



Daniel Defoe

**A Journal of the Plague Year**

«HarperCollins»

## **Defoe D.**

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Welcome to London in lockdown – in 1665 This timely re-release of Defoe's classic comes with an introduction by Wellcome-Prize-winning author, Will Eaves. Actually written sixty years after the plague of 1665 swept through London, Defoe brings the city to life in all of its hardship and fear. With a wealth of detail, A Journal of the Plague Year seems almost a firsthand account, taking readers through the neighborhoods, houses and streets that have drastically changed with the rising death toll. The bustle of business and errands gives way to doors marked with the cross to signify a house of death, as well as the dead-carts transporting those struck down to the mass graves as the dead rise in number to nearly 200,000. As the epidemic progresses and the narrator encounters more stories of isolation and horror, Defoe reveals his masterful balance as both a historical and imaginative writer.

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**Pony Club Secrets (10)**  
**Angel and the Flying Stallions**  
**Stacy Gregg**



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This book is dedicated to my super agent Nancy Miles and to her gorgeous horses Beamish and Apache

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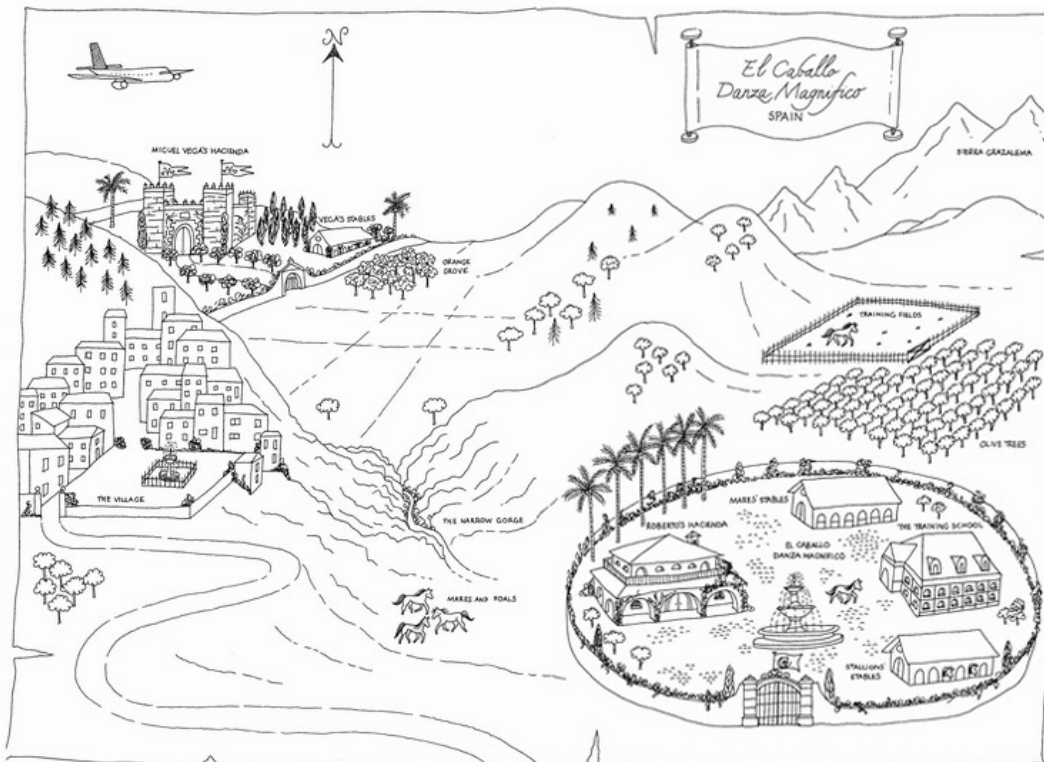
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## Chapter 1

It was after midnight in the stables of El Caballo Danza Magnifico, but the bay stallion was wide awake. He paced restlessly in his loose box, his noble head held high as he caught the scent on the night air, nostrils flared and muzzle quivering.

He was not like the other stallions here in Southern Spain. The Lipizzaners and Andalusians in these stables boasted famous bloodlines that could be traced back for centuries. Valuable beyond measure, each of the stallions had been schooled in the ways of classical dressage, trained to perform the elaborate manoeuvres of the *haute école*.

The bay stallion was leaner and more streamlined than the stocky Spanish purebreds in the stalls around him. His Andalusian blood had been mixed with Arabian and Thoroughbred, which imbued him with a rare speed and stamina that the heavy-set purebreds could never possess.

His name was Storm, and when he had first arrived at El Caballo he had been no more than a leggy and headstrong young colt. Since then he had grown strong, grazing with the herd on the upper pastures in the shadow of the mountains of the Sierra de Grazalema. The colt had become a stallion, and at sixteen-three hands high he was even taller than his sire, the great grey stallion Marius, who was currently asleep in his loose box just a few doors along.

