of his cheek.

“My two,” he said. “My little grey pair. I have not seen this in years.”

“We found the sale paper too,” said Jack. He could not wait another second.

“We know who bought her. A dealer. His name is Dunn. Mr. Dunn, from Barleyford!”

At the name, Dad looked up sharply.

“Dunn?” he said.

“You know it?” said Emma.

Dad frowned. He rubbed his chin, thinking hard.

“I know the name,” he said slowly. “Old Dunn. A horse dealer. He came to every fair in the county, years ago. Everyone knew him.” He shook his head. “But that was a long time back. He retired. His yard was sold.” He looked round at them, and his face was not so hopeful now.

“Nobody knows where he went.”

Chapter 3 — The Wrong Grey Mare

They had a name now. But a name was not enough.

“Dunn,” said Jack, for about the tenth time that week. “We know his name. So why can’t we find him?”

Emma knew why. Mr. Dunn had retired years ago. His yard was sold. Nobody knew where he had gone. A name with no address was like a door with no key.

So they asked. They asked everyone.

Sophie made a card and pinned it on the noticeboard at the shop. The noticeboard was a big board of cork by the door, where the whole village pinned their notes. *Lost cat. Eggs for sale. Piano lessons.* And now, in Sophie’s neat writing: *Do you know Mr. Dunn, the old horse dealer? Please tell the Hartleys.*

The Turners’ shop was also the post office. All week people came in for stamps and bread and their letters. Sophie asked every one of them.

“Mr. Dunn? A horse dealer? He’s ever so old now.” Most people just shook their heads.

Jack asked at the forge. Emma asked the postman. Dad asked every farmer whose horse he shod. Nobody knew a thing.

The days went by slow and hot. And Jack could not bear it.

“It’s been five days,” he groaned. He lay flat on his back in the hay. “Five days, and nothing. I can’t stand the waiting.”

“You never can,” said Emma. But she felt it too, deep down. Waiting was hard for her as well. She just kept it inside, the way she kept most things.

“Be patient,” she said — half to Jack, half to herself. “Storm taught you that, remember?”

Jack made a face. “Storm’s a horse. Horses have all day.”

Then, on Thursday evening, the telephone rang in the hall.

It was Sophie, and she was out of breath.

“A man came into the shop,” she said. “An old farmer. He saw my card by the door. He doesn’t know Mr. Dunn — but Emma, listen. He says there’s a grey mare for sale. At Longmarket, this Saturday. At the market. Grey, he says, and gentle.”

Emma held the telephone tight. A grey mare. At Longmarket — the same market town where Mr. Elliott had sold Misty, all those years ago.

“A tip,” breathed Emma. A tip was a little piece of news that might just help you. “Sophie — you’ve got us a tip.”

“Could it be her?” said Sophie. “Could it be Misty?”

“I don’t know,” said Emma. “But we can go and look.”

She could hardly sleep that night. She hardly dared to hope. But the hope grew anyway, quiet and warm, like a small light she could not turn off.

Saturday came at last. They all drove to Longmarket together — Mum and Dad in the front, Emma and Jack and Sophie squeezed in the back. Sophie brought her notebook, of course.

The market filled the whole town square. Emma had never seen so many stalls. There were tables of vegetables and cheese, boots and baskets, jam and cakes. People pushed everywhere, calling out their prices. A market was a place where sellers set out their goods on stalls, and the whole town came to buy.

Past the stalls, at the far end, was a little wooden pen. Inside were some hens, a brown goat, two small ponies — and a grey mare.

Emma saw her first. She stopped dead.

The mare stood quiet in the pen. She was grey — a soft, pretty grey, with a kind face and long dark lashes. She turned her head and looked at Emma with gentle eyes.



“Oh,” Emma breathed. “Oh, she’s lovely.”

Jack pushed up beside her. “Is it her? Is it Misty?”

Emma’s whole body wanted it to be. She climbed up onto the rail of the pen. Then she looked at the mare’s face — hard, the way you look when everything depends on it.

And her heart went cold.

There was no mark. No little dark cloud on the cheek. Just clean, soft grey, all the way down.

Emma looked again, to be sure. She checked one cheek. She checked the other. Nothing. Not a spot.

“It’s not her,” she said quietly.

“What?” said Jack. “Look properly. Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” Emma’s throat felt tight. “There’s no cloud mark, Jack. Storm has one. Misty has one, right there on her cheek — it’s written on the sale paper.

This mare has nothing at all.” She climbed down slowly. “It’s the wrong horse. It’s the wrong grey mare.”

The mare pushed her soft nose against Emma’s hand, as if she were sorry too.

The dealer came over, a friendly man in a cap. He told them all about the mare. Her name was Bonnie. She came from a farm up the valley. She was fifteen years old and good with children.

“A grand old girl,” he said. “But not the one you’re after, eh?”

“No,” said Mum kindly. “Not the one. But thank you.”

They walked back through the market. Nobody spoke. Emma felt the hope go out of her like air from a balloon. She had let herself believe it, just for a day, and now the day was over.

Mum stopped and put an arm round each of them.

“I know,” she said softly. “I hoped too. It’s all right to feel let down.” Disappointed was the word — that flat, heavy feeling when a thing you had wished for did not come true. “We take one more step, that’s all. We’re not lost yet.”

Emma leaned into her mum for a moment. It helped. It always did.

And that was when a great voice boomed across the market.

“David Hartley! Is that you, you old rascal?”

A big man came pushing through the crowd. He wore a heavy leather apron, all scarred and burned. Emma knew that apron at once. It was a farrier’s apron, just like her dad’s. A farrier was a man who made horseshoes and fitted them onto horses’ hooves. Her dad was a farrier. This man must be one too.

Dad’s whole face lit up. “Tom Reed! Well, I never.”

They shook hands and thumped each other’s backs like old friends. And they were old friends, Dad said — they had learned the trade together, twenty years ago, hammering their first horseshoes side by side.

Then Dad told him the whole story. Storm, and the lost sister, and the dealer they could not find.

“We’re looking for a man called Dunn,” Dad finished. “But he’s dropped clean off the map.”

“Dunn?” Tom laughed a big laugh. “Old Dunn? Course I know him. He’s still in Barleyford. Lives with his daughter now — far too old to work, but sharp as ever.”

Emma’s breath caught. “He’s there?” said Jack. “He’s really still there?”

“Alive and grumbling,” said Tom. “And I’ll tell you one thing about old Dunn.” He tapped the side of his nose. “That man never threw a book away in his life. Every horse he ever bought, every horse he ever sold — he wrote it all down. Rows and rows of them. If your grey filly went through his hands, it’ll be in a book somewhere. You mark my words.”

Emma looked at Jack. Jack looked at Emma. And the small light of hope came back on, brighter now.

That evening, Dad found the number that Tom had given him. He picked up the telephone in the hall and dialled Barleyford.

Emma sat on the stairs and listened. She could only hear Dad’s side.

“...yes... a grey filly... about eight years back... came from Greystone Farm...” A long pause. Dad nodded, though nobody could see him. “...Saturday? We’d be very glad to. Thank you, Mr. Dunn. Thank you kindly.”

He put the telephone down and turned round. Everyone was watching from the kitchen door.

“Well?” said Jack. “What did he say? Will he see us?”

“He’ll see us,” said Dad. “Next Saturday. At his daughter’s house.”

The kitchen burst into noise. Sophie grabbed her notebook. Jack whooped and punched the air.

But Dad held up one big hand, and they went quiet.

“He said one more thing,” said Dad. “He said this. ‘I sold hundreds of horses in my time, mind. Hundreds. So don’t you go hoping too hard.’”

The word sat in the room like a stone.

Hundreds. Hundreds of horses, in hundreds of pages.

And they were looking for just one.

Chapter 4 — The Man Who Wrote Everything Down

Jack had never known a week go so slowly.

He counted the days on his fingers. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. Each one crawled by like a snail up a wall. By Friday night he could hardly sit still at supper.

“Tomorrow,” he said, for the third time. “Tomorrow we see him.”

“Tomorrow,” said Mum. “Now eat your beans.”

Saturday came at last. Dad had three horses to shoe, so Mum drove them instead. Jack sat in the front. Emma and Sophie squeezed in the back, and Sophie had her notebook open on her knee.

Barleyford was a small grey town, an hour away over the hills. Mr. Dunn lived with his daughter now, in a low house at the end of a lane. There were roses by the door and hens in the garden.

The door opened before they even knocked.

A small old man stood there. He was thin and bent, with a bit of white hair and two sharp little eyes. A pair of spectacles hung on a string round his neck. Spectacles were reading glasses, and Mr. Dunn’s swung to and fro as he looked the children up and down.

