

All she wanted was to escape.  
But why does she still feel trapped?

KYLIE LADD

THE

WAY

BACK



*For Eloise, who should have been my classmate.*

First published in 2017

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‘You do it,’ Ivy said. ‘I’ll get it on the way back.’

Charlie kicked her feet out of the stirrups and obediently dismounted, looping Tic Tac’s reins over one arm while she opened the gate that separated pony club from the Kinglake National Park. A breeze sprang up as Ivy rode through and Charlie hesitated before remounting. Maybe she should have brought her jacket after all, instead of leaving it in the tack shed with the rest of her gear. She paused, wondering if she should go back and get it.

‘Hurry up, dreamer,’ Ivy said, kicking Duchess into a trot. ‘We have to be back by six. Are you just going to stand there until then?’

It would be OK, Charlie told herself, gathering up a handful of Tic Tac’s mane and placing one foot in the stirrup. It was only just past four; the day was still warm. She hauled herself into the saddle and set off after Ivy. Anyway, she needed to make the most of the good weather, of riding in just a polo and jodhpurs. Soon

it would be back to wearing jumpers, gloves, her oily old Japara. On the drive over, her mother had warned her that daylight saving finished next week, that she and Ivy would have to stop their trail rides after pony club because it would be too dark.

‘Did you shut the gate properly?’ Ivy asked as she pulled up alongside her. ‘Gia will go off at us if any of the horses get out.’

‘Yes,’ Charlie said. ‘I’m not stupid. And what do you mean, go off at *us*? You’d just tell her it was my fault.’

‘Probably,’ Ivy conceded, grinning. ‘Hey, watch.’ She nudged Duchess forward again, cantering away along the wide bush track. ‘Watch,’ she repeated, calling back to Charlie. She and Duchess went on about a hundred metres, then turned in a tight circle and cantered slowly back. ‘Well?’ she asked.

‘You didn’t bounce very much,’ said Charlie doubtfully.

‘Not that,’ Ivy moaned. ‘I changed the lead. Duchess’s lead, I mean. When we left she was leading on her right leg, and when we came back she was leading on her left.’ She sighed in exasperation. ‘It’s really difficult to do. Didn’t you see? When we were in the arena today at pony club I did it twice, right under Gia’s nose, and she didn’t notice either. Honestly, I don’t know how much she actually knows about horses, apart from looking like one.’

Charlie giggled. Gia did have a longish face, a certain equine set to her hips. ‘She was probably concentrating on that new girl, the one on Blaze. She was so nervous that I thought she was going to fall off. Blaze could tell, too.’

‘I’ll do it again,’ Ivy said, wheeling Duchess around. ‘Watch properly this time.’

Charlie wasn't actually sure what she was meant to be watching, Ivy's legs or Duchess's. When had Ivy learned to do this, anyway? It wasn't something Gia had taught them, or even mentioned. But Ivy didn't like to wait to be taught; Ivy hated to be told anything. She must have looked it up in a book or on the internet, then practised until she could casually unveil her new skill and claim it was nothing. And Ivy *could* practise, because she had her own horse and a stable at home. She could ride Duchess whenever she liked. Charlie's hands clenched around the front of the saddle. How good would that be, not to have to beg or manoeuvre for a lift out here; to have a mother who didn't work and was always available to do whatever you asked? No wonder Ivy could change leads. Envy bubbled in Charlie's stomach, then just as quickly receded. Her own mum was pretty good. She'd talked Dad into letting them lease Tic Tac, after all; she bought carrots and apples and even sugar cubes for Charlie to feed him when she saw him, even though she knew Gia had banned the latter. Tic Tac pawed the ground, impatient to be off. 'I know,' Charlie soothed, stroking his neck. 'I'm bored too. She's such a show-off.'

'Well,' Ivy demanded, halting beside her, 'did you see it that time?'

'Oh, definitely,' Charlie fibbed. 'It looked great. Now, let's go.'

