

The background of the cover is a photograph of a white filly with a brown mane lying down in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. In the distance, there are rolling hills and mountains under a blue sky with light clouds. The title 'Phantom Stallion' is written in a large, stylized, yellow font with a blue outline at the top. Below it, the subtitle 'A filly gets a second chance' is written in a smaller, italicized, black font. At the bottom, the title 'Free Again' is written in a white, cursive font, and the author's name 'TERRI FARLEY' is written in a white, bold, sans-serif font. A small white number '5' is in a blue box in the bottom left corner.

Phantom Stallion

A filly gets a second chance

Free Again

TERRI FARLEY

Phantom Stallion

~ 5 ~

Free Again

TERRI FARLEY



HarperCollins e-books

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Chapter One

SAMANTHA FORSTER stepped off the school bus and into an icy wind that hinted snow wasn't far away. She zipped up her blue fleece jacket, plunged her hands deep into her pockets, and shivered.

Her best friend, Jen, who usually kept her company on the long walk home, had stayed after school for an advanced math review. The weather wasn't so bad that Gram would drive to the bus stop to pick Sam up. So Sam trudged toward River Bend Ranch alone.

She looked over her shoulder and let her eyes search the Calico Mountains. Just for a minute, she told herself, because of course it was a waste of time.

Up there lay the Phantom's hidden valley. The clouds scudding overhead made the mountains look as dark as Sam's hopes. The magnificent silver mustang wanted nothing to do with her, because she'd betrayed him. Sam felt as if a cold metal ball had

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lodged where her heart should be. If only she could apologize.

She hadn't betrayed the Phantom, not really, but all his equine mind could know was that she hadn't been there when he needed her.

And now he was nowhere to be found. For weeks, she'd watched the La Charla River at night. Her eyes had searched War Drum Flats as the school bus drove by. And every day she stared at the mountains. Not once had she seen the pale, faraway shape of the Phantom.

Sam hoisted the straps of her backpack and sighed. She wanted to visit the stallion's haven. She imagined herself riding down the dark secret tunnel and emerging into the sunlight to be greeted by a soft nicker that would mean the Phantom had forgiven her for being human.

But that wouldn't work. He had to come to her. Because he hadn't, Sam was afraid the stallion had finally lost faith in people. Even her.

She was so intent on the mountain, she didn't notice the three horses in front of her until one snorted.

Two paints and a bay clustered together, shoulder to shoulder, tails to the wind.

She knew right away they weren't mustangs. The bay's nose showed a rubbed place from years of wearing a halter. The tap dancing sound of their hooves said there might be shoes on their overgrown

hooves. They jostled against each other to get a better look at Sam.

“Who do you belong to, poor babies?”

Three sets of ears pricked farther forward. One of the paints was mostly white. He cocked his head to the side before taking a few cautious steps toward Sam. The others followed. They kept edging forward until they were only about six feet away.

Sam knew all of River Bend’s horses, and most horses from the Three Ponies and Gold Dust ranches, but she didn’t know these. Since this was open range, they could have come from almost anywhere. Many ranchers only fenced a few acres of their land, and the Bureau of Land Management didn’t fence any.

Impatient for attention, the bay pawed and nickered.

“You’re hungry, aren’t you?” Sam crooned to the horse. Wind fluttered the bay’s thickening winter coat, and she thought she could see the outline of ribs.

A quick look at the other two horses showed Sam they were just as neglected.

Sam’s cheeks heated with anger. Whoever owned these animals ought to live the same way the horses did. Let the owner go without shelter, meals, and shoes that fit, and see how he liked it.

“I have treats.” Sam’s singsong voice drew the horses closer. “Granola bars for everyone.”

She eased her backpack off each shoulder and let

it down to the desert floor. She crouched beside it, sliding the zipper open quietly, so the horses wouldn't be frightened and bolt. She needn't have bothered. They were too curious to go anywhere.

"I knew these would come in handy." Sam retrieved four foil-wrapped granola bars from her backpack.