In the still of the night, Storm could hear the sound of hoofbeats approaching at a gallop. He raised his elegant head into the air and let loose a whinny. His sharp call was a warning cry to the herd of mares grazing the pastures outside the walls of the compound. Danger was coming.

The mares heard the bay stallion's clarion call and a moment later they too heard the thunder of hooves drawing closer.

The herd was gripped with panic and the mares and their foals began to scatter in every direction. One of the mares, Margarita, a pale grey beauty with coal-black eyes, immediately took charge of the situation. She was the alpha mare – the leader of the herd – and the others would follow her command. She acted quickly, nipping and kicking at the mares to make them do her bidding, rounding them up to move away from the approaching threat. Many of the mares had young foals at foot slowing them down, but Margarita urged them to be quick, attacking stragglers with squeals and bites, keeping the group tight so that no foal or mare would be left behind. Within seconds they were grouped together, ready to run – but where to? The gates to the hacienda had been closed for the evening so they could not come in to the safety of the courtyard.

The mares began to circle helplessly, driven into a frenzy, as Margarita fought to keep the herd together. If any foal or mare broke away now and left the safety of the herd they would be in even greater danger!

Inside the stables, Storm sensed that the galloping horses were very near now, but he could do nothing to help the mares. In desperation, he rose up on his hind legs and brought his front hooves crashing down hard on the door of his stall. But the doors were made of solid oak, built to withstand a thousand strikes, and his hooves barely scratched their surface. Frustrated and helpless, the bay stallion held his head high and whinnied again. This time the piercing urgency in his cry carried through the night and reached not only the mares, but the sleeping occupants of the hacienda.

Inside the house, lights flickered on. There were shouts of confusion and a moment later three figures came out on to the front step – Roberto Nunez, the owner of El Caballo Danza Magnifico, his son Alfonso, and his head dressage trainer Francoise D'arth. All three were still in their pyjamas and they hurriedly pulled on riding boots and raced down the steps into the cobbled courtyard.

“Go and check on the stallions' stables,” Roberto instructed Francoise. “Alfonso, put on the floodlights in the courtyard and open the gates. I'll bring in the mares!”

As Alfonso and Françoise set off running across the courtyard, Roberto turned around and ran back inside the hacienda. When he re-emerged a moment later, he had a shotgun in his hands. If his mares were being attacked by wolves or rounded up by bandits then he needed to be fully prepared.

As soon as Alfonso switched on the courtyard lights and heaved open the heavy wrought iron gates the terrified herd of mares swung about at full gallop and headed for the safety of the compound.

There was a mad clatter as the mares' hooves struck the cobbled stone of the courtyard and they galloped in to safety, their foals running alongside them.

"Are any mares missing?" Alfonso asked his father.

There were over twenty mares gathered in the middle of the courtyard. To anyone else they would have appeared almost identical, and yet Roberto Nunez could tell them apart at a glance. His eyes flitted swiftly across the herd and he breathed a sigh of relief. All of his prized mares and their offspring were here and they were safe!

"Close the gates!" Roberto ordered. Alfonso pushed the heavy gates shut once more and then came over to join his father. "We'll have to start bringing the mares in again at night," he told Roberto. "I think there are wolves about."

"No," Roberto Nunez shook his head. "Something was out there tonight, but I don't think it was wolves."

"Bandits? Vega's men maybe?" Alfonso asked.

"Perhaps." Roberto looked uncertain. "The question is, did they intend to steal the mares or were they after an even greater prize?"

As he said this, Françoise D'arth emerged from the stallions' stable block and ran towards them. Although she was French, and not Spanish like Roberto and his son, she could easily have been mistaken for a member of the family with her long black hair and lithe lean physique, earned through long hours in the saddle.

"I've checked the stalls," she told Roberto Nunez. "The stallions are safe."

"All of them?" Roberto asked nervously. "Even the Little One?"

Despite the fact that Storm was actually the tallest stallion in his stables, Roberto could not break the habit of referring to him by his nickname – Little One.

Françoise smiled. "Nightstorm is fine. He must have been the one that sensed the danger. I am certain that it was his call that woke me."

"Well," Roberto said, "we take no more chances. From now on the mares must be brought in again each night."

He looked at Françoise. "Perhaps you should assign one of your grooms to stand guard by the stallions' stables for the next few nights as well."

"*Oui*," Françoise agreed with him, "I'll organise a roster. Meanwhile, I will stay with the horses tonight."

Roberto seemed satisfied with this plan. "Keep a close eye on the Little One," he told her.

"Of course I will," Françoise nodded. She knew how important Storm was. Nothing must happen to the young stallion, especially now. In two days' time, his mistress was arriving in Spain to claim him.

Far away on the other side of the world, in Chevalier Point, Storm's owner, Issie Brown, was utterly unaware of the danger her horse was in. All her thoughts were focused on just one thing – getting a clear round.

