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Opening Extract from...

The Horse Whisperer

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Published by Sphere

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There was death at its beginning as there would be death again at its end. Though whether it was some fleeting shadow of this that passed across the girl's dreams and woke her on that least likely of mornings she would never know. All she knew, when she opened her eyes, was that the world was somehow altered.

The red glow of her alarm showed it was yet a half-hour till the time she had set it to wake her and she lay quite still, not lifting her head, trying to configure the change. It was dark but not as dark as it should be. Across the bedroom, she could clearly make out the dull glint of her riding trophies on cluttered shelves and above them the looming faces of rock stars she had once thought she should care about. She listened. The silence that filled the house was different too, expectant, like the pause between the intake of breath and the uttering of words. Soon there would be the muted roar of the furnace coming alive in the basement and the old farmhouse floorboards would

start their ritual creaking complaint. She slipped out from the bedclothes and went to the window.

There was snow. The first fall of winter. And from the laterals of the fence up by the pond she could tell there must be almost a foot of it. With no deflecting wind, it was perfect and driftless, heaped in comical proportion on the branches of the six small cherry trees her father had planted last year. A single star shone in a wedge of deep blue above the woods. The girl looked down and saw a lace of frost had formed on the lower part of the window and she placed a finger on it, melting a small hole. She shivered, not from the cold, but from the thrill that this transformed world was for the moment entirely hers. And she turned and hurried to get dressed.

Grace Maclean had come up from New York City the night before with her father, just the two of them. She always enjoyed the trip, two and a half hours on the Taconic State Parkway, cocooned together in the long Mercedes, listening to tapes and chatting easily about school or some new case he was working on. She liked to hear him talk as he drove, liked having him to herself, seeing him slowly unwind in his studiously weekend clothes. Her mother, as usual, had some dinner or function or something and would be catching the train to Hudson this morning, which she preferred to do anyway. The Friday-night crawl of traffic invariably made her crabby and impatient and she would compensate by taking charge, telling Robert, Grace's father, to slow down or speed up or take some devious route to avoid delays. He never bothered to argue, just did as he was told, though sometimes he would sigh or give Grace, relegated to the backseat, a wry glance in the mirror. Her parents' relationship had long been a mystery to her, a complicated world where dominance and compliance were never quite what they seemed. Rather than get involved, Grace would simply retreat into the sanctuary of her Walkman.

On the train her mother would work for the entire journey, undistracted and undistractable. Accompanying her once recently, Grace had watched her and marveled that she never even looked out of the window except perhaps in a glazed, unseeing scan when some big-shot writer or one of her more eager assistant editors called on the cellular phone.

The light on the landing outside Grace's room was still on. She tiptoed in her socks past the half-open door of her parents' bedroom and paused. She could hear the ticking of the wall clock in the hall below and now the reassuring, soft snoring of her father. She came down the stairs into the hall, its azure walls and ceiling already aglow from the reflection of snow through undraped windows. In the kitchen, she drank a glass of milk in one long tilt and ate a chocolate-chip cookie as she scribbled a note for her father on the pad by the phone. *Gone riding. Back around 10. Luv, G.*

She took another cookie and ate it on the move as she went through to the passageway by the back door where they left coats and muddy boots. She put on her fleece jacket and hopped elegantly, holding the cookie in her mouth, as she pulled on her riding boots. She zipped her jacket to the neck, put on her gloves and took her riding hat down off the shelf, wondering briefly if she should phone Judith to check if she still wanted to ride now that it had snowed. But there was no need. Judith would be just as excited as she was. As Grace opened the door to step out into the freezing air, she heard the furnace come to life down in the basement.

Wayne P. Tanner looked gloomily over the rim of his coffee cup at the rows of snowcrusted trucks parked outside the diner. He hated the snow but, more than that, he hated being caught out. And in the space of just a few hours it had happened twice.

Those New York state troopers had enjoyed every minute

of it, smug Yankee bastards. He had seen them slide up behind him and hang there on his tail for a couple of miles, knowing damn well he'd seen them and enjoying it. Then the lights coming on, telling him to pull over and the smartass, no more than a kid, swaggering up alongside in his stetson like some goddamn movie cop. He'd asked for the daily logbook and Wayne found it, handed it down and watched as the kid read it.

'Atlanta huh?' he said, flipping the pages.

'Yes sir,' Wayne replied. 'And it's one helluva lot warmer down there, I can tell you.' The tone usually worked with cops, respectful but fraternal, implying some working kinship of the road. But the kid didn't look up.