“So,” he said. “You’re the Hartleys.” He did not smile. “Come about a grey filly, eight years gone. I told your father on the telephone. I sold hundreds of horses. *Hundreds.*”

“We know,” said Jack quickly. “But please. We only need one.”

The old man looked at him for a long moment. Then something moved in his sharp eyes, and he gave a short nod.

“Aye,” he said. “Well. Come in, then. And wipe your feet.”

His daughter met them in the hall. She was round and kind, and she carried a jug of cold lemonade.

“Don’t let Dad frighten you,” she said, and winked. “He barks. He doesn’t bite.”

Mr. Dunn snorted. “Barks. I’ll bark you.” But the corner of his mouth twitched, just a little.

He led them out through the back door and down the garden path. At the bottom, past the hens, stood an old wooden shed. A shed was a small hut for storing tools and things. Mr. Dunn took a key from his pocket and turned it in the lock.

“In you go,” he said.

Jack stepped inside — and stopped.

The shed had no tools in it. No spades, no pots, no rope. Every wall, from the floor to the roof, was covered in books. Big, heavy books, hundreds of them, standing side by side on shelf after shelf.

“What are they all?” whispered Sophie.

“Ledgers,” said Mr. Dunn. He said the word the way other men say *treasure*. “A ledger is a book where a dealer writes down his business. Every horse I ever bought. Every horse I ever sold. It’s all in here.”

Jack turned round and round. He had never seen so many books in one place, not even at school.

“You wrote down *every* horse?” he said.

“Every single one.” The old man pulled a ledger from a shelf and opened it. Inside were rows and rows of writing — line after line, all the way down the page. Each row was one horse: a record of a sale. There was a date at the start, the day and month and year. Then a name, a price, and where the horse came from and where it went.

His handwriting was small and very neat. Not one word was crossed out.

Jack looked at Sophie, and Sophie looked at her notebook, where she wrote down everything too. She grinned.

“You’re just like me,” she told Mr. Dunn.

“Hmph,” said Mr. Dunn. But he looked pleased.

“Now,” he said. “Eight years back. Autumn. That’s where we start our search.” He ran a bony finger along the shelf and pulled out another book. “This one. Sit down, all of you, and be careful with the pages. They’re older than you are.”

They sat on stools and boxes, and the search began.



It was slow work. Jack wanted to grab a ledger and flip fast to the end, but the old man would not let him.

“Steady,” said Mr. Dunn. “You can’t rush a ledger. Row by row, boy. That’s the only way.”

So they went row by row. Date by date. Bay gelding, sold to a farm. Brown pony, bought at a fair. Two carthorses. A black mare. On and on, page after page, and none of them grey.

Jack’s finger followed the rows until his eyes ached. *Be patient*, he told himself. *Row by row*. It was the hardest thing he knew, but he did it. And

somewhere in the middle, without meaning to, he had gone quiet and calm, the way he did now with Storm.

Then Emma made a small sound.

“There,” she breathed. “Mr. Dunn. Look.”

Everyone leaned in. Emma’s finger rested on a single row, halfway down a yellowed page.

Jack read it out, slow and careful.

“Grey filly. From Greystone Farm.”

The shed went silent. Even the hens outside seemed to stop.

Mr. Dunn lifted his spectacles onto his nose. He bent close and read the row himself, and for a long moment he did not speak.

“Aye,” he said at last, very soft. “That’s her. I remember now.” He tapped the date. “Bought her at the Longmarket fair, autumn. Poor little thing. Too young to leave her mother, really.” He read on across the row. “I wintered her here, at my old yard. Kept her warm and fed all through the cold months. Then in spring I sold her on.”

“Sold her where?” said Jack. He could hardly breathe.

Mr. Dunn’s finger moved to the end of the row.

“There,” he said. “Fern Hill. A riding school. That’s a place where children go to learn to ride, and they always want a quiet pony. I thought she’d be happy there.”

Sophie was already writing. *Fern Hill Riding School*. She wrote it twice, and underlined it.

But Mr. Dunn had gone quiet again. He took off his spectacles and turned them over in his hands.

“I’ll tell you something,” he said. “I sold hundreds of horses, and I forgot most of them the same day. But not that one. Not the little grey.” He shook his head slowly. “She cried for her brother, you see. All the way down the

road. I could hear her calling and calling from the trailer, right till we turned the corner.” He looked up. “Eight years, and I never forgot the sound of it.”

Jack felt something go tight in his chest. He thought of Storm, back home in the paddock. He thought of the day the lorry took Misty away, and one grey foal calling for the other, each one alone.

“She wasn’t calling for nothing,” Jack said quietly. “Storm’s still there. He waited.”

The old man looked at him. Then, for the first time all day, Mr. Dunn smiled — a real smile, that changed his whole face.

“Is he now,” he said. “Is he now.” He let out a long breath. “You know, boy, in all these years, nobody ever came back to ask. Not once.” He put his spectacles on their string again. “I’m glad. Glad somebody finally did.”

His daughter called them in for cake before they left, and Mr. Dunn shook Dad’s hand — well, Jack’s hand, standing in for Dad — as if they were old friends.

“You find her,” he said at the gate. “You find that filly. And you tell her old Dunn is sorry he ever sold her at all.”

They drove home with the windows down and the evening sun on the hills. Sophie read the notebook out loud, over and over. *Fern Hill Riding School. Fern Hill Riding School.* Jack could not stop grinning. They had a place now. A real place, with a real name.

“We’ll telephone them tonight,” he said. “Tomorrow we could go. We could —”

“Jack,” said Mum.

Something in her voice made him stop.

She was watching the road, both hands on the wheel. She did not look round.

“I knew Fern Hill,” she said, quietly. “Years ago.”

“You *knew* it?” said Jack. “Then that’s brilliant! You know the way!”

Mum was quiet for a moment.

“Jack,” she said. “Fern Hill closed three years ago.”

Chapter 5 — The Photo Wall

For two days, nobody knew what to do.

Fern Hill had closed three years ago. The gate was locked, the fields were empty, and every pony was gone. But gone where? A riding school could have twenty ponies. When it closed, they went to twenty different homes.

“It’s the fair all over again,” Jack groaned. “One filly, and a whole county to look in.”

Emma said nothing. She sat on the mounting block and watched Storm in the paddock. He came to the fence and pushed his nose into her hand.

“We’ll find her,” she told him. But she was not so sure any more.

Then, on the Wednesday, the vet came.

Her name was Miss Okafor. She had kind hands and a deep, warm voice, and she drove a green van full of bottles and bandages. She had come to check Biscuit’s teeth. The old pony’s muzzle was grey now, and he could not chew his hay as well as before.

Emma held Biscuit’s rope while the vet looked in his mouth.

“Good old boy,” said Miss Okafor. “He’s slowing down, this one. But there’s life in him yet.”

Emma liked the vet. Miss Okafor knew every horse for miles around. If a pony was sold, or moved, or fell ill, she was the one who came. She had done it for thirty years.

Emma thought about that. Thirty years was a very long time.

Usually she kept her questions to herself. But not today.

“Miss Okafor,” she said. “Did you ever know a place called Fern Hill?”

The vet looked up.

“Fern Hill Riding School? Of course I did. I looked after their ponies for years.” She frowned. “But it closed. Poor Mrs. Kent.”

Emma’s heart jumped. “Who’s Mrs. Kent?”

“She ran it,” said Miss Okafor. “For thirty years, till her knees gave out. Then she had to close the school and sell every pony. It near broke her heart.” The vet clipped her bag shut. “She lives in town now. A little flat by the church. Why do you ask?”

So Emma told her. The whole story came out — Storm, and the sister, and the papers, and old Mr. Dunn, and the grey filly sold to Fern Hill eight years ago. Miss Okafor listened to every word. When Emma finished, she smiled.

“Well,” she said. “If a pony ever passed through Fern Hill, Mrs. Kent will know where it went. That woman never forgot a single one.” She wrote something on a card and gave it to Emma. “Here. Tell her I sent you.”

They went the next afternoon. Mum drove them into town — Emma, Jack and Sophie, squeezed in as always.

Mrs. Kent lived in a small flat near the church. She was a tall, thin lady with silver hair and a straight back. She opened the door slowly, leaning on a stick.

“You’re the children with the grey horse,” she said. “Miss Okafor telephoned me. Come in, come in.”

She led them into her sitting room. A sitting room was the room where you sat with your guests, with soft chairs and a low table. But Emma hardly saw the chairs.

She saw the wall.

The whole wall was covered in photographs. Ponies, ponies, ponies — dozens of them. Brown ponies and grey ponies, fat ones and thin ones, ponies with children on their backs, ponies with rosettes at shows. It was a photo wall, from the floor to the ceiling. Every frame hung straight. Every pony had a name under it.

