

The Wish

by Lisa Wysocky

Two weeks ago Maggie was at the top of the world. Literally. Now she was in the dung heap. Also, unfortunately, a literal interpretation.

Two weeks ago Maggie had arrived home, fresh from a win at the world championships with a horse owned by one of country music's top stars. The horse, Gold's Harmony, was a beautiful palomino Quarter Horse mare who had won the prestigious Junior Western Pleasure class. When Maggie pulled in to the barn at three in the morning, after two long days of cross-country travel back to the coast, she found a huge surprise party waiting. Everyone had turned out, including the horse's delighted owners, country star Lance Jackson and his wife, Kelli. There were banners, streamers, grooms, other trainers, students and reporters, all with champagne flutes in hand ready to toast the winning pair. There was even a glass waiting for Harmony. And when the party finally broke up it was dawn and time to start a new day. All in all, it was a wonderful homecoming.

As it was the end of the show season, Maggie had little but routine maintenance planned for the next six weeks. Oh, there were a few long two-year-olds that needed some miles put on them. There were the usual Saturday and after-school riding lessons. But generally it was a slack time of the year—a time she savored as it was usually all too short.

Harmony, as was the case with the rest of the show string, had been scheduled to spend some time at the home of her owner. Lance and Kelli, however, had decided to celebrate their world championship and great good fortune with a trip to Maui. As they wouldn't be back until mid-December, Harmony was hanging out in the barn for a while. In all honesty, there were many owners that Maggie just tolerated, and she far preferred the company of horses to that of people. But she genuinely liked Lance and Kelli for their fresh enthusiasm, their positive attitude, and most

importantly, because to them Harmony was a living, breathing horse, and not a business investment or a tax write-off.

About ten days after the triumphant homecoming, Maggie noticed Harmony didn't dive into her food when she gave her her breakfast. That was highly unusual. A routine check an hour later found some swelling in Harmony's legs.

"Hmmm," Maggie thought. "Strange. If she had a tiny cut, or strained a muscle, just that one leg would be swollen."

But on the other hand, even though it was several weeks after the trip, maybe the long days in the trailer had put strain on Harmony's legs. Or, as she had been stalled most of each day, maybe the swelling was from inactivity and she just needed more exercise.

So without thinking too much about it, Maggie turned Harmony out for the next twenty-four hours. The next morning her legs were worse.

A call to the vet did not bring any relief to Maggie's worries.

"I sure don't know what the problem is," said the seasoned veterinarian. "But I'll run some blood tests. If she gets any worse, call me."

Maggie was on the phone the next afternoon.

"Harmony has a temperature of 104 and still isn't eating," Maggie said, worry apparent in her voice.

The vet recommended a strong dosage of antibiotics and suggested that Maggie monitor the mare carefully.

"At least she isn't restless when she's sick," said Maggie's groom, Kevin. And that was true. In health, Harmony fully earned her stable name of Wiggles. In sickness, she was pitifully quiet.

But still, Maggie was worried. The blood tests came back with a high white count, indicating to the veterinarian some kind of virus. He said they'd just have to let it run its course.

"It's shipping fever," he explained, now that he had the blood work to back him up. "When you haul across the country all the time you have to expect every now and then that a horse will pick up some unusual virus like this."

His assurances that everything would be all right in a few days weren't convincing to Maggie. In her gut, she felt there was something else. Later that day she got on the phone to ask other trainers if they would be doing anything differently. Maggie was worried about Harmony's legs. They were incredibly swollen and all the liniment and home remedies she'd tried didn't seem to make a difference. And that's how Maggie came to be in the dung heap, mixing pungently fresh droppings with glycerine and hot water, which she packed around Harmony's legs as a poultice. The recipe had been recommended by another trainer. It didn't help.

By this time Harmony's temperature was 107 and she not only was not eating, she was not drinking.

"Thank goodness Lance and Kelli are in Hawaii," Maggie thought. "They couldn't bear to see Harmony like this." Harmony's flanks were sunken, her golden coat was dull, and her normally lively eyes were full of huge blank stares.

