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Horsewhisperer Academy – The Journey to Snowfields

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When Zoe entered the concert hall, she could feel Jake's gaze like a gentle touch, brushing her bare arms and caressing her cheeks.

As she walked across to her seat in front of the orchestra, the applause got louder and louder, rising like a wave of enthusiasm. The conductor, Onni Seikola, was already at his desk. Now he gave Zoe a nod and smiled. She bowed and the applause increased to a storm.

Stalls, second row, seat fifteen. That was Jake's seat, from there he would be looking up at her. She thought she should be able to see him from the stage. But she didn't allow herself to look.

Instead she tried to fade out the audience. The people turned into a wallpaper of eyes, noses, mouths, ears.

Her mom had taught her how to do that. The people aren't important, she always said. Focus on the music.

Forgetting her audience was usually easy for Zoe. But today it was hard. Because Jake was sitting down there.

She had given him the ticket very casually, as if the whole thing didn't matter to her one way or the other. Come if you like, she had told him. And not mentioned that the ticket cost a hundred and twenty dollars and the concert at Vancouver Concert Hall had been sold out for weeks.

The Vancouver Symphonic Orchestra under star conductor Onni Seikola was performing the Flute Concerto No. 2 by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. On the flute: child prodigy Zoe Deventer.

The applause slowly died down. Seikola gave Zoe another brief nod before turning back to his musicians.

The Flute Concerto was one of Zoe's favourite pieces. That's why she had invited Jake. She was hoping the music would blow him away, too. Mozart left nobody cold.

"Classical music?" he had said when Zoe had told him she played the flute. "I wouldn't have a clue. I'm more into House."

"I really like House, too," Zoe had assured him.

And wisely not mentioned that she had no time whatsoever to listen to House.

In the last six months, she had performed concerts in Toronto, Calgary and New York, recorded a CD and been on TV more times than she could count.

She had almost a million followers on YouTube, and whenever she posted a picture of a meal on Instagram, it had more than two thousand likes just ten minutes later.

Zoe was only thirteen but already more famous than her mother, violinist Irmhild Sullivan, who wasn't playing today and instead sat in the first row, her gaze firmly fixed on her daughter.

Her mom accompanied her to every concert, she was her most attentive listener, her biggest fan, her harshest critic. She would hear every mistake, no matter how small. And yet she would still be proud of Zoe, so proud!

Was Jake also proud that he knew her? He was here, sitting down there, looking at her, Zoe could feel it. Did he like the blue silk dress with the spaghetti straps she was wearing today? Her updo decorated with tiny rhinestones that made her blonde hair glitter and sparkle? He had only ever seen her in jeans and sneakers. She hoped he wouldn't think her outfit was silly.

Focus, she could hear her mom say. The music is important, nothing else.

Seikola raised his arms. Zoe set the flute to her lips. Then he gave her her cue and she began to play.

Her fingers produced the first notes, pearling from her flute like bubbles from a champagne glass. Behind her, the strings joined in, bows jumping. Zoe's fingers danced, Mozart's awe-inspiring music filling her body and making it vibrate. She felt as if her feet lifted off the floor, as if she floated through the concert hall, high above the orchestra and the two thousand in attendance, and the one who really mattered. She was playing for Jake, only for Jake.

When Zoe let her flute sink, it was dead quiet in the concert hall for a moment. Then deafening applause set in.

Onni Seikola came over and shook her hand. They bowed together. Behind them, the musicians began to clap as well.

She had never played this piece so well. She felt it with every fibre of her body, the thundering applause told her so, the glowing faces and her mom's proud smile, who was just getting up to give her daughter a standing ovation. The rest of the audience stood up as well.

Zoe took a deep breath. And for the first time that evening she dared to fix her gaze on the stalls. Row two, seat fifteen.

She gave Jake a brilliant smile, but he didn't smile back. Because he wasn't there.

Seat fifteen in the second row was occupied by an older lady, her little curls coloured a light blue, who was now getting up with some difficulty. When she saw Zoe looking at her, she threw her kisses with both hands.

The joy that had filled Zoe just a moment ago was gone. She wanted to cry.

There was a reception in the foyer after the concert, but Zoe didn't go. She went home with her mom.

"I've suddenly got a terrible headache," she lied. "All I want to do is sleep."

Irmhild Sullivan, who usually sensed when her daughter was hiding something, didn't notice anything this time. She was way too thrilled about Zoe's magnificent performance.

"You were perfect," she was saying for the third time now. "Very, very impressive."

Zoe nodded weakly. Her feelings for Jake had spurred her on and carried her away, he was the reason she had played so well. Why hadn't he come?

Had he sold his ticket to someone else? The thought seared through Zoe like an electric shock.

"He wouldn't do that," she murmured.

