

Pony CONFIDENTIAL



ONE SMALL PONY. ONE BIG MYSTERY.

CHRISTINA LYNCH

**PONY
CONFIDENTIAL**

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For all the ponies I have loved,
and for Addie, future pony girl

The greatest obstacle to the study of animal emotions is the common objection that “we cannot know what they feel.” While this is undeniably true, we should realize that it also holds for fellow human beings.

—Frans de Waal, *What Is an Animal Emotion?*

PROLOGUE

PENNY MARCUS OPENS her front door to find Ed, the local sheriff's deputy, on the doorstep. It's a bright sunny spring day and it never crosses her mind that something is amiss, partly because she saw Ed at the coffee shop just this morning, as she does every morning before she heads off to teach third grade in the little California mountain town where they live. They're both latte people.

"Hey, Ed," she says, opening the door with a smile and smoothing the front of her light blue linen sundress with lemons on it. "Your little girl aced her math quiz today."

"Hi, Penny," says Ed. He seems a bit apologetic as he says, "Can you stick your hands out for me?"

She laughs. Ed is a little bit of a prankster. He had a role in their local theater production of *Arsenic and Old Lace* last year. He was hilarious as the cop who is always one step behind the murderous old ladies.

Penny plays along and sticks out her hands and Ed snaps handcuffs on her. "Ha ha ha," she says. "What are you auditioning for now, *Murder, She Wrote?*" She hefts the cuffs a couple times. "Hey, these things are heavier than I thought." She adds pointedly, "And kind of tight and uncomfortable."

Ed doesn't smile. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will—"

"—be used against you in a court of law. Yeah, we've all memorized it. Very funny, but I have to get back to grading the kids' homework. The spelling bee is tomorrow. Can you take these things off now?"

“You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you.”

Her stomach begins to churn a little. “Ed? What is this?”

Almost apologetically he says, “You’re under arrest for murder.”

Penny blinks. “Murder? Ed, excuse my language, but I have no effing idea what you’re talking about. Murder of whom? Who died?”

He checks his phone. “Doesn’t say. You’re being extradited to New York.”

Penny just stares at him in shock. “New York?” Her mind is whirling. “When did this supposed murder take place?”

He looks at his phone again and counts on one hand. “Um, just about twenty-five years ago.”

“Ed. Twenty-five years ago I was twelve years old. Twelve. A twelve-year-old little girl.”

Ed shrugs. “I’m sorry, Penny, I can’t say more. I’m just doing my job. You’ll have to come with me.” He checks his watch, which Penny knows was a gift from the town to honor his first ten years of service. She herself had contributed ten dollars to the purchase of that watch, had even lobbied for the thick brown leather band instead of a blue nylon one that she worried would chafe his wrist. Now it’s her wrists that are chafing.

“Come on, Ed,” she says. “This is crazy. Please. Let me go.”

PART ONE

A Taste for Revenge
(and Carrots)

PENNY

ED HAS BROUGHT Penny to a courthouse in Fresno where a lawyer she met thirty seconds ago is talking fast. “Okay, so because the crime was committed in New York and you left the state, you’re considered a fugitive from justice.”

“But I wasn’t accused of a crime at the time I left the state. Which was twenty-five years ago!” Penny is trying to remain calm, but it’s not easy.

“It doesn’t matter. For the purposes of the law you’re considered a wanted fugitive.”

Penny has a flash of her face on a post office wall. “This can’t be happening,” she says.

The lawyer has thick black hair and kind eyes, and Penny has a vague recollection of seeing his face on a billboard alongside the highway, next to a walnut orchard. She can tell he’s trying to simplify it all for her, but it still feels like he’s speaking in a language she can’t understand. He says, “Also, because you were only twelve at the time, you could be tried in juvenile court.”

Penny thinks of the elementary school where she teaches, with little child-sized desks and chairs and drinking fountains. Is juvenile court like that? Tiny handcuffs and miniature gavels? Will she be like Alice in Wonderland in an orange jumpsuit, her head and feet sticking out of the bars of a playhouse-sized jail cell?

