PIPPA'S PONY TALES

Team Spirit



PIPPA FUNNELL

OLYMPIC MEDALLIST

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Chapter One

'If you find a certain type of fence difficult,' said Angela, 'don't avoid it. You never know when you'll have to face it at a competition.'

She was standing in the middle of the sand school helping Tilly with her stunning grey, Magic Spirit. Tilly looked back at the combination jump she'd just tried: three fences in a row, with one stride after the first element and two strides between the second and third.

Magic was very forward going so found the distances pretty short. Tilly knew it was

something she would have to work on, otherwise he could make up too much ground and have the fences down.

They'd done several Pony Club events, nearly all successfully, but Magic's eagerness had caused a few problems in the show jumping phase. He was fine with single fences and okay with doubles, but he'd developed a habit of getting too quick down the combinations. As a result, he sometimes had one, more often two parts of it down.

Tilly shifted uncomfortably in her saddle.

'Tilly,' called Angela as she rebuilt the fences, 'don't push with your bottom! Sit quiet with your seat.'

Tilly was convinced Angela had eyes in the back of her head. *How had she seen that? How many times had she told Tilly to sit quiet and still?*

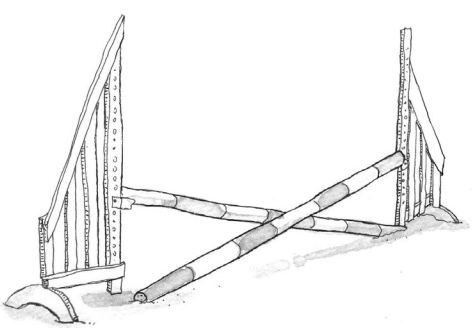
She could feel herself tighten up as she approached the combination. As Tilly tensed,

so did Magic. She was so relieved that she'd met the first element on a good stride, that she pushed him forwards. He reacted instantly by rushing, skimming over the first part, just leaving it up, gaining speed, hitting the second and completely destroying the last element.

'Don't panic, come again quietly. Be careful on your approach. Don't steady him with the hand, if you're driving him with your seat,' said Angela. 'It's sending mixed messages to him.'

Tilly did what Angela said and immediately Magic approached in a more relaxed way. She'd given him that bit more time to jump the first element so he landed in better balance to clear the next two parts without rushing.

'Wow, that made such a difference,' said Tilly, beaming. 'I wish it was that easy at a competition.'



'It will be, you have to keep working at it. Remember Magic trusts you. Every day I watch you training, I see you improving.'

Tilly smiled. Angela was right. No matter how tricky the Pony Club Eventing Area Competitions were becoming, she and Magic would rise to the challenge – and they'd do it together. They'd had a good season so far and were hoping to be selected for the Open Pony Club Championships. Tilly gave Magic a pat and praised him for trying. He lifted his head and half-turned to look at Tilly, letting her know that if she rode him correctly he would try his best.



Not everyone could get such an affectionate response from him. The regulars at Silver Shoe Farm, where Tilly stabled Magic – including the vet, the farrier and various experienced stable-hands – described him as a horse who

knew his own mind. And when they weren't feeling quite so generous, they used words like 'stubborn' and 'difficult'.

Tilly's experience of Magic had always been different. She was the person he behaved for, the person he trusted. That bond had started the moment they'd caught sight of each other on a busy road in Tilly's home town, North Cosford. Tilly had found him abandoned and running loose while she was out with her mum. He was a danger to road-users and himself. Despite the fact that her only experience with horses had been gazing at pictures in *Pony* magazine and dreaming of owning a top class eventer, Tilly hadn't hesitated. It never crossed her mind that this desperately thin, highly strung, wild-looking horse, who was obviously very distressed, could possibly harm her. Every time anyone had tried to approach him, he reared, striking out with his front legs.

He was confused and terrified. Tilly managed to calm him by being quiet, yet confident and reassuring, talking to him all the time. The crowd around them, including Tilly's mum, couldn't believe the level of trust that the horse was putting into this determined girl. So when Angela, Silver Shoe Farm's owner, had arrived on the scene and agreed to take the horse on, she agreed to take Tilly on too. With years of top eventing experience behind her, Angela knew that a bond like that between a horse and person was truly special.

Horses, eventing and helping at Silver Shoe Farm were Tilly's life. Her friend Becky said she lived on Planet Pony. She did normal things too. School. Homework. Catching up with friends. But horses were her world. While her friends gossiped about movies and make-up, she thought about snaffle bits and cross-country fences. While they whispered about boys

– boys they had crushes on, boys in the dinner queue, boys on television – she daydreamed of winning Badminton. When they talked about 'falling in love at first sight' Tilly simply thought about the deep and limitless feelings she had for Magic. Planet Pony all the way.