Although Gram had learned that Sam wasn't hungry in the morning, she never gave up. She kept offering bacon and eggs, biscuits and gravy, but Sam was satisfied with cereal. So Gram made her take a granola bar, every day, just in case her stomach began growling before lunchtime.

"Honey and oats," Sam announced. She broke the first bar into three pieces. Before she had a chance to toss them to the horses, the mostly white paint shoved past the others and began nuzzling her hand. "Greedy guts," Sam called the horse, but the paint just tossed his head in delight.

She shared the food among them. Although the granola bars had lots of sugar and probably weren't too nutritious for the horses, Sam didn't worry. She might be the first to consider the horses' health for a long time.

They chewed, then sniffed, whiskers brushing the desert. As the horses searched for crumbs, Sam checked them for brands. She didn't see any, though the marks could be hidden under their shaggy hair.

"We're going to do something about this," she told

them. "And the first thing to do is get you a real meal."

Should she challenge these horses' owners? Sam didn't wonder long. She'd failed to keep the Phantom safe, but she wouldn't fail these horses who'd walked right up and asked for her help.

Like three big dogs, the horses followed Sam. She tried not to imagine what Dad would say when he saw them.

Dad made lots of rules. His strictest rule was that everyone on the ranch worked and every animal earned its feed. River Bend horses worked the same long days as the cowboys. Gram cooked and cleaned in addition to being the ranch bookkeeper and Dad's business partner. Sam's chores were more than a formality. Without her help, Gram and Dad would be working long after sundown. Even Blaze, the dog, could herd cattle and sound the alarm when strangers neared the ranch.

"But all kids bring home strays, don't they?" Sam asked the horses.

They didn't answer, so she didn't mention that the River Bend Ranch already had two mustangs that weren't working. At least the BLM paid Dad to keep them. Popcorn and Dark Sunshine were part of the Horse and Rider Protection program. HARP paired mustangs that had been adopted, then abused or neglected, with troubled girls. Together, the girls and mustangs recovered and learned to trust each other.

But Sam didn't think Dad would sympathize with three tame horses looking for a handout.

On the other hand, though it was overcast and gray, it wasn't near sundown. Dad was probably still out on the range.

At the edge of the La Charla River, the horses stopped and drank, but not deeply.

"Someone's watering you, at least," Sam said.

But the horses wouldn't cross the bridge that led to the ranch.

"C'mon," she said. "We've got great hay in here, and maybe I could find you a little grain."

Sam smooched to the horses, but they just tossed tangled forelocks away from their eyes and watched her.

She clapped her hands softly, trying to coax them into the ranch yard. Her move was a mistake.

The three horses backed up, then trotted away from her and the ranch.

Frustrated, Sam crossed the bridge and walked toward the house. Blaze bounded out to meet her.

"You missed all the fun," Sam said to the Border collie. He lifted his head, testing the wind, then pricked his ears toward the bridge. The horses' scent must have lingered.

The captive mustangs had caught the scent, too.

Excited by the prospect of company, Dark Sunshine and Popcorn were galloping laps around the ten-acre pasture. The cow ponies were out on the

range working, but the mustangs enjoyed their herd of two. Popcorn's long white legs carried him ahead of the small buckskin.

"Sorry," Sam called to the horses. "They were too shy to come meet you."

Sam looked hard, trying to see any signs that Dark Sunshine was in foal. She didn't see anything, but the vet had said the mare would give birth to the Phantom's colt or filly sometime in late spring.

The screen door slammed as Gram came out on the porch. Sam gave Blaze's ears a hurried rumple, then walked faster as she neared the house.

Something had to be done about those neglected horses.

"What's got the animals so excited?" Gram asked.

"Three horses followed me home."

Gram peered past Sam, saw nothing, then chuckled. "Lands, don't ask if you can keep them." Clearly, she thought Sam was joking.

"Really," Sam insisted, but the horses were long gone and no dust marked their passing.

"Why don't you come have a little something to eat?" Gram held the screen door wide. "Today I stripped the tree of its last peaches and made a cobbler. I'm wondering if these cold nights hurt the fruit." Gram's apron smelled of cinnamon as she gave Sam a hug. "We'll both have some and you can tell me all about these tagalong horses."