"What's that, honey?"

"Nothing." Zoe leaned her head against her mom's shoulder.

The cab coasted through the brightly lit streets of Vancouver, past glittering skyscrapers and the harbour with its colourfully lit ships, bobbing up and down on the water. The city was wide awake, but Zoe was dead tired.

The next morning, it was raining cats and dogs. Zoe cursed herself as her mother drove her to school through the drizzling rain. She could have had the day off to fly to New York.

Two weeks ago, Carnegie Hall had enquired whether Zoe Deventer was available for a concert on short notice. A famous flutist had dropped out and they were hoping Zoe could fill in – but she didn't want to.

"It's all getting a bit much for me," she said. "I need a break."

Her mother was speechless.

"Are you serious, Zoe? It's always been your dream to play Carnegie Hall one day."

"I know," Zoe said. "But I just can't manage at the moment."

Her mom nodded, even though she would have been disappointed. To support Zoe, Irmhild Sullivan had put her own career as a violinist on the backburner in recent years. She was Zoe's manager and adviser, she attended her rehearsals, supervised, critiqued and motivated her. By now, she knew the flute almost as well as her daughter did.

Zoe's father wasn't a musician. He was director of human resources at a mechanical engineering company, and while he was extremely proud of his daughter, he couldn't understand Zoe's unconditional commitment to her music.

"You have to take a break at some point," he liked to say, "or you'll stop enjoying it."

But taking a break didn't make you the best flutist in the world. And that was Zoe's goal. She gave everything for that.

Yet she had turned down Carnegie Hall. Not because she really felt it was too much. She was used to touring, she loved being on stage. Last year, she had spent all of twenty weeks in Vancouver. When she was on tour, she took distance education classes via the internet so she wouldn't lose touch with her class.

The reason she had turned down Carnegie Hall was Jake.

Three months ago, he had suddenly turned up at her school when his family had moved to Vancouver from the States. One morning he had been sitting next to Zoe in art class.

Their task that day had been to create a collage from newspaper images but Zoe hadn't managed to cut out and glue on so much as a single image. Jake had mesmerised her from the get-go.

He had such a distinctive face. Beautiful grey-green eyes. And tiny freckles that danced on his nose.

In their second art class together, they had to draw a colourful spring meadow. Suddenly, Jake bent over Zoe's pad and drew a little elf fluttering out of a tulip blossom. A laughing elf with long blonde hair.

"Who is that supposed to be?" Zoe asked.

"It's you, don't you see?" Jake said. "I have no idea why you're wasting your time here at school. This flower world is where you belong."

You are totally different from the others, he kept telling Zoe. And she felt the same way about him. Jake was smart and funny and, unlike the other boys at Vancouver Junior High, he wasn't just interested in football and baseball but also liked books and played the guitar.

Unfortunately, he and Zoe only had two classes together: art and biology. From now on, those were Zoe's favourite subjects. She eagerly looked forward to seeing him in those classes. She would have loved to meet him after school as well, to talk about all the things they didn't have time for during class and in the short breaks. But she wasn't brave enough to take the first step.

And Jake didn't make any attempts to see her more often either. While he was always perfectly nice to her, beaming at her with his beautiful eyes and his gleaming white teeth, they weren't getting any closer.

And how could they, if Zoe was constantly jetting from one concert to the next?

She had turned down Carnegie Hall to have more time for Jake, to focus on nothing but him. Without thinking twice, Zoe had given up her big show in New York. And he hadn't even come to her concert in Vancouver.

Zoe stared morosely at the raindrops that kept dripping onto the windscreen. She was sure the sun was shining in New York right now. She would have a suite in a hip hotel on Times Square, with a gigantic wellness zone she could relax in after the concert.

Instead, she had to go to school and listen to Jake's excuses. When there were none. Zoe had played for him yesterday, no-one but him. And he hadn't heard her play.

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Outside the school, Zoe gave her mom a quick kiss on the cheek, jumped out of the car and ran up the stairs to the entrance.

First period was physics with Mrs Deadly, who was even gloomier than her name. Art class was next. Zoe usually counted the minutes until the bell rang and then rushed from the physics lab to the art space as fast as she could.

Today, she took her time. She told herself that Jake was dead to her, that she didn't care what he thought of her. And didn't believe herself one bit.

When she entered the art space, he wasn't there yet, even though the bell had already rung. Maybe he was sick, she thought with a sudden flare of hope. Maybe the flu or a sprained leg had kept him from coming to her concert. But this appealing

explanation evaporated into thin air when Jake raced into the room, just ahead of their art teacher, Mr Lorenzini.

"Hi, Zoe!" He flung his backpack onto the floor and flopped onto the chair next to her.