Another call to the vet produced a 'jug' bag. Given intravenously, a 'jug' was a storage sized plastic bag filled with electrolytes, vitamins and other body stabilizing fluids to keep a horse from getting too run down. The vet ran more blood tests and took careful notes of her vital signs and condition.

"I'm going to run these stats into the computer at the University," he said, getting into his truck. "I'll call you later."

That afternoon the phone rang and Maggie knew even before she picked it up that it was bad news.

"Purpura hemorrhagica," said the vet.

"Purple what?" she asked.

"Purpura hemorrhagica," he repeated. "It has to do with the circulatory system. It's usually caused by a strep infection."

"But Harmony hasn't had a strep infection,"

Maggie protested, still not knowing what this purple disease was.

He explained that Harmony may not have shown any outward signs, but in all probability she had been exposed to strep. And the time frame from travelling to sickness was right on, he said.

"Unfortunately, other than antibiotics and aspirin, things we've been doing for a few days now, I don't know what else to do. Oh yeah. . .um. . .by the way. The ah. . .the mortality rate is fifty percent."

Fifty percent. Oh, no. Maggie's first thought was for Lance and Kelli, celebrating jubilantly in Maui. Maggie would not spoil their pleasure with bad news. She would not. She vowed then and there that she would not let Harmony die. Somehow, she would keep Harmony from becoming a statistic.

Maggie went to Harmony's stall, bringing one of her horse health books, and sat with the mare in the straw. Lying there, Harmony seemed glad of Maggie's company, and Maggie was glad to be with her.

Harmony and Maggie had spent a lot of hours together in the last year—most of them under saddle and not all of them had gone smoothly. A lot of patience was needed from both of them. Eventually Maggie and Harmony learned to compromise and it developed into a partnership that worked, as evidenced by the world championship. Harmony had a definite mind of her own, but when it came right down to it, they were friends. Harmony knew Maggie as well as Maggie knew Harmony. And Maggie knew Harmony very well indeed. If it made Harmony feel better, Maggie thought, she'd move in with her until the mare had recovered. And she would get better, Maggie told her fiercely. She would.

By this time the swelling had extended to Harmony's stomach, and her lips and eyes had turned a peculiar shade of purple—signs that Harmony was in full stages of the disease, or so the book said. Although Maggie was upset that Harmony had not been diagnosed earlier, to the vet's credit, she read that purpura hemorrhagica

was quite rare. And according to the book, nothing else could have been done anyway.

Maggie tried to read. ". . . believed caused by an allergic reaction from a streptococcal infection. . . not a common disease. . . onset observed two to four weeks after. . . swelling becomes extensive and stiffness throughout is observed. . . legs become very enlarged. . . proper treatment is important. . . the mortality rate is high. . ."

The vet came by and hung another jug on Harmony and suggested ice packs to bring the fever down.

"If she doesn't turn around soon her head will start to swell and then her esophagus. She won't be able to breathe," he said quietly.

The vet left and night came. Kevin came by to feed and stayed with for a while, bringing one of Lance's CDs and a portable boom box with him. Maggie seemed to like the music, but as there was little else Kevin could do, he left.

About nine-thirty Harmony took a turn for the worse. Maggie could tell it was getting harder for her to breathe and she held Harmony's head in her lap, tears streaming down her face.

"Come on, Harmony, fight this. You've got to fight it," Maggie whispered. "You fought with me enough this year. I know you can fight this. You're a fighter. Come on."

To herself Maggie whispered, "If I only have one wish in my life, I wish for this mare to live, I wish life for Harmony." She repeated her wish over and over until it became so imbedded in her mind that the passing of time had become meaningless.

So by the time she noticed the man standing outside the stall, Maggie had no idea how long she had holding Harmony's head in her lap.

The man was old and small, grizzled and gray, wearing a frayed watch cap that could hardly have provided much warmth, for all the holes it had.

