



## The Jump by Nicolle Caputa | 2022

I got a job as a stablehand when I was just 12 years old. My mother's coworker, Megan Morris, allowed me to clean out the stalls and feed the horses in exchange for riding lessons, as she helped run the stables. From the time I was small, all I can remember is wanting to climb on every horse I saw. We'd pass a field of beautiful animals on the way to school and you could always expect me to say, "Horses!" But, it was the colorful ones I was most fond of; the paints and appaloosas... I knew getting attached to horses I took care of was just part of it, but I never thought it'd lead to where it did...

Starlight was a princess in her mother's eyes and a hunk of meat in her father's. Of course her mother, Quin Asher, never wanted to ride her or even run a brush through her mane with those white, leather gloves of hers—she just wanted me to; and Quin's husband wanted that also.

"She'll buck you off and crack your neck," he'd say.

Although, I knew Starlight would never buck anyone, not on purpose anyway. Starlight was a dream horse—completely gentle and a jumping star; a leopard appaloosa mare. Her soft, amber eyes said it all. She wasn't my only beauty to take care of, but she was my favorite, and they knew it.



I was mucking out the stall of naughty quarter horse on that Tuesday afternoon. Grinch, the sneaky, little brown gelding was munching on his grain while eyeing me in the corner of his stall. Feeding him was the only way to get into his stall without having a complete meltdown. Took me a while to figure that one out, but a few bruises later served my lesson.

"Alright, Mr. Grinch, just one more corner and I'll be out of your quarters for now," I told him.

His eyes were wide, showing all white around those big, brown circles. It would be much easier to lead him to a pen to run while I cleaned, but his owners insisted on keeping him in this little box due to his

temperament. I figured it was better this way so I wouldn't have to draw him back in, but my heart broke every time I saw his somber eyes as I passed by.

But, I didn't get paid to love the animals, just keep them alive, according to some owners; a rule I never truly followed. Megan, being a fellow horse lover, always allowed me the time and space to make this happen.

Just as I finished scooping the final remains of muck into the wheelbarrow, loud crunching of boots on crispy snow approached Grinch's stall. The man, of course, didn't enter the gate, being very aware of Grinch's attitude problem. But, seeing the face of the man who owned these stables, Quin's husband, Mr. Asher, I would have rather stayed in Grinch's stall for a little longer.

I redirected Grinch's attention to the back of his stall with a fresh salt block and snuck out the gate quickly with the wheelbarrow. Once the gate was latched, I turned my own attention to Mr. Asher.

"Already mucked, groomed, and turned out Starlight for the day, sir. She should be feeding right now," I told him, expecting a usual status report from his doubtful expectations.

I never gave him any reason to doubt my competency of care of any animal, especially Starlight, but that never seemed to change his attitude about me. Honestly, I was shocked every day I even had a job from our interactions, but I guess that wasn't exactly his call to make. Megan ran the boarding stables and ultimately, I was on her good side, despite Mr. Asher's wealth and power in this town.

"Never mind the regular routines. We won't be needing your assistance anymore with Starlight." He said it with such a straight face and turned to walk away. I was stunned.

"I'm sorry?" I jumped in front of him to block his path of leaving the stables. "Is it something I did? I can change anything you need at any time. I'm very flexible, especially when it comes to Starlight! I'll do anything! Are you not satisfied with my services?"

Typically it wouldn't matter, horse owners can be picky and stablehands hop around from horse to horse occasionally. But this was Starlight, my baby... I trained with her multiple times a day and always took the time to spend most of my day with her around my chores for ten years.

"No, it isn't your services," he said plainly.

The snow was starting to fall in a soft flurry.

"Then, why, may I ask, has Starlight been resigned?" I said, panicky.

"She hasn't."

In complete shock, I took off my black Stetson and asked, "Then has Mrs. Asher decided to exercise Starlight herself?"

As soon as it came out of my mouth I knew it was a mistake.

“Well, she is *her* horse!”

“Of course...” I responded shyly.

“We are relocating to Hawaii.”

“Wow... A beach horse. I’m sure Starlight will—”

“We, as in, my wife and I. We won’t take an animal of that size across the ocean. No, Starlight will be up for sale as of this week.”

