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Jumping to Conclusions

Sarah Challis

Published by Review

Extract

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First published in hardback in 2005 by REVIEW
An imprint of Headline Book Publishing

First published in paperback in 2006
by HEADLINE REVIEW

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ISBN 0 7553 2855 8 (A format)
ISBN 0 7553 2166 9 (B format)

Typeset in Meridien by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.reviewbooks.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

Chapter One

Tom knew there was something wrong as soon as he saw the mare in the paddock. It took two men to lead her up, and even then she swung her quarters about, her back arched like a cat, her neck dark and steaming with sweat. Tom caught hold of the stirrup leather. 'For God's sake, Jess!' he pleaded. 'Get off while you can! She's bloody dangerous!'

'She'll be all right,' Jess muttered, resenting the interference, her face pale and set under the bright blue silk of her helmet. Ignoring him, she collected up the reins, concentrating on keeping her balance on the tiny racing saddle which was slippery and wet from the slanting February rain. 'She's only a baby. It's her first race. She'll settle when we're away from the crowds.' Leaning down the mare's neck, she spoke to the owner, who was bracing his shoulder against the mare's chest in an attempt to keep her steady. 'Ask if I can go down to the start early, Mr Dawlish. She'll get worse here in the paddock, with the other horses and the people.'

The man looked up and nodded and the drops of rain which had collected on the peak of his cap shook themselves free to bounce down the front of his waxed jacket.

Tom let go his hold, knowing he was wasting his time. Jess would do what she wanted as usual. She wouldn't

listen. He watched as Ted Dawlish and his burly son, both farmers and heavy plant contractors, who trained the horse at home on a bleak Dorset hill, hustled the frantic mare onto the track and let her go, scuttling out of range of her flying heels as she bounded and bucked away from them.

With any luck Jess will fall off before she gets to the start, thought Tom gloomily, turning up the collar of his coat. It was freezing, with an icy wind blowing grey sheets of rain out of an iron coloured sky. The nylon knees of his breeches clung to his legs in a wet, transparent film and his thin-soled racing boots were sodden. Ted Dawlish came to stand beside him, carrying the lead rope, his son folding the blanket they had whipped off the mare's back in the paddock.

Sensing Tom's disapproval, he said, 'She'll settle all right. That's a good little mare, that is. Full sister to Flying Fish. She'll win a race, she will.'

'Not this one,' said Tom dourly. 'She shouldn't be on a racecourse yet. She's not ready.'

'That's your opinion.' The two men turned their backs, squinting into the stinging rain, to watch their mare's erratic progress between the white rails of the track.

Tom threaded his way through the punters who had gathered round the paddock to have a look at the horses for the maiden race. At this late stage of the afternoon the point-to-point crowds had thinned and only the diehards remained, hunched into waterproof coats, backs turned to the wind, damp racecards gripped between numb fingers. The ground beneath their feet had been turned to mud and was littered with the bright shreds of discarded betting slips.

The commentator's voice was announcing the runners and riders, fourteen in all, with Miss Jessica Haddon on Mr Edward Dawlish's Flying Fancy gone down early to the start.

Tom ducked under the rails and crossed the track to the far side, away from the flapping white trade tents where the displays of saddlery and racks of outdoor clothes were being dismantled and loaded into the backs of vans. It would have been a bad day for the retailers, he thought. Nobody wanted to browse round the stalls in this sort of weather. From the far side of the course he could look away over open country, across the vale to the west, from where the weather was coming. The distance was swallowed by pillows of cloud, the grey of the sky melting into the grey of the winter fields. A line of crooked thorn trees, hunched against the wind, marked the top of the ridge to his right. Down below, in the wet of a winding valley, he could just see some bedraggled ewes, their heavy fleeces dirty and hanging from their bellies in shreds, and the tiny white scraps which were their lambs. Poor little buggers, he thought. What a miserable start to life.

Using his binoculars, he could see down to the start of the course. Jess was trying to steady Fancy, riding her in circles, but she was spooking and shying, her head in the air, fighting the bit, not listening. Tom felt a knot in his stomach but he knew that had it been him down there he would not have felt this fear. Jess would only be aware of the strung-up animal beneath her. She would be concentrating on trying to give the horse confidence, to calm her nerves, to get her to settle.

He wiped his wet hair out of his eyes and noticed his

hands looked purple with cold, his knuckles white. He had to lose so much weight to race ride that the bones of his wrists jutted in knobs from his strong forearms. He looked like a concentration camp victim, his mother complained, hating to see the hollow angles of his face and his eyes sunk in their sockets. 'It's only for a few months, Mum,' he'd said. 'You can fatten me up again in June.' Still, it was a struggle that got harder as he got older. Over six foot and now twenty-seven, it took determination and iron will to get down to under eleven stone. It was different for Jess who was as slim as a reed, although she was quite tall. She had to carry a weight cloth, even with today's ten-pound allowance for a five-year-old mare.