'Uh-huh. You know that radar detector you've got there is illegal, don't you?'

Wayne glanced at the little black box bolted to the dash and wondered for a moment whether to play all innocent. In New York fuzz-busters were only illegal for trucks over eighteen thousand pounds. He was packing about three or four times that. Pleading ignorance, he reckoned, might just make the little bastard meaner still. He turned back with a mock guilty grin but it was wasted because the kid still didn't look at him. 'Don't you?' he said again.

'Yeah, well. I guess.'

The kid shut the logbook and handed it back up to him, at last meeting his eyes. 'Okay,' he said. 'Now let's see the other one.'

'I'm sorry?'

'The other logbook. The real one. This one here's for the fairies.' Something turned over in Wayne's stomach.

For fifteen years, like thousands of other truck drivers, he'd kept two logs, one telling the truth about driving times, mileage, rest-overs and all and the other, fabricated specially for situations like this, showing he'd stuck by all the legal

limits. And in all that time, pulled over God knows how many dozens of times, coast to coast, never had any cop done this. Shit, damn near every trucker he knew kept a phony log, they called them comic books, it was a joke. If you were on your own and no partner to take shifts, how the hell were you supposed to meet deadlines? How the hell were you supposed to make a goddamn living? Jesus. The companies all knew about it, they just turned a blind eye.

He had tried spinning it out awhile, playing hurt, even showing a little outrage, but he knew it was no good. The kid's partner, a big bull-necked guy with a smirk on his face, got out of the patrol car, not wanting to miss out on the fun and they told him to get down from the cab while they searched it. Seeing they meant to pull the place apart, he decided to come clean, fished the book out from its hiding place under the bunk and gave it to them. It showed he had driven over nine hundred miles in twenty-four hours with only one stop and even that was for only half the eight hours required by law.

So now he was looking at a thousand-, maybe thirteen-hundred-dollar fine, more if they got him for the goddamn radar detector. He might even lose his commercial driver's license. The troopers gave him a fistful of paper and escorted him to this truck stop, warning him he'd better not even think of setting out again till morning.

He waited for them to go, then walked over to the gas station and bought a stale turkey sandwich and a six-pack. He spent the night in the bunk at the back of the cab. It was spacious and comfortable enough and he felt a little better after a couple of beers, but he still spent most of the night worrying. And then he woke up to see the snow and discovered he'd been caught out again.

In the balm of a Georgia morning two days earlier, Wayne hadn't thought to check that he had his snow chains. And

when he'd looked in the locker this morning, the damn things weren't there. He couldn't believe it. Some dumbfuck must have borrowed or stolen them. Wayne knew the interstate would be okay, they'd have had the snowplows and sanders out hours ago. But the two giant turbines he was carrying had to be delivered to a pulp mill in a little place called Chatham and he would have to leave the turnpike and cut across country. The roads would be winding and narrow and probably as yet uncleared. Wayne cursed himself again, finished his coffee and laid down a five-dollar bill.

Outside the door he stopped to light a cigarette and tugged his Braves baseball cap down hard against the cold. He could hear the drone of trucks already moving out on the interstate. His boots scrunched in the snow as he made his way over the lot toward his truck.

There were forty or fifty trucks there, lined up side by side, all eighteen-wheelers like his, mainly Peterbilts, Freightliners and Kenworths. Wayne's was a black and chrome Kenworth Conventional, 'anteaters' they called them, because of the long sloping nose. And though it looked better hitched to a standard high-sided reefer trailer than it did now with the two turbines mounted on a flatbed, in the snowy half-light of dawn, he thought it was still the prettiest truck on the lot. He stood there for a moment admiring it, finishing his cigarette. Unlike the younger drivers who didn't give a shit nowadays, he always kept his cab gleaming. He had even cleared all the snow off before going in for breakfast. Unlike him though, he suddenly remembered, they probably hadn't forgotten their goddamn chains. Wayne Tanner squashed his cigarette into the snow and hauled himself up into the cab.

Two sets of footprints converged at the mouth of the long driveway that led up to the stables. With immaculate timing, the two girls had arrived there only moments apart and made

their way up the hill together, their laughter carrying down into the valley. Even though the sun had yet to show, the white picket fence, confining their tracks on either side, looked dowdy against the snow, as did the jumps in the fields beyond. The girls' tracks curved to the brow of the hill and disappeared into the group of low buildings that huddled, as if for protection, around the vast red barn where the horses were kept.