Forty minutes later they were galloping across an open section of scrub when Tic Tac suddenly stumbled. Charlie flew forward onto the pony's withers, grabbing at his forelock to stop herself coming off. Tic Tac panicked and threw his head up, connecting

with her nose. ‘Ow!’ Charlie cried, tugging at his mouth to slow him down and sliding to the ground.

‘What happened?’ asked Ivy, reining in Duchess. ‘That was so good! Why’d you stop?’

‘I didn’t stop,’ said Charlie. ‘Not on purpose. Tic Tac nearly fell.’ She felt rattled, shaky, couldn’t quite catch her breath.

‘Why? Did he trip over something?’ Ivy glanced around. ‘I can’t see anything. We were going pretty fast. Maybe you just lost your balance.’

‘I didn’t lose my balance,’ Charlie snapped. ‘He went down on one side. I think he might have stepped in a rabbit hole.’ Something warm touched her lip and she put her fingers up to her face. They came away red. *Damn*. She reached into her jodhpurs for some tissues before remembering they were in her jacket, back in the tack room.

‘Your nose is bleeding,’ said Ivy.

‘No shit,’ muttered Charlie. She wiped it on one sleeve of her shirt and turned to stroke Tic Tac, who was blowing slightly. ‘Hey, it’s OK,’ she whispered into his ear, chastising herself for not doing so earlier. Some horsewoman she was. She went to mount, but felt him immediately move away from her. Ivy noticed it too.

‘He doesn’t want you near that leg,’ she said, still seated on Duchess. ‘Look at the way he’s holding it. He must have hurt it.’

‘I told you something happened to him,’ Charlie said. Flies were collecting around Tic Tac’s eyes and he shook his head, annoyed. She bent and ran one hand gently down his left foreleg. He flinched.

‘It’s a bit warm,’ she told Ivy.

‘I hope he’s not lame. Walk him out, then try a trot. That’s the best way to tell.’

‘I *know*,’ said Charlie, but nonetheless did as she said. Tic Tac moved gingerly, favouring his right side.

‘Damn,’ said Ivy. ‘He is lame. You’re stuffed.’

‘Thanks for your compassion.’ Charlie felt tears prick her eyes. Her nose ached, she was hot and tired, and now poor Tic Tac was injured. ‘I’ll have to walk him back.’

Ivy looked doubtful. ‘It’s a long way. We were just about to turn round. It’ll take forever to walk that far.’

‘I can’t ride him. Remember what Hannah said? If you ride a lame horse you’ll make it worse.’ *Your horse before yourself.* Hannah was always telling them that: you don’t eat or relax or even wash up until you’ve looked after your horse, until he is unsaddled and rubbed down and fed and watered. He can’t do any of that, and he trusts you to—just like he trusts you to go where you tell him to, to canter even though he’d rather walk. A drop of blood fell from Charlie’s nose onto her boot, and she sniffed. She liked Hannah. She wished Hannah was here now, and not Ivy. Poison Ivy, Britta called her. Hannah would know what to do. Charlie brought her hand up to Tic Tac’s bridle and turned him for home. Duchess fell into step alongside them. Neither girl spoke. A cicada started up in a tree nearby. Before they’d gone two hundred metres Ivy sighed impatiently and made a big show of looking at her watch.

‘This is stupid. It’ll be dark before we’re even half-way back, and my mum will go off at me. She’s coming at six.’

Charlie rolled her eyes. Ivy's mum never went off at her. That was the problem.

'Your mum will worry too,' Ivy continued. 'And Gia. Well, she won't be bothered about us, but she'll worry about the horses. I think I should go on.'

'Go on?' Charlie asked. 'What do you mean?'

'You know, head back.' Ivy gestured vaguely in the direction of the pony club. 'I'll canter, so I get there on time. That way no one will worry.'

'What about me?' Charlie sputtered. 'So I'll just trudge through the bush in the dark by myself, dragging a lame horse behind me?'

'I was getting to that,' Ivy said coolly. 'As soon as I'm back I can send out Gia or Hannah, and one of them can ride out and walk him back with you. Or they might know a spot along the track that's not far from the road, so they could meet you with a float. Anyway,' she added, 'you're the one who wants to walk him. I'm sure it wouldn't hurt just to ride for a bit. You'd get there a lot quicker.'

