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Opening extract from

Joe and the Race to Rescue A Boy and His Horse

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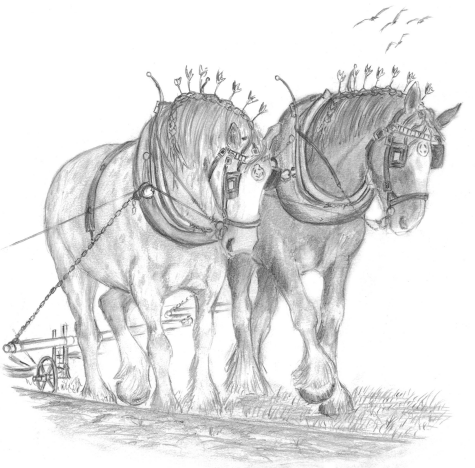
Chapter 1



Joe and Martin sat in the back seat of the car, too busy chatting to take much notice of the familiar scenery as it flicked by. They usually travelled this route together on the school bus, but today the journey had a carefree holiday feel about it. Nigel, Martin's dad, was driving them to the National Ploughing Championships, which were taking place on a farm near their local town of Bellsham.

Watching fields being ploughed wouldn't have been high on Joe's list of cool things to do at half term when he was living in Birmingham, but his life had

changed a lot since then. His family had moved to Newbridge Farm, Mum had given up teaching and turned the farm into a horse sanctuary, and he'd developed new interests like riding and fishing.

"Nearly there," Nigel said, grinning. He'd suggested the day out because he loved vintage tractors.

It was the horse-drawn ploughing that Joe really wanted to see. He'd encountered heavy horses for the first time at the Horse of the Year Show a few weeks ago, but he'd been too busy riding Lightning in the Bellsham Vale mounted games team to do more than admire them from afar. This would be a great opportunity to see some at close quarters.

He glanced at his watch: nearly midday. Emily would be taking Lightning to the Pony Club rally.

It was hard to accept he'd grown out of his pony. They'd done really well, and she'd taught him so much, but now she belonged to his little sister and they both seemed perfectly happy together. Adapting to a new pony wasn't turning out to be so easy for him, but he didn't want to think about that right now. An afternoon of enjoyment lay ahead, with no expectations or pressure. After a hectic year of competitions it would be a treat to be a spectator for a change.

Nigel pulled into a large grassy field and parked next to the car they'd been following. More cars lined

up beside them – row upon row – a bizarre temporary crop glinting in the October sunshine. The fields beyond were filled with marquees, tents, arenas and lorries. Brown patches of earth, like vast strips of sticking plaster, alternated with areas that hadn't been ploughed yet.

Nigel paid at the entrance gate and headed to where the vintage tractors were working. Martin followed. Joe looked wistfully through the open gate of a field signposted *Working Horses,* then hurried to catch up.

The three of them stood for a long time watching some grey Ferguson tractors at work, while Nigel talked enthusiastically about how they had transformed farming. It was odd to think that less than a hundred years ago they'd been cutting-edge. They looked like toys compared with modern farm machinery.

Eventually they moved on to look at the others: blue and orange Fordson Majors, green Field Marshalls with huge exhaust pipes, red and white McCormick International Harvesters, bright yellow Caterpillar crawlers . . . Nigel bombarded the boys with information about each one.

"Hey, how are you doing? I haven't seen you for ages!" A tall man with dark hair and a beard stopped to talk to Nigel. It sounded as if the conversation was

going to be a long one. Joe wondered whether he'd ever get to see the horses at this rate.

To his relief, Martin caught his eye and pointed towards the refreshment tent. He nodded in reply.

Martin tapped his dad on the shoulder. "We're going to get something to eat. Okay?"

"Fine. Got that money I gave you?" Nigel replied.

Martin patted his pocket and nodded.

"Be by the entrance at five o'clock," Nigel said, and turned his attention back to an in-depth discussion about tractors.

