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Opening extract from
For the Love of a Horse

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Jinny at Finmory

For Love of a Horse

On their fourth morning at Finmory, Jinny woke early. For a second, she couldn't think where she was. The window was in the wrong place and her bed should have been the other way round. Then she remembered. Finmory!

Jinny jumped out of bed and, picking her way through the assault course of books, boxes and clothes that covered her bedroom floor, she ran to the window. Beyond the tangled garden was the quicksilver line of the sea. Gulls soared above the stillness and the sky was blue and distant, without a cloud. It was going to be a blue day. Jinny felt it shiver through her. Too special a day for them all to go on scrubbing and disinfecting and arranging furniture. If they were going to spend their time slaving away in the house, they might as well have stayed in Stopton.

No one, absolutely no one, not even her family, and certainly not Ken, could possibly want to work on a day like this, Jinny thought.

She went under the archway and looked out of her other window. The sun was still a luminous disc, neat as a new two-pence piece. The early morning light made the moors and hills more mysterious than usual. In the dark valleys of shadow anything might be lurking.

‘That’s where we’ll go,’ Jinny said aloud to the red horse. ‘We’ll go to the very top of the hills, so that we can see right down the other side. If you were real, we would go together.’

Jinny stood staring resolutely at the red horse, but it was too late. She didn’t want to ride over the mountains on the painted horse who could never be real, but on the chestnut Arab.

‘It’s no use. I’ve thought about her,’ Jinny admitted to herself as she turned round to face her drawing of the Arab. Where was she now? Still at Inverburgh, or already miles away? ‘I’ll never see her again,’ murmured Jinny. ‘Never.’

Other people were always telling her not to go on wanting things that she could never have. Forget about them, they told her. But how could she forget when she hadn’t forgotten? She could only pretend she’d forgotten, and that was no use.

By breakfast time, the blue day had established itself



– golden and green and blue. Even Mrs Manders, who was keenest on carpets and curtains and washed windows, couldn't ignore the weather.

'Stay shut up in the house today, and, when you die, God will demand to know what you did with His great glorious gift. And you will say, "I scrubbed my floors", ' teased Mr Manders. "'Godliness is before cleanliness", He will roar, and down you will go to Hell.'

'No way,' said Ken. 'He will explain and give you another day to enjoy.'

'Never mind that rubbish,' said Petra. 'Where shall we go? I think we should take a picnic down to the beach and sunbathe.'

'Oh no!' exclaimed Jinny. 'We're going up the mountains. To the very top. I knew when I woke up that that was what we'd all do today.'

'Is that a fact?' said Petra.

'We'd be able to see for miles,' said Mike.

'Oh yes,' said Jinny. 'I know. Come on.'

Ken carried the haversack with sandwiches, flasks, fruit and lemonade.

'Let me know when it gets too heavy and I'll take a turn,' said Mr Manders.

'It won't,' said Ken. 'I let it carry itself.'

They climbed over the rocky ground behind the house, stopping to push open the creaking door of the croft and peer into the cobwebbed, dust-filled space.

'My studio and pottery,' said Mr Manders.



‘You’ll have spiders’ footprints all over your pots,’ said Mike. ‘And mice. They’ll probably nibble the edges.’

Mr Manders trod warily over the rotting floorboards and turned on a tap at the sink. Pipes groaned and creaked, and thick peat-brown water burst out of the tap, choked to nothing, then spluttered out again.

‘For goodness’ sake turn it off, Tom,’ shouted Mrs Manders above the noise. ‘The whole building is going to fall down on top of you.’

Mr Manders turned off the tap and the shuddering stopped. He looked around at the decay and damp. ‘You are completely mad,’ he told himself. ‘You should be pulling this ruin down, not kidding yourself that it will ever be a pottery.’ For a moment he remembered his office in Stopton, with its modern furniture and fitted carpets.

‘Very nice,’ said Ken’s voice behind him. ‘Very nice indeed. We’ll get it together in no time.’

Mr Manders jumped, not realising that Ken had come into the croft. The boy was looking around him, his eyes bright with enthusiasm.

