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Riders

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Extract

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I

Because he had to get up unusually early on Saturday, Jake Lovell kept waking up throughout the night, racked by terrifying dreams about being late. In the first dream he couldn't find his breeches when the collecting ring steward called his number; in the second he couldn't catch any of the riding school ponies to take them to the show; in the third Africa slipped her head collar and escaped; and in the fourth, the most terrifying of all, he was back in the children's home screaming and clawing at locked iron gates, while Rupert Campbell-Black rode Africa off down the High Street, until turning with that hateful, sneering smile, he'd shouted:

'You'll never get out of that place now, Gyppo; it's where you belong.'

Jake woke sobbing, heart bursting, drenched in sweat, paralysed with fear. It was half a minute before he could reach out and switch on the bedside lamp. He lit a cigarette with a trembling hand. Gradually the familiar objects in the room reasserted themselves: the Lionel Edwards prints on the walls, the tattered piles of *Horse and Hound*, the books on show jumping hopelessly overcrowding the bookshelves, the wash basin, the faded photographs of his mother and father. Hanging in the wardrobe was the check riding coat Mrs Wilton had rather grudgingly given him for his twenty-first birthday. Beneath it stood the scratched but gleaming pair of brown-topped boots he'd picked up second-hand last week.

In the stall below he could hear a horse snorting and a crash as another horse kicked over its water bucket.

Far too slowly his panic subsided. Prep school and Rupert Campbell-Black were things of the past. It was 1970 and he had been out of the children's home for four years now. He mostly forgot them during the day; it was only in dreams they came back to torment him. He shivered; the sheets were still damp with sweat. Four-thirty, said his alarm clock; there were already fingers of light under the thin yellow curtains. He didn't have to get up for half an hour, but he was too scared to go back to sleep. He could hear the rain pattering on the roof outside and dripping from the gutter, muting the chatter of the sparrows.

He tried to concentrate on the day ahead, which didn't make him feel much more cheerful. One of the worst things about working in a riding school was having to take pupils to horseshows. Few of them could control the bored, broken-down ponies. Many were spoilt; others, terrified, were only riding at all because their frightful mothers were using horses to grapple their way up the social scale, giving them an excuse to put a hard hat in the back window of the Jaguar and slap gymkhana stickers on the windscreen.

What made Jake sick with nerves, however, was that, unknown to his boss, Mrs Wilton, he intended to take Africa to the show and enter her for the open jumping. Mrs Wilton didn't allow Jake to compete in shows. He might get too big for his boots. His job was to act as constant nursemaid to the pupils, not to jump valuable horses behind her back.

Usually, Mrs Wilton turned up at shows in the afternoon and strutted about chatting up the mothers. But today, because she was driving down to Brighton to chat up some rich uncle who had no children, she wouldn't be putting in an appearance. If Jake didn't try out Africa today, he wouldn't have another chance for weeks.

Africa was a livery horse, looked after at the riding school, but owned by an actor named Bobby Cotterel, who'd bought her in a fit of enthusiasm after starring in *Dick Turpin*. A few weeks later he had bought a Ferrari and, apart from still paying her livery fees, had forgotten about

Africa, which had given Jake the perfect opportunity to teach her to jump on the quiet.

She was only six, but every day Jake became more convinced that she had the makings of a great show jumper. It was not just her larkiness and courage, her fantastic turn of speed and huge jump. She also had an ability to get herself out of trouble which counterbalanced her impetuosity.

Jake adored her – more than any person or animal he had known in his life. If Mrs Wilton discovered he'd taken her to a show, she'd probably sack him. He dreaded losing a job which had brought him his first security in years, but the prospect of losing Africa was infinitely worse.

The alarm made him jump. It was still raining; the horror of the dream gripped him again. What would happen if Africa slipped when she was taking off or landing? He dressed and, lifting up the trap door at the bottom of his bed, climbed down the stairs into the tackroom, inhaling the smell of warm horse leather, saddle soap and dung, which never failed to excite him. Hearing him mixing the feeds, horses' heads came out over the half-doors, calling, whickering, stamping their hooves.

Dandelion, the skewbald, the greediest pony in the yard, his mane and back covered in straw from lying down, yelled shrilly, demanding to be fed first. As he added extra vitamins, nuts and oats to Africa's bowl, Jake thought it was hardly surprising she looked well. Mrs Wilton would have a fit if she knew.