My mouth hung open despite the snowflakes falling onto my bottom lip. My hat nearly fell out of my hand. It was done...they had already made their decision. But, I couldn’t help to wonder if this was actually a group decision between the two or if it was just Mr. Asher and his blatant disregard for horses and people...

“And Quin is okay with this? After all it is *her* horse.” I mimicked his tone from the previous statement, knowing no matter what I said to him at this point, Starlight would be gone from my care in just a few short days.

“You need to learn some professionalism, Miss, and if you ever want to work in this industry again, or *keep* working in it for that matter, you better learn quickly.”

Mr. Asher got in his black Mercedes and stormed off, leaving a cloud of dust to settle around the horses and I. The rev of the engine put most of them in a tizzy, especially Grinch, all stomping their hooves and letting out loud outcries.

I immediately ran over to Starlight’s stall. She was inside the barn, away from the bitterness of the snowy wind. It’s like she knew the news herself as she was waving her head back and forth when I got to her. I slid the door open and cried into her nose.

“What are we going to do, girl?”

I scratched behind her ear until she calmed down and slept by her stall door that night. I couldn’t bear to leave her sight...



Bright and early that next morning, the pigeons and doves woke me with their cooing and flapping of wings into the metal roof. I looked at my phone right away and got on the internet. I searched every horse sale website I’d heard of for an eleven year old leopard appaloosa mare for sale. It wasn’t until I cross-searched that with the words *gentle* and *rideable* that I finally found my girl on a ritzy website.

***Starlight Gleams Brightly***

*11 years old*

*Mare*

*Leopard Appaloosa*

*Gentle, rideable, English jumping champion*

*\$23,000*

The price made my stomach lurch. Even if I wanted to buy her myself and figure out some way to afford to board her, there was no way twenty-three thousand dollars could come out of my bank account... I looked into her big, amber eyes and stifled a cry.

“I’m so sorry, girl... I wish I could help... Maybe you’ll find the perfect home with wide open fields to roam...”

I looked out to the windows all frosted from the powder snow that fell throughout the night.

“How’s a nice and easy trail ride sound? Take a break from the jumping?”

With Starlight’s belly full and her winter gear on, I slipped on my gloves and put her halter over her head. As per usual, she bent her neck down beautifully for my ease. I scratched behind her ear and under her chin, letting her know what a good girl she was.

Her hooves clopped over the barn floor then sunk into the fresh powder as I slid the barn door open. It was a beautiful, winter morning. The frost coated each branch of every tree and the snow lay in sparkling blankets over the entire facility. I knew this would have to be a slow trail ride and we’d stay out of certain spots to avoid ice.

Once mounted, I felt in my happy place once again. Her lungs breathed deep as her breath came out in little clouds. I squeezed my legs and she walked on. We rode through the trees behind the stables and around bushes. We didn’t get to more than a trot but I felt Starlight enjoying the relaxing fun as much as I was. It was a good change in pace from our usual jumping routine.

By the time we returned to her stall, the snow was glistening evermore from the sunlight warming the day. Starlight’s breath was steady but the sweat didn’t get a chance to form; unlike her regular days of training where I’d have to mop the sweat up to keep from freezing.

We entered the barn but I didn’t put her in her stall right away. The day was special for us so, I hung her saddle and pad on the railing and turned her out into the indoor arena to play and roll. I ran around her, keeping her moving while she whinnied and tossed her head. Seeing her so happy, and not working for once, brought tears to my eyes. I almost forgot about our untimely goodbye coming up...

That is until I heard the nagging voice of Mr. Asher behind me, “What do you think you’re doing?” he hollered.

I whistled and Starlight came running to me in the back corner of the arena.

“She needed some fun,” I said across the arena, not wanting to come any closer to the man.

“The animal is absolutely filthy and I have a potential buyer coming to view her in just a half hour!”

“I’m sorry, but that wasn’t on her calendar.” I was sure to check the calendar hanging on her stall door before I even took her out for the day, let alone let her roll in the dirt!

“Well I didn’t put it on her calendar because I told you that you are no longer taking care of her!” He was fuming at this point. His black and red checkered bomber hat bobbed as he threw his head around in fury.

“So you expected no one to even groom or feed her? Or to check on her at all?” My patience was wearing thin; I had dealt with this family and their odd behavior for ten years...

“It’s really none of your business. And if you continue to get in the way of *my* business, you won’t like the call I’ll make.” He stepped towards Starlight to grab ahold of her halter, but I backed her up.