Lunch was fried bacon in a large white bun, a packet of crisps, a can of fizzy drink and a double ice-cream cone with a chocolate flake in it – not exactly healthy eating, but never mind. It was great to be able to have junk food again once in a while. When Joe and Lightning had been in the Pony Club games team together, he'd grown so much taller that he'd had to be really careful about keeping within the weight limit for her size.

Joe and Martin sat on a straw bale and finished their ice-creams. The weather seemed hotter than it had been all summer.

"D'you mind going to see the horses next?" Joe asked.

"Dad put you off tractors for life?" Martin grinned. "Reminds me of a joke."

Joe groaned. "Why am I not surprised?" Martin had an inexhaustible supply of jokes – some better than others. "Go on, then."

"What do you call someone who used to like tractors?"

"Er . . . Haven't a clue."

"An extractor fan!" Martin said triumphantly. "Ex-tractor fan. Get it?"

Joe couldn't help smiling. "Terrible." He got up and stretched. "Come on, let's go and see some real horsepower."

Dry stubble scrunched underfoot as the two friends walked towards the area where the ploughing was taking place. Even from a distance the horses grabbed Joe's attention. He couldn't explain why, but he always felt irresistibly drawn to them.

"Mind your backs, please!"

Joe looked round to see a couple of huge horses marching towards him, their great dinner-plate hooves thudding on the ground. He stood, mesmerised. They looked magnificent, adorned with brightly coloured ribbons and polished horse brasses.

Martin grabbed Joe's arm and pulled him out of the way.

The Shires – at least Joe guessed that was what they were – came so close that the air trembled as they passed by, their harness clinking like armour. They were even larger than Joe had imagined – not just taller but bulkier as well. Four of Lightning's legs put together wouldn't have been as thick as one of theirs.

In spite of the warm weather, the man driving them wore a woollen suit and a shirt and tie. "Thank you. Much obliged!" he called, turning briefly to smile at the boys. Round-rimmed glasses magnified his wrinkled eyes, giving him the look of a wise old owl wearing a tweed cap.

They fell into step behind him without saying a word. Joe followed as closely as he could, and tried to imagine what it would be like to drive such massively powerful creatures.

Like all good horsemen, the man made it look effortless. A quiet word or chirruping noise seemed to be all that was needed to guide them: "Velvet, steady, there's a girl," or "Sherman, *chlik chlik*, good lad."

So Velvet's the black one, and she's a mare, Joe said to himself. She's the trickier of the two, by the looks of it. The dappled grey's called Sherman, and

he's a "lad". I expect he's a gelding because he seems too laid back to be a stallion. I wonder whether they're related. Perhaps I'll ask . . . Maybe it's dangerous to talk to someone when they're driving, though . . . I wonder why the reins are like thin white ropes when the rest of the harness is all brown leather and brass . . . And I wonder why their tails are plaited up like that, with those ribbons and funny dart-like things in them. They've got darts and ribbons in their manes too – much more fun than the plain little plaits we have to do at Pony Club.

As Velvet and Sherman lifted each hoof off the ground with a swirl of feathery white hairs, their broad horseshoes glinted in the sunlight.

My wishing shoe must have looked like that when it was new. The thought took Joe by surprise; he'd almost forgotten about the rusty old horseshoe hidden in a box under his bed. Joe had dug it up soon after they'd arrived at Newbridge Farm, in the field that Mum now used as her kitchen garden. It was hard to remember how different things had been then.

Nellie, their neighbour and good friend, was the only person who knew about Joe's horseshoe. She'd seen him dig it up, and it was she who'd suggested making it into a wishing shoe with a wish rolled up on a piece of coloured paper in each of the seven

holes. Nellie was Romany, and wishing shoes were a Romany tradition, apparently. The weird thing was that it really had helped, or so it seemed . . .

He'd wished for a dog, and Rusty had come along. His wish that Mum would get better after falling off Lady had definitely come true. She'd made a full recovery, and she and Lady were getting along fine now. He'd made a wish to go home – meaning Birmingham – but pretty soon he'd realised he felt more at home at Newbridge Farm, so that had worked out in an unexpected way. His wish for friends had been successful – he'd never had so many. Martin had become his best mate, of course, and Caroline was a good friend as well. He liked her *a lot*, though, and that made it sort of complicated.

