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Follyfoot

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Follyfoot

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Chapter 1

On these early spring Sundays, there were usually a few visitors who came to the farm at the top of the hill.

Some of them were regulars, horse-lovers and children with carrots and apples and sugar for all the horses, and special snacks for their favourites. Peppermints for Cobbler's Dream. Soft stale biscuits for Lancelot, who was too old to have much use of his teeth.

Some of the people who came into the yard under the stone archway were strangers who had been driving by, saw the sign, 'Home of Rest for Horses', and stopped to see what it was all about.

'What's it all about then?' The two boys who had roared up on a motorbike were not the sort of people who usually came to the farm. Nothing much doing here. Daft

really, the whole outfit. 'What's it all about?' The taller boy swaggered across the yard as if he had come to buy the place: cracked leather jacket with half the studs fallen out, cheap shiny boots, long seaweed hair, a scrubby fringe of beard that wouldn't grow.

'Saving lives,' Steve muttered, not loud enough for them to hear. They wouldn't understand anyway, that kind. Steve went on sweeping the cobbles, his head down dark hair falling into his eyes.

'Huh?' The shorter, thicker boy looked as if his mother should have had his adenoids out long ago.

'Horses that are too old to work, or too badly treated – we give them a good life.'

'Daft, innit?' The boys went jeering towards the loose boxes that lined three sides of the yard.

'Willy. Spot. Ranger. Wonderboy.' The younger boy, about sixteen, with a stupid hanging lip, spelled out the names above the stable doors, to show he could read. 'Cobles Dram. Whoever heard of a name like that?'

'Cobbler's Dream.' Callie came out of the stable, where she had been brushing the mud off the chestnut pony, whose favourite rolling places would delight a hippopotamus. 'And everybody's heard of him. He was on television. He was in all the newspapers for catching a horse thief.'

'Thrills.' When the boy hung his big cropped head and looked up at her with his slow eyes, she thought for a

moment she knew him. Where had she seen that broad earthy face with the thick lips hanging open, because he could not breathe through his pudgy nose?

One of the boys threw up a hand and the pony flicked back his ears and jerked his head away.

'That's not the way to go up to a horse,' Callie said. 'Especially Cobby. He's half blind.'

'Don't tell me about horses,' the boy grunted. 'We've got dozens of 'em at home.'

'Bad luck on *them*.' Usually Callie was polite to the visitors. Her mother was married to the Colonel, who ran this farm, and Callie loved to take people round the stables or down the muddy track to the fields, and tell them the history of each of the twenty horses, or as much as they would listen to.

But these boys would not listen to any of it. When she started to tell them about Wonderboy, who had been her brother's famous steeplechaser before he died, and Ranger with the ruined mouth, and Spot, the circus rosinback with the rump as broad as a table, the taller boy said, 'Oh shut up, you silly kid,' and the younger one stuck out a boot and tripped Callie up as she turned to go on to the mule's box.

'What the hell are you playing at?' Steve was there in seconds, holding the broom like a weapon, his clear blue eyes hard with anger.

'Don't touch me,' the boy whined, 'or I'll call the coppers.'

'I'll call them myself if you don't get out of here.'

'Can't wait,' the older boy said. '"Visitors Welcome", it says on the sign. Some welcome. Come on, Lewis.'

Willy the mule stared sadly over his door, a pocket of air in his lower lip, lop ears sagging. Callie, inspecting her grazed hands for blood and disappointed to find none, yelled after them as they ran under the arch, 'Don't bother to come back!'

'Don't worry!' Lewis yelled back over his shoulder. Yes . . . there was something familiar about him. Where on earth—?

'Lewis.' She wiped off her hands on the seat of her patched jeans, as if she were wiping off the disgustingness of Lewis.

'Louse,' Steve said.

The motorbike snarled, spat foul smoke and roared away.

Chapter 2

Dora, the girl who worked with Steve in the stables, had been home for the weekend, but she came back on an early bus, to help with the feeds. She would rather be here than at home anyway. The Colonel had to force her to take an occasional weekend at her parents' flat in the industrial town which sprawled along the valley, to keep her mother from storming up the hill to complain.

Steve's mother did not come, and he had no father. This was his home, and his family. Cobbler's Dream, the pony he had rescued from a spoiled and vicious child, was the horse he loved best.

It was going to be a wet night, so Dora brought the rest of the old horses in from the fields. She was coming round the corner of the barn with the two Shetlands, a

handful of shaggy mane in each hand, when a car stopped in the road and a man walked into the yard. A worn-looking horsey type of man, with bow legs and a lean brown face.

