

RESCUE RIDERS

Fire Alert

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Also by Peter Clover

Rescue Riders 1: Race Against Time
Rescue Riders 3: Ghost Pony



One

‘Some days,’ said Hannah, ‘I wonder if all this is worth it!’ She looked across at her best friend, Charlotte, who nodded in agreement and reined in her pony, Mandrake. Today was turning into exactly one of those days.

Sitting on their ponies in the middle of the windswept downs, the two girls hunched their shoulders and turned up their collars against the drizzling rain. They had been practising for next week’s riding competition for the last hour and it hadn’t stopped raining the whole time. Hannah for one was more than ready to turn her back

on the whole thing and trek home on Flash, her golden palomino. The pony's real name was Golden Fern, but Flash was his special nickname – after the pony that had really taught Hannah how to ride. She breathed down her gloves to warm her frozen fingers, patted Flash's neck and wished that the practice would come to an end.

‘Come on, you two over there. For goodness sake, wake up!’ Mrs Bellows, their riding schoolteacher, was standing up in her stirrups and yelling in their direction at the top of her voice.

Hannah and Charlotte suddenly realised that the B team had finished their flag race – dashing down a course planting flags in waiting buckets – and their own team was about to start practising for the old sock race – much like a relay race but using an old rolled-up sock.

‘Hey, Charlotte. Old Bellows is in a real mood today,’ murmured Hannah as she urged Flash into position at the top of the line.

‘And so would you be if you had such a feeble lot to deal with,’ snapped Mrs Bellows sharply from behind her.

‘Oops!’ Charlotte pulled a face at Hannah.

‘Don't you ever want to beat the Craxley team?’ Mrs Bellows was looking straight at them.

Of course we do, thought Hannah. Why do you think we're here? But she didn't dare say it. Not out loud anyway.

'I suppose she thinks we're here waiting for Santa Claus,' whispered Charlotte. She always seemed to know just what Hannah was thinking. But she was careful to turn her head as she spoke just in case Mrs Bellows could lip-read.

They had been practising for their races for months, and now, with the area competition just two weeks away, Mrs Bellows had them all up on the downs for an hour every day after school perfecting their techniques.

Hannah squeezed Flash with her calves and the golden palomino pranced forward. He really was a beautiful horse – golden blonde, just like Hannah. Eager to please, he danced on the spot next to Charlotte and Mandrake. Mandrake was fourteen hands and jet-black. You couldn't find a blacker pony if you tried. Charlotte, with her dark bob and striking features, made a perfect partner for him.

Mandrake pawed at the ground and tossed his head, eager to stretch out and race. Mandrake was very fast. The fastest pony in the team.

'It wouldn't be so bad if she didn't shout at us all the time,' said Hannah. 'It's not as if we don't listen or know what to do!'

At the front of the line, Mrs Bellows waved her right arm high in the air, like a general about to charge into battle. The first rider streaked down the opening run.

‘Prepare yourself, Charlotte. Ready. Go!’

‘See you, Han.’ Charlotte urged Mandrake forward and leaned out to receive the rolled-up sock from the incoming rider’s outstretched hand. Then she loosened her reins slightly and kicked Mandrake hard. The pony lurched forward and shot away like a bullet.

‘You’re supposed to squeeze gently with your legs! You’re not supposed to kick!’ Hannah shouted after her. But her voice was already lost in the grey drizzle.

Now it was Hannah’s turn. She pressed her seat down in the saddle as Sophie Warren loomed up on Pickles. But, as Hannah leaned forward, a flurry of raindrops hit Flash in the face and he backed up suddenly just as Hannah reached out. The sock slipped from Hannah’s fingers and rolled on to the ground.

Quick as lightning, Sophie leaped from Pickles, retrieved the sock and handed it up to Hannah. Then Flash was away.

‘Come on, boy,’ yelled Hannah. Flash’s creamy-white mane sailed out in the wind. He was going as fast as he knew how. Without Hannah needing to check Flash’s stride, they reached the home bucket.

Hannah held on to Flash with her legs, bent low across his shoulder and dropped the sock into the container. But the drizzle made her misjudge and the sock caught the rim of the bucket and bounced out.

‘Nice one, Han!’ It was Charlotte. Hannah could have killed her.

‘Well, that was awful,’ said Mrs Bellows. ‘Come on, we’ll do it again. And again. And again. Until we get it right.’

The rain had eased up now, but that made little difference to the A team’s performance. In fact it became worse. This time *everything* went wrong. Riders fumbled with changeovers, ponies kicked the home bucket. And Hannah somehow managed to lose the sock completely. It flew out of her hand at one point and just seemed to disappear into thin air.



‘There’s not much point in entering at all if you’re going to be as bad as this,’ said Mrs Bellows. Hannah opened her mouth to speak.

‘And it’s no use complaining about the weather, either. It could be even worse on the day,’ said Mrs Bellows.

Hannah’s jaw hung open catching stray raindrops.

‘Right then. You lot with your own ponies, same time tomorrow. My lot . . . home! Follow me. Trot ON,’ she hollered. ‘UP down. UP down. UP down.’

Hannah and Charlotte were the only two with their own ponies and used to being out on their own. They watched as the trail of riding-school ponies set off across the downs.

‘Don’t let her get to you, Han,’ said Charlotte as they began to hack home in the opposite direction. It would only take them about twenty minutes along the main road once off the downs.

‘It’s all right for you,’ said Hannah. ‘You never do anything wrong.’

‘That’s because I’m a brill rider,’ joked Charlotte. ‘Race you to Tombstones.’ Then she kicked Mandrake into a gallop.

‘You’re not supposed to . . .’ began Hannah, but Charlotte was already streaking away.

‘Wait for me!’