“Oh,” breathed Sophie. “It’s beautiful.”

“My ponies,” said Mrs. Kent softly. “Thirty years of them. I couldn’t keep the school. But I kept the photographs.”



Emma walked along the wall, looking at every grey face. Was one of them Misty? But the greys were old, or too small, or had long dark manes. None of them had a cloud mark on the cheek.

“You’re looking for one pony,” said Mrs. Kent. It was not a question.

“A grey filly,” said Emma. “She came to you eight years ago, from a dealer called Mr. Dunn.”

Mrs. Kent sat down in her chair. She thought for a long time.

“Eight years ago. A grey filly. From Dunn.” She shook her head slowly. “I remember Dunn. But I don’t remember a filly called — what was her name?”

“Misty,” said Jack. “Her name was Misty.”

“Misty.” Mrs. Kent frowned. “No. No, I never had a Misty. I’m sorry.”

The room went quiet. Emma’s heart sank. All this way, and the wrong place after all.

But then Mrs. Kent lifted a finger.

“Wait,” she said. “A grey filly, you say. From Dunn, eight years back.” She turned to a shelf and took down a book. It was an old exercise book, soft at the corners. “I never let a pony go without writing it down. Where it came from. Where it went. It’s all in here.”

Sophie’s mouth fell open. “You’ve got a notebook! Like mine!”

Mrs. Kent looked at her over her glasses. “A grown-up one,” she said. But her eyes were kind. A grown-up was simply a person who was fully grown, and Mrs. Kent’s book was just the same as Sophie’s — only older, and fuller. It was a list of every pony, and every home.

She turned the pages. Emma held her breath.

“Here,” said Mrs. Kent. “The year I bought from Dunn.” Her finger moved down the page. “A bay gelding. Two Welsh ponies. And here — a grey filly. Yes. This one.”

She read the words out.

“‘Grey filly, from Dunn. Very quiet. Cries at night for the first week, then settles.’” She looked up. “I remember her now. A dear little thing. But her name wasn’t Misty.”

“Then what was it?” said Emma.

“We gave her a new name,” said Mrs. Kent. “We often did. A new pony, a new start, a new name. To rename a pony means to call it something else.” She smiled. “I renamed this one Lady. Because she was so gentle. So well-behaved. A proper little lady.”

Lady.

Something turned over inside Emma, like a key in a lock. That was it. That was why no one had ever heard of a Misty. For eight years, she had not been Misty at all.

“Lady,” Emma whispered. “No wonder. No wonder nobody knew her.”

One name. And it unlocked the whole search. Emma looked at Jack. His eyes were wide.

“Where did she go?” said Jack. “When the school closed. Where did Lady go?”

Mrs. Kent turned to the very back of the book. Here the writing was smaller and sadder, all in one week — the week she had sold them all.

“The last summer,” she said. “Every pony to a good home. I made sure of that.” Her finger stopped. “Lady. Here she is.” She read it slowly. “‘Lady — grey mare — to the Parker family, Deepdale. For their daughter, Lucy.’”

“Deepdale,” said Sophie, writing fast. “The Parkers. A daughter called Lucy.”

“A lovely family,” said Mrs. Kent. “Deepdale isn’t far. An hour, maybe. Their daughter wanted a pony of her own more than anything.” She closed the book gently. “Lady would have been perfect for her.”

Emma could hardly speak. A name, a place, and a family. After all the empty fields and the wrong greys, it felt real at last. And it was so close.

“Could we—” she began. “Could we telephone them?”

“Of course,” said Mrs. Kent. “The Parkers won’t mind. Not for something like this.” She reached for the telephone on the little table and turned the pages of a small address book. “Here’s the number.”

She dialled. The children stood very still. Emma could hear the phone ringing, far away, in a house she had never seen.

Then a woman answered. Emma stood close by the table, and in the quiet room she could hear the voice on the line — warm and friendly.

“Hello, is that Mrs. Parker?” said Mrs. Kent. “It’s Mrs. Kent here, from Fern Hill. Yes — it’s been years. I have some children with me. They’re looking for a pony you bought from me, a long time ago. A grey mare. We called her Lady.”

There was a pause. Without meaning to, Emma took hold of Sophie’s hand.

Then Mrs. Kent’s face changed.

“Oh,” she said softly. “Oh, I see.”

And down the line, warm and kind but so very sorry, came Mrs. Parker's voice.

“Oh — but Lady isn't with us any more.”

Chapter 6 — Lucy's Pony

The drive home from Mrs. Kent's was very quiet.

Jack sat in the back and watched the fields go by. Nobody spoke. In his head, one sentence went round and round. *Lady isn't with us any more.*

They had come so far. A name in a dresser drawer. A shed full of ledgers. A new name — Lady. A house in Deepdale. And now this.

"She's gone," Jack said at last. "We found her home, and she's gone from it."

"We don't know that," said Mum, her eyes on the road. "Mrs. Parker didn't say *gone*. She said *not with us any more*. Those are different things."

Before she said goodbye, Mrs. Parker had told them one more thing. *Come and see us. Lucy is home for the summer. She can tell you everything.*

University. Jack knew that word now. It was the big school you went to when you were grown, a long way from home. Lucy Parker was there most of the year. But in the summer she came back.

"Tomorrow," Mum said. "We'll drive to Deepdale tomorrow."

But tomorrow felt a long way off, and that evening the house was low. Even supper was quiet. Everyone kept thinking of a grey pony they had almost found, and lost again.

After supper, Jack could not settle. He went out to the yard in the last grey light. Storm stood at the paddock fence, a soft shape in the dusk.

Someone was already there.

Emma stood at the fence with her back to him. She did not hear him come. Her hand rested on Storm's neck, and she was talking, very low. Not to Storm. To someone Jack could not see.

"Please let her be somewhere kind," Emma said softly. "Please let her be all right."

Jack stopped where he was.

Emma said her prayers every night — she always had, quiet and to herself. This was one of them, out under the sky, for a grey pony neither of them had ever met.

The old Jack would have called out. He would have said something, anything, to fill the quiet. But he stood still and waited, the way Storm had taught him to wait. He let her finish.

Then he came up beside her and leaned on the fence too.

“You think she’s all right?” he said.

“I hope so,” said Emma. “We’ll know tomorrow.”

Storm blew warm air at them both, and Jack felt a little better.

The next day, they drove to Deepdale.

It was an hour away, over the hills and down into a deep green valley. That was where the name came from, Mum said. A deep *dale* was a deep valley. The Parkers’ house sat at the end of a lane, with a long garden behind it. And at the bottom of the garden, past the apple trees, there was a paddock.

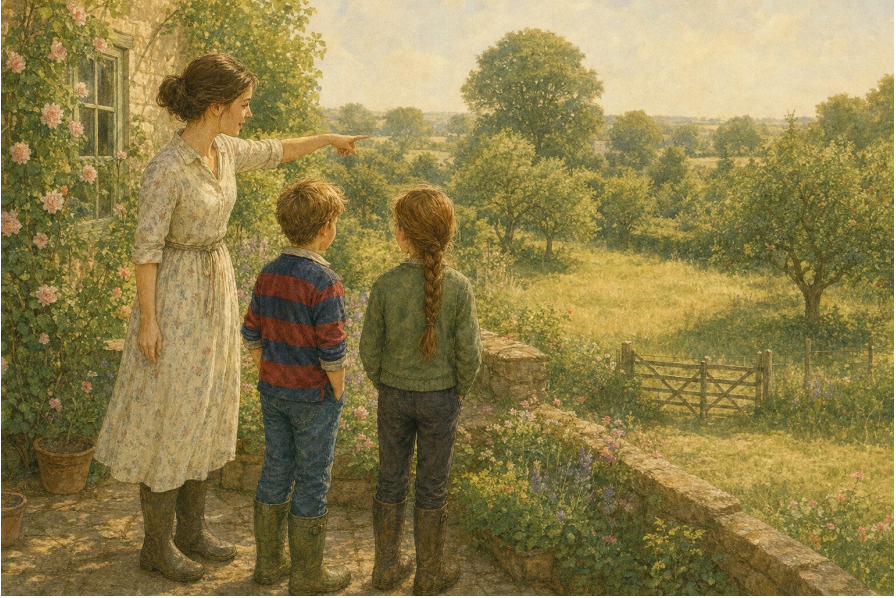
It was empty.

The gate was shut. The grass had grown long. No pony stood in it, and no pony had stood in it for a long time. Jack looked at the empty field and tried to see a grey pony there. He could not.

Mrs. Parker met them at the door, warm and kind, just like her voice on the telephone. Then a girl came out of the house behind her — tall, with the same warm smile.

“You must be the horse detectives,” she said. “I’m Lucy.”