'I'm sorry, we're closed to visitors.' Dora shoved one Shetland into its stable with a slap on its bustling bottom and made a grab for the long tangled tail of the other, as it ducked under her arm and headed for the feed shed. 'Shut that door!'

The man moved quickly and shut the door in Jock's square face. Dora got her arms round his neck and practically carried him back to the loose box he shared with Jamie and the tiny donkey. They had tubs on the floor because the manger was too high, and they nipped each other round and round the box, going from tub to tub like a buffet lunch.

'I've come to see the manager,' the bow-legged man said.

'The Colonel?' You were supposed to say he was not at home on Sunday afternoons, but Dora always stated facts, even when they were ruder. 'He's in the house, but he can't see you.'

'Why not?'

'He's probably asleep.'

The man bit his lip, which was cracked and dry, like badly kept leather. 'Could you possibly … It's an emergency. About a horse.'

'Another customer?' Callie came up. The stables at the farm were full, but she always wanted more.

'It's a hard case.' The man looked sad. He looked defeated, as if he had known a lot of disappointments and could not stand any more. 'The mare is in bad trouble.'

'I'll get the Colonel,' Dora said, but Callie said, 'Let me. He hates being woken up, but at least I do it gently.'

The last time a horse was down at night and thrashing in its box, and Dora had shouted in the Colonel's ear, he had sat up and yelled, 'Messerschmitts – take cover!'

The Colonel came out of the back door with his yellow mongrel dog, pulling his worn tweed cap over sleepy eyes. He was a tall thin man with a slight limp from the war, and a scar by his eye where a kick from one of his horses had left him able to move the right side of his face more than the left, so that you could not always tell if he was serious or joking. He limped down the cinder path in his socks because he couldn't find a pair of shoes, walking on his heels with his toes turned up, because the ground was damp.

He and the bow-legged man leaned against posts with their hands in their pockets and talked quietly. Callie put a wheelbarrow in a doorway and pretended to be cleaning out Lancelot's clean stable, so that she could hear.

'. . . but I can't do any more,' the man was saying, 'because I lost my job.'

'I'm sorry.' The Colonel waited. He was a good listener.

'Down at the Pinecrest.'

The Pinecrest was an unattractive shabby hotel outside the town, with no pine trees in sight and not on the crest of a hill, but in a swampy valley where a polluted stream ran sluggishly through, gathering more pollution from the garbage that the Pinecrest cook threw out of the back door.

'I was in the stable there. They hire out riding hacks, you know.'

'Yes, I know.' The Colonel made a face as if he would rather not know.

'It's been on my mind,' the groom said. 'I done my best for my horses, but they want to get the last scrap of work out of them, and they're not fit for it.' The Colonel waited. 'Well, you can't feed more than the owner will buy, can you? The pasture is all grazed out and the hay he bought – you wouldn't use it for bedding.'

'They got a licence to run a riding stable?'

'Must do, or they couldn't be in business. I don't know how they got it though, unless they bribed the authorities, *which* I wouldn't put it past them, the kind of people they are.'

'Why did you stay with them?'

'Work's not easy to find.' The groom shrugged. 'I kept my mouth shut, because I needed the job, and my horses

needed me. But then I couldn't hold myself in any longer. When I hit that boy of theirs – he was lucky I didn't kill him – they said, "Pack your bags and keep walking."'

'What happened?'

'They've got this old mare, see? A good one once. They got her off the track because she wouldn't race, and they've always kept her down and very poor, so she'd be quiet enough to ride. Quiet! The poor thing can hardly raise a canter. She gets a saddle sore, of course, with that thin thoroughbred skin and no flesh on her. Well, then it's my day off, and this fat lady comes to the hotel. "I want to ride Beauty Queen," she says. Beauty Queen, that's what they call her, though she'd win no prizes anywhere. I come back early with a bag of cracked corn I'd managed to scrounge from a friend of mine who has some poultry, and someone yells, "Hey you! Saddle up Beauty for this lady." "Her back's not healed," I says, shutting the door of my car quick, so they wouldn't see the bag of corn and grab it to make porridge for the guests. "Saddle her up, I told you!" That was their eldest son, name of Todd, very ugly customer. When I refused, he gets the saddle himself and thumps it on that poor old mare's back' – the groom winced, as if he could feel the pain of it himself – 'and leads her out. I grab the rein and start to lead her back inside, and when the boy gets in the doorway to stop me, I knock him sideways.'