As Grace and Judith turned into the stable yard, a cat skittered away from them, spoiling the snow. They stopped and stood there a moment, looking over toward the house. There was no sign of life. Mrs Dyer, the woman who owned the place and had taught them both to ride, would normally be up and about by now.

'Do you think we should tell her we're going out?' Grace whispered.

The two girls had grown up together, seeing each other at weekends up here in the country for as long as either could remember. Both lived on the Upper West Side of town, both went to schools on the East Side and both had fathers who were lawyers. But it occurred to neither of them that they should see each other during the week. The friendship belonged here, with their horses. Just turned fourteen, Judith was nearly a year older than Grace and in decisions as weighty as risking the ever-ready wrath of Mrs Dyer, Grace was happy to defer. Judith sniffed and screwed up her face.

'Nah,' she said. 'She'd only bawl us out for waking her up. Come on.'

The air inside the barn was warm and heavy with the sweet smell of hay and dung. As the girls came in with their saddles and closed the door, a dozen horses watched from their stalls, ears pricked forward, sensing something different about the dawn outside just as Grace had. Judith's horse, a soft-eyed chestnut gelding called Gulliver, whinnied as she came up to the stall, putting his face forward for her to rub.

'Hi baby,' she said. 'How are you today, huh?' The horse backed off gently from the gate so Judith would have room to come in with the tack.

Grace walked on. Her horse was in the last stall at the far end of the barn. Grace spoke softly to the others as she passed them, greeting them by name. She could see Pilgrim, his head erect and still, watching her all the way. He was a four-year-old Morgan, a gelding of a bay so dark that in some lights he looked black. Her parents had bought him for her last summer for her birthday, reluctantly. They had worried he was too big and too young for her, altogether too much of a horse. For Grace, it was love at first sight.

They had flown down to Kentucky to see him and when they were taken out to the field, he came right over to the fence to check her out. He didn't let her touch him, just sniffed her hand, brushing it lightly with his whiskers. Then he tossed his head like some haughty prince and ran off, flagging his long tail, his coat glistening in the sun like polished ebony.

The woman who was selling him let Grace ride him and it was only then that her parents gave each other a look and she knew they would let her have him. Her mother hadn't ridden since she was a child but she could be counted on to recognize class when she saw it. And Pilgrim was class alright. There was no doubting he was also a handful and quite different from any other horse she had ridden. But when Grace was on him and could feel all that life pounding away inside him, she knew that in his heart he was good and not mean and that they would be okay together. They would be a team.

She had wanted to change his name to something prouder, like Cochise or Khan, but her mother, ever the tyrant liberal, said it was up to Grace of course, but in her opinion it was bad luck to change a horse's name. So Pilgrim he remained.

'Hey, gorgeous,' she said as she reached the stall. 'Who's my man?' She reached out for him and he let her touch the velvet

of his muzzle, but only briefly, tilting his head up and away from her. 'You are such a flirt. Come on, let's get you fixed here.'

Grace let herself into the stall and took off the horse's blanket. When she swung the saddle over him, he shifted away a little as he always did and she told him firmly to keep still. She told him about the surprise he had waiting for him outside as she lightly fastened the girth and put on the bridle. Then she took a hoof pick from her pocket and methodically cleared the dirt from each of his feet. She could hear Judith already leading Gulliver out of his stall so she hurried to tighten the girth and now they too were ready.

They led the horses out into the yard and let them stand there a few moments appraising the snow while Judith went back to shut the barn door. Gulliver lowered his head and sniffed, concluding quickly it was the same stuff he had seen a hundred times before. Pilgrim however was amazed. He pawed it and was startled when it moved. He tried sniffing it, as he had seen the older horse do. But he sniffed too hard and gave a great sneeze that had the girls rocking with laughter.

'Maybe he's never seen it before,' said Judith.

'He must have. Don't they have snow in Kentucky?'

'I don't know. I guess so.' She looked across at Mrs Dyer's house. 'Hey, come on, let's go or we'll wake the dragon.'

They led the horses out of the yard and into the top meadow and there they mounted up and rode in a slow, climbing traverse toward the gate that led into the woods. Their tracks cut a perfect diagonal across the unblemished square of the field. And as they reached the woods, at last the sun came up over the ridge and filled the valley behind them with tilted shadows.

One of the things Grace's mother hated most about weekends was the mountain of newsprint she had to read. It accumulated

all week like some malign volcanic mass. Each day, recklessly, she stacked it higher with the weeklies and all those sections of *The New York Times* she didn't dare trash. By Saturday it had become too menacing to ignore and with several more tons of Sunday's *New York Times* horribly imminent, she knew that if she didn't act now, she would be swept away and buried. All those words, let loose on the world. All that effort. Just to make you feel guilty. Annie tossed another slab to the floor and wearily picked up the *New York Post*.