What else? That wish for good energy had been a slightly strange one, but he had to admit his whole outlook on life had become much more positive since he'd made his wishes, and great things had followed on from that, so perhaps there really was such a thing as good energy.

Most bizarre of all, he'd written down "Fortune" as a wish, hoping for lots of money to appear from somewhere, but a pony called Fortune had turned up instead. It was true that she wasn't exactly living up to expectations at the moment, but he'd only had her a few weeks. Perhaps, as far as the wish was concerned,

it had kept its part of the bargain and wasn't responsible for how Fortune turned out; maybe that was up to Joe.

Yes, it seemed that six out of seven wishes had come true so far. The final one, "England team", had been way too ambitious from the start. He'd been football-crazy at the time but riding had taken over since then, so getting into the England team was even less likely to happen now.

"Whoa!" the man said to his horses. They stopped instantly. Joe and Martin ground to a halt too. They'd arrived at the ploughing plots.

Several people immediately hurried over and started talking. Joe longed to find out more about the horses, but it was embarrassing hovering in the background so the two boys moved away to take a look at the other participants.

Joe was used to Pony Club events, where there were strict dress and turnout codes and everything was highly organised. Here, everything seemed much more relaxed, with ploughmen working the plots in their own time and frequently pausing to adjust their machinery or give their horses a rest. Some of the competitors were dressed smartly but others, especially the younger ones, wore jeans, T-shirts and baseball caps. The appearance of the horses also varied, from a few immaculately turned out pairs like

Velvet and Sherman to dusty-coated animals wearing dull working harness.

The air smelled of fresh earth and autumn. Murmured words and the clinking of the ploughs as they turned the soil were punctuated by other gentle sounds like horses blowing through their noses. In this field there weren't any engines popping away or smoky fumes wafting from hot exhaust pipes.

Joe looked back at Sherman and Velvet, keen for an opportunity to go and talk to their owner. There was only one person there now. He appeared to be helping to adjust the plough. It looked like a serious, skilful business. The horses stood quietly with their heads together, temporarily off duty.

"That's unusual, isn't it?" Martin said, pointing towards two stocky light brown horses with smooth legs, barrel-shaped bodies and long raffia plaits in their manes.

"Yup, smart, aren't they?" Joe said. "I think they're Suffolk Punches." He'd been reading about the breed the other day in Emily's pony magazine. "They're very rare, and their colour is officially 'chesnut' without a 't' in the middle."

"Not the *horses*," Martin said. "The person behind them."

Joe looked, and saw a middle-aged woman with an outdoorsy no-nonsense face holding the plough. She

wore a tweed cap, checked shirt, baggy brown trousers and stout leather boots, so it was easy to miss the fact she was female. "Oh, I see what you mean – it's a woman!" he said much too loudly.

"Ssshh, you idiot!" Martin hissed, and they both started laughing.

All of a sudden Joe realised the other reason why this felt so different from Pony Club competitions: most of the people here were male. For once it felt completely normal to be a boy who loved horses.

Joe glanced over to where the Shires had been standing, but they weren't there any more. They were down at the other end of the plots, ploughing. "Come on, let's go and watch Velvet and Sherman working," he said to Martin.

"*Who?*"

"The Shire horses we walked behind," Joe said impatiently. How could Martin have avoided noticing what they were called? The man had said their names often enough.

By the time the boys reached the plot, Velvet and Sherman had turned and were walking steadily towards them, their ears swivelling to pick up instructions and words of encouragement from the ploughman. Joe watched, fascinated, as Sherman made his way along the furrow, placing his huge hooves in front of each other with careful precision,

barely grazing the soil on either side. The horses were particularly beautiful now. Their necks were arched and they had a look of concentration on their faces as they worked. The ground they'd already ploughed had long, uniform waves of earth piled neatly against each other, as straight as a ruler.

How have those two gigantic animals learned to be that accurate? Joe wondered. There's so much I want to find out. Being a spectator's okay, but I'd love to be the one behind that plough.