'Into the manure heap, I do hope.' Callie was frankly listening now, standing in Lancelot's doorway with a foot on the barrow handle and her chin on the fork.

'Right.' The groom smiled for the first time, then turned back to the Colonel with a long face. 'So I lost my job, and the horses lost me, and Beauty – well, God knows what will happen to her.'

'What about the RSPCA?'

'The Inspector is away. I can't wait, because I'm leaving for Scotland first thing tomorrow. I've a pal up there might have a job for me. So I came to you, because I'd heard what you do here for horses. Will you help?'

'Oh Lord,' the Colonel said. 'I'll try.' He hated trouble and this looked like trouble, but for a horse, he would get into trouble with both feet. Last year, he had got himself knocked out at Westerham Fair, taking on a giant of a man who was dragging off a mare in foal tied to the tail gate of a lorry.

Chapter 3

'Remember when you pulled that chap out of the driver's cab and found out how big he was?' Steve laughed, remembering, as they drove next day down the long winding hill and headed towards the Pinecrest Hotel.

The Colonel grinned with the agile side of his face. 'I wouldn't have tackled him if I'd known.'

'You would.' Steve drove fast and cheerfully. He liked to drive the little sports car, which the Colonel wasted by driving too cautiously, and he loved to go on rescue missions like this. It made his nerves hum and his body feel light and strong at the same time. If he had lived in olden days, he would have gone off hacking at dragons with a two-bladed sword.

'Don't drive so fast,' the Colonel said. 'I've got to

think out how I'm going to handle this.'

'Why can't we just march in, demand to see the horses, and if the mare's condition is as bad as the groom said, take her away? I could start leading her home while you go back for the horse box.'

'And get charged with – let's see: forcing an entry,' the Colonel ticked it off on his fingers, 'breach of the peace – that's if you get into a fight – trespassing, horse stealing. No, Steve, we've got to be very careful to stay on the right side of the law.'

'Oh that.' Steve shifted impatiently. When he was younger, he had got into a lot of trouble for not caring which side was which. 'The mare is in a bad way. That's what counts.'

'We've got to do it right.' The Colonel bit at the skin round his nails, a habit that Callie's mother Anna had been trying to get rid of since she married him. He remembered and put the hand down into his jacket pocket. 'I've got twenty other horses and ponies to think of. No help to them if I get my stable closed down.'

'No one would do that. Everyone's proud of the Farm.'

'You'd be surprised, Steve. There are people round here who'd be glad to see us go out of business. They think the farm is a waste of money and a waste of land. Unproductive. Plough it under and raise wheat for the starving millions.'

'Couldn't grow much wheat in our chalky soil.'

'Face it, Steve,' the Colonel said gloomily, biting his nails again. 'There are people who don't like horses. Incredible, but true. Horses smell. They bring flies. They give you asthma. One end kicks and the other end bites. They get through gaps in hedges and go across people's land.'

'Old Beckett.'

'If a brewery Clydesdale with feet the size of Stroller's went over *your* lettuce seedlings, you wouldn't be so keen on horses either. These people at the Pinecrest sound very tricky. I can't risk any trouble. So back me up, Steve. Try and look like the assistant to the Agricultural and Domestic Animals County Surveyor.'

'Who's he?'

'I've just invented him.'

'Good morning to you!' The Colonel was always at his most polite when he was nervous. 'Am I speaking to the lady of the house?'

The elderly woman who was crouched over a weedy flower-bed outside the hotel looked up, brushing back grey hair.

'If you mean Mrs H,' she said, 'I think she's in the kitchen discussing menus with the cook. Listen – you'll hear plates and saucepan lids flying. I merely live here. But

there's nothing to do and the garden is so run down, I thought I'd give myself some bending exercise, at least.'

She began to get up, clutching her back and groaning, and the Colonel gallantly helped her to her feet.

'If you've come about taking rooms—' she looked suspiciously at the Colonel and Steve.

'No, we – er, we've come to see—'

'—my advice to you is forget it.'

She paddled off in grey gym shoes with her toes turned out. The hotel door had opened, and an anxious little woman with nervous hands and a twitching mouth had come out.

'Dear Mrs Ogilvie.' She tried a laugh. 'Quite a joker. No need to take any notice of what she says. She's a bit – you know.' She tapped her head, which was done up in pink rollers.