“But if found guilty you would serve your time in regular adult prison,” the lawyer adds.

“Prison?” Penny is trying to focus on what the lawyer is saying, but she’s also still waiting for someone to tell her this is all a joke. It’s not April Fool’s, but there’s gotta be a punch line here somewhere, right? Does this prank come with a TV appearance? A check? At this point she’d settle for an apology and getting dropped at the bus stop.

“In juvenile court you won’t have the right to a jury trial or bail,” says the lawyer. “I would advise you to waive the fitness hearing when you get to New York and go straight to adult court. You do have the right to an extradition hearing here, but it would only be a delaying tactic.”

“I don’t want any delays. I want this straightened out right now,” Penny says.

—

PENNY SITS IN the back of Ed’s police car, staring out the window on the way to the airport, marveling at the strange twist her day has taken. To avoid conversation Ed has put a country music station on loud, so Penny is treated to a series of songs about heartbreak, tequila, and Chevys. He takes pity on her when a song called “Way Too Pretty for Prison” comes on, but when he spins the dial it lands on Taylor Swift crooning “No Body, No Crime.” Ed meets her eyes in the rearview mirror and turns the radio off, but the silence is even more excruciating.

Surely the next stop will be a restaurant full of people shouting “Surprise!” Won’t it?

Penny tries to distract herself by examining the vehicles they are passing, guessing where the people inside are going. The truckers are taking their loads to big box stores, the commuters are racing home after a stop to shop at the big box stores. It’s central California, so there are trucks full of tomatoes headed for sauce, and oranges headed for juice. They pass a huge semi labeled BOB’S RACEHORSE TRANSPORT, and Penny catches a glimpse through the windows of sleek Thoroughbreds wearing halters with

fluffy sheepskin padding. She wonders what the horses think, zooming down the highway in a metal box. Not many vehicles later comes a gooseneck rig emblazoned with names of roping championships and a pair of sorrel quarter horses napping inside. They don't get to choose where they go, she thinks. Nor what they eat or wear. It's all out of their control.

More trucks of tomatoes, more oranges. They pull alongside a little rickety 1940s-era two-horse straight-load trailer with an open back and sides. Hand painted on the trailer it says **MAGICAL UNICORN RIDES** and an 800 number. Penny presses her nose to the car window and peers out. A white pony inside the trailer turns its head and stares back at Penny. The pony's mane and tail have been dyed bright pink. *Not my choice*, says the pony's expression. Penny blinks, and the pony blinks back.

"I had a pony when I was little," says Ed.

"Me too," says Penny.

"Mine was a pinto. What was yours?"

"The color of the sun."

They are both quiet for a minute.

"Happiest days of my life," Penny says.

"Yeah," Ed agrees.

Penny shifts, trying to position her handcuffed hands in a way that doesn't hurt. The white pony continues to stare back at her.

As the police car finally leaves behind the pony in its rattling metal box, Penny is left with the vision of the too-tight halter cutting into the pony's nose, and the expression in the pony's large brown eyes. *I don't know where I'm going. I don't know what comes next. But I'm pretty sure it's going to suck.*

"Yeah," Penny says.

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THE PONY

I AM A pony. But not just any pony. I am a pony who is bent on revenge. I am the Iago of ponies, a furry Fury. I am both adorable and devious, and, until I get what I want, I'm going to make every human I meet pay for your collective crimes. I am a tiny, mop-topped demon, and I am coming for you.

PICTURE A RIDING stable. If you haven't been in one, a row of horses hang their heads over their stall doors, gently bobbing to escape the flies, pricking their ears when a human appears who might have a carrot or a peppermint in her pocket.

In the riding arena, a sandy rectangle outlined by a white wooden fence that could use a coat of paint, there's a small dapple-gray pony named Boo Boo carrying a girl named Kimmie over a row of low jumps under the watchful eye of Phee, her instructor. It's all so sickeningly sweet, right? Boo Boo looks happy, lifting his forelegs and sailing over the crossbars in a perfect arc, his tail a lush banner in the breeze. Kimmie and Boo Boo come to a stop near Phee, who is very tall and wears tan breeches and tall black boots and a ball cap. The pony gives a happy sneeze, knowing he has done his job well. Kimmie takes her skinny legs, folded at the knee like a stepladder, out of the stirrups and they hang down below the edge of the pony's belly.