"Excuse me, miss. Don't mean to intrude."

Maggie was too tired to even wonder who he was, or what he was doing there. Sitting on the stall floor, she was too tired to even think he might not have good intentions, which was the

first thing that would have popped into her mind had she been thinking clearly. Fortunately, he was there to help.

"I heard tell about a girl with a sick horse," he said. "Are you being her?"

"Yes," said Maggie through her tears. "I am."

The man explained he was a distant relation of the feed store owner. He was a retired commercial fisherman and proud of it, too.

"I don't be knowing if'n it would be of help, but I grew up knowing the ocean like the back of my hand. My Pappy ran some cattle in times we weren't fishin' and when they got took real bad like this, he'd drive 'em into the tide flats and wait for the water to come in. Something about the salt water and the seaweed. It helped most of 'em. Thought it'd maybe help youn."

He went on to tell Maggie that the closest place where she could get Harmony to the ocean was about ten miles away.

"Would. . . would you wait here with Harmony while I get a coat and some rubber boots?" Maggie asked hesitantly. She didn't want Harmony to be alone in case. . . well, just in case.

He agreed to wait, and as she half walked half ran across the stable yard to her house Maggie wondered what in the world she was doing.

"How am I even going to get her on her feet, much less get her into the trailer?" Maggie asked herself.

And she answered herself that she had no other choice but to give it a try. They'd done it all. Nothing had worked.

"What if she dies in the trailer on the way, or worse yet, in the ocean?" Maggie thought.

And what if she dies in the stall, she countered. Either way she's dead. It's just a little more inconvenient if she's not in he stall. But this way at least you're trying to do something. No one can fault you for that.

"Ah, there's the thing" Maggie said. "What if someone thinks I didn't try hard enough, or smart enough?"

You've only yourself to answer to, she replied in rebuttal. You know you've done everything—everything—possible.

"But," Maggie argued back, "why should this crazy thing work when nothing else had?"

Why not, she answered.

And with that she left it. Maggie was too tired even to argue with herself. She hooked up the truck and trailer instead. By this time it was getting on toward midnight and starting to drizzle. And to her surprise Harmony was standing when she returned to the barn.

"She started to gettin' up as soon as you left," he said with a toothless smile.

Maggie led a very shaky Harmony up the ramp into the trailer and turned her loose inside. She hoped Harmony would be able to balance better untied and, if she went down, she wouldn't break her neck or strangle herself. Maggie hoped.

On the way Maggie had to block the situation from her mind in order to drive. If she thought about Harmony, or the fact that she might die, Maggie got so shaky she couldn't keep her foot on the clutch. Instead, she did multiplication tables and was struggling with 13 when she found the entrance to the bay.

There was a wide parking area screened by a row of scrub trees and rocks. It looked as if it led directly to the beach. It did. Maggie unloaded Harmony, found a footpath with the flashlight and led her toward the water.

"What if she won't go in!" Maggie thought with exasperation. "That would be just like her." But Harmony followed willingly. She, too, was too tired to argue. They walked in the cold salty water until the bottom of Harmony's belly was lapping in the waves. Maggie sat perched on a heavy old bar stool she'd found in the barn and decided to bring at the last minute.

Maggie talked to Harmony for most of the night. She told her about her childhood, of her fear of heights, of her thoughts on the upcoming presidential election. Maggie was afraid to stop talking, afraid that her voice was Harmony's only connection left with this world. Maggie told her how much the win at the world meant to her and to Lance and Kelli, how much her owners loved her and admired her, and how she would get to be in a music video if she was feeling better after the

holidays. The sound of Maggie's voice mixed with her tears as she talked through the night.

Because of the drizzle and the blackness of the sky Maggie couldn't see Harmony. The mare never once tugged on the lead, or made a sound. But between the lapping of the waves and the cold breeze Maggie knew she was still there. Maggie knew she was. As the tide slowly came in they moved some, toward the sandy shore. Twice they did that, thoroughly wetted by the rain and the salty waves. Maggie felt the seaweed catch her rubber booted feet and wondered if, hoped that, the plants and the water were performing some sort of magic on Harmony's legs.