'Too true.' Mrs Ogilvie spun round in the gym shoes. 'Anyone must be to stay in this dump.'

'She's been here for five years,' Mrs Hammond whispered. 'We can't get her out of the bridal suite. But come in, do. Mustn't keep you standing. It looks like rain.' She put out a hand and squinted suspiciously up at an innocently blue sky. 'Come into the office and let's see what we can do for you.'

She was all smiles and pleasantries, and so was her husband when he came into the office, summoned by a

maid who opened a door and yelled down an echoing stone passage, 'Mr H! You're wanted up front!'

After what the groom had told them, Steve and the Colonel were surprised to find him quite an agreeable man, a bit soapy and smiling too much, with an oiled wave in his hair and small pointed teeth like a saw, but not the mean and brutish tyrant they had expected.

The Colonel was thrown out of gear. They chatted politely about nothing much, and although he kept trying to start his piece about the Agricultural and Domestic Animals County Surveyor, he could never quite get it out. Instead of being put at his ease by the smiling Hammonds, he was even more nervous. He shifted his feet. He blew his nose. He bit round his nails – what a giveaway. Steve wanted to slap at his hand as Anna would have done.

When Mr Hammond finally stopped vapourizing about the weather and taxes and asked him, 'And what can I do for you, sir?' the Colonel lost his nerve completely and blurted out, 'Well, it's like this. I'm from the Home of Rest for Horses, up at Follyfoot Farm.'

That did it. Steve had told him at least twice. 'Keep quiet about the farm, till we see the mare.' But Mr Hammond said without relaxing his smile, 'I know that, of course.'

'You know the Colonel?' Steve asked, surprised.

'Oh yes, I've heard a lot about the Brigadier.' Mr Hammond deliberately upgraded him. 'It's wonderful work you're doing up there.'

'Yes indeed, very wonderful. The poor dumb beasts.' Mrs Hammond's anxious eyes misted over slightly under the rollers.

'Of course,' said the Colonel, trying to get the talk round his way, 'most of my horses are past working, but in a stable like yours, they have to earn their keep.'

'You've hit it on the nail, Brigadier,' Mr Hammond complimented him as if he had said something clever. 'I'm not a rich man, but I feed the best. Hard food, hard grooming, hard work, and what do you get?'

The Colonel's eyes were glazing over. They were all sitting down, too comfortable, and Mrs Hammond had sent the noisy maid for coffee. Would they ever get out to the stables?

'What do you get? I'll tell you what you get.' Mr Hammond, with his long glossy sideburns and his smiling sharp teeth, was an unstoppable tap of horse hokum. 'You get a fit horse, as you and I, sir, very well know, eh? Eh, lad?' He winked at Steve, as if this was a chummy secret.

The Colonel cleared his throat desperately. 'How about stable help? Hard to get these days.'

'You've hit the nail again, Brigadier. I'm not a rich man, but I pay the best. But they don't want to work, that's

where it is. Had to get rid of a chap just the other day. Lazy! You've no idea. And when my son had to speak to him about neglecting the horses, he went for the boy. Like a madman, Brigadier. He had to go. I'm running the stable now with my boys, though one's still at school. Too much for me, with the hotel as well, but the horses come first.'

'I'd love to see them.' The Colonel stood up quickly and moved towards the passage door, but Mr Hammond was quicker.

'Flattered, Brigadier, flattered.' He moved casually but swiftly in front of the door. 'A man of your experience, interested in our modest—'

'I am,' said the Colonel firmly. 'Let's have a look at 'em.'

Still smiling, still soapy, Mr Hammond managed to say No without saying it. 'Feeding time . . . highly sensitive animals . . . nervous when they're disturbed . . . ' The coffee arrived right on cue, and the Colonel and Steve had to sit down again and drink it. It was as soapy as its owner, with scummy milk and bitter grounds. Steve's cup had lipstick on it.

They left in a flurry of smiles and compliments. 'So kind of you to drop in . . . always nice to swap horse yarns . . . ' and a shout from the grey-haired lady who was back in the flower-bed, cutting everything down with a pair of rusty sheep shears, 'I didn't think you'd stay!'

Steve drove out by the back gate, past the stables, a patched together, rickety line of uneven sheds with a couple of thin horses in a yard outside, nosing sadly about in the trodden mud. Bales of mouldy hay were piled in an open shed. A boy was leaning against them, a cigarette smoking on his hanging lip.

It was the boy Lewis, who had tripped Callie up in the yard at the farm.