"Hi." Zoe didn't get a chance to say anything else because Mr Lorenzini was now explaining their new task, the details of which sailed right past her. Her heart was hammering much too loudly.

Then everyone took out their watercolours and started to chat. The good thing about art class was that you were allowed to chat for the entire class.

"Granny Sue says hi," Jake said with a wink.

"Who?"

"My grandma. She went to your concert yesterday and she's over the moon. She called us at seven this morning to tell us how amazing you were." Jake rolled his eyes as if he thought that was pretty crazy. Then he smiled at her. "Thanks again for the ticket. You've gained another fan."

Zoe swallowed. "Actually, the ticket was meant for you," she said without returning his smile.

Jake's smile faltered. "I know." He nodded, chagrined. "But that kind of music really doesn't do anything for me. And Granny Sue loves classical music. You've made her really happy."

"That's great, then." Zoe turned towards her empty piece of paper. Too bad she hadn't been listening earlier and didn't have the slightest idea what she was supposed to do.

"Are you mad at me?" Jake asked.

"Of course not! Never mind."

"Hey, Zoe." He placed a hand on her bare lower arm, his touch searing through her body like an electric shock. Zoe's legs felt like rubber. She was glad she was sitting down, or she would have fallen over. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. If I'd known how important it was to you, I would have come, of course."

She didn't reply, instead silently staring at her piece of paper with sudden tears in her eyes. Hopefully he wouldn't notice!

"Well, you guys have got far, haven't you." Mr Lorenzini had stopped at their table to inspect their sketches, but neither of them had yet drawn a single line.

"I ... uh ... didn't quite understand what we're supposed to do," Zoe stammered.

Mr Lorenzini sighed. "You're supposed to paint a landscape in the impressionist style. We talked about Impressionism last time. You do remember, don't you?"

"Sure," Zoe lied.

"Let's get started," Jake said when their teacher had moved on. "Can I borrow your watercolours? I forgot to bring mine."

Before the class was out, she had forgiven him. She couldn't even remember what she had been so upset about.

Surely it was okay that Jake wasn't into classical music and didn't admire Zoe for how beautifully she played the flute?

She had enough fans. She wanted Jake as a friend. She wanted to see him as often as she could and learn everything about him. What he thought, how he felt, what mattered to him. She wanted him to touch her arm and hold her hand.

"Are you going to Lizzy's party, by the way?" he asked as they were leaving the art space together.

Lizzy Delaney's birthday party was the weekend after next. Zoe was invited but had intended to decline. She had a big concert at Singapore Concert Hall the week after. Her entry into the Asian music market, if everything went according to plan. Her mom had pulled all sorts of strings to get her this gig.

Zoe was planning to use the weekend of the party to rehearse.

"Are you going?" she asked cautiously.

"Of course," he said. "Lizzy asked me to DJ for her."

"Cool," Zoe said. "I'll be there, too."

After the break, Zoe was on her way to their English classroom when her friend Kim suddenly materialised at her side.

"Hey, don't you read your WhatsApp messages anymore?" she asked by way of a greeting. "I've been trying to reach you this whole time."

"Really?" Zoe took her mobile from her bag. Eight new messages from Kim Taylor.

"What's up that's so urgent?" She noticed only now how exhausted her friend looked. Kim was tall and thin and had wavy red-blonde hair. Her skin tone was very light and she didn't tan well even in summer. But today, Kim was pale even by her standards, and there were thick dark shadows under her eyes. "Did something happen?"

"Snowfields Academy called yesterday." Kim's voice was hoarse with excitement.

"Guess what, I can take the exam after all!"

"What? I thought that ship had sailed?"

"I was on the waiting list," Kim said. "And now I've made it into the tryouts somehow."

"Wow!" Zoe said. "Oh my god, Kim, that's amazing!"

Snowfields Academy was a horse-riding boarding school in the country's north, and Kim's biggest dream. The school was the perfect springboard for a career as a professional competition rider. The list of Snowfields graduates who had won medals and other prizes at competitions all over the world was impressively long.

In interviews, the alumni gushed about their amazing life at the boarding school – the special atmosphere and the team spirit, the excellent teachers, the incomparable "Snowfields feeling" they would remember all their lives.

If you wanted to be accepted into the school, you had to pass a tough selection process. Kim had applied for the first time a few weeks ago – and been rejected. Her achievements weren't adequate, she didn't have enough competition experience, she had been told in a friendly letter.

Zoe had consoled Kim when she had received that letter. But she only realised now that in her heart of hearts, she had been relieved. She and Kim had spent their entire

lives together. They had gone to kindergarten together, had sat next to each other in primary school and now attended the same Junior High.

Zoe neither could nor wanted to imagine how she was supposed to cope without her best friend. Now she would have to brace herself for the fact that Kim might be leaving her after all. Zoe tried to be happy for her. Even if Kim herself looked anything but happy right now.