“Very well... I see there’s nothing I can do to make you want her, or to even care about her. But at least let me get her ready for the visit.”

In a gruff tone he responded, “Fine, since you got me in this problem in the first place, you can clean it up. But make it snappy!”

I watched him stomp away in a huff and head into the barn’s office to make himself a cappuccino. I knew it wouldn’t improve his mood any since it was only an automatic espresso machine, nothing fancy.

As I removed the rest of Starlight’s tack, I paid extra attention to her mood. She sensed my upset but I rubbed her nose in long strokes with the soft brush.

“You better calm yourself if you want to go to a good home and not end up in some auction. I doubt Mr. Asher will give you much patience...” She nudged my arm and side with her head as I brushed and polished her as much as possible in the half an hour allowed.

Just as I finished giving Starlight a final brush of her mane, I heard the barn door slide open and the screeching of a young child.

“It’s my horse so it doesn’t matter! I can do whatever I want with it! And if I want to paint her mane and tail pink, then I will!”

The young girl marched forward towards Starlight and I with confidence. Her sparkly pink english boots glittered in the sunlight streaming in through the doors and windows.

“Are you Mrs. Asher?” the woman with her asked me.

“No, I’m just the stablehand. I’ll go grab him for you.”

I placed Starlight safely in her stall and grabbed the grumpy man from the office. As Mr. Asher and I walked back to Starlight’s, we found her stomping her hooves into the stall door as the little girl stood on a stool, pulling at her mane. I jumped in immediately and pushed Starlight back through the bars.

“That’s *not* how you touch a horse!” I yelled in an emotional spiral.

“I was just color testing with the pink dye I brought! I want to make sure it would match her tone!”

I had no words. Sure, I’d seen other horse owners color their horses hair temporarily for things like shows or parties. But the lack of safety knowledge stunned me. There was no way this little brat would turn my beautiful Starlight into some barbie pony doll!

But Mr. Asher chuckled. “You’ll have plenty of time to give her a makeover once you take her home!”

The woman beside the little girl stepped into the conversation that I wasn’t even sure if I should be a part of. “Not so fast, I want to see what she can do. Saddle her,” she said directly to me with a snap of her fingers.

Considering I wasn’t even sure if Mr. Asher knew how to buckle a saddle, I was glad I hadn’t left. I also wanted to be the one to ride Starlight for this little sales pitch. I didn’t want Starlight to fall into this girl’s hands, and I knew exactly how to keep her out of them.

I set up just a few jumps, enough to make an impression. As we headed over each one, I hesitated just at the last second to throw Starlight off. I felt horrible about confusing her and making her sense fear in me, something I hadn’t felt on a horse in a very, very long time. So, we missed every jump and knocked the last one off the rails. As I dismounted I put my hands on my hips and gave them all a confident smile.

“That was a pretty good run for Starlight! She hasn’t gotten that close in a long time! Glad she could put her best hoof forward for y’all today!” I said with much enthusiasm.

The air was cold and quiet and all three of them stood there in shock. Mr. Asher had rage building in his cheeks in little red circles. I knew I would feel his fury later but at least Starlight wouldn’t be some play thing for the rest of her life.

“You know, she is normally not like this! We have so many ribbons, our entire shed is filled with them at home. It’s just this rider, she really doesn’t know what she’s doing. I mean look at her, she’s wearing jeans and old, beat-up western boots for goodness sakes! Her competition rider usually exercises her. I can show you some videos—” Mr. Asher tried to clean up the mess of confusion I made.

“I think we’ve seen enough,” the little girl answered for her parental figure. “I will only have a world-class competition jumping horse. This horse is obviously worn down and past her career.”

“Absolutely not! She’s in her prime!” Mr. Asher begged.

The woman finished the conversation, “If my baby thinks this horse isn’t good enough for her, then it’s not. You need to update your sales page. Thank you for wasting our time.”

They both stormed out of the barn, gossiping about both Mr. Asher and myself, not even bothering to close the sliding door. I grabbed tight of Starlight’s halter, waiting for Mr. Asher’s wrath to lay out on me and Starlight. I knew I wouldn’t get to say goodbye.

“How dare you, you evil—” he started.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of your problem right now.”

I jammed my foot into the stirrup and swung my body onto Starlight.

“Don’t you dare!” he yelled as we galloped around the indoor arena.

