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Opening extract from
The Scorpio Races

Written by
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To Marian

who sees horses in her dreams

The Water Horses

capall uisce is pronounced CAPple ISHka

cappaill uisce is pronounced COPple Ooshka

PROLOGUE: NINE YEARS EARLIER

SEAN

It is the first day of November and so, today, someone will die.

Even under the brightest sun, the frigid autumn sea is all the colors of the night: dark blue and black and brown. I watch the ever-changing patterns in the sand as it's pummeled by countless hooves.

They run the horses on the beach, a pale road between the black water and the chalk cliffs. It is never *safe*, but it's never so dangerous as today, race day.

This time of year, I live and breathe the beach. My cheeks feel raw with the wind throwing sand against them. My thighs sting from the friction of the saddle. My arms ache from holding up two thousand pounds of horse. I have forgotten what it is like to be warm and what a full night's sleep feels like and what my name sounds like spoken instead of shouted across yards of sand.

I am so, so alive.

As I head down to the cliffs with my father, one of the race officials stops me. He says, "Sean Kendrick, you are ten years old. You haven't discovered it yet, but there are more interesting ways to die than on this beach."

My father doubles back and takes the official's upper arm as if the man were a restless horse. They share a brief exchange about age restrictions during the race. My father wins.

"If your son is killed," the official says, "the only fault is yours."

My father doesn't even answer him, just leads his *uisce* stallion away.

On the way down to the water, we're jostled and pushed by men and by horses. I slide beneath one horse as it rears up, its rider jerked at the end of the lead. Unharméd, I find myself facing the sea, surrounded on all sides by the *capaill uisce* — the water horses. They are every color of the pebbles on the beach: black, red, golden, white, ivory, gray, blue. Men hang the bridles with red tassels and daisies to lessen the danger of the dark November sea, but I wouldn't trust a handful of petals to save my life. Last year a water horse trailing flowers and bells tore a man's arm half from his body.

These are not ordinary horses. Drape them with charms, hide them from the sea, but today, on the beach: Do not turn your back.

Some of the horses have lathered. Froth drips down their lips and chests, looking like sea foam, hiding the teeth that will tear into men later.

They are beautiful and deadly, loving us and hating us.

My father sends me off to get his saddlecloth and armband from another set of officials. The color of the cloth is meant to allow the spectators far up on the cliffs to identify my father, but in his case, they won't need it, not with his stallion's brilliant red coat.

"Ah, Kendrick," the officials say, which is both my father's name and mine. "It'll be a red cloth for him."

As I return to my father, I am hailed by a rider: “Ho, Sean Kendrick.” He’s diminutive and wiry, his face carved out of rock. “Fine day for it.” I am honored to be greeted like an adult. Like I belong here. We nod to each other before he turns back to his horse to finish saddling up. His small racing saddle is hand-tooled, and as he lifts the flap to give the girth a final tug, I see words burned into the leather: *Our dead drink the sea.*

My heart is jerking in my chest as I hand the cloth to my father. He seems unsettled as well, and I wish I was riding, not him.

Myself I am sure of.

The red *uisce* stallion is restless and snorting, ears pricked, eager. He is very hot today. He will be fast. Fast and difficult to hold.

My father gives me the reins so that he can saddle the water horse with the red cloth. I lick my teeth — they taste like salt — and watch my father tie the matching armband around his upper arm. Every year I have watched him, and every year he has tied it with a steady hand, but not this year. His fingers are clumsy, and I know he is afraid of the red stallion.

I have ridden him, this *capall*. On his back, the wind beating me, the ground jarring me, the sea spraying our legs, we never tire.

I lean close to the stallion’s ear and trace a counterclockwise circle above his eye as I whisper into his soft ear.

“Sean!” my father snaps, and the *capall*’s head jerks up quickly enough that his skull nearly strikes mine. “What are you doing with your face next to his today? Does he not look hungry to you? Do you think you’d look fine with half a face?”

But I just look at the stallion's square pupil, and he looks back, his head turned slightly away from me. I hope he's remembering what I told him: *Do not eat my father.*

My father makes a noise in his throat and says, "I think you should go up now. Come here and —" He slaps my shoulder before mounting up.

He is small and dark on the back of the red stallion. Already, his hands work ceaselessly on the reins to keep the horse in place. The motion twists the bit in the horse's mouth; I watch his head rocking to and fro. It's not how I would have done it, but I'm not up there.