“We’ve got to lengthen those stirrups,” says the instructor. “You’ll get a cramp.”

Kimmie frowns. “The judges won’t like it. And my feet are going to hit the poles. It’s fine.”

Kimmie’s mom calls out from where she’s leaning on the fence, holding the leash of a Labrador retriever who is sniffing for crumbs. “She looks big for the pony,” says the mom, removing her sunglasses and squinting from under a straw hat. “Is she getting too big for him?”

“Mom,” says Kimmie, “he’s such a good boy.”

“I know, but you look ridiculous,” says the mom.

“I don’t want to sell him.”

“Well, we can’t afford to keep two animals. If you want to keep riding, you need to move up to a horse.”

Kimmie slumps forward like a rag doll and throws her arms around the pony’s neck. She will never agree to part with her beloved pony, the pony who has carried her safely and dutifully over hundreds of obstacles, through rivers, up and down mountains, in parades, the pony who did not protest when forced to wear antlers at Christmas, bunny ears at Easter, and large wings at Halloween. Surely all that is worth more than—

“Can I get a Thoroughbred?” Kimmie asks.



NOW TURN YOUR gaze back to the stable nearby. Inside that stable there’s another pony. A heck of a pony, if I do say so myself. I was once, like Boo Boo, a good boy. Not anymore. Fifteen summers ago, I had my own little girl just like Kimmie. Her name was Penny. Penny and I did everything together. Then one day out of the blue she up and sold me. With no warning she kicked me to the curb like an old bicycle or a Slinky that no longer slinks.

After Penny cast me adrift, I floated from home to home, islands in the sea of life. I was eventually bought by Phee for children to take riding lessons on. (A lucky few kids will end up owning their own ponies, but most will ride lesson ponies until they either discover romance or get tall enough to ride

horses, or both.) Phee is not a bad person—she’s quiet and sensible, like an oak tree, and she gets along with all the children and parents by never contradicting them, at least not out loud. (I have been privy to some muttering.) Despite the dislike for humans that simmers in me thanks to Penny, I dutifully carried the children Phee trains and coaches for years on end, circling the damn arena, trotting over crossbars. I’m getting older now, and I figured Phee would retire me at some point soon and let me live out my final years in peace and quiet in the pasture behind the barn. If well cared for, ponies can live to thirty or even forty years old, and after twenty years of being a fairly good boy, all things considered, I felt I had some well-earned leisure coming my way.

Then last week, in a deeply, deeply tragic misunderstanding, my reputation and my retirement plans went permanently south after I dumped one too many “future Olympians” into the dust of the riding ring.

In my defense, Peacock Lastrigon had it coming. Peacock’s family owns a chain of burger joints, the Hungry Cannibal. At age ten, Peacock has an astounding faith in his own wonderfulness. All of us should have a day of walking around in Peacock’s skin, just to experience what total self-confidence feels like. As you might expect, he is oblivious to any evidence of his shortcomings. When he fails a test, it’s the teacher’s fault. When his friend Tip shunned him after Peacock called him stupid, Tip was too thin-skinned and couldn’t take a joke. When Peacock tripped and fell on the playground, it was the playground’s fault and his family demanded it be repaved. In short, Peacock is a monster. In stories, people like Peacock get punished. In life, they get prizes.

Peacock loves to win horse shows. This means that Phee trains me, schools me, grooms me, cleans my saddle and polishes my bridle, and drives me to the show location. There, ringside, pug-nosed Peacock is hoisted into the freshly oiled saddle. We go into the arena, walk and trot around, maybe jump a little obstacle or two, then line up for the judges. Peacock is usually awarded a blue ribbon, further proof that he’s *better* than everyone else. The