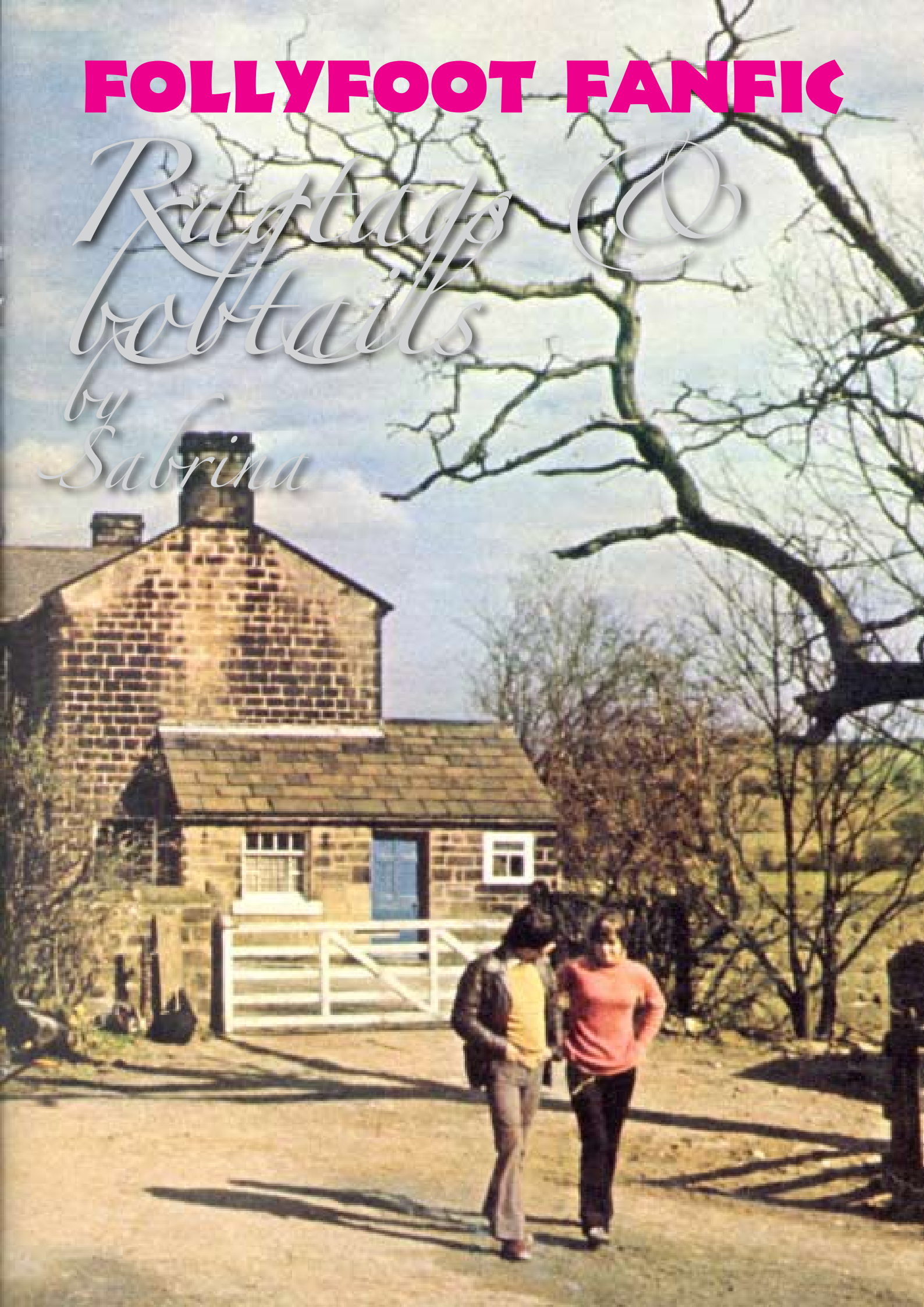


FOLLYFOOT FANFIC

Rugrats @ bootails

by
Sabrina



Set between "Family of Strangers" and "A Present for Sandy" in Series 2. For me, there's lots of unresolved stuff between Steve and Dora about Steve's trip to Liverpool and the impact that has on their friendship – or whatever it is simmering under the surface between them. This is what could have happened...

The letter sat in front of her plate; accusatory stamps proclaimed it as being posted from Brazil. It sat there while Dora ate her bacon and eggs in silence, chewing methodically, not noticing the eggs were like leather and the bacon crispy black.

A letter from her parents. What could it tell her that she would find interesting? Cocktail parties and glamorous people held no place in Dora's world. What could she reply that they, in turn, could boast about to their diplomatic colleagues? "Oh, Dora. She's staying with her Uncle Geoffrey, you know, Arthur's brother. Oh no, she's not living in his lovely big house, she chooses to live in the farmhouse near the stables. What stables? Oh, a rest home for unwanted and old horses. Follyfoot, it's called. A total folly of Geoffrey's, if you ask me. Honestly, the company that girl keeps! An old chap called Slugger of all things, an ex-boxer who used to work in a carnival. A carnival! I ask you! What could he know? And a young man called Ron who's chosen to eschew his nice family and be a wild biker, and a total misfit called Steve, who's spent his life until now going from orphanage to Borstal to prison. What kind of life is that for our young Dora, so well-educated and well brought up? Can you believe Geoffrey thinks it's a perfect situation for her? I do wonder what's happened to England since we last lived there. In my day, a young gel would never have lived in close proximity to stablehands. And we've brought Dora up so well..."