I want to tell my father to mind how the stallion spooks to the right, how I think he sees better out of his left eye, but instead I say, "See you when it's over." We nod to each other like strangers, the good-bye unpracticed and uncomfortable.

I am watching the race from the cliffs when a gray *uisce* horse seizes my father by his arm and then his chest.

For one moment, the waves do not attack the shore and the gulls above us do not flap and the gritty air in my lungs doesn't escape.

Then the gray water horse tears my father from his uneasy place on the back of the red stallion.

The gray cannot keep its ragged grip on my father's chest, and so my father falls to the sand, already ruined before the hooves get to him. He was in second place, so it takes a long minute before the rest of the horses have passed over the top of his body and I can see it again. By then, he is a long, black and scarlet smear half-submerged in the frothy tide. The red stallion circles, halfway to a hungry creature of the sea, but he does as I asked: He does not eat the thing that was my father. Instead,

the stallion climbs back into the water. Nothing is as red as the sea that day.

I don't think often on my father's body strung out through the reddening surf. Instead, I remember him as he was before the race: afraid.

I won't make the same mistake.

CHAPTER ONE

PUCK

People say my brothers would be lost without me, but really, I'd be lost without them.

Usually, if you ask someone on the island where they come from, they say something like *Round about Skarmouth* or *Back side of Thisby, the hard side* or *Stone's throw from Tholla*. But not me. I remember being small, clutching my father's lined hand, and some wind-beaten old farmer who looked like he'd been dug out of the sod asking, "Where you from, girl?" I answered, in a voice too loud for my tiny freckled self, "The Connolly House." He said, "What's that, now?" And I replied back, "Where we Connollys live. Because I'm one." And then — I am still a bit embarrassed about this part of it, as it speaks to a black part of my character — I added, "And you're not."

That's just the way things are. There are the Connollys, and then there's the rest of the world — though the rest of the world, when you live on Thisby, is not very large. Before last fall, it was always this: me, my younger brother, Finn, my older brother, Gabe, and our parents. We were a pretty quiet family altogether. Finn was always putting things together and taking

them back apart and saving any spare parts in a box under his bed. Gabe wasn't a huge conversationalist, either. Six years older than me, he saved his energy for growing; he was six feet tall by the age of thirteen. Our dad played the tin whistle, when he was home, and our mother performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes every evening, though I didn't realize what a miracle it was until she wasn't around.

It wasn't that we were unfriendly with the rest of the island. We were just friendlier with ourselves. Being a Connolly came first. That was the only rule. You could hurt all the feelings you liked, so long as you weren't hurting the feelings of a Connolly.

It's midway through October now. Like all autumn days on the island, it begins cold but warms and gains color as the sun rises. I get a currycomb and a brush and I knock the dust out of Dove's dun hide until my fingers warm up. By the time I saddle her up, she's clean and I'm grubby. She is my mare and my best friend, and I keep waiting for something bad to happen to her, because I love her too much.

As I pull up her girth, Dove pushes her nose into my side, just shy of a nip, and pulls her head back quickly; she loves me, too. I can't ride long; soon I'll have to come back and help Finn make cookies for the local shops. I also paint teapots for the tourists, and since the races are coming up, I have more than enough orders backed up. After the races, there'll be no more visitors from the mainland until spring. The ocean is just too uncertain a thing when it's cold. Gabe will be out all day, working at the Skarmouth Hotel, getting the rooms ready for the race spectators. When you're an orphan on Thisby, it's hard work making ends meet.

I didn't actually realize there wasn't much to the island until a few years ago, when I started reading magazines. It

doesn't feel it to me, but Thisby's tiny: four thousand people on a rocky crag jutting from the sea, hours from the mainland. It's all cliffs and horses and sheep and one-track roads winding past treeless fields to Skarmouth, the largest town on the island. The truth is, until you know any different, the island is enough.

Actually, I know different. And it's still enough.

So I am up and riding, my toes cold in my scruffy paddock boots, and Finn is sitting in the Morris in the drive, carefully applying black tape to a rip in the passenger seat. The rip was a gift from Puffin, the barn cat. At least Finn has now learned to never leave the windows rolled down. He's pretending to look annoyed with the repairs, but I can tell that he is actually cheerful to be doing it. It is against Finn's code to reveal too much happiness.