They sat in the garden, near the empty paddock. Mrs. Parker brought out lemonade. And Lucy told them about Lady.



"I got her for my birthday, three years ago," Lucy said. "She was the best thing in the whole world to me. That first year, I rode her every single day." She looked down the garden at the empty field.

"But I grew," she said. "That's the trouble with children and ponies. The pony stays small, and you don't." She smiled a sad little smile. "My legs got too long for her. I outgrew her."

"Outgrew?" said Sophie, her pencil ready.

"It means you grow too big for something," said Lucy. "Too big, or too old. I outgrew my pony. And I got busy. School, then friends, then university. I came home less and less. And when I did come home, I never seemed to ride."

She was quiet for a moment.

"So Lady stood down there," she said, "in that field. On her own. Day after day."

Jack looked at the empty paddock again. Now he could see it – a grey pony, alone by the gate, waiting for a girl who did not come.

“A pony shouldn’t be on its own,” Emma said quietly. “They get lonely. They’re not made to be alone.”

“No,” said Lucy. “They’re not. And Lady wasn’t a pony you could leave in a field. She wanted people. She wanted a job to do.” Her voice went soft. “She was too kind a pony for that. Too good. It wasn’t fair on her, standing there empty and lonely.”

Jack swallowed. He thought he might not like the end of this story.

“So we found her a new home,” Lucy went on. “Somewhere she would be busy. Somewhere with children every day.” And now she smiled a real smile. “There’s a man called Mr. Avery. He keeps a little stable right by the sea, at a place called Sandy Bay.”

“The seaside?” said Jack.

“The seaside,” said Lucy. “Right on the coast, with the beach and the waves. Mr. Avery takes children out on his ponies along the sand, by the water. Every day, all summer long. A ride on the beach, with the sea beside you.”

Jack tried to picture it. A grey pony walking on the sand. A child on her back. The sea coming in and out beside them. It was a good picture.

“Lady loved children,” said Lucy. “She was perfect for it. Steady and gentle and never in a hurry.” She looked at Jack. “She’s happy there. I know she is. I visited her once, last summer.”

“You saw her?” said Emma. “How was she?”

“Fat and shiny and happy,” said Lucy, and she laughed. “There was a whole line of children waiting for a turn on her. She was far too busy to miss me.” She said it like a joke, but her eyes were bright. “That was how I knew we had done the right thing by her.”

Jack sat back. Something had changed inside him, and it took him a moment to understand what.

Lady wasn’t lost.

She had never been lost. She was by the sea, on a beach, with children who loved her, in a place with a name. Sandy Bay. They knew exactly where she was.

"She's not lost at all," he said out loud.

"No," said Lucy. She looked at them all — the two Hartleys, and Sophie with her notebook, and the empty paddock behind them. "You've come a long way for one pony. Are you going to go and see her?"

"Yes," said Emma, before anyone else could speak. "Yes. We are."

Lucy fetched a pen. On a corner of Sophie's notebook she wrote a name and a telephone number. *Mr. Avery. Sandy Bay.*

"Tell her hello from me," she said, "when you find her."

That evening, back at Willow Creek, they told Dad everything.

He listened the way he always did — quietly, his big hands still on the table. When they had finished, he stood up and went to the telephone in the hall.

"Sandy Bay," he said. "Let's find out."

He dialled the number Lucy had written down. The children crowded round. Jack could hear the phone ringing, far away, down by the sea.

A man answered. His voice was rough and slow and kind, like a man who spent all day out in the wind.

Dad said who he was. He said he was asking about a grey mare, sold from Deepdale, a pony once called Lady.

There was a pause. Jack held his breath.

Then the man on the line spoke again.

"The grey mare? Aye, she's here." Another pause. "But you'd best come soon."

Dad said thank you and put the phone down slowly.

"Come soon," Jack repeated. "Why soon? Dad — what did he mean, *come soon?*"

But Dad was still looking at the telephone, and he did not answer.

Chapter 7 — The Grey Mare of Sandy Bay

They left before the sun was really up.

Dad had said only one thing at breakfast. “We go today.” So they went. The whole family climbed into the car, and Sophie came too, with her notebook on her knees.

Emma sat by the window and watched the road. All week, one question had gone round in her head. *Come soon*. Why soon? Nobody knew. Dad had not answered, and after a while they had stopped asking.

The drive was long. The hills went by, then flat green fields, then something new in the air. Emma opened the window. The wind smelled of salt.

“We’re near,” said Mum. “Can you smell it? That’s the sea.”

Then they came over a low hill, and there it was.

The sea.

It filled the whole window, grey and blue and huge, all the way to the sky. White birds turned above it. Below them the land dropped away in tall cliffs. At the bottom lay a long curve of yellow sand.

“Oh,” said Sophie softly. Even Jack had gone quiet.

A wooden sign stood by the road. SANDY BAY. RIDING ON THE BEACH.

Dad turned down a narrow lane. It ran all the way to the bottom, close to the water. He parked, and they got out, and the sound of the sea came up to meet them.

The waves rolled in, one after another, and broke white on the sand. Far out, the water was calm. Close in, each wave climbed up the beach and slid back down again.

“The tide is coming in,” said Dad. “Watch. The water is higher than it was ten minutes ago. Twice a day the sea comes up the beach. That’s the tide.”

Emma watched a wave run up the sand and stop, and slide back. Then another, a little higher.

White birds walked on the sand near the water. They were big, with grey wings, and they cried out over the sound of the waves.

“Gulls,” said Mum. “Sea birds. They live out here by the water.”

And then Emma saw the ponies.

They came along the beach in a line, walking on the wet sand near the sea. One behind another, nose to tail, a whole string of them. On each pony sat a child, holding the reins, laughing. A woman led the first pony. The waves came in beside them, and the ponies did not mind the water at all.

Emma counted them. Five ponies. A brown one, a black one, two small shaggy ones — and at the front, leading them all, a grey.

Emma stopped breathing.

The grey mare walked at the head of the string. She was calm and slow, with a small child on her back. She was round and shiny. Her coat was grey, and over the grey lay soft dark rings, like little coins, all along her body. Dapples. The same soft grey dapples that Storm had.

“Emma,” said Jack, very quietly, beside her. “Emma, look at her.”

“I see her,” Emma whispered.



They walked down onto the sand. Emma's feet felt slow and strange. The string of ponies came closer, and the grey mare came closer, and Emma looked at her face.

There, on her right cheek, was a mark. A small dark mark in the grey, the shape of a little cloud.

Emma's knees went weak. For a moment she thought she might sit down on the sand.

The cloud mark. The one from the paper in the dresser drawer. *Grey filly, dark cloud mark on right cheek*. Storm had one just like it on his own face. Two grey foals, side by side in the old photo. Two little clouds.

It was her. It was really her.

A man was walking towards them along the sand. He was old, but strong. His face was brown and lined, like old leather left out in the sun and the wind. He wore a cap and big boots, and he moved slowly, the way Dad did.

"You'll be the Hartleys," he said. "I'm Avery."

Dad shook his hand. "David Hartley. You spoke to me on the telephone."

"I did." Mr. Avery looked at the children, and at their faces, and then at the grey mare. A slow smile came into his lined face. "And I think you've found who you came for."

"Is that Lady?" Emma said. Her voice came out small.

"That's Lady. Best pony on the whole beach." He looked at Emma kindly. "You've gone quite white, lass. Come and say hello. She won't mind."

The woman had stopped the string of ponies. She lifted the small child down. Mr. Avery took the grey mare's rein and led her over the sand to Emma.

Up close, she was warm and round and smelled of salt and pony. She put her soft nose against Emma's hand and blew, gently, looking for an apple.

Emma's eyes were wet. She put her hand on the warm grey neck.

"Hello," she said. "Hello. We've been looking for you for such a long time."

"You know her, then?" said Mr. Avery.

So they told him. They sat on the low wall by the sand. The gulls cried and the tide climbed, and they told him the whole story. The empty farmhouse. The name in the drawer. Mr. Dunn and his ledgers. Fern Hill, and the new name Lady. Lucy Parker in Deepdale.

"Lucy says hello," said Sophie, reading it off her notebook. "She made us promise."

"Aye, the Parker girl. She loved this pony." Mr. Avery nodded slowly. "I bought her from the Parkers, the summer before last. Best thing I ever did. The children here, they all want Lady. She's the gentle one. Never in a hurry, never a cross moment." He rubbed the mare's neck. "So she had a brother, you say."

"Storm," said Emma. "His name is Storm. He's got the same mark. The same dapples." She could hardly say it. "They were born together. They lost each other eight years ago."

Mr. Avery was quiet for a moment. He looked out at the sea.

“Well,” he said. “Then I’m glad you came. And I’m glad you came soon.”