Dora sighed and sipped her tea. She was well aware of Slugger, Ron and Steve watching her, to see when and if she'd open that blue envelope with its AIRMAIL writing and blue flashes around the edges.

"Gonna be sunny today," said Slugger finally.

"Expert on the weather now, are you?" said Ron, putting on a posh voice. "Clouds will move in from the east, bringing a storm front to Follyfoot, where Dora will explode in a thunderclap about the latest letter from 'er esteemed parents. Lightning can be expected in about five minutes."

"Oh, shut up, Ron!" snapped Dora, slipping the letter into the back pocket of her strawberry-coloured trousers.

"Now, now," Slugger cautioned, "Let's not start the day on a bad foot. Lots to do today."

"Sorry, Slugs," Dora said, "But I can't eat any more." She pushed her plate of bacon and eggs away. "Copper wants his

breakfast too."

Only Steve caught her eye as she shoved her chair closer to the table. It was a glance of sympathy...and polite enquiry. Dora was in too much of a bad, disturbed mood to smile at him. She simply met his eyes – those kind, big, brown eyes – with a glance and stormed out to the stables.

"What's eating her?" wondered Steve out loud.

"You know as well as I do," Ron countered. "Her parents. Another letter listin' all them cocktail parties they been to. Oh Dora, darlin', please come and join us. You'll meet such lovely young men. Much nicer than those 'orrible stable boys you been hanging out with." Ron simpered and aped what he imagined Dora's mother would sound like. He picked up his coffee mug and remembered to crook his little finger at an exaggerated angle. "Oh, old chap, finest java, I do declare."

"Hmph," Steve grunted.

"Nescafe," countered Slugger. "What's this java stuff? Isn't java a country? 'Ow can it be a coffee?"

"Oh, we upper clarse know things mere stablehands and housekeepers don't," Ron drawled.

"Pack it in, lad, she's gone out to Copper," Slugger said. "We upper clarse, 'e says. Born an' bred in a cottage, same as me. Anyway, which of you lads is gonna help me fix the big doors on the barn today?"

"Fix the big doors? Slugger, we never even use them, I've never seen them closed yet," said Steve, mopping his plate with a slice of toast, and relishing the mix of bacon grease and egg yolk that had accumulated on the edge of his toast. A stroke of luck, he'd got the one

egg that was actually cooked to perfection.

"Don't matter. They need to be fixed. In case we ever do need to use them. Stupid things are off their hinges. You lads are young and fit – you'll have it done in no time. If your leg's up to it, Steve."

Steve flexed his left leg; only two weeks ago it had been caught in a trap, in an elaborate plan hatched up by Ron to encourage Dora's friend Cleo to ride again. A typical Stryker plan, it had gone horribly wrong, with Steve getting caught in a real poacher's trap, not the mock one they'd planned on. The stitches were out now, and the wound had gone from red and angry to a pale red strip on his calf which throbbed occasionally and reminded him it wasn't quite business as usual yet. "It's okay, Slugger. I'll take it easy. Ron can do the hard stuff – for once!"

"Gaah!" said Ron through a mouthful of coffee.

Steve grinned and limped his way out the door. He stood



for a moment enjoying the spring sunshine on his face, and breathed the fresh Yorkshire air. In that moment, he wondered what his mother was doing. Had Bert from the mobile café paid her 40 quid fine, or was she in prison? She'd made it clear she didn't want his help – or his love, come to that. Steve had returned to Follyfoot from Liverpool a few weeks ago bitter and confused about his Mum. So much of it was still pent up inside him; he couldn't unbend to anyone, not even Dora. Especially Dora. She'd obviously been thick as thieves with Ron while he was away and now his friendship with her was slightly awkward. Oh, they worked together, and chatted and laughed around the dining room table as they'd always done, but Steve had gone through too much darkness to reach out and touch her – metaphorically OR physically.

But he was home now, and reaching out would come. He smiled at the sun and took another deep breath, relishing the earthy farm smell after the clogged air of Liverpool.

"Horses to feed," he said to himself, and limped across to the barn.

Dora leaned against the back of Copper's stable while the Arab horse ate passionately, his nose flicking through the mix of feed for oats and pony nuts; feed spilled onto the bedding as Copper greedily ate his favourites first.

The letter was just as awful as she'd imagined.