The showjumping fences in front of Issie were set at a metre-twenty and it was a tough course. Thankfully Comet, the skewbald gelding she was riding, could eat jumps like these for breakfast.

A clear round was vital if they wanted to win today at the Chevalier Point one-day event.

A combined score from all three phases – dressage, cross country and showjumping – would decide the winner. Issie and Comet's weakness in the dressage phase that morning meant they went into the cross country with a decidedly average score.

Issie wasn't surprised – dressage was never their forte. Instead, the partnership relied on blitzing their competition on the cross country and showjumping courses to pull them up the rankings. So far they'd managed to go clear and fast around a tricky cross-country course that had got the better of many of the other riders. Providing Issie could coax Comet to yet another clear round in the showjumping phase, they had every chance of winning a ribbon.

Even though Comet was a bold cross-country ride, he was also a remarkably careful showjumper. He hardly ever scraped the rails, picking up his feet cleanly over the jumps. As they set off around the course, the skewbald felt fresh and eager despite his exertions across country just a few hours earlier. He took the first three fences with deceptive ease, jumping them as if they were no more than trotting poles. At the treble Issie tried to check the skewbald in preparation for the jump, but Comet gave an indignant snort as if to say, "Leave me alone, I know what I'm doing!" He shook his head defiantly to loosen the reins and bounded forward in a bouncy canter, popping the first fence on a perfect canter stride and then leaping to take all three fences without so much as grazing a pole!

"Good boy!" Issie gave the skewbald a slappy pat on his sweaty neck and turned him towards the spread. They took it neatly and cantered on. Only two more jumps and they would be done. The skewbald pony was now hitting his stride and he cantered towards the next fence with ears pricked forward. Issie turned Comet sharply in mid-air over the jump and by the time they landed they already had the next fence in their sights. It was a wide oxer, and as they flew it with a huge leap the crowd broke into spontaneous applause. Only one more jump to go! At the final fence Comet stood back and jumped far too wide. This time his hooves scraped across the top rail, rocking it in its metal cups and there was a horrified gasp from the crowd. It was Issie's turn now to hold her breath as she waited to hear the pole fall. She was beyond relieved when she heard the audience give a whoop and break into applause once again. The pole hadn't fallen! Clear round!

As he raced through the finish flags, Comet saluted his victory with a gleeful buck, and Issie had to grab a hank of mane to stay onboard. She was still grinning when Tom Avery, her instructor, met her at the arena gates.

"If I didn't know better," Issie said as she slid down from the skewbald's back, "I would say Comet scraped that last rail on purpose, just to give the crowd a bit of drama."

Avery laughed. "You know, I was thinking the same thing."

He took Comet's reins so that Issie could undo her helmet. Comet, as usual, was refusing to stand still. He wanted to go back into the arena and show off in front of the crowds again!

"You'll get your chance in a moment," Issie told the pony. "We'll have to go in for the prize-giving. That clear round has raised us up to third place!"

The skewbald gelding had his head held high and was looking around, as if waiting for more applause for his antics. Issie gave him a pat on his patchy chestnut and white neck. "He's going to miss all of the attention once he's turned out."

Avery nodded. "Comet's certainly earned the break this season." He smiled at Issie. "As have you."

Six months ago Issie had turned up on Tom Avery's doorstep with a serious proposal. She told him that she wanted to become an international eventing rider – and she wanted Avery to become her trainer.

Avery had warned Issie that working her way to the top of the international circuit would be a huge commitment. He told her that there would be a gruelling physical training schedule and that a professional rider needed more than just talent. They must have absolute, unwavering dedication.

Issie replied that she understood – she was totally committed to her goal. This was all Avery needed to hear. Ever since then he had taken up the challenge without hesitation and, even though he had his hands full with both Dulmoth Park and the pony club to run, he was totally focused on turning Issie's dream of international eventing into a reality.

“The first thing we need to do is get you a horse,” Avery had told her that day. With his new position as head of the Dulmoth Park stables, Avery could offer her the pick of the best eventing hacks.

“You can have any one you like,” Avery told Issie, “but if I were you, I would stick with Comet.”

Issie was shocked. Comet was a Blackthorn Pony, born and bred on her Aunt Hester’s farm. Issie adored him and had been very successful in the showjumping ring with him, but she couldn’t believe Avery rated the fourteen-two pony above the fancy sport horses at Dulmoth Park.

“Don’t judge him by his size or his bloodlines,” Avery told her. “Comet has proven himself a brilliant showjumper. He picks his feet up more carefully over the jumps than any horse I’ve ever met. And he’s bold and fearless, so he’ll make a great cross-country horse.”

The only problem that Avery could see was Comet’s dressage. “He’s too hot-headed,” Avery admitted. “He lacks the patience for dressage...” adding with a smile, “...and, to be honest, you’re not much better, Issie!”