Emma remembered. *Come soon*. She looked up at him.

“Why did you say that?” she asked. “Come soon. Dad wouldn’t tell us. Why soon?”

Mr. Avery took off his cap and turned it in his brown hands.

“Because this is my last summer, lass,” he said. “I’m getting old. My knees are worse than the tide. At the end of the summer, I’m going to retire. I’m going to stop working, and put my feet up, and let a younger man do the walking.” He looked around the beach, at the ponies and the sand and the sea. “Sandy Bay is closing. After this summer, there’ll be no more rides on the beach.”

Emma felt cold in the warm sun.

“But the ponies,” she said. “What happens to the ponies?”

“I have to sell them,” said Mr. Avery. “Every one. There’s a sale in September — a big sale, up at the auction ground. All my ponies go there, to find new homes.”

Dad had gone very still.

“The auction ground,” he said. “Which one?”

Mr. Avery told him the name.

And Emma saw her father’s face change. Because she knew that name too. It was the same muddy field, an hour from Millbrook, where Dad had gone one cold spring day. It was the field where a frightened grey horse once stood shaking in a pen. Nobody wanted him. Dad had bought him for ten pounds.

Storm.

The same field. The same sale.

“That’s our auction ground,” Dad said slowly. “That’s where I bought Storm.”

Mr. Avery raised his eyebrows. “Is that so. Well. The world is smaller than folk think.” He put his cap back on and looked at the grey mare, standing quiet with her nose in Emma’s hair.

Emma’s heart was beating fast. If Lady went to the sale — the same sale, the same field — then maybe, just maybe, they could bring her home.

“Mr. Avery,” she said. “At the sale. Could we buy her? Could we bring her home?”

The old man looked down at her, kindly, and there was something careful in his eyes.

“You can try, lass,” he said. “Anyone can try. But I’ll tell you true.” He patted the grey mare’s neck. “She’s the best pony I’ve ever had. Half the county will want her.” He shook his head slowly. “A mare like that won’t go for ten pounds.”

Chapter 8 — Ten Pounds and a Plan

They could not wait to tell Mr. Elliott.

Dad fetched him on Sunday, the way he did every Sunday. Jack stood at the gate and watched the car come up the lane. He had kept the news inside all week. Keeping it in had been the hardest thing he had ever done.

Mum had cooked a big lunch. There was roast chicken, and potatoes, and the last of the beans from the garden. But nobody could eat yet. Not until they had told him.

Mr. Elliott came in slowly in his wheelchair. Under his arm he carried the old photo album from Greystone. He set it on the table.

“Well?” His bright eyes went from face to face. “You’ve been to the sea. I can see it on you. Tell an old man everything.”

Jack could not hold it in one second longer.

“We found her,” he said. “We found Misty.”

The kitchen went very quiet. Mr. Elliott’s hands went still on the table.

“We found her,” Emma said softly. “On a beach at a place called Sandy Bay. She gives rides to children on the sand.”

Then they all talked at once. Jack told him about the string of ponies on the wet sand. Emma told him about the grey mare at the front, round and shiny, with soft dark dapples. Sophie had drawn it all in her notebook, and she held the page up.

“And the mark,” said Emma. “The little cloud on her cheek. The same as Storm’s. It’s really her, Mr. Elliott. It’s Misty.”

The old man’s eyes filled with water. He opened the album to the first page. There they were — Mr. Elliott, standing tall on his own two legs, and two little grey foals, one at each shoulder.

“My little grey pair,” he said. His voice shook. “Both of them. After all these years.”

He passed the photo round the table. Everyone held it, and everyone was quiet. Even Jack. Mr. Elliott wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and laughed at himself.

“Silly old man,” he said. “Crying at the lunch table.” But he was smiling too.

Then Jack remembered the hard part, and his smile went away.

“But we can’t just bring her home,” he said. “Mr. Avery is closing Sandy Bay. All the ponies go to a sale in September. And it’s *our* auction ground, Mr. Elliott. The same field where Dad bought Storm.”

“For ten pounds,” said Jack, and he tried to laugh. “Ten whole pounds. But Mr. Avery said Misty won’t go for ten pounds. He said half the county will want her.”

Mr. Elliott looked at Dad. “And what does the man who bought the first one say?” he asked.

Everyone looked at Dad.

Dad put down his fork. He did not say anything for a moment. That was Dad’s way.

“After lunch,” he said at last, “we’ll hold a family council. All of us. And we’ll decide it together, fair and square.”

A family council meant they all sat down and talked properly, and everyone got to speak. They cleared the plates and stayed at the table. Mr. Elliott stayed too. He was family now.

Mum spoke first. She was not just being kind. She had thought it through.

“Listen,” she said. “I have a waiting list. Children in the village, all wanting lessons. Every week I have to say no to somebody.” She looked at Jack. “And Biscuit is old. His muzzle is grey. He can’t work every day any more.”

She spread her hands on the table.

“This yard needs a second quiet pony,” she said. “Calm and kind with children. That’s a hard thing to find.” She smiled. “But a beach pony carries

small children all day long. That is *exactly* the pony we need. Misty isn't only good for our hearts. She's good for the stable."

Jack sat up. He had never thought of it like that.

Dad nodded slowly. "That's true," he said. "It's a good reason. A fair one." He folded his big arms. "But money is tight. Hay costs money. Shoes cost money. Those things come first, always. The horses we already have must be fed."

Jack's heart sank.

"So we can't," he said.

"I didn't say that." Dad looked round at them all. "I said we buy her fairly, at auction, like anyone else. No tricks. We wait, and we bid, the same as every other person in that field." He paused. "But hay and shoes come first. If you children want her — you help earn her."

Jack blinked. "Earn her?"

"Earn her," said Dad. "Work for the money. Every penny you can. Then we'll see how much we have when the day comes."

The plan came together fast after that. That was the good thing about a council. Everyone had an idea.

Mum found an empty jam jar in the cupboard. She washed it out and dried it and set it on the kitchen shelf, where they would all see it every day.

Emma cut out a small label and stuck it on the front. On the label she wrote one word, in big letters: **MISTY**.

"Every penny we earn goes in the jar," said Dad. "Every single one."

"How do we earn it?" asked Jack.

"Odd jobs," said Mum. "Little jobs, all over the village. Washing cars. Weeding gardens. Carrying shopping for the old folk. Mrs. Bell always needs help with her hens."

“And the harvest,” said Dad. “Mr. Fletcher next door cuts his hay this week. He always needs hands to bring it in. He pays wages for the work — good wages, at harvest time. Ben helps every year.”

Wages. Real money, earned by real work. Jack looked at the jam jar on the shelf, with its MISTY label, empty and shining. He could almost see it full.

“We’ll do it,” he said. “All of us. Me and Emma and Sophie and Ben. Odd jobs, harvest, everything. We’ll earn her, Dad. Just watch.”

All this time, Mr. Elliott had said nothing. He sat quietly by the window, turning something in his old hands.

Now he wheeled himself up to the table. He held out an envelope to Dad.

“Take this,” he said.

Dad looked at it, and wanted to refuse it. He did not take it. “Mr. Elliott—”

“Take it, David.”

“I can’t.” Dad shook his head. “You’ve done enough. That money is yours. You keep it.”

But Mr. Elliott only pushed the envelope closer, and pressed it gently into Dad’s big hand.

“Now you listen to me,” he said. His voice was soft, but it was firm. “That grey mare was born on my farm. She was my foal, same as her brother. I fed her from my own hand.” He pressed Dad’s fingers shut around the envelope. “I lost her once. I won’t stand by and let her be lost again — not while I have breath, and not while I have this.” He smiled. “Let an old man help. It’s the only thing I’ve got left to give.”



Dad tried once more to refuse. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He looked at the old man's face, and he could not say no.

"Thank you," he said quietly. He put the envelope beside the jam jar on the shelf. "We'll add it to the rest. And we'll earn all we can beside it."

Mr. Elliott sat back. He looked very happy.

"Good," he said. "Then it's begun."

That afternoon Jack ran next door to Fletcher's Farm. Emma came too, and they found Ben and his father in the yard.

"We want work," said Jack. "For the harvest. We're earning money, all of us — for a pony. Will you take us on?"

Mr. Fletcher rubbed his chin. He was a big man, gruff and slow, but his eyes were kind.

"Aye," he said. "I can always use young backs at haymaking. There's wages in it, if you're not afraid of hard work."

“We’re not,” said Jack.

Ben had not said anything yet. He was standing a little apart, looking up. He tipped his head back and studied the sky, the way his father did, the way farmers do. Far away over the hills, a low grey line was building.

“Then we’d best work fast,” said Ben. “Rain is coming. If the hay isn’t in by Friday, there are no wages for anyone.”