Now the huntsman, his black horse cantering crabwise, head down into the weather, ears flat back, was escorting the other runners down to the start. The sound of the horn floated away on a vicious gust as the splash of the red hunt coat led the field of bright racing colours, yellow, pink, orange, green, into the grey distance.

Tom refocused on Jess's mare who stood rooted to the spot, transfixed by the other horses cantering towards her. She'll explode in a minute, he thought. She won't stay still for long.

'What the hell is she riding?' said a voice at his elbow. He looked round to see two of the girls who worked with Jess at Ken Andrews' point-to-point stable: little Moira, her dark hair wet against her cheeks, the hood of her waterproof coat pulled low, and the head lass, Rhona, who was known to prefer horses to men by a wide margin. Her nose was red from the cold and her glasses were streaked with rain.

'A youngster of Ted Dawlish's. It's never run before.'

'Jesus!' said Rhona, shaking her head.

'She got offered the ride just before the race,' said Tom. 'You know Jess. She won't turn down anything.'

'How did it behave in the paddock?'

'Mad!' sighed Tom. 'Dawlish and his son couldn't hold her. She was nearly climbing over the rails. Jess asked to go down to the start early.'

Rhona sniffed and pulled a disapproving face. 'Those two couldn't train water to run down a drain,' she said. 'That mare's not ready to run, is she? She's too ignorant.' She saw it at the start of every season, these hair-raising introductions of young horses to racing. 'Jess is good, though, Tom,' she added. She could see how he was feeling. His face looked white and strained. 'She's a sensitive rider. You know that. She'll get the best out of the mare. I hate to see Carl or one of the other blokes bullying a youngster round. Jess won't do that.'

'If you ask me, she's nuts,' said Moira. 'I'm surprised she does it, to tell you the truth, what with Izzy and all. It seems, like, irresponsible.'

Tom said nothing. He knew that Moira and Jess did not get on. He wasn't going to criticise Jess in front of her, anyway.

'Are they here?' asked Rhona. 'Izzy and Jess's mum?'

'No, thank goodness,' said Tom. 'Belinda hates it when Jess is riding. She can't bear to watch. Izzy wanted to come but Jess persuaded her it was too cold. She's only six, remember.'

'They're lining up,' said Rhona, peering down the course. 'They'll be off in a minute.'

Moira turned her back on the driving rain. She could not pretend she was interested. As far as she was concerned, Jess could break her neck if that's what she wanted. You had to be off your head to sit on an unknown young horse for the first time and set out to gallop for three miles over eighteen stiff brush fences in the company of a lot of other novices. It annoyed her to hear everyone saying that Jess was so brave, as if it was something to be proud of. Foolhardy, she'd call it, and wanting to draw attention to herself. Wanting to win. That's what got up her nose.

She glanced at Tom who had his field glasses concentrated on the start. She had always fancied him. He was tall and lean with a lot of wild, curly, dark hair which he wore in a shaggy mop, more out of not caring what he looked like than affectation. His face was long and thin with lines running down his cheeks which deepened when he smiled. He looked somehow poetic and romantic, she thought, like an old-fashioned hero who would come cantering up on a white horse and doff his tall hat at simpering girls in bonnets and empire-line dresses. He wasn't the type she usually went for – loud, joshing, red-faced young men who got dressed up for Saturday night and drank themselves stupid with their mates. Tom was quiet, a bit serious; and sharp-faced, clever little Moira knew instinctively that he was a good bet.

He was classy, that was it, she thought. He had a posh voice, but not like some of them she'd come across, not braying like a bloody donkey, and he had good manners. He could muck around and have a laugh but you knew he'd never take it too far because there was a gentleness

about him. He really was like a bloke in a film, she thought. One of those films where the hero is a bit hopeless but you can see from the beginning that he has potential. He's only got to meet the right girl, take his glasses off and square his jaw, and suddenly he's a sex god. Anyhow, he was wasted on Jess, who was so busy proving herself that she didn't have time for anybody else. Moira nestled in close behind him.

'I'm sheltering, Tom,' she said, leaning her head against his wet coat. Being small and pretty, she hoped to bring out his protective side, which, God knows, Jess wasn't interested in.

Down at the start Jess was conscious of nothing but the chestnut mare. She could sense the tension, made up in equal parts of fear and excitement, pulsing through Fancy's body like an electrical charge. She talked to her softly, keeping a hand on the trembling neck where the veins stood out like ropes under the thin skin. She kept a gentle pressure with her seat and legs, trying to keep her moving forward while staying out of the way of the other horses, which were all inexperienced, all unpredictable, wheeling and fretting along the start line, several striking out wildly with hind legs in a frenzy of excitement.

The rain was coming in almost horizontally but at least they would have it at their backs for the first half-mile or so, before the loop at the bottom of the course and the long haul back up the hill. Jess pulled her goggles down over her eyes with one hand and adjusted her whip. She had to be ready for the starter's flag, ready to give the mare the

signal to set off and then try to settle her down as well as she could towards the first fence. She aimed to tuck her in behind the other horses and keep to the rails, well out of the way. Mr Dawlish said she jumped like a stag, but Jess knew enough about owners to discount that as any true indication of the mare's ability.