She took the criticism good-naturedly. After all, her instructor had a point. Issie couldn’t deny that she found dressage schooling sessions dull. She would always find an excuse to skip the flatwork and take Comet out jumping instead. Comet was just as bad, if not worse. The skewbald pony made it clear that he loathed trotting around the dressage arena and would act nappy and behave sluggishly. In the end, Issie would give up and they would tear off to do some cross-country jumps instead.

As a consequence, their first season together on the eventing circuit had been a series of appalling dressage tests followed by spotless clear rounds in both cross country and showjumping. Sometimes this was enough to elevate the duo in the final rankings and they would still manage to win a rosette, but Avery was still very dark on Issie about her lack of commitment to resolve her dressage schooling issues. He had pointed out to her that several times this season they had been pushed down the rankings and had ended up out of the prize money because their flatwork simply wasn’t up to scratch.

Despite the skewbald pony’s disdain for dressage, Issie knew that Avery considered him a serious eventing prospect for the future. But Comet’s future would have to wait. The eventing season in New Zealand was over for another year and Avery had decided that Comet should be spelled – turned out and left unriden for a month – to recuperate before the new season began in spring.

As the worst of winter set in, Comet would be having a horsey holiday with his paddock mates, Toby and Marmite, down at the River Paddock. Issie’s two best friends, Stella and Kate, were keeping an eye on the horses for the next few weeks. Issie, meanwhile, was about to set off to collect the horse that Avery pinned so much hope on for her international eventing career.

When Issie had told Avery her dream, he knew that she needed the right horse to take her to the top. Comet was on the list of potential mounts. But there was also another horse that Avery had in mind. Not just any horse, but *the* horse. If Avery was correct, this stallion would be talented enough to take Issie to the highest level, competing in international, four star events. A horse like this would normally cost a fortune but, luckily for Issie, she already owned the perfect horse. And right now he was waiting for her, far away in Southern Spain.

Issie’s bags were packed and the plane tickets were ready. Tomorrow they would board the plane to travel once again to El Caballo Danza Magnifico. There, she would be reunited with her beloved Nightstorm. And this time, they wouldn’t be separated again. This time, she was bringing him home.

## Chapter 2

Issie's last flight to Spain had been one of the worst times of her life. Nightstorm had been stolen from Chevalier Point and Issie had gone after him, spending the entire twenty-four-hour journey worried sick that she might never see her colt again. This time, however, the butterflies in her tummy as she boarded the plane to Madrid were not from fear, but from excitement.

It had been a difficult decision, when she chose to leave Storm behind at El Caballo Danza Magnifico all those months ago. She knew deep down that she had done the right thing, but that hadn't made it any easier. She still remembered how it broke her heart to hug Storm goodbye.

When she said goodbye to him, Storm had still been a leggy yearling. Now, by all accounts, he was fully grown – a strapping stallion! Issie was beside herself with excitement at the prospect of being reunited with her horse. It was almost impossible to sit still on the plane. Her nervous energy didn't escape the attention of the passenger sat to her left.

“Are you going to keep jiggling about like that for the whole trip?” Mrs Brown asked as Issie squirmed in the cramped economy-class seat beside her. She peered over at her daughter's tray table. “Look! You've barely touched your food.”

“Mum,” Issie groaned, “it's airline food! No one touches it.”

“Do you want me to ask the cabin crew if they have something else?” Mrs Brown asked.

“No, Mum,” Issie smiled. “Stop fussing over me. I'm fine.”

It had come as a bit of a shock to Issie that her mum would be accompanying her and Avery on the journey to El Caballo Danza Magnifico.

“I don't see why you're so surprised,” Mrs Brown had said. “I need to keep an eye on you after last time. I don't want you entering another Spanish horse race!”

Issie's mother was still upset about her last trip there. “Racing horses through the streets!” Mrs Brown shook her head. “What were you thinking?”

If Mrs Brown had actually seen how Issie had ridden the El Caballo stallion, Angel, that day then she would have had a heart attack! The Silver Bridle was a wild, winner-takes-all contest, run through the town square of the local village. Issie had galloped against hardened, Spanish *vaqueros* – cowboys twice her size who rode with ruthless determination.

“I had no choice,” Issie had shrugged in her defence. “It was the only way to get Storm back from Miguel Vega.”

Issie had won the race and the colt had been returned to her safe and sound. She had been intent on bringing Storm back home immediately, but Roberto Nunez persuaded her not to. He convinced Issie to leave Storm with him in Spain at El Caballo Danza Magnifico so that the colt could receive an education in the art of *haute école* – the ‘high school’ dressage movements.

“I still don't understand why you want to come, Mum,” Issie had said when her mother told her of her plans. “We're not going to some seaside resort on the Costa Del Sol! This is a horse farm in the middle of nowhere. You don't even like horses!”