Chapter 9 — The Race Against the Rain

By Friday morning, the whole valley smelled of cut hay.

Jack had never worked so hard in his life. Mr. Fletcher's big field lay open to the sky, and all across it stood the bales — hundreds of them, square and heavy, tied tight with orange string. The grass was gone. In its place was stubble: short, dry stalks that poked through Jack's socks and scratched his legs.

"Load every bale onto the wagon," Mr. Fletcher had said at dawn. "Every last one. Before the rain comes."

So that was what they did.

It was Ben who ran the work. Nobody had asked him to. He just did it, quietly, the way his father did. He stood by the wagon and worked out where each bale should go.

"Two along the bottom, then one across the top," he told Jack. "Like bricks. Build it tight, or the whole load slides off on the first corner."

Jack did not argue. Ben was good at this. He was not the fastest reader in the class, and he never put his hand up at school. But out here, in the field with the bales and the wagon, Ben was the cleverest person for a mile. He was the foreman. A foreman was the one who ran the work, who told everyone what to do and when. Ben had never been the foreman of anything before. It suited him.

Jack lifted, and passed, and stacked. His arms began to ache. Then they ached more. The sun was hot, the hay was sticky and scratchy, and the sweat ran down his back. His hands went red, then sore.

Once, he nearly stopped.

Then he thought of the jam jar on the kitchen shelf, with MISTY written on the label. He picked up the next bale.



Emma worked without a word, steady as always. Sophie talked enough for all of them.

“In London,” she puffed, heaving a bale onto the wagon, “the heaviest thing I ever carried was shopping bags.” She blew a curl out of her eyes. “This is a bit different.”

At midday a lorry came for the first load. Its bales were piled high, and long ropes crossed over the top to hold them down. The wind had risen now — the rain wind — and the loose ends of the ropes flapped and cracked in the air.

Jack looked up. And then he stopped, a bale in his arms, and forgot to move.

Across the hedge, in the Willow Creek paddock, Storm stood by the fence. The flapping ropes were close. Close enough to hear. Once, that sound would have sent him wild. Once, flapping lorry ropes had made him break a gate and gallop down the road.

Now Storm only lifted his head. His ears turned to the sound. He watched the ropes for a moment, calm as the summer grass. Then he dropped his head and went on eating.

Jack said nothing. He did not call out, or point, or tell the others. Some things were too big for that. He just watched his grey horse stand quiet in the wind, and something warm rose in his tired chest. Then he turned back to the wagon and lifted the next bale.

All afternoon they worked. The grey line of cloud that Ben had seen days ago was right over them now, low and dark. The wind grew cold.

“Faster,” said the foreman, not unkindly. “It’s nearly here.”

They worked faster. Nobody talked. Bale after bale, wagon after wagon, up to the barn and back again. Jack’s arms had gone past aching now, into a kind of numb, heavy nothing. But he did not stop. None of them stopped.

The last wagon rolled into the barn just as the first drops fell.

Jack felt one land cold on his neck. Then one on his arm. Fat, heavy drops, one and then another and then too many to count.

“That’s it!” shouted Mr. Fletcher from the barn door. “That’s the lot — IN!”

And the rain came down.

They stood together in the barn doorway, wet and filthy and grinning, and watched the whole field turn silver with rain. They had done it. Every bale was safe under the roof. Not one bale sat out in the wet.

Mr. Fletcher paid them there in the barn, out of an old tin box. He counted the money into each pair of hands — Ben’s, then Emma’s, then Sophie’s, then Jack’s. Coins, and folded notes, warm from the tin.

“Good workers, all of you,” he said. “That’s honest money, honestly earned.”

Then Ben did something Jack did not expect. He pressed his own notes back into Jack’s wet hand and folded Jack’s fingers over them.

“For the jar,” said Ben, and shrugged, as if it were nothing at all.

That evening, at the kitchen table, they counted it. Outside, the rain streamed down the dark window. Inside, the coins clinked and rang as they went in – the coins first, sliding down, and then the notes pushed in on top. Jack lifted the jam jar to the light. It had stood empty on the shelf all week. Now it was heavy in his hand, and the coins slid and rattled when he tipped it.

Nobody said a number out loud. It was not about a number. It was about the jar growing heavier – one long day of real work, sitting there behind the MISTY label. Dad looked at it for a long time.

“That’s a start,” he said. “A good, honest start.”

By evening the hard rain had passed. It left the yard washed and dripping, the puddles bright, the air cool and clean. The real rain – the days of it the farmers feared – would come in the night. But for now there was a soft grey window, and the school was just wet enough to be perfect. Soft ground. Not slippery.

Because Sophie had a reward coming, and she had earned it.

All summer she had trotted round the school on old Biscuit, up and down, rising and sitting, learning to hold the reins soft and her back straight. Tonight, Mum had promised, she was going to canter.

A canter was faster than a trot. It was the next thing – a smooth, rolling run, like a rocking horse come to life. Sophie had watched Jack and Emma canter a hundred times, and wanted it more than anything.

“Sitting tall?” called Mum from the middle of the school.

“Sitting tall.” Sophie’s face under her helmet was tight with trying.

“Ask him gently, then. Squeeze him on – and canter.”

Old Biscuit, safe as a sofa, rolled up into a canter as smooth as you like. And Sophie’s mouth fell open, and then it burst into the biggest smile Jack had ever seen.

“I’m doing it!” she shouted, bumping round the corner. “Jack! Emma! I’m CANTERING!”

She wobbled. She lost a stirrup. She grabbed a handful of mane and laughed out loud. But she stayed on, and Biscuit carried her round the whole school, steady as the old gentleman he was.

When she pulled him up, pink and breathless, Mum was laughing too.

“There,” said Mum. “Now you’re a real rider.”

It was nearly dark when Dad drove Sophie home. Jack came along for the ride, too tired and too happy to sit still.

The road to the village ran past the auction ground — the wide, muddy field where, one cold spring day, Dad had bought a thin grey horse for ten pounds.

Tonight there were two men at the gate with a ladder and a bucket of paste. They were pasting a big poster onto the board by the road. The car’s lights swept across it as they passed, and Jack read it in one quick breath:

SANDY BAY SALE — SATURDAY 6 SEPTEMBER

Nobody spoke. The poster slid away into the dark behind them. It was real now. It had a date on it. Somewhere on that page was a grey mare they had crossed a whole summer to find.

They dropped Sophie at the shop. When they got home, the kitchen window glowed gold and warm — and Mum was standing in the doorway with the telephone in her hand and a strange look on her face.

“It’s Mr. Avery,” she said. “From Sandy Bay.”

Dad took the phone. Jack stood close beside him, close enough to hear the slow, rough, kind voice on the other end.

“Just thought you’d want to know,” said Mr. Avery. “A dealer came to the yard today. From up north. Came all that way, special. To look at the grey.”

Chapter 10 — Sale Day

Saturday the sixth of September came grey and cold.

The auction ground lay on the edge of town — a wide, muddy field, just as Emma remembered it. She had stood here once before. One cold spring day, she had watched Dad buy a thin, frightened grey horse for ten pounds. Nobody else had wanted him. That horse was Storm.

Now she was back. And this time, half the county had come.

Cars and trailers filled the field. Men in caps leaned on the rails. Emma's boots sank into the mud with every step. The air smelled of hay and rain and horses. At the far end stood the pens — rows of little wooden pens, each one holding a horse or a pony, all of them waiting.

"Stay close," said Dad. "Stay together."

They were all there. Mum, Dad, Jack, and Sophie, who had come to write it all down. Emma's stomach was tight. In Dad's coat pocket was the money. Every bit of it — the jam jar counted out, and Mr. Elliott's envelope. They had counted it that morning at the kitchen table. Emma knew the exact number.

She did not say it out loud. It was not a large number. Not for a pony like Misty.

They found her in a pen near the middle of the field.

Emma stopped, and could not speak.

She remembered Storm in his pen, that first day. He had stood in the corner, shaking, wild-eyed, pressed as far from the people as he could get. He had been so afraid.

Misty was not afraid at all.

She stood right in the middle of her pen, calm as Sunday. Children came to the rail and reached in to pat her, and she let them. She dropped her round grey nose into their hands. The dark cloud mark showed clear on her

right cheek. When a lorry rattled past, she only flicked one ear and went on chewing.

“She’s never learned to be afraid,” Emma said softly. “All those children. All those years on the beach. Nobody ever frightened her.”

“There you are.” Mr. Avery came through the crowd, his cap pulled low, his face brown and lined like old leather. “I hoped you’d come.”

He looked tired. It was a hard day, Emma thought — to sell all your ponies at once.