The Macleans' apartment was on the eighth floor of an elegant old building on Central Park West. Annie sat with her feet tucked up on the yellow sofa by the window. She was wearing black leggings and a light gray sweatshirt. Her bobbed auburn hair, tied in a stubby ponytail, was set aflame by the sun that streamed in behind her and made a shadow of her on the matching sofa across the living room.

The room was long and painted a pale yellow. It was lined at one end with books and there were pieces of African art and a grand piano, one gleaming end of which was now caught by the angling sun. If Annie had turned she would have seen seagulls strutting on the ice of the reservoir. Even in the snow, even this early on a Saturday morning, there were joggers out, pounding the circuit that she herself would be pounding as soon as she had finished the papers. She took a sip from her mug of tea and was about to junk the *Post* when she spotted a small item hidden away in a column she usually skipped.

'I don't believe it,' she said aloud. 'You little rat.'

She clunked the mug down on the table and went briskly to get the phone from the hallway. She came back already punching the number and stood facing the window now, tapping a foot while she waited for an answer. Below the reservoir an old man wearing skis and an absurdly large radio headset was tramping ferociously toward the trees. A woman

was scolding a leashed gaggle of tiny dogs, all with matching knitted coats and with legs so short they had to leap and sledge to make progress.

'Anthony? Did you see the *Post*?' Annie had obviously woken her young assistant but it didn't occur to her to apologize. 'They've got a piece about me and Fiske. The little shit's saying I fired him and that I faked the new circulation figures.'

Anthony said something sympathetic but it wasn't sympathy Annie was after. 'Do you have Don Farlow's weekend number?' He went to get it. Out in the park, the dog woman had given up and was now dragging them back toward the street. Anthony returned with the number and Annie jotted it down.

'Good,' she said. 'Go back to sleep.' She hung up and immediately dialed Farlow's number.

Don Farlow was the publishing group's stormtrooper lawyer. In the six months since Annie Graves (professionally she had always used her maiden name) was brought in as editor-in-chief to salvage its sinking flagship magazine, he had become an ally and almost a friend. Together they had set about the ousting of the Old Guard. Blood had flowed – new blood in and old blood out – and the press had relished every drop. Among those to whom she and Farlow had shown the door were several well-connected writers who had promptly taken their revenge in the gossip columns. The place became known as the Graves Yard.

Annie could understand their bitterness. Some had been there so many years, they felt they owned the place. To be uprooted at all was demeaning enough. To be uprooted by an upstart forty-three-year-old woman, and English to boot, was intolerable. The purge was now almost over however and Annie and Farlow had recently become skillful at constructing payoff deals which bought the silence of those departing. She

thought they had done just that with Fenimore Fiske, the magazine's aging and insufferable movie critic who was now badmouthing her in the *Post*. The rat. But as Annie waited for Farlow to answer the phone, she took comfort from the fact that Fiske had made a big mistake in calling her increased circulation figures a sham. They weren't and she could prove it.

Farlow was not only up, he had seen the *Post* piece too. They agreed to meet in two hours' time in her office. They would sue the old bastard for every penny they'd bought him off with.

Annie called her husband in Chatham and got her own voice on the answering machine. She left a message telling Robert it was time he was up, that she would be catching the later train and not to go to the supermarket before she got there. Then she took the elevator down and went out into the snow to join the joggers. Except, of course, Annie Graves didn't jog. She ran. And although this distinction was not immediately obvious from either her speed or her technique, to Annie it was as clear and vital as the cold morning air into which she now plunged.

The interstate was fine, as Wayne Tanner had expected. There wasn't too much else on the road what with it being a Saturday and he reckoned he'd be better keeping on up 87 till it hit 90, cross the Hudson River there and head on down to Chatham from the north. He'd studied the map and figured that though it wasn't the most direct route, less of it would be on smaller roads that might not have been cleared. With no chains, he only hoped this access road to the mill they'd told him about wasn't just some dirt track or something.