Eventually dawn started to drift in. Was it her imagination, or just her hopes, that Harmony's eyes looked a little brighter, or that her lips felt a little cooler? Maggie couldn't tell in that half light. She'd have to give it a little more time.

As the day became a little stronger, the seagulls started to caw overhead. Did Maggie see Harmony move her head ever so slightly to look at the birds? Or was it her imagination? Was it just her wish that it had been so?

Was that a flick of her tail in the water? Or was it just another wave?

As the sky finally lightened that very gray morning Harmony lifted her head and gave a nicker. A soft nicker for sure. But a nicker none the less. Maggie was so happy, so full of hope, she jumped off the bar stool and threw her arms around Harmony's neck.

It was then that Harmony reached around behind Maggie and took a chunk of her rain gear with her teeth and pulled Maggie back into the ocean. Maggie knew then that the worst was over and that Harmony would recover. And she did.

Maggie never told Lance and Kelli the extent of Harmony's illness, just that she'd come down with shipping fever and that there would be a few vet bills. There was no use, Maggie thought, of them worrying over something that was in the past. And it was very good to know, Maggie thought, that sometimes wishes really do come true.

Author's Note: The Wish is based on real events. Harmony recovered fully and went on to live a long, full life as a show horse and brood mare. Please check back at www.powerofhorses.com for new stories periodically throughout the year.

About the Author: Born and raised in Minnesota, Lisa Wysocky had early success on the national and world championship horse show circuit. She soon was asked to begin speaking and writing about horses. A knee injury cut short Lisa's career as a trainer, but she quickly ventured into music. Six years with Nashville's afternoon paper, the *Nashville Banner*, and her reputation in the music industry as a writer of quality biographical and promotional material, piloted Lisa to a career in public relations.

Recently, Lisa served as general manager of the independent record label, Scarlet Moon Records, and authored the **only** book about country music stars and their horses, *The Power of Horses: True Stories from Country Music Stars*, which features true horse stories and original photos from 18 of country music's top artists. A mystery, *The Opium Equation*, is due out in 2003. Lisa is also active in assisting clients with their public image and with their interview skills.

A witty, down-to-earth speaker, Lisa gives her audiences 'news they can use', along with step-by-step advice on how they can create their own success stories. Former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden once said, "More often than we ever expect, the lives of others we affect." Author, speaker, trainer, and publicist—Lisa Wysocky positively affects those who have the opportunity to hear or read her words.

Also by Lisa Wysocky

The Power of Horses: True Stories from Contry Music Stars

(Fura Books, 2002, ISBN: 1-890224-10-3)

*"Readers be warned:
once you pick this book up, it is very hard to put down!"*
Suzie Housley, www.MyShelf.com

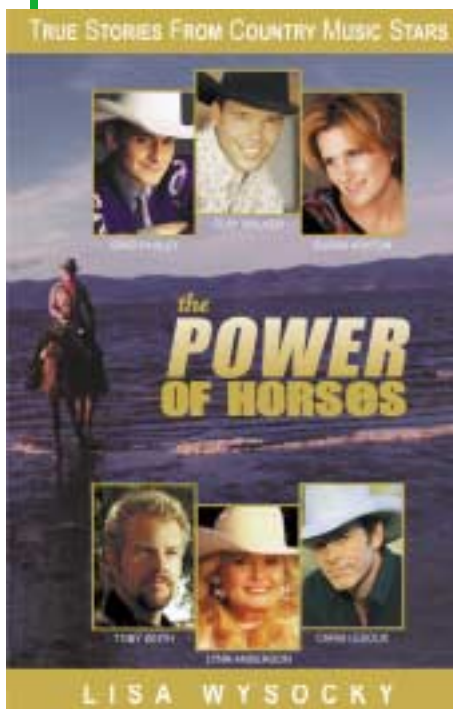
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