Then a man stepped up to Misty’s pen. He was tall and neat, in a good green coat, with a small notebook in his hand. He looked at Misty for a long time. He ran his eye down her legs, her back, her feet. He made a little note.

“That’s him,” said Mr. Avery, low. “The dealer. From up north.”

The man touched his cap to Mum, and nodded to Dad. He was not rude, and he was not unkind. He was simply there to work.

“He buys for other people,” Mr. Avery said quietly. “He has a client who wants a good grey mare. He’s come a long way to find one.”

Emma looked at the neat man and his little notebook, and her heart sank into her muddy boots.

Then the sale began.

One by one, the horses were led into the sale ring — a small round space in the middle of the crowd, fenced with white rails. Each horse had a number stuck on its side. Each one was a lot, the auctioneer said. Lot after lot, in they came.

The auctioneer was the same man Emma remembered, up on his wooden box, with the same little hammer in his hand. He talked so fast she could hardly follow him.

“Who’ll start me? Come on now, a good sort — who’ll bid?”

Hands went up around the ring. The bidding climbed, then stopped, and the little hammer came down with a crack. “Sold!” Then the next lot. And the next.

Misty was lot number twenty-seven.

When her number was called, Emma’s mouth went dry.

Mr. Avery led her in himself. Misty walked into the ring on a loose rope, calm as could be, and looked round at the crowd of faces with her kind dark eyes.

“Now here’s a pony,” said the auctioneer, and for once he slowed down. “A real pony. Quiet as they come. Carried children on the sands all summer, every day, and never put a foot wrong.” He lifted his hammer. “Who’ll start me?”



And the bidding began.

Dad raised his hand.

Across the ring, the neat man in the green coat raised his.

The auctioneer's voice went faster and faster, pointing from one to the other. "And you, sir — and you — thank you — and again —"

The number climbed. Dad's hand went up, then the dealer's, then Dad's again. Each time, the number climbed a little higher. Emma watched her father's face. It stayed calm, the way it always did. But she knew what was in his pocket. She knew the number could not climb for ever.

Up and up it went. Past the jam jar. Emma felt it in her chest — all that summer of work, the hay and the odd jobs, gone now, passed by. Still the hands went up. Past Mr. Elliott's envelope.

Now they were near the end. Near the very last of it.

Dad raised his hand one more time.

The auctioneer turned to the dealer. "To you, sir?"

And there was silence.

The neat man looked down at his little notebook. He looked at the number he had written there — his client's limit, the most he was allowed to pay. Then he looked up at Misty, standing quiet in the ring.

He shook his head.

"Once," said the auctioneer. "Twice —"

The little hammer went up.

Emma could not breathe.

"Sold! To Mr. Hartley."

The hammer came down with a crack, and the whole field seemed to ring with the sound of it.

For a moment nobody moved. Then Jack let out a whoop that turned every head in the field. Sophie grabbed Emma's arm so hard it hurt. Mum put both hands over her mouth. Dad let out a long, slow breath.

The jar was empty now. The envelope was empty. But there in the ring stood a round grey mare with a cloud on her cheek — and she was theirs.

The dealer closed his notebook and put it away. As he passed, he stopped by Dad and held out his hand.

“You bought well,” he said. “That’s a good pony. My client will be sorry — but the right home is the right home.” He nodded, and was gone into the crowd.

Then Mr. Avery came to the rail. He was carrying something over his arm — a saddle, worn soft and shiny with use, and a bridle to go with it.

“They go with her,” he said, and laid them gently in Emma’s arms. “Her own saddle. Her own bridle. She’s worn them every day for two years.” He gave a small, tired smile. “She’ll want her own things, in a new place.”

Emma held the warm leather against her chest. She could not think of a single word big enough. So she just said, “Thank you.” And she meant it with all her heart.

They walked Misty across the muddy field to the trailer. Dad let down the ramp at the back.

Emma’s heart gave a little jump. She remembered another loading, long ago. It had taken a bucket of feed. It had taken her own soft singing. It had taken a whole hour of patient coaxing — one more step, easy now, there’s a good boy — just to get a frightened grey horse to set one hoof on the ramp.

Not today.

Misty walked up to the ramp, looked at it once, and strolled straight up into the trailer, as if she had done it a thousand times. Which, of course, she had.

Dad laughed out loud — a rare thing.

“Well,” he said. “That’s the easiest horse I ever loaded.”

They lifted the ramp and fastened it. Inside, Misty pulled calmly at a net of hay.

They stood a moment in the cold grey field, tired and muddy and happier than Emma could say. And then Jack said the thing that none of them had thought of yet.

“Wait.” He looked at the trailer, and his grin slowly faded. “We found her. We bought her. She’s coming home.” He turned to Emma, and his voice went quiet. “Now the real question. Will Storm know her?”

Nobody answered. It had been eight years.

Sophie opened her notebook. On the page marked MISTY, under everything else, she wrote one new line in careful letters:

Will he know his own sister?

Chapter 11 — Two Grey Horses

The trailer came up the lane in the last of the light.

Jack sat in the back of the truck with his face against the window. All the way home, he had asked the same question in his head. Over and over. *Will Storm know her?*

Nobody could answer it. Not Mum, not Dad, not Emma. It had been eight years. Eight whole years.

Dad turned in at the gate. The tyres crunched on the yard, and there was Willow Creek, quiet in the evening — the stalls, the barn, the school, the two paddocks running down to the creek.

“Right,” said Dad. “Let’s get her out.”

They walked round to the back of the trailer. Dad let down the ramp. Jack held his breath.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a round grey nose came round the corner. Misty backed slowly down the ramp, one careful hoof at a time. She reached the bottom, set her feet on the yard, and stopped. She lifted her head and looked round at her new home.

Calm as Sunday morning.

“Good girl,” said Emma softly. “That’s the way to unload.”

She had come out of the trailer as easily as she had gone in. No fear. No fuss. Misty stood in the middle of the yard and looked about her. New smells. New sounds. She was not afraid of a single one of them.

Then, from down the field, a horse called out.

Jack’s heart jumped. “That’s Storm,” he said. “He’s heard us.”

“Bring her down, then,” said Dad. “Nice and slow. We’ll let them meet over the fence first. That’s the safe way, with two horses.”

Emma took Misty’s rope. They walked her down the track to the bottom paddocks. Jack went ahead. Patch ran at his heels.

Storm stood in his own field, next to the empty one. A low wooden fence ran between the two paddocks — the fence line. He was right up against it now, ears sharp, staring up the track. Jack had never seen him stand so still.

Emma led Misty into the empty paddock and slipped off her rope. Then she stepped back out through the gate and shut it.

And there they were. Two grey horses. One on each side of the fence line. Two grey heads, high in the evening light.

Nobody moved. Nobody said a word.

The stillness went on and on. Even Patch sat down and stayed quiet. The whole yard seemed to be holding its breath. Jack wanted to shout. He wanted to run down and throw the gate open. But he held still, the way the horses had taught him. He just watched the two greys, standing so quiet, looking and looking at each other across the fence.

Will he know her?

Then Storm lifted his head higher. His nostrils opened wide. And he called. It was not an ordinary whinny. It was deep and long and glad — a great glad sound that rolled all the way down the field.

Jack had heard that whinny once before. Only once. At the show, when Storm saw Mr. Elliott again after two long years. That same deep, happy sound.

He knew her.

For a heartbeat, Misty stood still. Then her answer came back — high and bright, ringing across the fence. She trotted straight to the fence line, and the two greys pushed their noses together over the top rail and breathed each other in.

Then something wonderful happened.

Storm spun round and galloped away down the fence — and Misty galloped with him, on her side, matching him step for step. Down to the bottom, round, and back up again. Up and down the fence line they ran, manes and

tails flying, two grey shapes in the dusk, always together, with only the fence between them.

Patch could not stand it. He raced round and round in circles, barking for joy.



“Look at them,” Emma whispered. “Oh, look at them.”

Jack turned to Dad. And Dad — big, quiet Dad, who never made a fuss about anything — had taken his cap right off. He held it against his chest, the way he had at the show, and he watched the two horses run, and he did not say one word.

At last the greys slowed. They came back to the fence, side by side, blowing hard, and stood there nose to nose.

Dad put his cap back on. “Well,” he said quietly. “I think we can let them in together now.”

He walked down and opened the gate in the fence line. Then he stepped back to watch.

Storm walked through. Slow and gentle now. He came right up to his sister, and the two greys touched noses, soft as anything. Then Misty turned herself round, and they stood together the way horses do when they are true friends — nose to tail. Her head down by his tail, his head down by hers.

And they began to nibble. Little gentle bites, up and down each other's necks. First Storm, then Misty, then both at once — nibble, nibble, nibble, all along the long grey manes.

"What are they doing?" asked Sophie.