Charlie shook her head. She couldn't do that to Tic Tac.

'OK then,' said Ivy, taking silence as consent. 'We'll be as quick as we can.' She dug her heels into Duchess's flanks and the horse sprang forward. 'Bye,' she called without looking back.

'Bye, then,' Charlie mumbled. She didn't want Ivy to go, she didn't want to be left alone, but there was no point pleading with her. Ivy always did whatever she wanted, and it was clear she didn't want to hang around with Charlie. She was probably dying to gallop again, Charlie thought. They'd been having a wonderful ride, one of their best, and Ivy wouldn't want that



ruined. Neither would Charlie, but if their situations had been reversed she would have stayed. Oh, bugger Ivy, she thought. She was a selfish bitch. Wait until she told Britta about this. Charlie clicked her tongue to encourage Tic Tac, who was limping quite distinctly now, and pulled her helmet down to protect her eyes from the lowering sun. Another cicada joined the first, then a third and a fourth until their ringing filled her ears.

They had gone what felt about a kilometre when Charlie saw someone standing by the side of the track. Relief flooded through her. Maybe they could help. 'Hi!' she called out, waving one arm. The figure stepped forwards. As she came closer, Charlie recognised him: it was the man she had seen out here a month or so ago while riding with Ivy.

'Hello,' she said. 'Do you have a phone? My horse has gone lame.'

'No,' he replied. 'There's one near my home, though. A pay phone. We could walk back.'

He spoke slowly, carefully, as if selecting each word before speaking it.

'Oh,' said Charlie, disappointed. She took off her helmet, which was getting hot on her head, and held it in one hand. 'Is it far?'

'Not too far.' He stared at her without blinking. There was something faded about him, Charlie thought. Pale blonde hair, washed-out eyes, the old khaki coat he'd been wearing the last time she saw him bleached almost to grey, as if it had been left too long on the line. 'Can I pat your horse?' he asked.

Charlie shrugged. She didn't really want him to, but to say so would be rude.

‘She’s a nice horse,’ he said, stroking Tic Tac’s neck. Charlie wrinkled her nose at his smell. Tic Tac stood there impassively, his sore leg lifted slightly, balanced on the tip of one hoof.

‘Yes,’ Charlie agreed, ‘except he’s a he, not a she.’

‘A boy horse,’ the man said thoughtfully. His gaze returned to Charlie. ‘You have pretty hair.’ He reached out his hand as if to touch it. Instinctively, Charlie’s elbow went up, knocking his arm away.

‘Hey,’ he said, edging towards her. ‘You didn’t have to do that. I just wanted to feel it. Won’t you let me feel it?’

Charlie took a step backwards. Her heart was pounding. She wished Gia was here, or Hannah, or even Ivy. She thought about leaping onto Tic Tac and galloping away, but he was hurt. They probably wouldn’t get very far.

‘Can you take me to that phone?’ she asked.

‘Only if you let me touch your hair.’ The man lunged at her again and she twisted away in alarm, knocking against Tic Tac and falling to the ground. Tic Tac whinnied and recoiled, jerking the reins from her hand. Before she could react the man had grabbed them and was pulling at the pony’s mouth.

‘Don’t!’ cried Charlie. ‘You’ll hurt him!’

The man yanked harder. ‘You were mean to me, so I’m going to keep him.’

Charlie leapt to her feet and flew at him, dropping her helmet.

‘He’s mine! Give him to me!’ She tried to snatch at the reins, but when the man wouldn’t let go she went for his face instead, scratching and clawing at his cheeks, his eyes, desperate to have Tic Tac back.

‘Ow!’ he screamed, and then she was sinking to the ground again, this time in slow motion, her head knocked back, pain erupting behind one temple, the bush and the sun and Tic Tac all spiralling around her, the track tilting as it came up to meet her, the dirt of it gritty on her skin and in her mouth.