"I feel sick just thinking about the tryouts." Kim's face lost its last remnants of colour. "There's no way I'm going to make it!"

"Not with this attitude you won't." Zoe put her hands on Kim's shoulders and shook her friend. "Hey, I'm Kim and I'm an awesome rider! I'm going to crush you all! – That's what you've got to tell yourself, all the time."

Kim nervously pulled at a red-blond strand of hair. "It's no use. After all, I know for a fact it's not true."

"Hello?" Zoe exclaimed. "Of course it's true! You're a fantastic rider. You made first place at the Vancouver Masters Tournament last year. Is that nothing, hm?"

"It's not enough. The people I'm competing against are successful internationally. Not just here." Kim hung her head. "I don't know whether I should even go."

"Kim." Zoe gave her friend an incredulous look. "Tell me you're joking! Of course you're going! You've been dreaming of Snowfields for years. And now that you've almost made it, you want to give up?"

"Almost made it?" Kim snorted. "Two hundred people apply every year and they end up accepting thirty."

"You and twenty-nine others," Zoe said. "You have to believe in yourself or nobody else will."

"When it really matters, I lose my nerve." Kim smiled weakly. "You know me."

*You know me.* Indeed, Zoe thought. She had accompanied Kim to her very first riding lesson and Kim had come to Zoe's first flute lesson when they had both been four years old. These days, Zoe was a star and toured the world. And Kim had her own horse, Freddy, and dreamed of a career as a professional rider.

She could make it, Zoe knew it. Kim was a talented rider and had a great instinct for horses. But unlike Zoe, she lacked confidence and constantly questioned her abilities. And she didn't have Zoe's iron discipline.

For the last five years, Zoe had practiced for three hours a day on school days and seven on weekends. Chromatic scales, chords, trills, intonation exercises – technique, technique, technique. Her flute teacher came to their home three times a week. Zoe even took her flute along on holidays.

Kim on the other hand didn't mind skipping the occasional riding lesson for a party or a visit to the cinema with her friends. But then she didn't have a mother like Irmhild Sullivan who kept pushing her daughter to practice and was planning her career for her. Sandy Taylor was of the opinion that you were only young once and should enjoy life.

But that attitude wasn't going to get you into an elite boarding school, Zoe knew that much, and Kim needed to learn that, too, or she could indeed save herself the trip to Snowfields.

"I'm nervous and get stage fright before my concerts, too," she explained to Kim. "But that's not a bad thing, on the contrary, it's good for your focus. You just have to be extremely well prepared, that's what matters. The rest happens pretty much by itself."

Kim sighed. But then she had an idea.

"Why don't you come along?" she asked. "That would be awesome!"

Zoe shrugged. "When is the entrance exam going to be?"

"Saturday week. We're flying out Friday night, and then back Sunday morning. We're staying at the boarding school's guest house, so you could sleep in my room. Please say yes, Zoe!"

"Saturday week. That's ... uh ..." The date of Lizzy's party, Zoe almost said. She bit her tongue just in time.

Kim wouldn't have understood that the party was more important to Zoe than her tryouts. After all, Zoe and Lizzy only knew each other in passing.

And Zoe had never told Kim about her feelings for Jake. She had been on the brink of confiding in her best friend more than once. But at the last minute, she had always decided against it. Her feelings were too new, too unfamiliar, too exciting. She was afraid of breaking something by talking about it.

"... that's really bad," Zoe amended quickly.

Kim's smile vanished. "But why?"

Zoe's mind was racing. "I have this mega concert in Singapore the Tuesday after. I need the weekend to rehearse."

"Can't you just take your flute with you? The entrance exam will only take half an hour, tops," Kim begged her. "There'll be enough time left to practise."

Kim gave Zoe such a pleading look, she almost gave in. She wasn't really interested in the stupid party, after all. But Jake. Jake! Just thinking of him made her heart give a little jump.

Lizzy's party, she felt, was her big – maybe even her only – chance to finally get closer to Jake. If she didn't grasp this opportunity, another girl would snap him up.

Besides, Zoe wouldn't be able to help Kim with her entrance exam anyway. If she messed up the tryouts, it wouldn't make any difference whether Zoe was watching or not.

But then Zoe suddenly had a splendid idea.

"How about if I coach you?" she asked.

Kim's expression turned from downcast to uncomprehending. "You want to do *what*? Uh ... sorry, Zoe ... but you don't even know how to ride."

Zoe laughed. "Of course not. Your coach will do the riding lessons. I'll do the mental coaching. That's what you need most, after all."

"And how do you suppose we do that?" Kim asked warily.

"You'll see." Zoe took her friend's arm and marched her into the classroom. "Let's start right away, today. We have much to do."