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The Steeplechase Secret

by
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Based on the original TV series created by
Vicki Lutas and Anna McCleery

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An Island Visitor

Zoe breathed in the salty sea air and felt the breeze against her face. On impulse, she tugged off her boots and socks and dug her toes into the sand. She faced the ocean, curly wisps of hair fluttering in the wind. She closed her hazel eyes to feel the sun on her face, and—*BAM!*

“Raven!” Zoe yelped, stumbling forward. “Way to ruin the moment!” Raven, who had just playfully head-butted Zoe during her almost-perfect Zen moment, tossed his head in the air with a neigh. Zoe laughed and reached her arm around the beautiful black horse’s neck. She took a deep breath and realized that *this* was the moment she had been working for—fighting for—ever since she had arrived on this small English island a couple



of months earlier. Zoe leaned into Raven, giving him a hug. Raven snorted and dropped his coal-black head to rest on Zoe's shoulder.

"Hey, boy," she whispered into his tangled mane. "Isn't it great? No training. No Junior Nationals. No obligation to former owners who want you to win every competition." Zoe was referring to Raven's previous owner. Raven had been through a lot in his life: stolen as a foal and then shipwrecked, washing up on an island—the very island that was now their home. After that, he'd been horse-napped! But now he belonged to Zoe, and she belonged to him. It was the one thing of which Zoe was certain.

Maybe Raven hadn't minded the pressure of all the competitions, but Zoe was thrilled that life was back to normal—well, the new normal. Her old normal life was thousands of miles away, across a continent and an ocean, in Los Angeles, California. That's where she had lived her whole life until her mom decided to bring Zoe and her little sister, Rosie, to the island to visit their grandfather.

Zoe's mom had grown up on the island. She was used to being separated from the rest of the world, in a big, old stone house with a gorgeous garden and yard, where



the only social life was at the local riding stables, Bright Fields. But surprisingly, Zoe was getting used to it, too.

Now her world revolved around Raven and Bright Fields. She'd made *horse-some* friends in Jade and Becky—together, they were Pony Squad! She'd also made a formidable frenemy in Mia, and she'd even had a couple of attempts at a proper boyfriend. First with Marcus, and then there was Pin. If things kept going well when Pin came back from Vienna, maybe they'd actually be able to make it “official” between them once and for all. Man, a lot had happened in a few months!

Zoe could hardly believe that her mom and Rosie had remained on the island just so Zoe could stay with Raven. “You really turned our world upside down, didn’t you?” she said to him. As she thought about her old life, she gazed out at the ocean. A long, flat ferryboat caught her eye. Zoe hadn’t seen any ferries dock at this side of the island. The ferries to the mainland usually came in at the pier, where there was an ice cream parlor and a couple of other attractions.

Zoe clucked to Raven and led him to the other side of the beach. “Let’s get a better look,” she said. Why would the boat be docking there? A little part of her told her she should just leave it alone. After all the drama with Raven



and the horse stealers, she had promised her mom—and her dad, via Skype—that she would lie low and focus on her own responsibilities, like schoolwork—and Raven, of course. Still, Zoe could not contain her curiosity. On closer inspection, she could see a large SUV, a two-horse trailer, a bunch of building supplies like lumber and bags of sand, and many bales of hay and bags of grain.

“Looks pretty tasty, right?” Zoe said, patting Raven’s neck, but she kept her eyes on the boat.

Just then, a boy walked to the bow and leaned over the railing. He wore a V-neck sweater with a crisp collared shirt and looked a couple of years older than Zoe. Soon, a man in a suit came up behind the boy and put a hand on his shoulder. Zoe wondered where they were headed. The island had several stables. What were the chances that they were bound for Bright Fields?

“We really should be getting back,” Zoe said, as much to herself as to Raven. “Let’s go, boy.” But as she turned to go, Raven stayed put, still eyeing the ferry. He snorted.

“I know,” Zoe said. “Something feels weird about it to me, too, but I’m sure it’s nothing.” Zoe looked at her horse, who did not seem convinced. “Not everything is a conspiracy!” she insisted, sounding a lot like her mom.



Raven sighed and dropped his head. When Zoe lightly jangled the reins and rubbed his ear, he followed. She trudged back to where she'd discarded her footwear. "Ugh! Sand in the socks is not a good feeling with boots on," she mumbled to herself. Raven whinnied as if to laugh at her. "I know, I know. Serves me right."

By the time Zoe made it back to Bright Fields, the excess sand was bugging her so much that she let her feet dangle out of the stirrups.

"If you would stay *on* the horse, where you belong, these things wouldn't happen to you, Zoe," Mia declared. "You keep forgetting that Raven and you are horse and rider. It's not like you're mates."

Zoe scowled. "Speak for yourself. You and Firefly may have that relationship, but Raven and I have a special bond," Zoe said, patting Raven's neck.

Still in the saddle, she pulled off her boot and turned it over. Just as the sand started to spill out, Raven snorted and blew a cloud of sand grains right in Mia's face. Zoe tried (only a little) to contain her laughter, and Mia stomped off.

Zoe had come to learn that Mia could be a little less insufferable when she wanted to be—nice, even—*sometimes*. She'd still probably never stop making snarky



comments or acting like she always knew best. But Mia had her reasons for being, well, Mia, and Zoe just had to keep reminding herself of that.