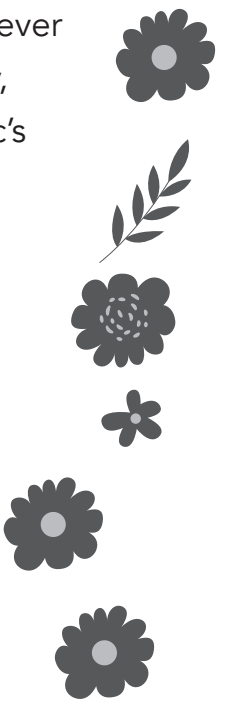
As Tilly wandered back to the yard with Magic, she thought about Angela's advice. What was the problem with the combination? It wasn't the height or width of the fences. She and Magic had cleared bigger jumps. In fact, they were known for their courage. Perhaps it was the technical complexity? Perhaps it was the fact that often when they'd jumped a combination, they'd messed it up? A fear of failure, a crisis of confidence. But Tilly knew confidence was vital in such a demanding sport as eventing. She remembered something her half-brother, Brook, also a talented rider, had once said: 'Believe in yourself and your horse will believe in you.'

'That's it,' she said as she tied Magic up in the wash-down area. 'Combinations may be a challenge, but they're not going to stop us from making the team. We'll conquer them somehow.'

Tilly took a breath and thought of the progress she'd made. When she'd first started riding, she'd had passion and natural flair, but that was it. No experience. No knowledge, apart from the hints and tips she'd picked up from websites and books, even though she'd never had the chance to try them out. Over the last few years, with Angela teaching her, she'd developed new skills. She had worked tirelessly on the basics: riding without stirrups to help with her balance, making herself ride with her hands together, so she learned to steer and straighten with her legs. Often when her friends were going off on hacks, she would be repeating more transitions, and getting circles exactly the size she wanted, without

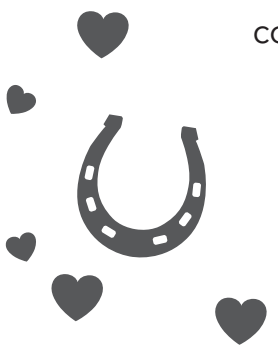
falling in or out. Now she and Magic had a genuine shot at success.

Despite their potential, it hadn't been a straightforward journey. Tilly knew in her heart that if she'd never rescued Magic from that roadside, she probably wouldn't be in the saddle at all. There was no way her adoptive parents, the Redbrows, could afford the upkeep of a horse. Riding lessons were expensive enough, never mind the stabling costs. Thankfully, Angela had agreed to cover Magic's upkeep, everything from hay to farrier's and vet's fees, and she had given Tilly riding lessons in exchange for working in the yard. She'd told Tilly and her parents countless times that it was worth her while, because she could see how amazing their partnership was.



At Pony Club competitions, the fact that Tilly didn't officially own Magic sometimes made her feel out of place. She'd meet riders with fantastic horses, state-of-the-art horseboxes and all the latest tack and equipment and she'd wish she had the same. Worst of all though, was her fear that Magic might be taken from her. Technically, he still belonged to someone else. She only hoped that someone would never want him back.

Angela always insisted it didn't matter whether a rider had every bit of tack and equipment going, whether they had luxury stables in their own back garden, or the money to buy five top competition horses. Trust, dedication and talent were everything. And since Tilly and Magic had plenty of all three, they deserved a chance.



Thinking about chances, Tilly stroked Magic's neck and stared at the horizon, across the spring green of the trees and fields to the rolling hills. She was about to start brushing him down, when her phone buzzed. She gave a small sigh and answered it.

'Tilly?' said a voice. 'It's Penny from North Cosford Pony Club.'

'Oh, hi, Penny. How are you?'

'Great, thanks. I think you will be too, when I tell you why I'm calling. We've been reviewing the North Cosford Branch Event Team, Tilly, and you've been selected. That's right. You're going to the championships.'

'What?'

Tilly gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. The smile burst out of her.

'I am?'

'Of course. You must have known that you and Magic were in with a chance. This year you've been one of our most successful partnerships.'

'But I thought because of my hiccups in the show jumping...'

'You've still had better results than most,' Penny interrupted. 'Besides, we're confident that under Angela's watchful eye you're working on that.'

'Oh, wow!' said Tilly. 'Totally, totally wow!'