“I'm coming because I need to keep an eye on you!” Mrs Brown said. “Besides, I've always wanted to go on holiday to Southern Spain. And the weather is perfect in Andalusia right now.”

Issie couldn't argue with that. July was mid-summer in Spain, a pleasant change from Chevalier Point, where the nastiest month of winter was about to set in. They would be leaving behind rain, mud and chilly mornings in favour of thirty degree temperatures, sunshine and blue skies for five whole weeks! It seemed like a long time just to collect a horse, but Avery had insisted that they needed to stay for at least a month to “do the training work and fulfil the terms of the contract with Françoise” – whatever that meant.

Avery had been vague about the details, but then he seemed rather preoccupied lately. Issie guessed that he had a lot on his mind; organising this trip back to El Caballo, emailing and phoning Françoise regularly to discuss their plans.

It had taken a whole six months to negotiate the arrangements for bringing Storm home. Françoise, in her capacity as head trainer at El Caballo Danza Magnifico, had resisted the idea at first. She felt the stallion needed more time to continue his training and she had been reluctant to let Storm go. Eventually, however, she and Avery had reached an agreement and a date was set for Issie, her mum and her trainer to travel to Spain.

It wasn't a simple journey to undertake. The flight to Spain from New Zealand took twenty-four hours and after that there was a high-speed train from Madrid to Seville. By the time the three travellers arrived at the railway station in Seville they were jetlagged and exhausted. The heat of the sun struck Issie as she wheeled her suitcase out of the front doors. It was so intense that she felt like she was melting into the pavement. She cast a glance at the road ahead and suddenly caught sight of the familiar beaten-up old Land Rover parked directly in front of the train station. There was a lanky teenager leaning back against the bonnet of the car. He had tousled black hair, tanned skin and the square-jawed good looks of a Spanish film star. The boy waved to Issie and his face broke into a broad grin.

"Alfie!" Issie squealed as she dropped her luggage and made a dash across the busy street, throwing herself into his arms.

Mrs Brown watched wide-eyed as her daughter hugged him. "The local Spanish lads are very friendly with tourists, aren't they?" she commented dryly to Avery as they followed across the road with the luggage.

"Mum!" Issie was beaming. "This is Alfonso Nunez. He's the son of Roberto and the head rider in El Caballo Danza Magnifico."

"Lovely to meet you, Mrs Brown," Alfie said, letting go of Issie and racing forward to help with the luggage. "We're very excited that you could join your daughter on this trip," he smiled. "Isadora has told me how much you love horses and what a great rider you are. My father has already chosen one of his most spirited stallions and asked one of the men to prepare him for you to ride. We can saddle up as soon as we get to the hacienda!"

Mrs Brown's face dropped. "Ride?" She turned to Issie in panic. "He is joking, isn't he, Isadora? You did tell him that I'm utterly terrified of horses, didn't you?"

Alfie and Issie couldn't keep straight faces any longer and burst out laughing.

"Very funny!" Mrs Brown fumed as she clambered into the back seat of the Land Rover. Alfie and Avery loaded the last of the bags, then Alfie leapt into the driver's seat and turned the Land Rover out on to the cobbled streets of downtown Seville.

Within an hour they had left the city and begun to climb through the forest-clad hills of Andalusia. As Alfie turned off the main road, yellow dust flew up from beneath the tyres and he began to steer more vigorously to avoid the potholes in the rugged road that wound around the hills. Soon they were surrounded by olive trees and then as the Land Rover began to descend into a green valley Issie felt her heart soar. There it was, El Caballo Danza Magnifico! Down below she could see the herds of mares with their foals grazing the sunburnt fields around the perimeter of the estate, its beautiful stone buildings arranged around a cobbled courtyard and enclosed by a vast, white stone wall.

"The mares are only allowed out to graze during the daytime now," Alfie told Issie as they drove down the hill. "There was an incident last week, late at night. We think maybe it was bandits trying to raid the herd."

Issie was horrified. "The mares and foals were all fine," Alfie reassured her, "but since then Dad has insisted that we bring the horses in every night, just to be safe."

"Do you think it might have been Miguel Vega's men?" Issie asked.

Miguel Vega's hacienda was El Caballo's closest neighbour. The two great horse farms had been fierce rivals for many years and Vega was not above resorting to dirty tricks.

"Miguel Vega?" Mrs Brown joined in the conversation. "Why do I know that name?"

"He's the one that stole Storm," Issie reminded her mother.

Alfonso nodded. "Since your last visit, *Señor Vega* has been suspiciously quiet. I wondered how long it would be before he gave us trouble again." Alfie shrugged. "Whoever it was, we have taken precautions now. The mares are locked up at night. It will not be easy for them to try again."

