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Katy's Champion Pony

Written by

Victoria Eveleigh

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Katy's Champion Pony



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Times Gone By



It was a typical winter's evening – chilly but not really cold, and drizzly but not really raining. Katy Squires and her best friend, Alice, stood in the old cow shed which had been converted into stables for Katy's two ponies at her home, Barton Farm. The girls leaned on the wall inside the shed and chatted as they watched the ponies eat their hay.

Jacko was a liver chestnut gelding. He was fourteen hands high, ten years old and lovely to ride. Somehow he was cheeky and fun but at the same time kind and dependable. Katy had loved him from the first time

she'd ridden him at Stonyford Riding Stables. Her Granfer had bought him for her as a surprise birthday present.

Trifle was a registered Exmoor filly who'd been born on the moor above Barton Farm on Katy's birthday nearly three years ago. Katy had secretly bought her from Brendon pony sale. It was hard to imagine that the sturdy, confident pony munching away without a care in the world had, not so long ago, been a timid wild foal. Katy had brought Trifle back to where she belonged, and the little pony seemed to know it.

Jacko and Trifle had been at Barton for nearly two years now, and Katy couldn't imagine life without them. She looked at the contented ponies, breathed in the wonderful stable smell and felt pure happiness envelop her like a warm blanket.

"Look how fluffy Trifle's winter coat is," Katy said. "She looks like a life-sized cuddly toy, doesn't she?"

Trifle realised she'd become the centre of attention. She stopped eating, came to Katy and nuzzled her jacket affectionately.

Alice laughed. "Do you remember Mum winning that huge teddy in the raffle at the New Year's Eve party last year? Be careful, Trifle, or Katy will give you away as a raffle prize tonight."

Katy put her hands over Trifle's furry ears. "Don't listen to silly old Auntie Alice," she said. "For starters, you'd never get up all those steps in the Town Hall, would you?"

"Oh well, Trifle," Alice said. "You'll just have to stay here and have a stable sleepover with Jacko." She turned to Katy. "Have you made any New Year's resolutions yet?"

"Mmm. I suppose I ought to," Katy replied. "I wish I didn't like chocolate so much and I want to win lots of rosettes. Oh yes, and I'd love Trifle to become a champion Exmoor pony, of course."

"Are those wishes or resolutions? A resolution is something you're going to do, not something you wish would happen."

Katy gave her friend a light punch on the arm. "Oh, you're such a know-it-all, Alice Gardner! They're a bit of both, I suppose. So what are your resolutions, clever-clogs?"

"Okay. My resolution is to try to be nice to my terrible twin brothers, and my wish is that I'll be happy when we move to new schools next year after the summer holidays."

"I shouldn't worry about that, Alice. We'll all be going together, so at least we'll know some people already. You always seem to get on with everybody, anyway, so you'll be all right."

"Um… there's something I've been meaning to tell you, Katy."

Katy was unconcerned. "Well, tell me quickly because we'd better go and get ready for the party."

"I'm going to a different school. A boarding school miles away."

"Oh, Alice! How awful for you!"

"No, you don't understand. I *want* to go."

"But I thought we were best friends," Katy mumbled.

"Of course we are, and we can stay best friends too. We'll still see each other in the holidays, and we can text each other and things, can't we?"

"No we can't! I haven't got a mobile phone, have I? There's no signal here at the farm, remember?" Katy said, angry now. Alice *knew* she didn't have a mobile phone! Not having one made her feel left out at school, but her parents said it would be a waste of money.

"Sorry, I forgot. Okay, we can email each other. Chat on Facebook. I mean, there's lots of ways of keeping in touch."

"It won't be the same, though, will it? Can't you just say you've changed your mind and you don't want to go?"

"Are you crazy? Think what my parents would say!" Alice exclaimed. "Besides, I really do want to go

there. I've been for an interview and everything, and it's *such* a cool place. They do loads of games, and they've got amazing stables, with an indoor school and a cross-country course. And there's a big forest nearby with lots of sandy tracks for riding. You can even take your own pony and keep it at livery. It costs extra, but Dad says he doesn't mind paying for me to take Shannon. Isn't that great? His new house is quite near the school, too, and I'll be able to go there for weekends. I've hardly seen him since he split up with Mum, and I do miss him a lot. So I'm really excited about it, actually. I wish you could come too though. You with Jacko and me with Shannon – just think what fun we'd have!"