*"Dearest Dora,
I do wish you'd reconsider and join Daddy and I out here. You would have such a lovely time! We meet the most interesting people at parties, and if you're interested in horses there is a polo club not far from our house. Among our little expat community are a couple of young men who ride, and I'm sure you'd have a thrilling time with them. The countryside outside Brasilia would delight you, especially now it's getting a bit cooler in the daytime.
Do you remember Eddie Garrett, Richard's son? You used to go to birthday parties with him when you were little and we were living in London. Well, he's here too, working at the Embassy in a rather exciting hush-hush role, and he was asking after you. He was frightfully disappointed you weren't here with us. You and Eddie used to have such fun playing together, and I'm sure you'd find him fun again now if you renewed your acquaintance with him. He's grown up into the most handsome young man. If I was young and single again, I'd make sure I was in his path!
Dora, can you really be happy out there at Geoffrey's farm? Geoffrey writes to us a lot more often than you do, young lady. It's no life for you there; what excitement is there in cleaning up after dirty old horses that aren't even your own? And what nice young men can you possibly meet there?
We'd love to have you visit us and find out for yourself what fun it can be living here for a young person. We can be a family again. Daddy can pay for your ticket, there's no problem about that. Will you write back to us, and let us know what date you'd like to arrive?
All love
Mummy"*

"What a nightmare," she whispered to Copper. "A round of cocktail parties with the parents urging me to marry Eddie Garrett. Oh yes, I remember Eddie. He was an absolute horror of a boy, I'm sure he tortured innocent animals, but his parents thought the sun shone out of him. How could I go

there, Copper? How could I leave you? Or Steve?" The last was barely audible, as if invoking his name would bring him to Copper's stable door, and he'd see the misery on her face.

She folded the letter up small, so her mother's dark spiky writing was hidden, and shoved it in her back pocket again.

For a moment she rested her head against Copper's warm chestnut neck. His muscles rippled as he sorted and chewed his breakfast, snorting in contentment.



Of course, it wasn't just the letter. It was Steve, too. He'd been so distant in many ways since he'd first found out his mother was in trouble. He'd stopped confiding in her, and she didn't know why. Until last winter they'd grown close, and while nothing short of torturing Copper would have made Dora admit she was falling in love with Steve, she had a feeling he felt the same about her. A strange falling in love it was, with no kisses, no embraces. A friendship with the possibility of developing into something big and wonderful and overwhelming, if both of them had the courage to do something about it.

But Steve had walked away from the potential of her love, and gone in search of his mother, who had no love to give in the end. Dora thought she understood why he had to do it, but it was the doing of it, and the way of it, that stung.

He left without even hugging her, just with a casual, "Be seeing you," as if he'd be back for tea or supper. She'd bit back tears, longed to reach out over the gate and pull him to her and make him aware that she could love him, that she DID love him; she ached to feel her arms around him, to touch him, to make him believe in her, to make him realise that she just didn't care about horses, she cared about people as well – especially him! She wished senselessly he'd hold her to him before he walked away. But it didn't happen. Couldn't happen. His heart was already far away, she could see it, and by his very stance – firmly on the other side of the gate – he dared her to reach out and touch him, and her courage had failed.

Would he have stayed if she'd held him, and kissed those lips that had smiled at her countless times? She knew in her heart the answer was No.

In the end it was Slugger who held her when she cried bitter, heartbroken tears at the foot of the Lightning Tree as Steve walked down the hill and out of her life, and cursed the tree for the wish that this time didn't come true. He'd picked her

up and helped her inside, more of a father to her than her real one had ever been, listening to her incoherent sobs and her fears that Steve wouldn't come back, that she'd lost him forever.

When he'd made her drink some truly horrible brandy, she'd gradually calmed down from hysterical to sniffing, her black eye makeup streaking her pale cheeks.

Sluggo rocked her like a baby; she sat on his knees. "He'll come back, luv. You mark my words, he'll be back by the spring."

"The spring! Oh Slugs, that's months away. Months and months without him. He doesn't care... he doesn't care..." She bit back another sob, screwing her eyes shut.

"Sshh, lass." Sluggo rubbed her back. "He does care, you know. But he's got to do this, girl. He's gotta find out for himself."

"Find out what?"

"Everything," Sluggo said enigmatically. "And he'll be back."

As the days turned into weeks, Dora didn't believe him. Steve hadn't written, not a word. Nor had he telephoned. It was as if he simply didn't exist any more. She worried about him; had he been killed in an accident? She loved him and hated him, prayed for him and cursed him.

The pain got less as winter became icier, and snow covered the ground in great mounds of white crystal. Dora began to laugh again, having snowball fights with Ron, the two of them ganging up on Sluggo and pelting him, then running as he picked up a handful of snow and aimed it at them.

As the thaw melted, Dora no longer believed he'd return. He'd moved on, was probably living with his Mum for the first time since he was four years old, looking after her and making a new life for himself.

She still cried sometimes, when she was out alone on Copper, and nobody could see her, especially Ron, who teased her like an elder brother. If only she'd had the courage to hold Steve before he left, to let him know he had something to come back to!

Other times, she rode happily with Ron, who helped her exercise the fitter horses. He was a capable rider, even if he did slouch in the saddle and thrust his cowboy boots forward, a

piece of straw or grass sticking out of his mouth.

One morning, when they'd finished mucking and out feeding, they'd felt the brisk wind and the tug and tang of early spring, and wordlessly saddled Copper and Hercules and cantered down the hill, whooping and laughing like children, the horses snorting and excited.

