

The Horse Who Danced

OLIVIA TUFFIN

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Chapter One

Iona screwed her eyes up, squinting so that everything appeared blurry. If she really tried, she could turn the lumpy arena surface of Whitemoor Riding School into the smooth pale sand of a top-class equestrian centre. The worn wooden gate became the entrance to an international arena, and the few spectators standing around, hopping from foot to foot to keep warm, became vast crowds all cheering her on.

In next we have Iona Patterson and Double Jinks, riding for Great Britain! Can they repeat their success in the Grand Prix from last year? She closed her eyes, imagining the commentator calling their names, instead of Henny Fisher, the ancient proprietor of the riding school, who shunned technology and had a handwritten list of the competitors waiting to ride the next class, the novice dressage.

“Miss Patterson, wake up!” Henny squawked, waving her stick towards the indoor arena set up in an old barn. “You’re next. Get moving.”

Iona’s daydream vanished and she sighed. Nudging her pony forward, Iona ran a hand over the neatly plaited mane, always with cotton thread, as her mum insisted.

“Elastic bands are so naff,” she would say, the needle held in her mouth as she weaved and twisted the jet-black mane by the light of a head torch. “Nothing like a proper sewn-in plait.”

No one else had plaited their ponies. Cobs stood with hairy legs resting, ancient-looking ponies with dipped backs flicked thin tails, and hardly any of the riders had even tied back their own hair. Whitemoor was a small riding school, tired round the edges, but it was local and friendly. Despite Henny’s fierce

exterior, she was actually very kind and had always encouraged Iona and her pony. Though Henny was well into her eighties, she and Iona could chat for hours about horses.

Double Jinks, known as Jinks at home, tossed his head, and Iona patted him, feeling the muscles under his ink-black coat, the immense power in his compact body. Jinks was only thirteen hands high but his attitude seemed to give him height. His coat shone, and although his white saddlecloth was frayed round the edges and Iona’s jacket was missing a few threads, they were easily the best turned out.

“Come on, boy,” she whispered to him. “I know it’s the same old place, but let’s dance.”

Jinks surged forward, his trot rhythmic and powerful but light. Iona noticed the judge in the little hut, a garden shed over which Henny had strung some cheery bunting, sit up as she rode past, and she paused so the judge could see her number. She didn’t recognise her, which was a pleasant change, as she was desperate to have some varied feedback. When the bell rang, Iona took a deep breath, turning up the centre line. Even at Whitemoor, she never grew tired of the way Jinks seemed to float down the arena, turning at exactly the right point, his neck rounded

but not tense, striking off into his canter perfectly each time. As she saluted at the end, giving him a big pat, she grinned and noticed the judge was smiling too as she wrote up her notes.

“That was nice, Iona.”

Sara, Iona’s mum, was waiting for her outside, having watched quietly from the viewing area with a polystyrene cup of coffee from Henny’s catering trailer. “Viewing area” made it sound grand; in reality it was three plastic chairs on a platform made of wooden pallets.

“Good boy, Jinks.” Sara wrapped her arms round the pony and kissed his plaits, as Jinks snuffled against her.

Iona’s mum adored the little black gelding. She had bred him thirteen years ago. He had been born just a week before Iona, both arriving during one of the worst storms in the area’s history. “Should have known what I was letting myself in for,” Sara often joked. “From you *both*.”

“We can’t stay for the results,” Sara continued. “I’ve got a fully booked afternoon: two treks, and Mouse has the dentist coming too. Why don’t you cycle back later, pick up your sheet then? I need you to go to the shop too anyway. Be closed by the

time I’m free otherwise.”

“OK.” Iona was used to her mum’s busy schedule. Sara Patterson ran a trekking centre that was home to a handful of stocky native ponies who took mainly tourists on hacks around the moors and beaches surrounding their home. It was the start of half-term so busier than usual. But winter was closing in, which meant weeks and weeks when no one came. She could feel the other competitors’ eyes following them as they crossed the car park. She wondered whether people expected Jinks to be loaded into a smart lorry, perhaps metallic black to match his coat, with leather seats and a sponsor’s logo emblazoned on the side.

The reality was Sara’s ancient truck and a cattle trailer. But the straw was clean and the sweetest-smelling hay hung up ready, which Jinks launched into enthusiastically.