Alice's tactless enthusiasm cut into Katy. Before she could stop herself she blurted out, "Well, thanks for rubbing it in."

Alice looked bewildered. "Rubbing what in?"

"You *know* that my mum and dad would never be able to afford a boarding school. They're not rich like your family!" Tears started to run down Katy's cheeks. She turned and ran out of the shed.

"Katy! Come back. I didn't mean it like that," Alice called after her.

"I don't want to talk about it!" Katy shouted into the damp night. She was vaguely aware she was being unfair but she was too upset to care, and it

was much easier to get angry about things like mobile phones and money than talk about her true feelings. For the past year or so she and Alice had been inseparable friends, both at school and in the holidays. The thought of being parted for weeks – months even – was dreadful, but Alice obviously didn't feel the same way. Why couldn't she see how much that hurt?

The New Year's Eve party was in the local Town Hall. There was a barn dance for all ages, with a band and a caller who told everybody what they should be doing. Some people knew the steps already and others got in terrible muddles, but it didn't matter. The main idea was that everyone got together and had a good time.

To begin with Katy tried to avoid Alice, but it became impossible – especially when Mum and Dad went off to sit at a table with Alice's mum, Melanie.

It was Alice who broke the ice. She came up and said, "I'm sorry, Katy. I didn't mean to. I mean I don't want you to think … oh – you know what I mean!"

Katy still felt betrayed. She wanted to say, *Yes, I know what you mean: you'd rather go miles away to a posh boarding school than stay here and go to the*

local school with me. I thought we were best friends, but you've ruined everything! Instead, she said, "Yeah, well, it's okay. Let's just forget about it, shall we?"

Alice gave her a quick hug. "I knew you'd understand!" she said. "Friends for ever?"

"Friends for ever," Katy replied, trying her best to smile.

Alice grabbed her hand and headed towards their parents, who were beckoning to them. "Come on! They need us to make up numbers for the next dance."

It was hard to be unhappy with all the music, dancing and laughter.

Next autumn is ages away, Katy thought. Too far away to worry about now.

They stayed on the dance floor for several more dances until the caller announced, "Take your partners for The West Country Waltz!"

"Let's sit this one out. It sounds complicated, and I'm done in," Katy said to Alice.

They went back to the table where Katy's Gran and Granfer were sitting.

Alice collapsed onto a chair in a mock faint. "We're shattered!" she announced.

"Pah!" Granfer scoffed. "Young people don't have any stamina nowadays. Come on Peggy, love. We'd

better show them how it's done." He took Gran's hand and led her onto the dance floor.

"How embarrassing!" Katy whispered to Alice, but her embarrassment soon turned into amazement.

Gran and Granfer danced gracefully and in perfect harmony, their feet hardly touching the floor. People stood and watched in awe as the couple swept round the room with breathtaking style.

"I had no idea Granfer could dance like that, and how does Gran manage with her arthritis?" Katy asked her father.

"When Gran gets her dancing shoes on, nothing stops her," Dad answered. "Gran and Granfer used to win all sorts of prizes for their dancing when they were younger. The money they won helped them to turn Barton into one of the best farms on Exmoor."

For the first time, Katy imagined her grandparents as a handsome young couple with their whole lives in front of them, long before they were Gran and Granfer, or even Mum and Dad.

When the music stopped everybody burst into applause.

Soon it was midnight, and everyone was hugging and kissing and saying, "Happy New Year!" Then they

formed a huge circle, held hands with crossed arms and sang *Auld Lang Syne*.

Katy was sandwiched between Alice and Granfer, diving in and out of the circle in a long, snake-like chain as they sang the chorus.

"What on earth does Auld Lang Syne mean?" Katy asked Granfer afterwards.

"Roughly translated, it means times gone by, I think," Granfer explained. "It's Scottish, but over the years it seems to have become a traditional New Year's Eve song all over the place, probably because it tells about how time goes on but friendships should be remembered." He paused, and sighed deeply. "Yes, whatever happens, friends and family should never be forgotten."

A forlorn expression came over him, and for a dreadful moment Katy thought he might cry. Perhaps he'd overheard her row with Alice. She accidentally caught Alice's eye and looked away quickly.

Luckily, Melanie appeared with a tray of drinks. "The glasses with stems are champagne and the tumblers are lemonade," she said.