When Hercules starting blowing they'd slowed to a walk, each lost in their own thoughts. Ron was far away; instead of the green rolling Yorkshire hills he saw the American west, the flat prairies, the fearsome canyons, the herd of cattle in front of him. He narrowed his eyes under the harsh hundred degree sun, and rode his cow pony with the reins in one hand, the other free to draw on his six-gun if he needed it. He was a hero from one of the western paperbacks he read whenever he could get out of working. Here he was, riding around the herd, his eyes scanning the mirage of the horizon for the cattle rustlers he knew were waiting for him before they got to the safety of the ranch. He had to protect the cattle and Miss Dora, the beautiful niece of the ranch owner, a girl as bold as she was pretty, who rode like a man; a Calamity Jane of a girl who'd break a man's heart...

"Do YOU think he'll come back, Ron?"

Ron started. The prairies vanished, Hercules was no wiry cow pony but a stocky carthorse cob, and it was a lot colder than a hundred degrees. "Eh?"



"Steve. He's been gone months. So...do you think he'll come back?"

She had that look on her face again, her mouth a little concerned rosebud and her eyes sadder than a spaniel's.

"Dunno, girl. If I was him..." And I had you waiting for me, Ron added silently. "I'd come back. But he's gotta sort it out himself."

"He hasn't written. Not once."

"Look, girl, you know what they say. If you love it, let it go. If it comes back, it's yours, if it don't, it never was." He didn't meet her eyes. He couldn't. He'd hoped for himself she'd realise Steve was well and truly gone.

Dora's look became more mutinous. "That's awful. So depressing."

"Mopin' about won't help. Blokes don't like birds who mope. He's there, Dora, wherever he is. Liverpool I suppose, unless his Mum's moved on. You're here. You gotta start livin', girl!" He nudged Hercules closer to Copper and patted Dora's shoul-

der. "C'mon, why don't you come to the dance tonight? You came once before."

Dora shook her head, her fingers tangling in Copper's mane and her eyes staring unseeing at the ground.

"Dear, dear, dear. Ah, c'mon, you enjoyed it. Remember all them dances I taught you?" Ron grinned. She could be a right little raver when she let loose, her mini dress working itself dangerously high up her thighs as she bopped to T. Rex; he'd thoroughly enjoyed taking Dora out on the razz.

"I'm not in the mood, Ron. But thanks, anyway."

"Your loss, girl. But remember, bein' sad don't win 'earts." Hercules pulled the reins out of his hands and began to crop grass with his blunt old teeth. Ron jerked his head up with a jingle of the bit. "Come on, race you back to Follyfoot! Last one 'ome gets a double servin' of Slugger's stew!"

That got her moving. Ron grinned as Copper pulled ahead, Dora urging him faster, her spirits rising again in the beauty of his speed. She lay against his neck like a jockey, his mane stinging her eyes. By the time he and Hercules ambled into the yard, she'd got Copper unsaddled and rubbed down.

After that morning she made a deliberate attempt to be happier. She went with Ron to the village hop after all, and although she'd decided once again it wasn't really her scene, she'd danced for hours until she was so tired she almost fell asleep on the back of Ron's motorbike on the ride home.

Without Steve to help there was more for each of them to do, and Ron, for the first time in his life, began to pull his weight, to the Colonel's delight.

"We'll make a worker of you yet, Stryker," the Colonel said, slapping Ron on the back as he swept the yard.

"One day I'll wake up and find this is just a bad dream," Ron muttered, putting down the broom and picking up a dirty bridle and the sponge. The bit had green grass and saliva stuck to it. "Ugh."

It was when they were stacking up bales of straw, laughing together as one bale broke and Ron threw a handful of straw at Dora, that Ron turned to see Steve at the gate, looking a bit wary, unsure of his welcome. Ron caught his breath. Dora had been so much happier in the last few weeks; like she was getting the bloke out of her system. "Hey, Dora, ready for a nasty surprise?" he said.

The way Dora's hand sprung to her mouth, and the tears that welled instantly in her eyes, told Ron she wasn't over Steve, not by a long shot.

Her legs moved almost of their own accord; hesitantly at first, then she ran to the gate, her heart thudding so hard it almost flew out from her body and into the sky, like a dove set free from a cage. "Steve! Steve!"

She stopped at the gate, unsure of what to do. The look on his face...! It had been hard and horrible then, his time away. He looked older, tired, and very hurt.

For months she'd imagined this, dreamed about it, longed for the moment he'd arrive back at Follyfoot. She'd throw herself into his arms, and he'd hold her tight, and they could be honest about how they felt, at last.

But that's not how it happened.

"Hiya, Dora," he said simply, opening the gate as if he'd just been down the village shops for an hour, or into Tockwith to pick up a mended piece of tack from the saddler's.

"H-hi, Steve," she said wonderingly, astonished at his casual tone. "How are you?"

"Knackered." He closed the gate behind him, and fell into step next to her as they walked back up the yard. "It's a long bus ride from Liverpool."

"How's your mother?"

"I don't know." He sighed and shrugged his jacket over his shoulder again. "Talk about that later, eh? It's good to be back, girl." And he put an arm over her shoulder, like he'd do to one of his mates.



Dora nestled closer, hoping the arm would slip down to her waist and hold her tight, but it stayed where it was. "I've missed you, Steve," she said, her voice shaking.

