SAFE

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Lost children and abandoned horses – can Kizzy and Jakob bring them all home?

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To

my siblings:

Penny, Sue, Jacky and Nick

For being the best big sisters and brother ever
and for putting up with me!

Author note: Kizzy knows which mushrooms are safe because she was taught to forage by her papa and taught herbal medicine by her mama. Do not eat or drink wild mushrooms or any wild or garden plants unless an adult has told you they are safe. There are many poisonous mushrooms and plants. Please be safe.



Chapter 1

'Ouch!' Kizzy looked at the bubble of red blood oozing from the tip of her thumb.

'Don't get any blood on the white material!' The countess's hawk eyes spotted her mistake. 'It'll be a devil to get out. Stop looking out of the window, Kizzy. Focus. Make the stitches neat and the smaller the better.'

Kizzy sighed but couldn't help glancing outside again. In the distance, she could see Jakob having a riding lesson on Raluca with the director of the riding school and Heinz, their guardian. Jakob was working hard towards his dream of being a professional rider. All she wanted was to be out there too, but the countess had her trapped inside, in a room full of delicate, breakable things, making her sit still, with her back straight and her legs just so. Everything Kizzy, who'd spent most of her thirteen years living outside, detested.

Looking back down at her embroidery, she

focused on not stabbing herself again with the needle. She twisted the hoop, stretching the material taut. It was no good. Even squinting, her mess of lumpy stitches just did not look like the robin in the book. Not even vaguely. Kizzy let out yet another deep sigh.

'What music is playing, Kizzy?' the countess asked.

Kizzy jumped. Sweat trickled down her back. She hated these spot tests. It was all part of giving her the skills any other 'suitable young lady' would take for granted.

She strained to listen to the notes bouncing around the room. She'd never come across a gramophone until she'd come here. Her Roma parents didn't have one in their horse-drawn caravan. She stared at the spinning disc for inspiration.

'Well?'

Her pulse thumped in her neck.

'Um … is it Chikofsky? The ballet that you told me about: *Sleeping Beauty*?'

The countess sighed. 'It is *Sleeping Beauty*, yes. But it is Tchaikovsky. Do try to pronounce these things properly, my dear.' Her mouth formed the cat's bum shape of disapproval she always

did when Kizzy got things wrong. 'You need to concentrate harder if you're going to find a man to marry you. No girl survives on her own, you know.' The countess tapped her fingers on the arms of her chair. Everything about her was just so, from her feet to her hair.

Kizzy's insides bubbled with frustration. She'd survived on her own for over a year, living on the food she'd caught and foraged, hiding, until she'd met Jakob and Heinz. She knew the countess was very generous taking the three of them in when she'd already welcomed the Spanish Riding School and its director to her *Schloss* in Sankt Martin. They were free to be themselves here, to ride, except… She pulled at her stiff, starched white collar.

'Don't get blood on your shirt!'

Kizzy closed her eyes, trying to slow her breathing. Her leg shook up and down.

Unfortunately, the countess moved on to her favourite subject.

'You need to forget about this ridiculous horse-riding nonsense. You can ride occasionally. As long as it's sidesaddle, of course. A lady must know how to ride. But you can't help in the stables. That's most unladylike.'

Words started to explode in her head.

No!

No!

No!

No!

No!

No!

No more!

Chucking her embroidery on the floor, she ran out of the room, banging into the door as she left.

The countess shouting, 'Kizzy, come back now!'

No. The room was suffocating her. She had to get out.

She ran and ran – past some of the American soldiers, who looked at her aghast. 'Kizzy, what's the matter?' they shouted after her.

She didn't answer. There was only one place she wanted to be.

Racing past the Spanish School Riders, she ran through the stables until she found her safe place.

With the Lipizzaner stallion, Pluto.

She threw her arms around his neck, sobbing and shaking with anger. Taking a deep breath, she smelt her favourite smell. Sweet hay and horse dung.

'Oh Pluto, what am I going to do?'

The horse leaned into her, nickering quietly. He dropped his head down. It felt like the hug she so badly needed. They stood together, not moving, as he let her cry it out.

'Kizzy?' a voice whispered.

She couldn't turn around.

A hand touched her shoulder and gently pulled her back.

'What's happened?' It was her best friend, Jakob. His mop of hair flopped so far over his eyes, she knew Heinz would be telling him to get it cut soon.

She took a gulping breath. 'I don't want to be a lady!'

Jakob roared with laughter.

She lightly punched his shoulder. 'Don't laugh at me.'

'Well, you should see your face!' He handed her a hankie. 'You're covered in snot and have a dirty mark just here.' Jakob wiped her cheek gently with his thumb. 'We both know you'll never be a *lady*. Don't worry about it.'

After giving her nose a good blow, she turned back to Pluto, reaching up and stroking the

soft, warm fur just under his mane. This was her favourite thing to do – so comforting. His rose-grey coat was getting paler every day and it wouldn't be long until he was pure white like the other stallions.

'Would you tell that to the countess, please?' Kizzy looked back at her friend. 'Seriously, Jakob, I know she means well, but all the music, the walking up and down with a book on my head, the embroidering…' She showed him her bruised and scabbed thumb. 'And the clothes … oh, the clothes!'

She stepped back so Jakob could have a good look at her. 'Who wears these things?' She pointed to the starched white shirt, neat cardigan and skirt, her long white socks. 'Who?'

Pluto snuffled at her side, pushing her slightly with his muzzle.

Jakob hesitated, shrugging slightly. 'Young ladies?'

Kizzy stared at him, every part of her body fuming.

Their guardian, Heinz, came in and interrupted them. 'What's going on here?' He looked at Kizzy and raised his eyebrows. 'What happened? I thought you were with the countess?'

Kizzy looked at them both: Heinz and Jakob, who had found her in the forest when they'd been coming here to the *Schloss* with their horses. She'd been alone and they had accepted her, shared everything with her, brought her here with them and helped her find a home.

They were her family. If she ran away from the countess, she'd have to leave them both.

But if she didn't, if she stayed, could she bear it?