Jade and Becky were a far more welcome sight on Zoe's return to the stables. Pony Squad sat together in the tack room as Zoe cleaned the sand off her feet. "I got to see a super-sized ferry arrive and dock all the way over by the cove," she said to her friends. "That's kind of weird, right?"

Becky's expression grew serious. She tugged on her super-tight French braid, deep in thought. "Very weird," she agreed, always willing to consider the most unlikely explanations first. Becky was, after all, a firm believer in the so-called ghost pony who haunted the island. "Maybe it's a pirate boat! Or a boat full of *ghost* pirates! Or a gravy boat! Wait, that's not right . . ."

Jade, as usual, opted for a rational explanation instead. "Maybe the other pier was too crowded? It does get quite busy at this time of year." Just then, Mia waltzed into the tack room with Susie, her second in command, at her flank. In her hand Mia held a fancy cream-colored envelope embossed with a gold horseshoe.

"That ferry was just the first of many," she announced. She waved the envelope like an ornate fan. Zoe would



never understand how Mia's poker-straight hair always looked salon fresh after hours at the stables. "A partnership from the mainland is investing in the old Grindlerock Racing Grounds. They're going to rehabilitate it and then sponsor a formal steeplechase event at the end of the month."

This news inspired the gasps of awe that Mia had hoped for—from everyone except Zoe.

"They're using that dock because it's better for oversized deliveries, like building equipment, trailers, and *top-ranked* European racehorses," Mia went on. She watched Zoe closely for her reaction, but Zoe didn't blink or even raise her eyebrows. "Isn't it thrilling?" Mia prompted.

"Oh, yes," Susie said on command. "Thrilling."

When Mia stared her down, Zoe finally commented. "Well, I might be thrilled, but you lost me at Grindlehock, and then you lost me again at steeplechase."

"It's *Grindlerock*," Mia corrected, "and it was once a stately racecourse that attracted tourists from the mainland every weekend of the competitive season. Of course, that was long before our time, but everyone knows it was lush and lovely."

"This is an island," Zoe stated. "We've ridden all over



the place. How is there a big, fancy racetrack here that I've never seen?"

"Well," Mia replied, "Ireland and Australia are islands, too. Have you explored every square kilometer of those islands as well?"

"O-kay," Zoe replied. Mia had a point. The island did have all kinds of nooks and crannies that Zoe hadn't explored. This place was full of surprises! "But what are you so excited about, Mia? It's just a racetrack. You were a show jumper last I knew."

"Oh, Zoe," Mia said. "You are so provincially American. Steeplechase is not your stateside version of racing. It's not like the Triple Crown or other straight gallop-to-the-finish races. Steeplechase is a race with jumps. It is a quintessentially British event."

"Because they wear hats?" Zoe asked hopefully. Was there anything more British than the elegant spectator hats that they wore to weddings and parades and other posh affairs?

"Yes, because they wear hats," Mia confirmed. "And there will be hats at the Grindlerock opening event as well. You will all need one since you'll want to come cheer for Firefly and me."

"Hats? I'll make you a hat," Becky offered. "I have a



bunch of old lampshades that I've been saving for a major crafting event—I knew they'd come in handy!"

"Um, no, thanks," Mia promptly replied.

"Wait. You're racing?" Jade asked Mia. "That sounds intense."

"Well, my dad met Mr. Cooke, the event promoter, on the mainland. They hit it off, of course. When Daddy told him about my performance at Junior Nationals, Mr. Cooke asked me to compete. This is the invitation." Mia paused and raised her eyebrows for effect. "I figure we need something to focus on now that Junior Nationals are over. Who's with me?" Mia immediately turned to Zoe.

"Um, no," Zoe answered. "Raven and I need some downtime. And training for a high-profile tourist attraction with hurdles and fancy hats is anything but that."

She and Raven needed a rest. Still, it was kind of exciting, knowing that the island would host a big event in just a few weeks.

"Why don't we ride out to this old track tomorrow and see it for ourselves?" Zoe tossed her chaps into her tack trunk. "The weather's supposed to be nice, and since we don't have to train, we could take a picnic and be gone all afternoon."



“Oh! I could bake something horse-some, like carrot-cake doughnuts,” Becky suggested. “They’re Bob’s favorite. And mine.” Bob was Becky’s pony.

“That sounds delicious—and fun,” Jade agreed.

“I know Raven could use more time exploring and less time in the ring practicing,” Zoe said, loving her plan even more. “I could, too.”

“An old racing track?” Becky said absentmindedly, not seeming to have heard a word Zoe just said. “Think of all the expectations and hope over the years. The adrenaline. The rivalries. The heartbreak.” She went on with a faraway look in her eyes. “I’ll bet there are at least three ghost ponies trapped in the race grounds. Or maybe ghost *jockeys*,” Becky whispered. Jade and Zoe turned to her. “Oh, did I say that out loud?” Becky asked, biting her lower lip.

“You did,” Jade responded, giving her best friend a knowing smile. “But we’ll pretend you didn’t.” Becky had a habit of letting her imagination get away with her. Jade preferred to stick to the facts. “We’re not going on a whole ghost pony quest tomorrow. It’s just a jaunt. For fun,” Jade insisted. “To celebrate not having to train for Junior Nationals anymore.”



Becky gave an enthusiastic smile, her braid bobbing with each nod. “Absolutely,” she said. But something told Zoe that ghost ponies—or other kinds of ghosts—were still running wild in Becky’s mind.

This will just be an innocent little field trip, Zoe told herself. There won’t be anything strange or mysterious at all. Right?