‘When I think of the times I’ve sat in that ticky-tacky bungalow bedroom, thinking of all I could do if I only had a place like this . . .’

‘And now you’ve got it,’ said Mr Manders.

Ken looked straight at him. ‘Thanks,’ he said.

Outside, Jinny turned cartwheels of impatience,

entangling herself with Kelly, who had come up to inspect this unusual human behaviour.

They climbed over the rusty wire that separated the grounds of Finmory from the moors.

‘There’s a path,’ pointed Mike.

‘Sheep track,’ said his father.

Jinny ran ahead of her family, sitting on boulders to watch as they came towards her, then running on ahead again. As she climbed upwards, the world unrolled beneath her. Every time she stopped to look back, new headlands, black as jet against the aquamarine sea, had sprung into sight. As she struggled up over each peak of hillside, moorland sprang up around her – marsh and rock, glimmering lochans, the calm reaches of Loch Varrich, and oceans of bracken rolled away from her. Finmory House and Mr MacKenzie’s farm were tiny Monopoly pieces set in the pattern of cultivated fields.

The hill grew steeper, and sometimes Jinny had to climb on hands and knees. Below her, her family stopped to examine Petra’s heel. A *blist*er, Jinny thought, knowing from a lifetime’s experience the tender state of her sister’s feet. *They can’t be going to stop now. Not when we’re almost at the top. Well, I’m going on*, she decided, and began the final scramble.

It took Jinny another ten minutes to reach the crest of the hill.

‘Keep going. Don’t give up,’ she muttered to herself,



and then, with a final effort, she made it. She stood to see the land stretching down on the other side in one, green, rolling sweep, to the grey, snail-trail of the road from Inverburgh. Cars and lorries were matchbox models. Jinny stood waving her arms and shouting for joy.

“Behold a giant am I”, she yelled, filled with the exhilaration of standing on top of the world.

Ken was the first to reach her. He stood beside her, laughing.

‘Can they see us from their cars?’ Jinny asked him.

‘They wouldn’t think to look,’ said Ken, swinging the haversack from his shoulders.

‘I’m going to make a kite,’ said Mike, joining them, ‘and bring it up here to fly.’

‘Great,’ agreed Ken.

‘What are those animals down there?’ Jinny asked suddenly. ‘They’re not cows, are they?’

‘Well, they’re not sheep,’ said Mike, looking at the seven or eight shapes that were grazing halfway down the hillside.

‘Elephants?’ suggested Ken. ‘Unicorns?’

Jinny stared, shading her eyes against the sun. They couldn’t possibly be . . . but they were!

‘Ponies,’ she screamed. ‘They’re ponies!’

‘Trust Jinny,’ said Mr Manders, as the others reached the top of the hill. ‘Take her anywhere and all she finds is horses.’



‘I’m going down to see them,’ called Jinny, already running towards the ponies.

Her feet went faster and faster over the rough sloping ground. Ponies on the Finmory hills!

She ran full tilt until she was close to the little herd and then fell into a clump of heather to stop herself.

The ponies had seen her coming, and were standing watching her suspiciously, ears pricked through overgrown forelocks, forefeet planted primly together, ready to whirl and gallop away from the intruder in an instant.

‘It’s all right,’ Jinny reassured them. ‘There’s the good ponies. Steady now.’

There were eight Shetland mares and five woolly-coated foals. Jinny plucked a handful of grass and held it out to a skewbald. The mare snorted warily, taking care to keep herself between Jinny and her foal.

‘It doesn’t look very special grass,’ Jinny agreed, ‘but I’ll scratch you behind the ears and you’ll like that. Bet you’re itchy as anything under all that mane. I know what it’s like having long hair in the summer.’

As she spoke, Jinny eased herself closer to the Shetlands. Reluctantly, she supposed that she was too heavy to ride them, but maybe she could train one of them to pull a cart. Jinny was driving two of the ponies along the road to Inverburgh when her foot slipped on a tussock of reeds – she lost her balance and fell sprawling to the ground. She sat up to see rumps and tails vanishing over the hillside.