The herd was grazing near the dusty road as they drove past and even Mrs Brown was captured by the beauty of these mares with their charcoal-black foals. "Why are the mothers white when their foals are black?" she asked.

"Lipizzaners and Andalusians are grey, but their foals are always born black," Avery explained. "Their coats change colour as they age. Eventually the dark colour fades away completely and the horses become grey."

"They don't look grey," Mrs Brown said stubbornly. "They're white really, aren't they?"

Issie sighed. Her mum was the most unhorsey person she knew. "Mum, technically there's no such thing as a white horse," Issie explained. "They're always called grey."

"We have over fifty horses," Alfie told Mrs Brown, taking up the role as El Caballo tour guide. "All of them are bred here. We have the Lipizzaners and Andalusians, and we also have Anglo-Arabs – the same bloodlines as Isadora's own mare, Blaze."

Alfie pulled the Land Rover to a rough stop outside the gates of the hacienda and Issie leapt out of the car, swung open the enormous wrought iron gates and let him through. Alfie drove sedately around the cobbled compound, continuing his tour for the benefit of Mrs Brown. "That large building to the rear is the mares' quarters, where we keep them at night," he explained. "The stallions are in separate quarters over there and that building ahead of you now is our main indoor arena where the riders train the horses. And this..." he said, swinging hard on the wheel of the Land Rover, turning back around the fountain and parking the car in front of the central archway of the main hacienda, "...is our house, where you will be staying as our guests."

Mrs Brown was stunned. "Much nicer than the Costa Del Sol!" she muttered.

The Nunez hacienda was a stately Spanish villa, two storeys high with curved archways on the bottom floor and top-floor balconies smothered in vines of brilliant pink and orange tropical bougainvillea. All the windows were trimmed with wrought iron window boxes filled with candy pink geraniums, and the front steps were lined with elegant topiaries of Seville oranges. The front door was made of heavy, dark-stained wood. It swung open and a man stepped out to greet them.

"Thomas!" Roberto Nunez skipped down the stairs and grasped Avery by the hand before pulling him into his arms in a manly embrace. "So good to see you again!"

"You too, Roberto," Avery hugged the Spaniard who had been his best friend ever since they met as young riders on the international eventing circuit.

"And Isadora!" Roberto smiled. "Welcome back. And this lovely woman must be your sister?"

He stepped forward, took Mrs Brown's hand and clasped it lightly in his own.

"Roberto," said Issie, grinning at his charming antics, "this is my mum, Amanda Brown."

"Welcome!" Roberto smiled. "Don't worry about your luggage. Alfonso will take it to your rooms. Come in and sit down! Have something to eat and drink. You must be famished."

He guided his guests towards the front door of the hacienda.

"Where is Françoise?" Avery asked, looking around.

"Down at the stallions' stables," Roberto replied. "Isadora, perhaps you might like to go and let her know you have arrived?"

Issie's heart was racing as she headed across the cobbled courtyard. It was so strange to be back here again! She couldn't believe she was about to see Storm. Her stomach was tied in nervous knots. It had been so long.

The stallions' quarters were located on the far side of the compound. From the outside they looked like all the rest of the buildings at El Caballo Danza Magnifico; classical Spanish stone with curved archways and tiled rooftops. But inside was a different story. The stallions' quarters were ultra-modern and the loose boxes were state-of-the-art.

Issie looked down the row of stalls and at the far end of the corridor she saw Francoise D'arth. The French dressage trainer was wearing cream jodhpurs and a white shirt, her long dark hair tied back in a high ponytail. She was leading a horse and with one glimpse of the pretty, dished Arabian face with the wide, white blaze Issie knew it was him.

"Storm!" she called out, unable to control her excitement.

The horse suddenly froze at the sound of her voice and stood alert with his head held high. Without thinking, Issie raised a hand to her lips and gave a wolf whistle – the call she had always used back home when she played tag with the colt.

At the sound of the whistle, Storm let out a loud nicker and began to dance and skip, going up on to his hind legs so that Francoise was forced to pull him back down.

"Storm! Easy boy, no!" Issie cried out, aware that her call had rattled the big bay stallion.

It was too late. Storm reared up a second time with such force that he ripped the lead rope out of Francoise's hands.

Francoise was an experienced horsewoman, but she hadn't been expecting this and the stallion was too powerful. He broke free from her hands and surged forward, heading straight for the girl. His metal horseshoes chimed out against the hard concrete floor beneath his hooves as he cantered through the stable block.

Issie stood perfectly still. The bay stallion's enormous, muscled body was thundering through the stables. She knew that he could easily trample her down or knock her over, and yet, as the horse continued to bear down on her, Issie wasn't in the least bit afraid. This wasn't any stallion, this was her horse. It was Storm.