"Don't go crying on me, girl." He smiled. "I've missed you, too. And everyone here." He looked around at the boxes, and the horses' heads that popped out in mild enquiry at his footsteps. "You can tell me everything that's gone on here while Slugs

makes us a cuppa.”

And that was it. No kiss, no embrace, not by a word did Steve let her know he felt anything more than friendship for her.

It was a surreal afternoon, sipping tea with Slugger’s face cracked in a delighted smile at seeing Steve again, and all the important things left unsaid.

And they were still left unsaid.

A family of strangers, Cleo had called them. Steve had agreed. He was aware that something indefinable had happened while he was away. Ron and Dora were thick as thieves, joking with each other and mucking about. This was his family, but what part did he play in it now?

When he saw Dora running to him, his heart tumbled and somersaulted. He’d never written, afraid that she’d write back and tell him not to return; he knew her anger, knew her pain, for it was the same as his own.

And when she met him at the gate, her eyes sparkling with tears that glinted like diamonds, he wanted more than anything to drop his bag and jacket and hold her like he’d never



let her go, smother her with wild kisses and tell her he was a fool to ever have left her, left his real home. Those big eyes of hers told him that was exactly what she wanted – so why didn’t he do it?

There was so much turmoil inside him still; it wasn’t right to love her when he was mixed up inside. She deserved the best, a whole man, not one still coming to grips with his mother rejecting him once and for all and choosing a life of wrongs rather than rights, and betraying his trust. Reason told him Dora could give him all the love he needed; she was mother, sister, lover and goddess rolled into one. Thinking of her had

kept him going all through the long Liverpool winter, through the freezing garage he worked at, and the bitter nights at the mobile café, and the struggle to make ends meet and pay his mother’s ever-mounting debts.

So for now, he had to hope she loved him enough to accept him as a friend and nothing more. It was so tempting to take her in his arms, but that would have been selfish, drawing on her love without being able to give it back one hundred per cent.

And then there was Dora’s innocence. She believed in only good, where Steve had seen enough in his whole life, not to mention the last few months, to know that goodness was a blessing, not a given, and the world was geared to sadness and misery. His memories of her had been linked with horses, her hands around their necks and heads, never holding people. Did she love him as she loved horses, or was it something bigger? He’d had too much else on his mind to contemplate it, and when he saw her at the gate it was overwhelming, and too big a question, so he farked it.

She’d been stunned at his casual arrival. When he put his arm over her shoulder it had trembled beneath him, and he had to fight himself not to squeeze her tight.

He still hadn’t found the courage to tell her about his time in Liverpool, and changed the subject every time she brought it up. What would she understand about living hand to mouth in two shabby rooms, with barely enough money to buy a coffee once he’d paid their rent and put money aside to pay the debt? He’d been so happy when he’d found his mother, unable to keep the grin from his face, but as he got to know her he knew helping her would be hard if not impossible. Unless he hid money from her, she’d spend it, like she spent the rent on a new coat and a wasteful candlelit supper for them both. Would Dora understand how that made him feel? She, who had money in spades? How could he explain to her his feelings when the police finally caught up with his mother, who’d splurged the entire 40 quid he’d saved to clear her name on a raucous night out with girlfriends? And when she told him to clear out and leave her alone, that she’d live her life her way, Steve had sunk to the lowest of the low. He felt as if he’d been slapped in the face, that the whole winter, getting to know his mum, had been a lie. Deep, horrible roiling thoughts and visions crept into his dreams and waking hours too. He had to get through it and over it, make himself feel whole again, before he could begin to tell Dora, before he could reach out and touch her and ask her to trust him. For now, he didn’t trust himself.

And when he’d caught his leg in the trap, the pain on Dora’s face was a mirror of his own. She’d hovered beside him, so unsure of him that her hands fluttered around him without touching him once. He wanted her to hold him, to cradle his head in her arms and stroke his hair and comfort him and give him strength. He had never needed her so much, but things were still so stiff between them he couldn’t ask, and nor could she. He leaned against the tree, gasping, the world fading in and out as he fought to stay conscious, with Dora crouched beside him, that awful void of air between them.

And now, weeks later, he still hadn’t reached the point where he could tell her what was in his heart, the good and the bad.

He knew she was in Copper's stable with that letter. Her parents left her feeling as unwanted as his own did, as a rule. She'd be down, he'd bet on it. Perhaps now they could really unbend to each other, and start to build something different and new and better between them.

As he needed her, she needed him; it was time to talk.

Steve felt as if a weight had lifted from his shoulders; the sun seemed warmer and brighter as he closed Sultan's door and left the pony to his horse nuts. Walking carefully, as his leg was still painful, he started across the yard to Copper's stable.

He'd barely got halfway there when the Land Rover pulled up outside the gate, and the Colonel called, "Steve!"

Steve cursed under his breath. Of all the bad timing -! "Hello, Colonel."

"D'you have a bit of time, Steve? I've just had a phone call from the Police, and we need to go and pick up a dumped horse." The Colonel swung down from the car and leaned over the gate. "Is your leg up to it? Not that I'm asking you to ride it back." He grinned his crooked grin. "I need some helping loading it into the trailer."