A man's voice laughed. Jinny jumped to her feet, and saw Mr MacKenzie sitting on a boulder, grinning at her.

'Aye,' he remarked, as if they were meeting in Inverburgh High Street, 'it's a grand day.'

'I never saw you. Were you there all the time?'

'Up taking a look over the ponies. Now and again I take a bit walk to myself and see how they're doing. On a fine day, you understand.'

'Are they yours?'

'Aye.'

'I was going to speak to them.'

'I saw that. I was just about to stop you. That skewbald's a right bad one. Kick your head off as soon as look at you.'

'Oh, she wouldn't. Not my head.'

'As wild as tinks, the whole bunch of them.'

'But doesn't anyone ride them?' demanded Jinny.

'Ride them?' Mr Mackenzie spat derisively out of the corner of his mouth. 'They haven't had a rope on them since they were foaled. I keep them for breeding, that's the thing for the cash these days. Off to America with them.'

'Oh,' said Jinny. She stared down at the road, watching traffic that had grown into recognisable cars and lorries now that she was further down the hill. 'I wasn't actually so much thinking of riding them,' she admitted to the farmer. 'More driving them?'

‘Then think again, lass,’ suggested Mr Mackenzie.

‘Oh,’ said Jinny, wondering if he would really notice if one of his mares was missing, since he didn’t seem to have much interest in them as individuals.

‘And how’s the family? Getting settled in?’

‘We’re up on the hill having a picnic . . .’ began Jinny, her eyes still on the road, her mind half on the thought of a foal tied to the back of the cart as they trotted into Inverburgh. She saw four gaudily painted vans and trailers appear round the corner of the road from Inverburgh and thought, *What’s that?* Then she thought, *Circus* and *Arab* at the same time, and felt the sun go out, the grey earth cold and made of metal. On the road beneath her, the chestnut Arab, shut in one of the horseboxes, was being driven away from her for ever.

‘Look at that stupid idiot,’ said Mr MacKenzie, pointing with the stem of his pipe in the opposite direction from the circus vans.

Jinny saw a bright yellow oil tanker booming down the road, straight towards the circus vans.

‘No bloomin’ wonder folk are killed on that road.’

The driver of the tanker could not see round the corner to the lumbering circus vans and the swaying sideshows stacked on the trailers. The driver of the first circus van could not see the bulk of the oil tanker speeding towards him. Only Jinny and Mr MacKenzie could see the road on both sides of the blind corner.

The oil tanker was in the centre of the road as it took the bend.

‘He’ll hit them!’ Jinny cried, her voice a helpless scream, for there was nothing she could possibly do to stop the accident happening.

Her nails dug into the ground as the oil tanker rounded the corner in the middle of the road, saw the circus vans, and swerved violently.

Jinny let out her breath. He had missed them. They were safe. The terrifying picture of the Arab’s horse-box, crushed into shattered wood – and screaming, wounded horses – vivid as colour telly, began to flicker out. Then the tanker’s rear wheels seemed to skid, and the yellow, uncontrolled bulk swung across the road and rammed into one of the circus vans.

The sound of grinding metal reached them a fraction after they saw it happen, but already Jinny was tearing madly down the hillside.

‘No place for a lass,’ shouted Mr MacKenzie as he caught up with her. ‘May be people hurt. Get back with you.’

Jinny hardly glanced at him. What did people matter when the Arab might need her? She could feel her lungs as pain in her back, the muscles in her legs burning, and her heart trying to jump through her throat, but she kept on running.

The driver of the oil tanker was slumped over the wheel. Men were struggling to open the truck door.



‘The horses? Where are the horses?’ shouted Jinny, but none of the circus people seemed to hear her. The van that had been hit was lying on its side with the trailer that it had been pulling concertina’d into it. From inside the trailer, Jinny could hear the crash of hooves and the screaming whinnying of terrified horses. Three men, one of whom Jinny recognised as the ringmaster, were trying to open the ramp at the back of the trailer.

‘Here it comes, Joe,’ one of them yelled, as the ramp yawned open.

‘Be ready to catch them in case they’re loose,’ the ringmaster warned.