"Grooming each other," said Mum, and she was smiling. "Scratching the places they can't reach on their own. Horses only do that for a friend they really trust." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "They must have done it as foals, the two of them. And look at them now."

Two grey horses, nose to tail in the last of the light, nibbling each other's manes — as if the eight years had never been at all.

They stayed at the fence and watched, all of them, until the light turned soft and grey.

"We should give her her supper," said Emma at last. "But first — what do we call her?"

Jack blinked. "Misty. She's Misty."

"At Fern Hill they called her Lady," said Emma slowly. "For all those years she was Lady. On the beach she was Lady. That was her name for a long, long time."

"She was a good pony called Lady," said Mum gently. "That name looked after her all those years. We can let it go with honour." She laid a hand on the fence. "But she was born Misty. And she's home now."

"Then that's that," said Dad. "Lady can retire — with honour. She's Misty again."

Sophie already had her notebook out. On the page marked MISTY, under everything else, she wrote in careful letters: *She is Misty again.*

Down in the paddock, the two greys grazed side by side in the dusk, so close their shoulders touched.

At supper, nobody could stop talking about it. Jack told the winny story three times. Sophie drew a picture of two horses running. Even Emma, who was usually the quiet one, could not sit still.

Then Mum said the thing that made Jack sit straight up in his chair.

"Tomorrow is Sunday," she said. "And on Sunday, your father fetches Mr. Elliott for lunch. Same as always."

Jack's fork stopped halfway to his mouth.

Mr. Elliott. He had lost his little grey pair eight years ago. And tomorrow he would come up the lane in the car, the way he did every week — and he had no idea. No idea at all.

"He doesn't know," Jack breathed. "He doesn't know she's here."

Emma leaned forward, her eyes shining. "Then we don't tell him," she said. "Not a word. Not on the telephone. Not on the drive." She looked straight at Dad. "We let him see her for himself. From the gate. We just — let him see."

For a moment nobody spoke. Then Dad's slow smile spread right across his face.

"A surprise," he said.

"The best surprise there ever was," said Jack.

Mum was laughing now. "All right," she said. "Not a word from any of us. Your father and I will keep it a surprise too." She looked round the table at them all, and her eyes were bright. "Tomorrow, we show an old man his little grey pair. Both of them. Together again."

Jack could hardly sleep that night, for thinking of Mr. Elliott's face at the gate.

Chapter 12 — The New Photograph

Sunday came bright and warm.

Emma stood by the gate and watched the lane. Down in the bottom paddock, two grey horses grazed side by side. Storm and Misty. Their tails swished at the flies. They had not left each other's side since the evening before.

"Here he comes," said Jack, up on the top bar of the gate. "Don't say anything. Not one word."

"We won't," said Sophie. She held Mum's camera against her chest. Emma had never seen her so quiet.

Dad's car came slowly up the lane and stopped by the yard. Dad got out and lifted the wheelchair from the back. Then he helped Mr. Elliott into it, gentle as always, and pushed him across the yard to the gate.

"Well now," said Mr. Elliott. "What's all this? You're standing about like it's Christmas morning."

Nobody answered. Emma's heart was thumping.

Dad turned the wheelchair to face the field. And down in the paddock, the two grey horses lifted their heads.

Mr. Elliott went very still.

Emma saw his old hands grip the arms of the chair. He leaned forward. He looked, and looked, and looked.

"Two," he whispered. "There's two of them."

For a long moment he could not speak. His bright blue eyes filled up. He looked at Dad, and Dad only nodded, because he could not say anything either.

Then Mr. Elliott took a breath. And he began to sing.

It was the old song — the one he had sung to his horses in the field, morning and night, all those years ago. Emma knew it well. It was the song that

calmed Storm anywhere. His voice was thin and cracked now, but it carried down the field, soft and sure.

Down in the paddock, Storm's head came up. His ears turned. And he came — the way he always came — up the field to the old man's song, his mane lifting in the wind.

And close at his shoulder came Misty.

She did not know the song. But she knew her brother. Where Storm went, she went. The two greys came up the field together and stopped at the gate, and Mr. Elliott reached out with both shaking hands, one to each grey nose.

"My little pair," he said. "My little grey pair. Both of you. After all this time."

Tears ran down his lined old face, and he was smiling wider than Emma had ever seen him smile.



"She doesn't know your song yet," said Emma softly.

“She’ll learn it,” said Mr. Elliott. He stroked Misty’s cheek, right over the small dark cloud mark. “Don’t you worry about that. Storm can teach her. He’ll teach her everything.”

Sophie stepped back and lifted the camera.

“Mr. Elliott,” she said. “Stay just like that.”

The old man sat in his chair at the gate, a grey horse on each side of him, his hands on their noses. Storm on his left. Misty on his right. Both heads bent down towards him.

Just like the old photograph.

Emma remembered it — the picture from the album, the one they had found in the dusty old farmhouse. Mr. Elliott, still on his own two legs, standing between two small grey foals. For eight years, pictures had been all he had left of his little pair.

Click.

“Got it,” said Sophie.

Weeks later, when the picture was printed, Mr. Elliott stood it on the windowsill in his room at Fairview. He set the old photo right beside it. Two pictures, side by side. The two grey foals, and the two grey horses they had grown into — and in the middle of both, the same man, smiling.

“Now I see them every morning,” he told the children. “First thing, when the light comes in. My pair. Then and now.”

That morning they had all been to church, in the little stone church by the green. At lunch they crowded round the big kitchen table — Mum, Dad, Emma, Jack, Sophie, and Mr. Elliott in the best seat by the window.

Dad said grace, the way he did every Sunday. But this time, at the end, he added something.

“And thank You,” he said quietly, “for lost things found. Amen.”

“Amen,” said Mr. Elliott, and his voice was thick.

Then Mum passed the potatoes, and everyone talked at once. There was a great deal to be thankful for that summer. It was an ordinary happy Sunday lunch — except that it was not ordinary at all.

A week later, Misty had her first lesson.

Mum had a long waiting list — children who wanted to learn to ride, and no quiet pony to teach them on. Old Biscuit could not work every day any more. His muzzle had gone grey, and his back was stiff in the mornings. He had earned his rest.

So now there were two lesson ponies. And Misty, who had carried small children up and down the beach for two whole summers, was exactly right.

Emma led her into the school. On her back sat a small girl called Poppy, six years old, on a horse for the very first time. Poppy’s fingers were tight on the reins. Her eyes were huge.

“She’s ever so big,” Poppy whispered.

“She’s ever so kind,” said Emma. “Hold on with your knees. Misty will look after you.”

And she did. Misty walked round the school slow and steady, careful of the little rider on her back, just as she had walked the beach. By the end of the lesson Poppy was laughing out loud.

Over by the fence, in a warm patch of sun, old Biscuit stood with one back leg resting and his eyes half shut. He was dozing. He did not have to work today. He watched the new pony do his old job, and he dozed in the sun, happy as could be — in honourable half-retirement.

Sophie sat on the top of the fence and got out her notebook. She turned to the page marked MISTY. Under everything else — the long list of all the places they had looked — she wrote three last words in big careful letters:

FOUND. SHE CAME HOME.

Then she shut the notebook and put it in her pocket. That page was finished at last.

The days grew shorter. The leaves on the old oak up on Miller's Hill began to turn.

One morning near the end of September, Emma woke to the first cool air of autumn. The summer was over. There was mist across the fields, and a chill in the air that had not been there the day before.

She met Ben at the bottom of the hill. Patch ran ahead of them, nose down and tail up, sniffing at everything. They were walking up Miller's Hill to check the far fence before the winter came.

Halfway up, on the soft earth of the bridle path, Patch stopped. He sniffed the ground. The fur went up along his back, and he gave a low little growl.

"What is it, boy?" said Emma.

Then she saw them.

Hoofprints. Fresh ones, pressed deep into the wet path. Big ones — far bigger than any of their ponies made. And round each print ran the clear curved line of a horseshoe. An iron shoe.

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.

"These are shod," she said slowly. "A big horse, wearing iron shoes." She looked up at Ben. "None of ours wears iron shoes. And none of ours is anywhere near this big."

Ben crouched down beside her and pressed a finger into the mud. It was still soft.

"These weren't here yesterday," he said. "The rain would have washed them flat." He looked up the empty path, into the mist. "These were made in the night."

Emma stood up slowly. The hill was quiet. There was no one about — no one for miles. Only the mist, and the turning leaves, and the deep fresh prints of a big shod horse, climbing up Miller's Hill in the dark.

"Ben," she said. "Who rides up here at midnight?"

Ben did not answer. He was following the prints with his eyes, up and up the path, until they vanished into the mist.

And far above them the old oak stood grey against the morning sky, and kept its secret.