Granfer handed Katy and Alice tumblers, and took a couple of glasses of champagne for Gran and himself. "Thanks, Melanie," he said. He raised his glass and smiled. "To times gone by!"

"To times gone by!" the girls repeated. Katy took a sip of lemonade and the bubbles went up her nose.

The Squires family got home from the party in the early hours of the morning. Gran and Granfer stayed at Barton Farm for the night so they didn't have to drive back to their bungalow.

Mum had just finished cooking breakfast the following morning when the telephone rang.

Dad sat at the kitchen table, eating his eggs and bacon. "Who on earth could be ringing at this time of day?" he grumbled. "My New Year's resolution is to ignore the phone at meal times."

Mum gestured to him to be quiet. "Barton Farm. Can I help you? Oh! Hello, Rachel. Happy New Year to you too. What? Well, that's marvellous news! Congratulations! I'm thrilled for you both. Jack and Peggy are here, so do you want a quick word? We'll see you soon. Okay. Love and congratulations to Mark. Bye, now." She handed the phone to Granfer.

"Hello, Rachel love. Well done. I expect you want to speak to Mum, then. Yes, you too. Take care, now," Granfer said.

Gran took the handset from Granfer. "Hello? Congratulations, darling! I'm so pleased. What?

Yes, of course Dad's pleased too. He's just, you know, it takes a bit of time… Yes, I know. Oh, how lovely…"

"What's going on?" Katy whispered.

"Auntie Rachel and Mark are engaged," Mum whispered back.

"Wow! They're getting married?" Katy exclaimed.

"Ssshhhh!" Mum and Dad hissed together.

"There's too much noise in here, Rachel. I'll just go into the hall," Gran said, giving the family one of her stern looks.

With Gran talking in the hall, everyone talked more normally in the kitchen, although they were secretly trying to eavesdrop on Gran's conversation at the same time.

"You were a bit short on the phone, Jack," Mum said to Granfer.

"Oh, you know me. I hate talking on that contraption," Granfer said. "I'm very happy for them both. Delighted. Over the moon."

Katy sensed Granfer wasn't nearly as happy as he made out. She knew how fond he was of his only daughter, and guessed it was hard for him to let go, even though Mark and Rachel had been going out for ages and everyone had assumed they'd get married one day. The idea took some getting used to, she had to admit. For a start, it was bound to mean Rachel

would spend less time at Barton Farm. Since Katy had become the proud owner of Trifle and Jacko she'd grown to rely on her aunt's visits. Looking after two ponies was an awesome responsibility, and Rachel seemed to have all the answers to Katy's frequent questions.

"You're what? You can't be! When? That soon? Oh dear! Yes, of course it's a great opportunity, but…" Gran's voice became alarmed.

They all fell silent, straining to hear what she was saying.

A few minutes later she returned to the kitchen, looking flustered. "Oh dear! I can't believe it!"

Dad leaped up and helped her to her chair. "Can't believe what?" he asked. "That Rachel's getting married at long last?"

"No, of course not! We all expected that! No… Oh dear, I don't know how to tell you this, so I'll just have to come out with it straight. Rachel says Mark's uncle has offered him a job running a huge cattle station in Australia. They're going to live out there just as soon as they're married. They're moving to Australia this summer! Oh dear!"

Granfer got up from his chair and put his arm round Gran's slumped shoulders. "Don't take it so hard, love. It'll be okay. We'll go out and see them, if you

like. It's not far nowadays. I've always fancied a trip down under."

Gran looked up at him with watery eyes. "You knew, didn't you? How come you knew?"

Granfer forced a smile, but his face looked sad. "Mark came to see me yesterday to ask for our daughter's hand in marriage. Very proper and correct, as always. He told me then. Said I wasn't to breathe a word to anyone until he'd asked Rachel to marry him."

Now Katy understood why Granfer had looked so sad last night when he'd said friends and family should never be forgotten.

I don't like this year much, Katy thought as she put the ponies out in the field later that morning. What other surprises has it got in store?

She watched as Jacko and Trifle cantered off together.

Alice had promised to be her best friend for ever, and Rachel had promised to help her train Trifle, but they'd either forgotten or didn't care. Both had made different plans for the future, and Katy was no part of them. She remembered raising a glass to times gone by a few hours ago. Time moves on and people move on with it, she thought sadly. What if

friendships aren't remembered? What if Alice and Auntie Rachel make new lives for themselves and forget about me? How on earth am I going to cope without them?