**A**t the exact moment Rachael tipped the onions into the pan, the phone rang. They hissed and spat as they hit the hot surface, and she prodded at them quickly so they didn't stick. She probably had the gas up too high. Matt was always warning her about that, but Matt was on a shift, so bugger him, she thought. She poked at the onions again, then crossed to the fridge to get out the bacon, ignoring the phone. It was Saturday night—Saturday evening, anyway—and anyone who knew her would call her mobile. Rachael didn't know why they even had a landline anymore, not since they'd given Charlie her own mobile when she started high school, just as they'd done for Dan three years earlier. She must ask Matt to do something about that, she thought, laying out the bacon rashers. No point paying line rental just so they could be hounded by charities or survey groups. No one had time for that.

The ringing stopped. She picked up her glass of wine and took a long sip. Thank goodness Ivy's mother, Caitlin, had offered to

bring Charlie home from pony club. It wasn't like Rachael to cook dinner when Matt was on shift, particularly on a weekend, but avoiding pick-up had given her a couple of extra hours and she felt she needed to make the effort. She wasn't going to be around much in the week ahead; she hadn't been around much in the past week, either. There was an important new exhibition opening at the museum on Wednesday and she'd be needed to do the media, the publicity, to make sure all the finishing touches fell into place and no one stuffed up. She was proud of this exhibition, which had been one of her ideas: children's toys over the past thirty years, and the way they reflected changes in society. The Museum Director had rejected her first proposal, insisting that her focus was too narrow, that she should be examining the past century, not just the last few decades, but she had convinced him otherwise. A museum needed to engage with progress, not simply showcase it, she'd argued. No one would linger over glass cabinets filled with marbles or jacks. In Rachael's experience, people were far more interested in the history that they'd lived through than the sepia-stained remnants of the past. Visitors—those who paid the entry fees, anyway—wanted to show their children a Tamagotchi or a View-Master; they wanted to see if they could still solve a Rubik's Cube. And what did it tell us about ourselves, that a Rubik's Cube was almost obsolete, but Candy Crush was an addiction? She finished chopping the bacon and swept it into the pan with the onion, hoping that the joysticks she'd sourced for the exhibition's four Atari consoles were sturdy. She had a feeling they were going to be getting a lot of use.

A siren erupted from her handbag on the kitchen table, and Rachael jumped. That was Dan's idea of a joke, changing her mobile's ringtone to the only one he claimed that might actually get her attention or away from her computer. It got Matt's attention too—she'd witnessed the colour drain from his face the first time it went off, during a rare dinner they'd sat down to together—but she kept forgetting to change it back. For a moment Rachael considered ignoring it as she had the landline, then turned the stove down, wiped her hands on a tea towel and fished the phone out of her bag.

'Hello?' she said, glancing at the clock on the microwave. Charlie was due back any minute.

'Oh, Rachael, it's Gia. From pony club.'

'Gia?' Rachael's hand tightened around her mobile. 'What's happened? Is Charlie OK?'

'She's fine,' Gia said, then coughed a little. 'We assume she's fine, that is. It's just that she hasn't come back from her ride yet, so I thought I'd better call you.'

Rachael stared again at the microwave's green glowing numbers. 6.46. Pony club went until four, then Charlie and Ivy were going to ride until 5.30. Charlie had promised her she'd be home by seven: half an hour after the ride to unsaddle and rub down Tic Tac, then the hour's drive home. 'She's an hour late. More,' she calculated aloud.

'I know,' Gia replied. 'I was wondering if she had her phone with her—maybe you could give her a call?'

'She's not allowed to take it riding. She'd just lose it or break it—but Ivy always has hers. Have you rung her?'

‘Well,’ Gia hedged, then rushed on, ‘Ivy’s actually here. She got back around five.’

Rachael sat down. None of this made sense. ‘Ivy’s back? But aren’t the girls supposed to stay together?’

‘They are, but Tic Tac went lame, apparently, a fair way out, so Ivy said she’d go and get help. I’ve sent Hannah out to meet Charlie, but they haven’t returned yet, and Ivy’s mother’s been here a while now, and I think she wants to get going.’ Gia’s voice trailed off.