The girl and the stallion were just a few metres apart when Storm pulled up dramatically to a halt and stood, snorting and quivering, in front of her. The stallion was sixteen-three hands high and every inch of him was pure muscle. Issie looked into his deep brown eyes and didn't hesitate. She threw herself forward and flung her arms around the horse's neck, burying her face in his long, black mane.

"Storm!" Issie was finding it hard to breathe, a sob was stuck in her throat and she was choking on her words. "Hey boy, it's me."

The stallion was trembling all over, nickering and stamping, flicking his head as if to say, "You're back! Where have you been all this time? I missed you!"

At the far end of the corridor, Francoise D'arth watched this touching reunion and a faint smile crossed her lips. She had never seen a horse behave like that before, but then she had never known any horse and rider to have a bond as close as the one Issie shared with Storm. The girl loved the bay stallion and he had missed her dreadfully. But as Francoise knew only too well, it was not enough to love a horse. You must also have the skills to handle it. In the month to come, Issie would need to prove herself at El Caballo Danza Magnifico. But for now, Francoise stood back and let Isadora enjoy the reunion with her beloved horse. The girl would find out soon enough about the nature of the challenge that lay ahead.

## Chapter 3

When Storm was nothing more than a skinny-legged colt running around the paddocks at Winterflood Farm, Issie had trained him to come when she whistled. It was a cute trick to teach a foal, but it was a totally different story now he had become a fully-grown stallion.

“I’m sorry,” Issie called out to Francoise as she led Storm back up the corridor, “I can’t believe he still remembers my whistle.”

“It is my fault,” Francoise replied as she strode forward to meet them. “I should have anticipated his reaction. They say that horses do not remember as you and I do, but this is not always true. Some memories run so deep they cannot be erased. He has not forgotten you, Isadora. That is quite clear.”

As if to confirm this, Storm gave another nicker and rubbed his handsome face up against Issie, using her as a scratching post just as he had always done in the paddock back home.

“Storm!” Francoise chastised the stallion. “Where are your manners? An El Caballo stallion doesn’t behave like that!”

Francoise took the lead rope and jiggled it to make him step back. Storm got the message and stood obediently while Francoise embraced Issie in the customary French way with a kiss on each cheek before adding a hug of her own.

“Welcome back to El Caballo Danza Magnifico, Isadora,” she smiled.

“It’s good to be back, Francoise,” Issie grinned.

Issie had been hoping that perhaps they could saddle up straight away. She was desperate to ride Storm for the first time and Francoise seemed to be reading her mind. “There will be time for riding soon enough,” the Frenchwoman said as she grasped Storm’s lead rope and began to guide him down the corridor back towards his stall, “I don’t think Roberto would be impressed if I took his guest out for a gallop straight away. We should go back into the house and get you settled in.” She smiled at Issie. “That is, if you can possibly bear to be apart from Storm again!”

Issie laughed at this, but really she would rather have stayed out here, exhausted, grubby and jetlagged, and fallen asleep beside her horse on the straw in his stall than go to the luxury and comfort of her room in the Nunez hacienda. But Issie knew that would have sounded ungrateful, so she followed Francoise as she led the stallion back to his loose box.

“He has grown up so beautifully, hasn’t he? Look at his topline!” Francoise gestured at the ridge of muscle along the stallion’s neck just beneath the glossy, black mane. “You can see by the developing muscles that we have already begun his training in the dressage school. He is still too young for the advanced *haute école* manoeuvres. They will come later. We are taking things gradually, but already my riders think he shows great promise. Once he learns collection and paces he will be ready to progress to the ‘airs above ground’.”

Issie felt herself tense up. Francoise was talking about Storm as if he still had more training to come. But how could that be possible when they were here to take him home to Chevalier Point? Francoise was acting as if he wasn’t actually going to leave El Caballo Danza Magnifico!

“We’ll keep training him when we get him home, of course,” Issie said, hoping that she was subtly making it clear that she expected to take the colt back with her, “but dressage isn’t really my priority. Avery believes Storm will be a great prospect as an eventer.”

Francoise looked serious. “We have had long discussions about this, Tom and I. When you first agreed to keep the colt with us, it was so that he could be schooled as a classical dressage horse. And, as I have been trying to impress upon Tom, his training has not yet finished.”

“What do you mean, he hasn’t finished?” Issie was getting edgy. “I’m here to take him home.”

Francoise frowned. “But surely you know about this? I made it clear to Avery that I could not permit you to take Storm away now. The stallion’s basic training has begun, but he has yet to learn the truly advanced moves of dressage. It would be wrong to drag him out of the best classical school

in the world when you could not possibly complete his training back home in Chevalier Point. Only an *haute école* rider will do for a horse such as Storm. That is why we came to the arrangement.”

Issie was taken aback. “Arrangement? What arrangement?” This couldn’t be happening! “I’ve come all this way and now you’re telling me I can’t take my own horse home?”