Whitemoor was a short drive away, and Iona gazed out of the window as they passed the big stone pillars at the end of their drive. The Kestrel estate had been home all her life, and her mum’s too, but they didn’t live in the vast country house; they had the cottage attached to the yard just below it. Sara’s parents, Iona’s grandparents, had lived and worked on the estate and the cottage’s tenancy had been passed down the

generations. Her grandparents were long gone now, part of another life. Iona shivered as the enormous mansion towered into view. It had been empty for over two years, ever since the owner, Lady Van-De Writson had died, leaving a tangle of legalities and complications to sort. There was talk of a sale soon after, but it had been vague. Iona preferred to push that thought away because it had only been mentioned once. Lady Van-De Writson had insisted Iona and Sara call her Penny and she was hugely missed. No one would have guessed from her ancient wax coat and beaten-up old car that she was a multimillionaire. She'd often wander down to the stables to say hello to the ponies, or chat to Iona about dressage, or just sit at the kitchen table with a cup of tea, laughing away with Sara. Penny's son lived abroad now. He wouldn't sell, Iona told herself firmly. Surely he'd have done it already if he'd wanted to? She tried to ignore the fact there seemed to be a buzz about the place. Cars appearing up the long drive after it had been quiet for months. Overhearing conversations in the village, talk of incomers.

Once Jinks was back out in his paddock with his best friend Merry, the Shetland pony Iona had learned to ride on, and Iona had tacked up Biscuit, Monty and

Pebbles, three of the trekking ponies, she picked up her ancient bike and set off down the winding estate drive, freewheeling as the wind whipped through her long, tangled dark-blonde hair. She'd inherited her colouring from her dad. Sara was small and dark, and Iona's height and hair was all her father's side. *Leo's girl through and through.* She'd heard that all her life.

She felt a pang as she realised she hadn't visited her dad for a few days, having been so busy with the ponies, so vowed to go later that day once she'd picked up her sheet and the shopping. Leo Patterson's final resting place was in a windswept corner of the churchyard, overlooking the sea he had so loved. Iona didn't remember him – she'd only been a baby – but Sara talked about him freely and his photos were everywhere. For years it had just been Sara and Iona and then Sara had met Sam Jones in the village pub. He'd just moved to the area, looking for a fresh start and the country life. He'd worked in the city before, had never worn a pair of wellies. He'd made Sara laugh, and he was kind to Iona, and he'd willingly mucked out a stable within two weeks of their first date. They'd married quickly, and very soon it was as though he'd always been part of Kestrel.

It took Iona twenty minutes to reach Whitemoor, where the dressage was still going on. Leaning her bike against the brick barn where the results would be posted she was gratified to see a red rosette on the table, pinned to a blue sheet.

Henny handed it over to her with a smile. “There you go, Miss Patterson,” she said. “Another win for you.”

“Thanks, Henny.” Iona took the rosette and put it in her pocket, scanning the sheets quickly. Lots of eights and a sprinkling of nines. The score was high: not quite her best but right up there. The comments were lovely and she felt herself lift as she read them.

Henny chatted away as she wrote up the next results on the blackboard. “How’s your mum? Didn’t get a chance to speak to her this morning.”

“She’s fine,” Iona said, picturing her mum who, right this moment, would be mounted on Biscuit, her favourite pony, leading a group, regaling them with tales of shipwrecks and the folklore of the coastal paths they were riding. They’d end with a canter up the long stretch of mostly deserted sand with the waves crashing on to the shore. “She’s busy this afternoon with treks.”

“Great stuff,” Henny said, but her face was

thoughtful. “Long may it continue. So everything’s OK?”

Iona knew Henny was dying to ask if she’d heard anything about a possible sale, but she also knew that Henny would probably know more than her. And there was nothing to tell anyway.

Their conversation was interrupted by a pleasant-looking lady coming into the barn. Iona recognised her as the judge from earlier. She looked at Iona and then her smile widened.

Iona looked down. She had thrown on a woolly jumper, and her hair, now free from the confines of her net, was wild, but she still had her jodhpurs on.

“You were riding the black pony in the novice class, right?” the lady said.

Iona nodded. “Thank you for the great score.”

“It’s my pleasure,” the lady said. “It was a joy to judge you. Do you do anything else with your pony? Affiliated dressage? You ought to think about the youth training programme.”

Iona thought about the evenings spent poring over the laptop she used for homework, adding up costs. Lessons, registration, entry fees, travel – it was all beyond them. Whitemoor, just down the road and that charged seven pounds per class, was all they

could do for now.

“Um,” she said, and she glanced at Henny, who gave her a small understanding smile. “I’m just happy with local stuff.”