When he sees me riding Dove, Finn gives me a funny look. Once upon a time, before last year, that funny look would've changed into a sly smile and then he would've gunned the engine and we would've raced, me on Dove, him in the car, though he was technically too young to drive. A lot too young. It didn't matter, though. Who was going to stop us? So we would race, me through fields, him on the roads. First to the beach had to make the other's bed for a week.

But we haven't raced for nearly a year. Not since my parents died on the boat.

I turn Dove away, making little circles in the side yard. She's eager and too brisk to concentrate this morning, and I'm too cold to make her soft and round on the bit. She wants to gallop.

I hear the Morris's engine rev. I turn in time to see the car go tearing down the lane, accompanied by a puff of ill-advised exhaust. I hear Finn's whoop a moment later. He pokes his head

out the window, face pale under his dusty hair, smiling a grin that shows every tooth he has.

“Are you waiting for an invitation?” he calls. Then he retreats back into the cab and the engine revs high as he shifts gears.

“Oh, you’re on,” I tell him, though he is far, far out of earshot. Dove’s ears swivel back toward me and then prick toward the road, quivering. It is a wild, cool morning, and she barely needs to be asked. I press my calves into her sides and cluck my tongue.

Dove leaps into action, hooves digging up half circles of dirt behind her, and we tear after Finn.

Finn’s path is no mystery; he has to follow the roads, and there’s only the main one, heading into Skarmouth past our house. It’s not the straightest way, though. It winds around patchwork fields protected by stone walls and hedges. There’s no sense following his serpentine progress, marked by a trail of dust. Instead, Dove and I tear across the fields. Dove is not large — none of the natural island horses are, as the grass isn’t great — but she’s scopey and brave. So she and I throw ourselves over hedgerows at will, so long as the footing’s good.

We shave off the first corner, spooking several sheep. “Sorry,” I say to them over my shoulder. The next hedgerow comes up while I’m minding the sheep, and Dove has to twist herself in a hurry to launch herself over. I throw out reins in the world’s worst release but at least keep from jerking on her mouth, and she tucks her legs up tight beneath her and saves us both. As she canters away from the hedge, I gather up the reins again and pat her shoulder to show that I noticed her rescuing us, and she tips her ear back to show she appreciates that I cared.

Then it’s sailing across a field that used to hold sheep but

now holds scrubby heather waiting to be burned off. The Morris is still a little ahead of us, a dark shape in front of a tower of dust. I'm not worried about his lead; to get a car down to the beach, he'll have to either take the road through town, with its sharp right angles and crossing pedestrians, or make a detour around the town, losing several minutes and giving us a good chance to catch up.

I hear the Morris hesitate at the roundabout and then zoom toward town. I can take the road around Skarmouth and avoid any more jumping — or I can skirt through the very edge of the town, popping through a few back gardens and risking being seen by Gabe at the hotel.

I can already imagine being the first to charge onto the beach.

I decide to risk Gabe seeing me. It's been long enough since we did this that the stodgy old ladies can't complain too much about a horse passing through their yards, as long as I don't squash anything useful.

"Come on, Dove," I whisper. She charges across the road and through a break in a hedgerow. Here there are houses looking like they grew out of the rock, and cluttered back gardens full of possessions that have spilled out of the houses, and on the other side of them, a stretch of solid stone that no horse should have to canter on. The only way across is to tear through a half-dozen yards and past the hotel on the other side.

I hope that everyone's busily at work at the piers or in their kitchens. We burst through the gardens, half leaping over wheelbarrows in the first, avoiding a crop of herbs in the second, and getting barked at by an evil terrier in the third. Then, inexplicably, over an old, empty bathtub in the final yard, and we're off down the road to the hotel.

Of course, there is Gabe, and he sees me instantly.

He's sweeping the walk in front of the hotel with a mighty push broom. The hotel is a forbidding, ivy-covered building behind him, the leaves cut in neat squares to let the sun into the windows with their bright blue sills. The height of the hotel blocks the morning light and casts a deeper blue shadow on the stone walk he sweeps. Gabe looks tall and grown-up with his brown jacket stretched across his broad shoulders. His ginger-blond hair creeps down the back of his neck, a little long, but he is still handsome. I feel a sudden surge of fierce pride that he is my brother. He stops what he's doing to lean on the end of the broom and watch me canter by on Dove.