After the full circle of gaining speed, I directed Starlight directly straight towards Mr. Asher. With full trust in me, she ran ahead with all her might, letting him jump out of our way at the last minute and flying over the arena gate in a beautiful, clean shot. I gripped the reins harder than necessary as we galloped out of the open door, graciously left open by the unwanted, spoiled visitors. I pushed Starlight straight into the dense trees behind the stables and didn’t stop until both of us were breathing too hard. I slowed her down and leaned over onto her neck. I could feel the warmth of her sweat swelling beneath my legs.

“I’m sorry, Star, I didn’t know what to do... I panicked. I’m so sorry... For ten years you’ve been mine to love and care for... I don’t know what I’d do without you... Oh, I’m going to jail for sure...” I sobbed into her mane with the snow coming down once again on us.

Soon, Starlight’s breath slowed and I pulled myself upward once again. I knew I couldn’t hide for long. I wasn’t even sure what I had planned...mostly because I didn’t even have a plan! Was I going to run away and live in the wilderness off the land just Starlight and I? It was an emotional instinct and although I don’t regret it, it was the worst mistake of my life...



When I rode back to the barn an hour later with Starlight and I both covered in a thick blanket of snow, Mr. Asher, Mrs. Asher, and two police officers stood waiting for my arrival. Surprisingly, Quin ran right over to us. She grabbed Starlight by the head with tears in her eyes and mascara running down her cheeks.

“Don’t you ever leave me again, Starlight Gleams Brightly!” She leaned her face into Starlight’s nose and although Star flinched, Quin kept her position. “Thank you, thank you, thank you for bringing her back to me, Tera!”

I expected to get my hands in cuffs and cussed out from both of them; this left me speechless. I ran away with her, I should be no hero in their eyes and I definitely *wasn't* to Mr. Asher for his glare shot bullets through me.

“I thought you wanted to get rid of Starlight?” I uttered through choked sobs.

“No! Absolutely not! Starlight is my star jumper. I know I’m probably not with her as much as I should be, but I still love her... My husband is mistaken.” Quin would not let go of her despite me still being mounted.

To say she wasn’t with Starlight as much as she should be was an obtuse understatement, but to be honest, it never bothered me. In fact, I was thankful, for it allowed me to grow a relationship with my amazing beauty I never would have if Quin was around more.

“You’ll take care of her for me, won’t you?” I asked Quin as I dismounted and prepared to face the police and Mr. Asher.

Before she could answer, one of the officers had me in handcuffs and ushered me into the back of his cruiser. I swear I could hear Starlight’s whinnies as we drove away.



It’s been about ten years since I made that irrational, life-altering mistake... I would do it all over again though. I spent one solid night in the local police department cell. After that, my mom came to pick me up. I was so ashamed, but proud I made Quin finally stand up to Mr. Asher. They would be keeping Starlight at the same boarding stable after all.

Of course, once Megan got caught up on the situation, my job was dissolved immediately. I’ll never forget the grin she gave me though as I left her office when she let me go. It was one of those grins a parent gives a kid when they know what they did was wrong but was proud of it all the same...

“Visit all you want, just stay *out* of the stalls, you hear me?” she told me.

I waited about a month for the hearing; luckily Megan was able to give me a good reference for character. The judge racked it up to me doing what I thought was best for the animal even though the Asher’s were still deemed viable to take care of Starlight. I was sentenced to six months of community service and sent on my way. I’ll forever be thankful to Megan for vouching for me, the judge and jury for seeking the truth and for Quin for taking on Starlight all on her own and not filing a restraining order or charges against me. Since then, I’ve yet to see Mr. Asher and it’s probably better that way.

No, I haven’t rode Starlight since that day and I’m 32 now, Starlight 21 and getting on in her final years. But when I leave her door after my regular visit, her whiny still echoes through the barn every day. I’m



thankful to still see her even if I won't ever feel her lungs on my thighs again or nuzzle my face into her neck after a long practice.

I'm thankful we got one final ride; one final ride that saved her life and possibly Quin Asher's... I hear she not only went to that barn every day after I left, but also rode her occasionally. I'm glad she found her love for Starlight once and again Star found it for her... The bond between a horse and their person is like nothing else I've ever seen or felt.

It was a jump worth taking...

A short story by Nicolle Caputa

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