"Of course." Steve glanced to his left and saw Dora's pale face in the shadows of Copper's stable. He smiled at her and saw her mouth twitch in a sad imitation of the usual beautiful smile that spread across her cheeks and made her eyes sparkle.

"Everything OK?" The Colonel helped Steve into the Land Rover.

"Yeah, sure."

"Sorry about your leg. We're a pair of crocks at the moment, aren't we? Blasted shrapnel mucking up again." He shut the door and limped to the driver's side. "Where's Dora?"

"In with Copper. She got a letter from her parents this morning and I don't think she's very happy."

"Ah. Yes, well. Arthur and Prudence spent Dora's childhood shunting her away. Now the duckling has become a swan they want to show her off, I suspect. Sensible girl not to have anything to do with it." The Colonel roared the Land Rover and trailer down the hill, shouting over the rattles and squeaks. "Are you going to stick around, Steve?"

Surprised at the question, Steve said, "Yes, of course. If you'll let me."

"Why wouldn't I?" The Colonel grinned again.

Steve shrugged. "That mare I brought home, just before I went to Liverpool. The one I wouldn't let you put down. You were pretty angry with me."

"Only because you did it for the wrong reasons. I think you've sorted that out now, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes," said Steve feelingly.

"Want to talk about it? We've got a bit of a drive."

Steve took a deep breath, and told the Colonel all about Liverpool, his shattered belief in his mother, the poverty, and the final rejection. The Colonel pulled the Land Rover to the side of the road, ignoring the frantic horn blowing from the little green car behind them.

"Oh, Steve. I'm very sorry it turned out that way. Still, you had to go and find out for yourself, didn't you? You tried your best, Steve. You did the decent and honourable thing, and you can be proud of that." The Colonel clapped him on the shoulder. From the Colonel, it was praise indeed; Steve felt a silly surge of emotion and looked out the window.

"Hope Dora thinks that way," he mumbled.

"What's that? Dora? Have you told her what you just told me?"

Steve shook his head. "Don't know how to start. Where to start."

"Just start." The Colonel cleared his throat. "My niece thinks a lot of you. She was downright miserable when you were away, even though she wouldn't admit it. Clear things up between you, eh? She's your friend. She needs to know."

My friend, thought Steve. Is that all she can ever be? What would the Colonel - let alone Dora's parents - think if friendship blossomed into romance? He was a stable boy, a miner's son, she the mistress of Follyfoot, the rich girl with the world at her feet. He was a realist, she a dreamer, and so much younger than him in the head and the heart. Even just weighing it all up like that, it sounded doomed, and Steve sighed.

"We should collect that horse," Steve said.

The horse proved to be a skinny dun-coloured pony, all bones, its ribs sticking out like xylophone keys, its summer coat coming through in rough ugly patches, the winter coat hanging off in great clumps. The Colonel opened its mouth and groaned when he saw the long yellow teeth, some of them wobbling when he prodded them.

"Twenty five if he's a day. Probably more. Full of worms, I should think, and looks like he hasn't had a drink of water in a week. Be lucky if he lasts a week."

"We've given him a bucket, Colonel, sir," said the constable stiffly. "We were only called out to him this morning."

"I do wish people who do this to animals could suffer the same fate themselves," grumbled the Colonel. "Any idea who owns him?"

The constable shook his head. "He was dumped here overnight, the neighbours say. Don't worry, you'll get the usual rate for looking after him."

"I'm not worried about that, I just want to see them in court! Come on Steve, let's get this poor beggar home."

The pony followed them weakly up the ramp, his unshod hooves slipping on the slope. He pulled eagerly at the haynet Steve had tied in one corner.

Steve was thankful the Colonel kept up a rant about bad owners all the way back to Follyfoot. He didn't feel like talking.

Dora fell on the pony with cries of horror. "Oh, the poor thing. How CAN people -? Oh, Uncle, I hope the police find the owner and throw the book at him! Poor pony, he's starving, and he hasn't been brushed in months by the look of him. And those hooves! They're all split!"

The Colonel patted her shoulder. "If anyone can make him better, you can, Dora. All those ragtags and bobtails you've brought into this place, and made good... you've got the magic touch. He won't have a long life with us, you understand that, he's ancient, poor chap, but what life he has will be a happy one."

Dora glanced at him from under her lashes; was there a message there about ragtags and bobtails? There was something in her uncle's voice, and his quick glance towards the tack room, where she knew Steve was busying himself cleaning a saddle. If so, what did he mean when he said the pony wouldn't have a long life with them? Was there a parallel with Steve, the ultimate Follyfoot ragtag and bobtail? Was Steve going to leave again? She felt cold of a sudden, and shivered.

If he left again, so would she. Much as she knew the horses needed her, and she needed them, she knew now she couldn't stay here without him. Too many memories, too much left unsaid and too much future left unresolved.

"I'll do everything I can," she said steadily. "I'll give him all the love he needs, and all the attention and care, and he'll be here for a long time."

"Then you'd better give him a name." The Colonel pulled his pipe from his pocket and chewed on it.

"Phantom," Dora murmured. For would Steve, like a phantom, vanish again?