"Don't be mad!" I shout at him.

A smile walks over one side of his face but not the other. It almost looks like he's actually happy, if you've never seen one of his real ones. The sad thing is this — I've gotten used to this fake one. I've become willing to wait for the real one to reappear, without realizing I should've been working hard to find it again.

I canter on, urging Dove into a gallop once we're off the walk and back onto the grass. Here, the ground is soft and sandy, and begins to slope rapidly, the track becoming narrow between the hills and dunes that lead to the beach. I can't tell if Finn is ahead of me or behind me. I have to draw Dove back down to a trot as the ground grows too steep. Finally, she makes the awkward leap that takes us down to sea level. When we round the final bank, I make a noise of irritation: The Morris is already parked where the grass meets the sand. The scent of exhaust hangs in the air, cupped by the rise of the ground around us.

“You’re still a good girl,” I whisper to Dove. She is out of breath but she blows out her lips. She considers it a good race.

Finn stands half in and half out of the car, the driver-side door standing open, his feet on the running board. One arm rests on the roof and the other on the upper part of the open door. He is looking out toward the sea, but when Dove blows out her breath through her lips again, he looks back to me, shielding his eyes. I can see that his face is worried, so I nudge Dove next to the car. I let out the reins so that she can graze while we stand there, but she doesn’t lower her head. Instead, she, too, turns her gaze toward the ocean, a hundred yards ahead of us.

“What?” I ask. I have a sick feeling in my stomach.

I follow the line of his eyes. I can just see a gray head thrusting its way above the surf, so far away and so close to the color of the tossed ocean that I can almost believe I’m imagining it. But Finn’s eyes wouldn’t be so large unless he was certain. Sure enough, the head emerges again, and this time I see dark nostrils blow so wide that I glimpse a tinge of red in them, even from here. Then the rest of the head follows, and the neck, crimped mane pasted to its skin by salt water, and then the powerful shoulders, glistening and damp. The water horse surges from the ocean and gives a mighty leap, as if the final steps over the incoming tide are a huge obstacle to overcome.

Finn flinches as the horse gallops down the beach toward us, and I lay a hand on his elbow, though my own heart is thumping in my ears.

“Don’t move,” I whisper. “Don’t-move-don’t-move-don’t-move.”

I cling to what we’ve been told over and over — that the

water horses love a moving target; they love the chase. I make a list of reasons it won't attack us: We're motionless, we're not near the water, we're next to the Morris, and the water horses despise iron.

Sure enough, the water horse gallops past us without pause. I can see Finn swallowing, his Adami's apple bobbing in his skinny neck, and it's so true, it's so hard not to flinch until it's leapt back into the ocean once more.

They're here again.

This is what happens every fall. My parents didn't follow the races, but I know the shape of the story nonetheless. The closer it gets to November, the more horses the sea spits out. Those islanders who mean to race in future Scorpio Races will often go out in great hunting parties to capture the fresh *capaill uisce*, which is always dangerous, since the horses are hungry and still sea-mad. And once the new horses emerge, it's a signal to those who are racing in the current year's races to begin training the horses they caught the years before — horses that have been comparatively docile until the smell of the fall sea begins to call to the magic inside them.

During the month of October, until the first of November, the island becomes a map of safe areas and unsafe areas, because unless you're one of the riders, you don't want to be around when a *capall uisce* goes crazy. Our parents tried hard to shield us from the realities of the *uisce* horses, but it was impossible to avoid it. Friends would miss school because an *uisce* horse had killed their dog overnight. Dad would have to drive around a ruined carcass on the way to Skarmouth, evidence of where a water horse and a land horse had gotten into a fight. The bells at St. Columba's would ring midday for the funeral of a fisherman caught unawares on the shore.

Finn and I don't need to be told how dangerous the horses are. We know. We know it every day.

"Come on," I say to him. Staring out to sea, his thin arms bracing him upright, he looks very young, just then, my little brother, though he's really caught in that strange no-man's-land between child and man. I feel the sudden urge to protect him from the grief that October is going to bring. But it isn't really the grief of this October I have to worry about; it's that of an October already long gone.

Finn doesn't answer, just ducks back down into the Morris and shuts the door without looking at me. It's already a bad day. And that's before Gabe gets home.