‘They should have stayed together!’ Rachael turned her head and peered through the French doors. Still light, but daylight saving had ended that morning, and it would be getting dark soon.

‘I know,’ Gia said. ‘I’ll make sure I talk to them about it. Ivy said that Charlie insisted, though, that she told Ivy to go back so no one got worried.’

‘Well, I’m worried,’ Rachael snapped. She groped in her handbag for her keys. ‘I’m coming now.’

‘Thanks,’ said Gia. ‘I’m sure Charlie will be in any minute, probably well before you get here. It’s just that Caitlin has some sort of ball on tonight, and she should have left ages ago.’

‘I know. You said. Tell Charlie I’m on my way.’ Rachael hung up and called out to Dan that she was leaving. There was no reply and she wondered if he’d even heard her, but she didn’t have time to check.

*Charlie would be fine*, Rachael told herself as she gripped the steering wheel. It was the same thing she’d been telling herself for the past fifty minutes, ever since she got into the car, and she

almost believed it. She was just a little shaky because she was annoyed at having to leave home with dinner underway, and because the girls knew better than to separate when they were out riding. She thought she'd drilled that into Charlie, but obviously not. There would have to be some form of punishment to get the message across. Maybe she wouldn't let her go to pony club next week. Rachael glanced at her phone on the passenger seat, swerving as she did. *Shit*, she muttered, straightening up. Gia would call the minute Charlie got back, surely? But then again, maybe she wouldn't bother, knowing Rachael would arrive soon.

The turn-off appeared up ahead. It was OK. She was almost there, and Charlie would be waiting for her in Gia's office, tired and dirty, a little sunburned perhaps. Or not exactly waiting—Charlie would never stay in an office when she could be hanging over a fence line, watching horses, or even cleaning tack; but she'd be around, and she'd say sorry for leaving Ivy, but they'd had a fabulous ride, and could they please get some hot chips on the way home? Rachael could almost see her standing there, smiling, her helmet dangling from her fingertips, blue eyes bright. The image was so clear that Rachael inadvertently accelerated as she hit the dirt road, wanting to reach Charlie as quickly as she could. At the same time a message pinged onto her phone. As she looked towards it, the wheels locked and slid; the back of the car spun around and slammed into a tree.

It was all over before she knew it. Rachael sat for a moment as the dust she'd thrown up slowly drifted back down to earth, then turned off the engine. Nothing hurt. That was good. She hadn't actually collided with anything herself; she was just jolted



a little where the seatbelt had grabbed her. Rachael snatched up her phone. *Please let it be Gia*, she thought, but the text on the screen was from Matt. *Hey there, pretty quiet here. Hope your day's gone well xx.*

*Oh, it's been great*, she thought, with a sigh. She got out of the car and walked to the rear of the vehicle, wincing as she surveyed the damage. One panel, two—and the bumper bar lopsided, as if it had suffered a stroke. Damn. The tyres and the wheel rims were intact, though, so the car should still be OK to drive. She turned to climb back into her seat, rebuking herself. She shouldn't have looked at her phone.

Rachael knew the moment she finally arrived at pony club to find Gia standing by the gate that Charlie wasn't back. Their eyes met, and Gia slowly shook her head. Rachael parked the car and sat there for a moment, staring at her hands balled up in her lap, wondering if she needed to call Matt. Then she took a deep breath and got out.

'What do we do now?' she asked Gia without preamble.

Gia's face was drawn. 'Hannah's still out. Maybe if we wait for her—' she started to say before she was cut off by the thudding of hooves and Hannah cantering into the car park. She pulled her horse up alongside Rachael. Its flanks were heaving and there were flecks of lather caught in its mane like pearls. 'I couldn't find her,' Hannah gasped, glancing between Gia and Rachael. 'I'm so sorry. I looked and looked, but I was scared that if I stayed out much longer I'd get lost.' Behind her, darkness was falling, shadows advancing across the hills like an army.