“*Non, non!*” Francoise shook her head. “That is not what I am saying. Of course you will take him.” She paused. “But first, you must fulfil your side of bargain. That was the deal that I struck with Tom.”

The conversation had grown tense. Issie desperately wanted to make a childish snatch and take back the stallion’s lead rope. She was jetlagged and on the verge of tears, trying to behave like an adult. But Issie didn’t feel very grown-up. She didn’t want to be having this conversation. She just wanted her horse.

Footsteps echoed in the stable block, and Francoise and Issie both turned to see Avery walking up the corridor to join them.

Francoise emphatically slid the bolt on the door, as if to make a point that the stallion was still under El Caballo lock and key, and then turned to face Avery with her hands on her hips. “I assumed you would have explained it to her by now. What is going on here?”

Francoise’s abruptness took Avery by surprise. “Well, bonjour to you too!” he smiled at her. “I was expecting at least a French kiss on the cheek before we started fighting.”

His amused expression seemed to infuriate Francoise. “Do not be cute with me! We made a contract. And, since it involves Isadora too, I thought you would have told her about it.”

Avery’s smile disappeared. “I did tell her. I said that we would be staying here for at least a month to fulfil the terms of the training contract.”

Francoise shook her head as if she was trying to rearrange jigsaw-puzzle pieces inside her brain. “But you didn’t tell her anything more than that?”

“Hey!” Issie was getting fed up with the to-and-fro between Avery and Francoise. “I’m standing right here! Will you please stop bickering and tell me what’s going on?”

Francoise cast a sullen look at Avery then turned to Issie. “If you want to take Storm home to Chevalier Point, you must know how to train him first.”

“I know how to train a horse,” Issie frowned. “I’ve schooled Fortune and Comet. I’m quite capable of teaching Storm the basics...”

“No,” Francoise interrupted her, “not the basics, Isadora. If you want to take Storm you must know how to continue his dressage education. You must learn the ways of classical dressage so that you can ride the *haute école*.”

Issie was gobsmacked. “You’re kidding me, right? Francoise, I can barely get through a dressage test for a one-day event. I can’t do any fancy moves!”

“Believe me, Issie,” Avery interjected, “Francoise is only too aware of your limitations when it comes to dressage.”

“Tom has told me about your riding on the eventing circuit,” Francoise continued. “Your dressage tests are, without fail, sub-standard. This is why I insisted that you must stay and learn *haute école*.”

“You agreed to this?” Issie was stunned. “It’s like you’re checking me into some kind of dressage rehab! You’re both ganging up on me!”

“It’s not like that,” Avery said. “You might not realise it now, but you will benefit enormously from what Francoise is suggesting.”

“You will have a month at El Caballo training in the dressage school with my riders,” Francoise explained. “The performers are all in training mode preparing their new routines for the upcoming touring season, so the timing couldn’t be better. You will train with the school as if you were one of them. It is a great honour, as I am sure you can appreciate. These riders are some of the best horsemen in the world. Their knowledge of dressage is second to none.”

Francoise was right. Her riders were amazing. The manoeuvres they could perform on their horses were nothing short of astonishing to watch. But Issie had never imagined herself in the same league. She wasn't capable of performing this intricate ballet on horseback. She would only embarrass herself in front of Francoise's riders. It sounded like a nightmare to Issie, but her fate had been sealed before she even set foot on Spanish soil. Avery and Francoise had agreed to this. She had to learn the *haute école* or she would not be allowed to take Storm home with her. She did not doubt that Francoise was quite serious about this. Or that Avery had agreed to it. She knew that neither of these formidable trainers would take no for an answer.

"OK, but I don't understand how I'm going to do this," Issie frowned. "You said a minute ago that Storm was still too young to learn *haute école*."

"He is," Francoise confirmed. "You will not be riding Storm in the school. You will be riding another horse."

Francoise turned on her heels and led Issie and Avery further down the corridor of the stallions' stables until they reached the stall at the end. Here she swung open the top of the Dutch door to reveal the horse that stood inside.

The stallion was almost as tall as Storm, sixteen-two hands high. His face had the noble bearing of a classical Andalusian with wide-set, soulful eyes and a dark, sooty muzzle. He was a grey, but his dapples had long ago faded so he was as creamy white as parchment. His long mane was like gossamer silk and it tumbled and cascaded over his broad neck and down his powerful shoulders. Only one thing marred this stallion's pure and exquisite beauty – on the bridge of his Roman nose, just where the noseband of a bridle rests, were tiny jagged scars where once there had been deep cuts in the stallion's flesh. The wounds were very old now and had healed over with time. Issie knew exactly how the stallion had received these scars – from wearing a cruel *serreta* bridle in the hands of Miguel Vega.

She reached up and stroked the stallion's soft muzzle, touching the scar tissue tenderly as she looked deep into his dark, liquid eyes.

"Hello, Angel," she said softly to him. "It's me. I've come back."

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