"Phantom it is. Hay for the time being so he doesn't get colic, Dora. Start him on hard feed tomorrow." He strode back to the Land Rover, fishing in his pockets for matches, the pipe bobbing between his teeth.

"Phantom, eh?" Steve's hearing was excellent, and he stood in the shadows while she fixed a biscuit of hay in the pony's manger. "How do you think he got to be like that? All skin and bones?"

"Neglect, probably. People get horses and don't realise what's involved. They think it's as easy as having a dog, or a cat." She leant against the pony's rough neck as he pulled at the hay hungrily. "Poor boy."

"What if it's poverty, Dora? What if the people who own him love him but can't afford him? What if turning him loose was a last resort to save his life? And what about this? What are they living on, if the pony looks like this?" He was still in the shadows, but she could feel his recalcitrance, his anger. "You never look further than the horses, do you? Horses are good, people are evil. Behind horses, there are usually people, Dora, and they're not all evil. Think of them as horses with two legs, if you like, and you might think of them more kindly." His boots clacked on the stone floor of the tackroom as he walked outside, still a bit dot-and-carry. She caught a glimpse of his profile, with its set mouth and frowning brows under the thick dark forelock of hair.

Dora's hands stilled on the horse's neck. "Damn you," she said, but not to the pony. "Why won't you talk about what happened in Liverpool?" But she didn't speak loud enough; the pony merely flicked an ear back towards her and gulped the sweet hay as if there was no tomorrow.

When she finally left the pony, who had finished his hay and was in a post-prandial trance, his stomach full and his eyes half-shut in ecstasy, Steve and Ron were mending the barn doors with plenty of swearing and shouting and laughing. Slugger leaned on the fence nearby, a mug of tea in hand, giving encouragement and suggestions, egging them on. She felt rather excluded, having no expertise in anything involving handyman stuff; finishing school had, rather, taught her to mix a mean martini, a skill that was totally unnecessary at Follyfoot.

Sighing, she saddled Copper and went out for a long and



thoughtful ride, not noticing the bright day and the beauty that Yorkshire could provide for a brief and wonderful spring. Her thoughts swirled between Follyfoot and Steve and horses and the future, and two hours later she arrived back, unable to say where she'd been or what she'd seen, and thankful nobody asked. Slugger was busy creating one of his inedible stews, Steve had taken himself off to his lair above the tackroom, and Ron kept her busy listening to lewd jokes that she smiled at automatically.

Phantom was hungry enough to gobble another feed of hay, and Dora spent time caressing him and convincing him that humans weren't all bad, that they loved horses and provided food. She brushed the worst of his moulting coat from him before doing her share feeding the other horses, and was hungry enough even to face Slugger's dry old worst on the dinner table, even if it was an evening that was too hot for stew.

"How's your leg, Steve?" She'd noticed him wince at he sat down.

"You talking to me, Dora? Have I suddenly grown four legs and a mane?"

A mane, yes, thought Dora. One I'd very much like to run my fingers through. But she bristled at his tone anyway; he was out for an argument. She took a deep breath and made herself calm. "Steve, I do care about people as well as horses, you know. I thought you'd have realised that by now."

"We could have done with your help when you went belting off on Copper, then." Steve poked at his stew; was there ANYTHING edible in there?

"You looked like you were doing perfectly well without me," Dora countered hotly. "What do I know about mending things like barn doors?"

"You could have asked. We'd have taught you."

"Oh, I'm not hungry." She slammed her fork onto the table.

"Ere, that's good stew," Slugger protested.

"Then I'm sure you'll serve it up tomorrow, too." Dora pushed her chair in and headed out the door in a fluid motion, her plimsolls squeaking on the flagstones.

"Women!" grumbled Slugger. "You slave over a hot stove for them and that's all the thanks you get."

"More trouble than they're worth," Steve agreed, finding a potato.

"You getting' on okay with her, son?" Slugger looked at him keenly: boy was peaky, he thought, needed a good feed and a good woman, at a guess the one who had just stormed out into the wide blue yonder.

"Oh, Slugger, don't you start!" Steve gave up on the stew. It was truly awful. "I'll just check how that barn door's hanging, I'm not really happy with it."

But Slugger watched from the scullery window, and Steve

headed straight for his lair over the tackroom. Dora was nowhere in sight. Philosophically, Slugger carefully saved the stew from the pot and put it in the tiny fridge for the night. Maybe they'd all be hungrier tomorrow.

* * *

Dora sat in her room, chewing on the end of her pen.

"Dear Mummy," she had written.

"Maybe I'll take up your offer after all. Perhaps I need a month or two away. Just that, no more." She'd stalled at that point. How could her mother understand all the things that meant so much to her: Follyfoot, the Colonel, Slugger, Ron, Steve and Copper? Especially Copper, who wasn't even human and therefore didn't rate an atom in her mother's eyes. How could she leave them, for even a couple of months? But with things so awkward with Steve, how could she stay? Even if horses like Phantom needed her? She truly felt torn in two.

An hour later, the page was just as empty, but the pen was chewed beyond recognition.