Sam had told her tale and started upstairs to

change out of her school clothes when Gram called after her.

“You said two *paint* horses, didn’t you?” Gram didn’t give Sam time to answer. “You know, Trudy Allen always fancied paint horses, but I figured she sold them along with all of her cattle.”

“Who?” Sam came halfway back down the stairs.

“You must remember Mrs. Allen.” Gram wore a troubled frown, and suddenly Sam did remember.

Chills scurried down her arms like a bunch of freezing-footed lizards. Sam thought of toadstools, bubbling cauldrons, and Hansel and Gretel. Yes, she remembered Mrs. Allen.

When she and Jake Ely were little, they’d been petrified of her. Jake and Sam had been friends forever. And for just as long, he’d acted braver and tougher because he was two and a half years older. But Jake’s fearlessness had faded—and he’d stayed close to his big brothers—whenever he rode onto Mrs. Allen’s property.

Mrs. Allen’s lavender Victorian house was surrounded by roses and an iron fence with uprights like twisted spears. It sat in the middle of Deerpath Ranch, looking creepy and out of place. The house didn’t fit into the ranching community any more than Mrs. Allen did.

“Is she still alive?” Sam blurted.

“Samantha Anne, I should wash out your mouth with soap!” Gram jerked loose the ties on her apron

and held it crumpled in one hand. "Of course she's still alive. Trudy Allen is about the same age I am."

"Sorry, Gram." Sam wouldn't have believed anyone except Gram. Mrs. Allen had always looked a hundred years old. "She just—" Sam stopped, and Gram's expression said it was a good thing. "I am sorry."

"You're about to be sorrier, young lady," Gram said. "Don't bother changing out of your school clothes. We need to see if those are Trudy's horses."

"But it's awfully cold—"

"What a nice opportunity to wear your suede jacket with the sheepskin lining." Gram rolled down the sleeves she'd turned up while cooking.

Sam didn't explain that her chills weren't from the weather. She thought of another excuse. "I have chores and homework—"

"That's the nice thing about work. It always waits for you." Gram nodded as she buttoned her cuffs. "Now, I'll get a jar of peach jam to take along, just to be neighborly."

"Gram, you didn't see those horses. If you had, you wouldn't want to be nice."

"I'm not going to be, Samantha. You are."

You are. The words echoed as Sam stared. Gram's smile looked a little too sweet.

"You don't mean" Sam spoke slowly. If she'd misunderstood, she didn't want to give Gram any ideas. "You're sending *me* out there? Just me?"

It had been bad enough when she thought they were going together. She might be thirteen and a freshman in high school, but Sam did not want to go to Mrs. Allen's spook house all alone.

"Goodness, Samantha, I'm not sending you to Mars. Deerpath Ranch is no farther than the Gold Dust, and you ride over to see Jen all the time. It's just in another direction. A direction" —Gram's tone turned sympathetic—"you've been staring in quite a lot lately."

Sam nodded. Deerpath Ranch lay between River Bend and the Calico Mountains. The very paths it had been named for were shared by the mustangs. The Phantom might even consider the ranch his territory.

Sam felt torn. "I don't care how far it is. Ace can use the run, but—"

"There you go, then," Gram said.

Gram hustled back toward the kitchen and Sam followed at her heels, trying to think of another excuse. Anything was better than the embarrassing truth.

Gram was reaching into a cupboard for jam when she turned so suddenly that Sam nearly bumped into her. Gram's arms were full and a frown line appeared between her eyebrows. But it was the way she studied Sam that told her Gram had remembered. "Maybe Trudy felt abandoned when her kids went away to college and never moved back home, but

that's been ten years, now. And when her husband died, soon after, Trudy did turn a bit private and peculiar," Gram admitted. "But, Sam, please tell me you don't still believe she's a witch."