By the time he picked up the signs for 90 and swung east, he was starting to feel better. The countryside looked like a Christmas card and with Garth Brooks on the tape machine and the sun bouncing off the Kenworth's mighty nose, things

didn't seem so bad as they had last night. Hell, if it came to the worst and he lost his license, he could always go back and be a mechanic like he was trained to be. It wouldn't be so much money, for sure. It was a goddamn insult how little they paid a guy who'd done years of training and had to buy himself ten thousand dollars' worth of tools. But sometimes lately he'd been getting tired of being on the road so much. Maybe it would be nice to spend more time at home with his wife and kids. Well, maybe. Spend more time fishing, anyway.

With a jolt, Wayne spotted the exit for Chatham coming up and he got to work, pumping the brakes and taking the truck down through its nine gears, making the big four-twenty-five horsepower Cummins engine roar in complaint. As he forked away from the interstate he flipped the four-wheel-drive switch locking in the cab's front axle. From here, he calculated, it was maybe just five or six miles to the mill.

High in the woods that morning there was a stillness, as if life itself had been suspended. Neither bird nor animal spoke and the only sound was the sporadic soft thud of snow from over-laden boughs. Up into this waiting vacuum, through maple and birch, rose the distant laughter of the girls.

They were making their way slowly up the winding trail that led to the ridge, letting the horses choose the pace. Judith was in front and she was twisted around, propped with one hand on the cantle of Gulliver's saddle, looking back at Pilgrim and laughing.

'You should put him in a circus,' she said. 'The guy's a natural clown.'

Grace was laughing too much to reply. Pilgrim was walking with his head down, pushing his nose through the snow like a shovel. Then he would toss a load of it into the air with a sneeze and break into a little trot, pretending to be frightened of it as it scattered.

'Hey, come on now you, that's enough,' said Grace, reining him in, getting control. Pilgrim settled back into a walk and Judith, still grinning, shook her head and turned to face the trail again. Gulliver walked on, thoroughly unconcerned by the antics behind him, his head moving up and down to the rhythm of his feet. Along the trail, every twenty yards or so, bright orange posters were pinned to the trees, threatening prosecution for anyone caught hunting, trapping or trespassing.

At the crest of the ridge that separated the two valleys was a small, circular clearing where normally, if they approached quietly, they might find deer or wild turkey. Today however, when the girls rode out from the trees and into the sun, all they found was the bloody, severed wing of a bird. It lay almost exactly in the middle of the clearing like the mark of some savage compass and the girls stopped there and looked down at it.

'What is it, a pheasant or something?' said Grace.

'I guess. A former pheasant anyway. Part of a former pheasant.'

Grace frowned. 'How did it get here?'

'I don't know. A fox maybe.'

'It couldn't be, where are the tracks?'

There weren't any. Nor was there any sign of a struggle. It was as if the wing had flown there on its own. Judith shrugged.

'Maybe somebody shot it.'

'What, and the rest of it flew on with one wing?'

They both pondered a moment. Then Judith nodded sagely. 'A hawk. Dropped by a passing hawk.'

Grace thought it over. 'A hawk. Uh-huh. I'll buy that.' They nudged the horses into a walk again.

'Or a passing airplane.'

Grace laughed. 'That's it,' she said. 'It looks like the chicken they served on that flight to London last year. Only better.'

Usually when they rode up here to the ridge they would

give the horses a canter across the clearing and then loop back down to the stables by another trail. But the snow and the sun and the clear morning sky made both girls want more than that today. They decided to do something they had done only once before, a couple of years ago, when Grace still had Gypsy, her stocky little palomino pony. They would cross over into the next valley, cut down through the woods and come back around the hill the long way, beside Kinderhook Creek. It meant crossing a road or two, but Pilgrim seemed to have settled down and anyway, this early on a snowy Saturday morning, there would be nothing much about.

As they left the clearing and passed again into the shade of the woods, Grace and Judith fell silent. There were hickories and poplars on this side of the ridge with no obvious trail among them and the girls had frequently to lower their heads to pass beneath the branches so that soon they and the horses were covered with a fine sprinkling of dislodged snow. They negotiated their way slowly down beside a stream. Crusts of ice overhung it, spreading jaggedly from the banks and allowing but a glimpse of the water that rushed darkly beneath. The slope grew ever steeper and the horses now moved with caution, taking care where they placed their feet. Once Gulliver slipped lurchingly on a hidden rock, but he righted himself without panic. The sun slanting down through the trees made crazed patterns on the snow and lit the clouds of breath billowing from the horses' nostrils. But neither girl paid heed, for they were concentrating too hard on the descent and their heads were filled only with the feel of the animals they rode.

It was with relief that at last they saw the glint of Kinderhook Creek below them through the trees. The descent had been more difficult than either girl had expected and only now did they feel able to look at each other and grin.