It was seven-thirty before he had mucked out and fed all the horses. Africa, feed finished, blinking her big, dark-blue eyes in the low-angled sun, hung out of her box, catching his sleeve between her lips each time he went past, shaking gently, never nipping the skin. Mrs Wilton had been out to dinner the night before; it was unlikely she'd surface before half past eight; that gave him an hour to groom Africa.

Rolling up his sleeves, chattering nonsense to her all the time, Jake got to work. She was a beautiful horse, very dark brown, her coat looking almost indigo in the shadows. She

had two white socks, a spillikin of white down her forehead, a chest like a channel steamer funnel, huge shoulders and quarters above lean strong legs. Her ears twitched and turned all the time, as sensitive as radar.

He jumped when the stable cat, a fat tabby with huge, whiskers, appeared on top of the stable door and, after glancing at a couple of pigeons scratching for corn, dropped down into the straw and curled up in the discarded warmth of Africa's rug.

Suddenly Africa jerked up her head and listened. Jake stepped outside nervously; the curtains were still drawn in Mrs Wilton's house. He'd wanted to plait Africa's mane, but he didn't dare. It would unplait all curly and he might be caught out. He went back to work.

'Surely you're not taking Africa to the show?' said a shrill voice. Jake jumped out of his skin and Africa tossed up her head, banging him on the nose.

Just able to look over the half-door was one of his pupils, Fenella Maxwell, her face as freckled as a robin's egg, her flaxen hair already escaping from its elastic bands.

'What the hell are you doing here?' said Jake furiously, his eyes watering. 'I said no one was allowed here till ten and it can't be eight yet. Push off home.'

'I've come to help,' said Fenella, gazing at him with huge, Cambridge-blue eyes fringed with thick blond lashes. Totally unabashed, she moved a boiled sweet to the other side of her face.

'I know you're by yourself till Alison comes. I'll get Dandelion ready . . . please,' she added. 'I want him to look as beautiful as Africa.'

'Shut up,' hissed Jake. 'Now shove off.'

'Please let me stay. There's nothing to do at home. I couldn't sleep. I will help. Oh, doesn't Smokey look sweet curled up in the rug? Are you really taking Africa?'

'Mind your own business,' said Jake.

Fen took the boiled sweet out of her mouth and gave it to Dandelion, who was slavering over the next half-door, then kissed him on the nose. Her shirt was already escaping from

the jeans which she wore over her jodhpurs to keep them clean.

'Does Mrs Wilton know?' she asked.

'No,' said Jake.

'I won't tell her,' said Fen, swinging on Africa's door. 'Pattie Beasley might, though, or Sally-Ann; she's always sneaking about something.'

Jake had already sweated uncomfortably over this possibility.

'They're probably too thick to notice,' she went on. 'Shall I make you a cup of tea? Four spoonfuls of sugar, isn't it?'

Jake relented. She was a good kid, cheerful and full of guts, with an instinct for horses and a knowledge way beyond her nine years.

'You can stay if you keep your trap shut,' he said. 'I don't want Mrs Wilton waking up yet.'

After she had spilt most of the tea in the saucer, Fen tied Dandelion up outside Africa's box and settled down to washing his white patches, managing to get more water over herself than the pony.

Jake half-listened as she chattered on incessantly about her sister Tory, who was doing the season but not enjoying the parties at all, and who often had red eyes from crying in the morning.

'She's coming to the show later.'

'Does your mother know you're here?' asked Jake.

'She wouldn't notice if I wasn't. She's got a new boyfriend named Colonel Carter. Colonel Cart-ah, he calls himself. He laughs all the time when he's talking to Mummy and he's got big yellow teeth like Dandelion, but somehow they look better on a horse.

'They're coming to the show too. Colonel Carter is bringing a lot of soldiers and guns to do a display after the open jumping. He and Mummy and Tory are going to lunch up at the Hall. Mummy bought a new blue dress specially; it's lovely, but Tory said it was jolly expensive, so I don't expect she'll be able to afford to buy me a pony yet; anyway she says Tory being a deb is costing a fortune.'

'Shampoo and set, darling,' she said to Dandelion twenty minutes later as she stuck the pony's tail in a bucket of hot, soapy water. 'Oh, look, Africa's making faces; isn't she sweet?' The next moment Dandelion had whisked his tail at a fly, sending soapy water all over Fen, Africa's rug and the stable cat, who retreated in high dudgeon.

'For God's sake, concentrate,' snapped Jake.