Chapter Two

ACE RAN INTO THE WIND and Sam leaned forward, cheek pressed to the gelding's warm neck. She squinted against the whipping of his coarse black mane. With her eyes half closed, she could imagine the blurry world around her held the Phantom. Maybe he was running behind her, long legs sweeping forward again and again until he could catch up and gallop beside her, matching strides with Ace.

But she and Ace were alone. She felt the smooth sway and shift of Ace's muscles as he veered around rocks and sagebrush. Only four hooves pounded the desert floor.

Sam told herself it didn't matter. The Phantom would come to her when he was ready. For now, it was enough to hold close to Ace—who, she was sure, wouldn't have been running with such speed if he'd known each stride carried them closer to Mrs. Allen's haunted house.

Sensing the change in her mood, Ace slowed to a lope, then a hammering trot. Sam didn't correct him. She was too busy looking at the remains of Deerpath Ranch.

Although much of the land was fenced, no cattle or horses would have trouble escaping.

"You could step right over that, couldn't you, boy?" Sam asked Ace. So could the three shaggy horses she'd seen this afternoon.

The fence posts had loosened with the changing seasons and no one had dug fresh holes or reset the posts. The barbed wire strands had stretched with age and the crossing of animals.

Now the posts and rusty wire bowed with each gust of wind. Ace's ears flicked toward the rasp of wire on wood, but he trotted on.

The hay fields lay abandoned except for one piece of farm machinery. The wheeled contraption sat where it had stopped. Unsure what it was, Sam rose in her stirrups to study it. She still couldn't tell, but judging from the ripped upholstery on the driver's seat and the field mouse nest built in the seat's cottony stuffing, it had been there for a while.

Sam urged Ace toward the fenced lane leading to the house. He shied at something moving up ahead. It was a coyote. His gray coat matched the desert shadows. If not for his tawny face tipped to one side with curiosity, she might have missed him. The coyote's front paws shifted as he stopped, considered horse

and rider, then bounded over the fence and off toward the foothills of the Calico Mountains.

"He's gone," Sam told Ace. Neither of them was afraid of coyotes, but this one had appeared out of nowhere.

Nonsense, Sam told herself. It's dusk. Coyotes blend in with their background and the evening had turned a hazy purple-beige.

Head tossing, Ace turned onto the lane. In memory, the lane was soft and powdery. The soil had shown each hoofprint. She must have been pretty little when she'd traveled it last, since she remembered wanting to climb off her pony to dig in the dirt. Now the lane was carpeted with weeds, as if no one ever came this way.

Suddenly, Sam saw the house. Its front door faced her and its back was turned on the hillside. Everything about the house seemed pointed: its zigzag roofline, the spear-shaped bars in the fence, and the triangular sign that warned KEEP OUT.

Once, people had probably considered the house elegant. Sam remembered a rose garden and an ornate iron fence. The house was the last piece of civilization before the open range. But it wasn't elegant or civilized now.

Twilight had turned its lavender paint to gray. One of its window shutters flapped in the wind. The shutter struck the house, sounding as if someone was knocking. The other shutters hung like broken wings.

A tumbleweed bounded across the yard in front of Ace, to join the others mounded up against the barn.

The place was a shambles.

Chills raced down Sam's arms as she realized she might have been right, after all. Maybe Mrs. Allen's horses were wandering, hungry, across the countryside because she *had* died.

Sam would not go into the house to find out. Gram wouldn't want her to. But Gram would expect her to knock and leave the jars of jam.

Sam took one deep breath. Then another. She tried to work up the nerve to dismount, open the gate in the iron fence, and walk through. Such bravery stayed out of reach until a loud series of welcoming neighs made Sam jump.

She turned in her saddle, searching for horses. She saw a small corral next to the barn. The connecting door swayed on creaky hinges, but there were no horses in sight.

Then she spotted a large square corral. There stood the two paints and the old bay. They *were* Deerpath horses.

Still side by side, they waited in the corral. There wasn't a blade of grass or a wisp of straw to be seen. The gate was wide open, creaking in the wind on hinges in need of oil.

Ace returned their greeting with a nicker and Sam patted his neck. "I'll feed them in a minute, Ace. I promise."