The lady nodded. “Well, if you ever want to take it further, do look it up, won’t you?”

“I will,” Iona said, even though she knew the contents of the website by heart. “Thank you.”

Picking up her bike, folding her sheet into her pocket alongside her rosette, Iona gave a groan as she saw a familiar figure stalk towards her. Her breeches were snow white and her jacket was elegantly tailored. Her boots were glossy patent leather and Iona saw that her hat, with a strip of crystals, was the one worn by all the horsey influencers recently and cost over five hundred pounds. Of course *April Lewis* would have one.

April gave her a cheery wave. “Iona! How are you?”

“Fine,” Iona said, her teeth gritted. “You?”

“Really good!” April trilled. “I’ve just come to get Mambo out for a leg stretch before the autumn championships next weekend at Longlands,” she said, referring to a high-class competition venue a couple of hours away. “He’s feeling amazing.”

“Great,” Iona said, keen to get the conversation

done and dusted, but April was clearly in a chatty mood.

“How’s Jenks?” she continued.

Iona rolled her eyes. “*Jinks* –” she overemphasised his name – “is good, thank you.” She pulled out her rosette, hating herself for having to prove anything to April. “He won his class earlier. Novice.”

April laughed. “Oh, samesies! We won the elementary. Be great when you’re at that level too, Iona. A win at Whitemoor isn’t *really* a win, is it? But it’s just a practice today, nothing serious,” she added sweetly. “I need some competition, so hurry up and move up a level, won’t you?”

Iona’s jubilant mood evaporated. “Next time,” she said, feeling the tendrils of jealousy creep in.

April was doing all the things she dreamed about doing with Jinks: training with professionals, travelling to far-away posh centres, climbing up and up the ladder, far above Iona and Whitemoor Riding School. April had a social media account too and posted regular photos of her pony Mambo: lots of peace signs and pouts in front of smart venues and the unboxing of expensive pony wear. April made it sound as though she’d been sent things for free but Iona knew her parents spoiled her. They lived in a big

new house on the edge of town, and April's parents had paid a fortune for the paddock at the back and had built two pretty stables next to the garage. April was the queen of camera angles, making her small yard look much bigger than it was. Iona couldn't help scrolling through April's account more regularly than she liked to admit. She would die if April ever knew she checked her posts, though.

Iona only ever occasionally posted, even though she had some gorgeous photos of Jinks that her stepdad had taken. He was an ace with a camera and took all the photos for her mum's trekking pony website. She liked to see what the famous riders she admired were up to, including local rider Jessica Jefferies, who was described as a rising star of the dressage world. April had once mentioned casually that she knew her, but Iona was doubtful. She'd passed Jessica's yard twice, gazing up at the big wrought-iron gates, longing to see the stables on the other side. Jessica was only four years older, just turned seventeen, but her life couldn't be more different.

Free of April at last, Iona set off on her bike again. She reached the shop just as dusk started to roll in from the sea. She hummed to herself as she wandered around, adding a bag of carrots for Jinks and the

trekking ponies and a chocolate bar for herself, suddenly starving after her busy day. As she thanked the shopkeeper, promising to send on her best wishes to her mum, Iona pushed against the door straight into someone who was coming in.

"Watch out!" the man said crossly.

"I'm sorry," Iona said. "I didn't see you."

"Well, try being more careful," the man snapped.

Iona frowned. "It was an accident," she muttered sharply, but the man had already barged past her. He was wearing a suit and a black wool overcoat, and Iona had never seen him before. His dark hair was brushed back and his skin was tanned, as if he'd just stepped off a luxury yacht, or returned from an expensive ski holiday. He had the air of someone with money.

As she picked up her bike, she looked over at a shiny four-by-four, and back at the man who was now tapping his hands impatiently at the counter. He'd grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and seemed in a hurry to pay.

Rearranging her bag and stopping to say hello to a small terrier tied up outside the shop meant Iona was only just setting off as the man swung the door open and headed back out to his car. He had a mobile to his ear and was talking loudly into it.

“Yes, nearly there,” he said. “Last bits to get tied up and then it’s finalised. It’s almost yours.”

And at that moment his eyes met Iona’s and a smirk seemed to cross his lips. “It’s quite the house,” he said triumphantly. “Just give it a few more days...”

Iona felt a huge sense of dread, wondering if she’d heard him right. Giving herself a shake, she started for home, Jinks and safety.