'Mummy's picture's in *The Tatler* again this week,' said Fen. 'She gets in much more often than poor Tory. She says Tory's got to go on a diet next week, so she'll be thin for her drinks party next month. Oh *cave*, Mrs Wilton's drawing back the kitchen curtains.'

Hastily Jake replaced Africa's rug and came out of her box.

Inside the kitchen, beneath the ramparts of honeysuckle, he could see Mrs Wilton, her brick red face flushed from the previous night's drinking, dropping Alka Seltzer into a glass of water. Christ, he hoped she'd get a move on to Brighton and wouldn't hang around. Picking up the brush and the curry comb he started on one of the ponies.

Mrs Wilton came out of the house, followed by her arthritic yellow labrador, who lifted his leg stiffly on the mounting block, then as a formality bounded after the stable cat.

Mrs Wilton was never known to have been on a horse in her life. Stocky, with a face squashed in like a bulldog, she had short pepper and salt hair, a blotchy complexion like salami, and a deep bass voice. All the same, she had had more success with the opposite sex than her masculine appearance would suggest.

'Jake!' she bellowed.

He came out, curry comb in one hand, brush in the other.

'Yes, Mrs Wilton,' though she'd repeatedly asked him to call her Joyce.

They gazed at each other with the dislike of the unwillingly but mutually dependant. Mrs Wilton knew that having lost both his parents and spent much of his life in a children's home, Jake clung on to the security of a

living-in job. As her husband was away so much on business, Mrs Wilton had often suggested Jake might be more comfortable living in the house with her. But, aware that he would have to share a bathroom and, if Mrs W had her way, a bedroom, Jake had repeatedly refused. Mrs Wilton was old enough to be his mother.

But, despite finding him sullen and withdrawn to the point of insolence, she had to admit that the horses had never been better looked after. As a result of his encyclopaedic knowledge of plants and wild flowers, and his incredible gypsy remedies, she hadn't had a vet's bill since he'd arrived, and because he was frightened of losing this substitute home, she could get away with paying him a pittance. She found herself doing less and less. She didn't want to revert to getting up at six and mucking out a dozen horses, and it was good to be able to go away, like today, and not worry.

On the other hand, if he was a miracle with animals, he was hell with parents, refusing to suck up to them, positively rude to the sillier ones. A lot had defected and gone to Mrs Haley across the valley, who charged twice as much.

'How many ponies are you taking?' she demanded.

'Six,' said Jake, walking towards the tackroom, praying she'd follow him.

'And you'll get Mrs Thomson to bring the head collars and the water buckets in her car. Do try to be polite for once, although I know how hard you find it.'

Jake stared at her, unsmiling. He had a curiously immobile face, everything in the right place, but without animation. The swarthy features were pale today, the full lips set in an uncompromising line. Slanting, secretive, dark eyes looked out from beneath a frowning line of brow, practically concealed by the thick thatch of almost black hair. He was small, not more than five foot seven, and very thin, a good jockey's weight. The only note of frivolity was the gold rings in his ears. There was something watchful and controlled about him that didn't go with youth.

Despite the heat of the day, his shirt collar was turned up as if against some imagined storm.

'I'll be back tomorrow,' she said, looking down the row of loose boxes.

Suddenly her eyes lit on Africa.

'What's she doing inside?'

'I brought her in this morning,' he lied easily. 'She yells her head off if she's separated from Dandelion and I thought you'd like a lie in.'

'Well, put her out again when you go. I'm not having her eating her head off.'

Despite the fat fee paid by Bobby Cotterel, thought Jake.

She peered into the loose box. For an appalling moment he thought she was going to peel back the rug.

'Hullo, Mrs Wilton' shrieked Fen. 'Come and look at Dandelion. Doesn't he look smart?'

Distracted, Mrs Wilton turned away from Africa.

'Hullo, Fen, dear, you're an early bird. He does look nice; you've even oiled his hooves. Perhaps you'll bring home a rosette.'

'Shouldn't think so,' said Fen gloomily. 'Last time he ate all the potatoes in the potato race.'

'Phew, that was a near one,' said Fen, as Mrs Wilton's car, with the labrador's head sticking out of the window, disappeared down the road.

'Come on,' said Jake, 'I'll make you some breakfast.'

Dressing later before he set out for the show, Jake transferred the crushed and faded yellow tansy flower from the bottom of his left gum-boot to his left riding boot. Tansy warded off evil. Jake was full of superstitions. The royal gypsy blood of the Lovells didn't flow through his veins for nothing.