Dora rose with the sun. She'd spent a restless night, and the birds chirruping happily outside her window at dawn hadn't helped. Until now she'd loved the sound of the birds, their dawn chorus so cheerful and positive, but today the tits and martins were intrusive, shattering the little sleep she'd had. Her dreams had been mixed up, with Steve turning into Phantom the dun pony, who told her in a deep voice that she needed to grow up. The early beams of golden sunlight fell on her face, and she sighed, rolled out of bed and dressed in jeans and a shirt, flinging the neck-to-knee nightie she'd had since she was sixteen under the pillow with contempt.



The yard was silent. Drops of dew clung to the Lightning Tree, sparkling and fresh and hopeful, and Dora leaned her face against the bumpy old trunk, wishing for the impossible, for Steve to want her, and for him to think her mature enough for the first wish to come true. Would it work, making two wishes at once? She didn't know, but threw two buckets of water on the tree for good measure.

Filling the buckets had woken the horses, and uneasy, eager hooves stamped against the stones; headcollars rattled.

"Ssh," warned Dora, opening Copper's stable and welcoming the chestnut and white muzzle that thrust itself into her hands. "Don't wake Steve. Not yet." She left the half door open and moved next door, where Phantom had been put to bed last night.

The pony lay on his side. Dora thought he was sleeping until she rattled the bolt and he didn't move. "Phantom?" Not an ear twitched. His sides were still; the xylophone ribs had played their last tune.

"No!" Dora whispered. "No!" Hesitantly she knelt down and touched his neck. In the warm morning, it was cold as ice. Dora wailed, "Nooo!" and bit her hand, trying to still the sobs that came from nowhere.

Poor pony, poor pony! At least, she thought, he'd had one night of love and affection and food. The thought, perversely, made her cry even harder.

"Dora?" Before he even spoke, she knew the shadow across the sun was Steve. "Oh, Dora!"

He knelt beside her, awkward in the presence of her grief.

"Steve...Steve... he's gone. And...and he didn't stay with us long enough to know we loved him." Dora hiccupped. She was shaking, her body quivering, her hands clasped around herself as if she'd fall apart.



"Yes, he did," Steve said quietly. God, she took everything so deeply to heart! What was she doing, a soft touch like her, working in a place where old horses died every day? It hurt, of course it hurt, it was never easy, but for Dora it was like losing a best friend every time, every single time. Tentatively he touched her shoulder, and drew her towards him. "Of course he knew. You told him, Dora, you told him yourself. Come here, girl." (This last in a gentle voice, one she hadn't heard before.)

Steve nestled her against him. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. When he wrapped his arms around her for the first time it was supposed to be in joy, in triumph, in a declaration, finally, of what he felt for her. Instead, he gripped her tight, trying to take the pain from her, vaguely understanding it wasn't just grief for the pony, it was months of upset and fear all built up and finally pouring out.

She pushed her face into his shoulder, and he leaned his unshaven cheek against her hair savouring the silkiness against his bristles; it smelt floral, of shampoo. She was slight in his arms, as slight as he'd ever imagined. Fragile. He pulled her closer, rubbing her back until the racking sobs became hiccups and gulps. Gently he wiped her face with his handkerchief; did she sleep in that eye makeup? It was on her cheeks in black streaks. He smiled tenderly.

"It's not just Phantom, is it, Dora?" he murmured.

She shook her head. Her arms had untwined themselves from her own body and found their way around his waist, where

they held him as tight as steel. Strong arms that controlled strong horses, yet were gentle enough when they had to be. "Tell me about Liverpool, Steve."

So he did, leaving nothing out. And when Dora sobbed again, it was for the people, rather than horses, for Steve and his mother, and the life she'd chosen, and love and trust and betrayal and rejection.

They both felt spent, afterwards. Unable to say a word.

Steve leaned back against the cool stone wall, the carved sandstone bumpy against his skull and spine. He felt purged, and closer to Dora than he'd been for months. Dora snuggled against him, trying to understand what he'd been through and why he'd been through it, and loving and respecting him more for it.

Finally she said, "I was going away too, you know."

"You weren't." He stiffened, and she squeezed him reassuringly.

"I was. I was writing to my mother last night. I thought it best. There's so much here I can do – and so much I can't."

He turned her face towards him, brushing the dark makeup away with a thumb. "You can't go now."

"No." She smiled, finally, that slow, rare, beautiful smile that was genuinely Dora. She felt in the back pocket of her jeans, where she'd tucked the silly draft of a letter, all two lines of it, and screwed it up and threw it in the straw. Her raw, unformed writing was heavily blue against the thick cream of the expensive paper, and she stabbed it under the bedding with one finger.

Steve pulled her even closer, clasped her tight. He cupped her face in one hand, shielding her eyes from Phantom.

Eventually they'd have to untangle themselves from each other, dust the straw off, phone the Colonel and the man who took dead horses away, and Slugger and Ron would come into the yard and the day would begin. Death, and new beginnings, as there always were at Follyfoot.

She wouldn't move while Steve's arms were around her though, with the promise of more than friendship. It was a first, and might not happen again for a long time, given their spiky natures and frequent arguments. By tomorrow, they might be at loggerheads once more, circling each other like fighting cocks, with that breach of air between them. She savoured the warmth of his arms; there was enough in that, for the future.

The end

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