‘Is the Arab in there?’ Jinny demanded, but again no one seemed to hear her.

When the ramp was down, they led out the two rosinbacks – one with a bleeding gash on its shoulder.

‘Get out of the way,’ the ringmaster swore at Jinny as she pushed past him, trying to see into the box. He swung his arm at her and she dodged back out of his reach, but she had had enough time to see that the horse still in the box was the Arab.

‘Look out for this brute,’ the ringmaster shouted, as one of his men went into the box to move the partition that had separated the Arab from the other two horses.

Jinny craned forward to watch the man unhook the slatted barrier. She caught a glimpse of the Arab’s head – sweated dark with fear, a frenzied eye rolling in a

white socket, and ears clipped back – before the horse reared up, knocking the man aside, and came plunging desperately out of the box and down the ramp. From the end of the rope halter swung the metal bar to which the horse had been tied.

‘She’ll break her leg if she gets it caught in that,’ Jinny yelled. ‘Catch her. You’ve got to catch her.’

For a split second the Arab stood, dazzled by the light, then reared again. The ringmaster snatched at the halter rope but dodged aside to miss the swinging metal bar.

Jinny saw the man miss the rope and the other people jump out of the way.

Her legs, Jinny thought – and where the others jumped away, she threw herself against the Arab’s shoulder, smelling the acid stench of the horse against her face, as her hands gripped the cheek pieces of the halter and dragged it down over the Arab’s ears. The horse swerved and bucked, tossing her head violently. Jinny lost her balance and fell, but her hands were still knotted around the halter. The Arab was free.

With a piercing neigh, the horse surged up the hillside, rearing and bucking, standing for a moment of stillness like a heraldic beast, her head high and tail plumed. She screamed from the pits of her nostrils – and far up the hillside one of the Shetlands whickered shrilly in reply. The Arab gave one last tremendous buck, her hind hooves high in the air, crashing the gold



cymbal of the sun, and then she was away – thundering, drumming – her galloping hooves beating their tattoo of freedom as she raced over the hillside.

Tears poured down Jinny's face, her whole body shook with sobbing. Behind her, the ringmaster swore in useless anger, and a police car swung into the scene of the accident.

The policemen forced open the cab door and, twenty minutes later, the driver was on his way to hospital. The crashed vehicles had been pushed off the road and the two rosinbacks loaded into another trailer.

'You'll not get near your horse,' Mr MacKenzie told the ringmaster. 'I'd need to round the Shetlands up and bring them all down to the farm. And I'll not be thinking of that for a month or two yet.'

The ringmaster glared at the empty hillside. Jinny thought he was like a brimstone, pantomime devil.

'If I'd a gun, I'd shoot the useless brute,' he muttered. 'No saying when we'll be back this way again.'

'I'll charge you a pound a week for grazing, or I'll give you twenty pounds for her,' offered Mr MacKenzie.

'Forty,' said the ringmaster.

'Thirty,' said Mr MacKenzie, as he turned to walk away.

The ringmaster had to call him back to accept his offer. The farmer put his hand in his hip pocket, brought out a wad of dirty paper, and peeled off three ten-pound notes.

‘Lucky for you Murdo took away the scrap this morning. I’ll have a receipt, if you don’t mind.’

In the early evening, the Manders and Ken made their way back to Finmory. Jinny walked silently beside her father.

‘I don’t know how you manage it,’ he said.

‘Neither do I,’ said Jinny.

‘You’re not bounding very much,’ said Petra nastily, because her blister was hurting and she needed a quarrel to take her mind off it. ‘Usually, when something like this happens to you, you’re all over the place.’

‘Not this,’ said Jinny, patiently explaining. ‘You don’t bound when the most wonderful thing in the world has just happened to you. You feel empty somehow.’

And she walked on, seeing the stone walls of Finmory, the hills sleeked smooth after the day’s sun and the far, mirror glint of the sea. Yet, more clearly than any of these, Jinny saw the reaching neck of the Arab, her winnowing fringe of mane and her ears alive to the sound of her rider’s voice as Jinny rode her home to Finmory.