The horses milling in front of her were suddenly involved in some sort of nervous fracas. She could hear swearing and the starter shouting for them to get back and then the flag came down and they were off.

Fancy began badly, unwilling to start and running sideways across the track before Jess got her straight and moving forward. By then the others were galloping away from her and she was caught in their slipstream of flying mud and clods of earth. Jess managed to get in by the rails but the mare was still resisting, throwing her head in the air to avoid taking up the bit. Jess kept calm, pushing her forward gently until suddenly, realising that she was being left behind, Fancy lowered her head and bounded down the track, chasing after the others, desperate to catch them.

Jess pulled at the wet reins, trying to establish some sort of contact to make the mare slow down. A working gallop was what she wanted but now she was being run away with down the course and it seemed no time before the first fence was approaching as a dark line, growing thicker and higher with every stride. Up in front, the leaders met it in a bunch and flowed over but a following horse refused at the last moment, sliding into the groundboard, causing the one behind to run out through the wings. The white

plastic tubes buckled and gave way and the jockey fell off at the feet of the St John ambulance men.

Jess was conscious of the commotion but could not take her eyes off the point where Fancy must take off. Although she was tugging hard on alternate reins she was having no effect on the speed at which they were bearing down on the fence. God, we're going to crash, she thought, with a sudden stab of real terror as the mare ignored her signal to take off and rushed in too close, almost into the bottom of the fence. Then, at the last moment, Jess felt her gather herself to leave the ground and somehow her speed was enough to fling her over, but only just. They landed in a heap on the other side with bits of brush flying through the air behind them.

Jess was thrown up the mare's neck as she scrabbled to keep her feet and by the time she was back in the saddle, Fancy was galloping again in another wild, uncontrollable flight after the others.

A shower of mud splattered against Jess's goggles as they overtook a back runner and Fancy pulled and snatched at the bit, the wet reins sliding through the fingers of Jess's sodden gloves. The next fence was close and they were still galloping flat out. There was nothing Jess could do but sit tight and hope that speed would get them over once again. The dark slope of tightly packed birch loomed ahead but the mare had her head down now, nearly between her knees, boring along. Jess shouted out loud as she gave her the signal to take off and, miraculously, she did, too low, too fast, but enough to get them over, ready for the long run to the open ditch.

This was the moment to try and settle her, now that the

frenzied galloping had taken the edge off her nervous energy. Jess worked hard to bring the horse between her hands and legs, to soften her iron hold on the bit and to tuck her hindquarters under to steady her stride, and gradually she felt her respond. They were coming up to the public enclosures and she was vaguely conscious of crowds against the rails and the loudspeaker, and of the horses ahead of her and a few behind. Another hundred yards and they were closing on the next fence, the orange ground rail marking the ditch before the jump. The mare was going beautifully, coming in straight, head up and ears pricked, concentrating for the first time. Jess knew she was going to get it right and, sitting down, she drove her forward and felt her leap, soaring over the fence and landing galloping on the other side. The speed and power hit Jess like a blow on the chest and she cried out in exhilaration. If she could keep Fancy jumping like that they would be fine. They would get round safe and sound.

Now they had reached the bottom end of the course and as they swung round the curve of rails, she could see the rest of the runners ploughing up the long hill in front of them and then the force of the weather hit her head on. Her goggles streamed with mud and water and she ducked her head lower as they ran into the buffeting wind.

As they closed on the next jump, it seemed as if they would overhaul a grey horse which was labouring through the heavy ground and had already run out of steam. It was making a lot of effort but hardly going forward and they came into the fence almost side by side. When the grey refused and swerved to the side, Jess tried to remind the

mare what she had to do, but Fancy was distracted and unbalanced and at the instant when she should have taken off, Jess knew that their luck had run out. Fancy hardly left the ground, hit the guard rail with a crack like an exploding gun and catapulted over the fence. Jess was flung out of the saddle and into an arc through the air and as she started to fall she saw the mare's hind legs upside down against the grey sky above her head. The next moment she smacked into the ground and her mouth was full of mud.

'Come on, Izzy! Get a move on!' said Belinda Haddon to her granddaughter, but Izzy was not to be hurried. Squatting down in front of the hen house, she peered into the dark interior, breathing heavily as she counted the scaly legs which she could see in neat pairs on the perch within.

'Come on, Izzy! It's freezing. They'll all be inside on an afternoon like this.'

'I have to check,' said Izzy in a reprimanding tone. 'You never know. Just think if one of them *wasn't* and was shut out all night long in the rain!'

Oh dear, thought Belinda, she does make heavy going of everything. She tucked her hands deeper in the pockets of her old jacket. It was the nastiest sort of February afternoon. The sort of damp cold which got into your bones. At last, Izzy stood up, satisfied. Her round, freckled face under the hood of her coat was pink from the cold and her glasses were streaked with rain. Painfully slow, she shut the flap door and secured the bolt, while Belinda tried to be patient. At last the job was done and she caught hold of Izzy's wet mittened hand and turned back towards the cottage.

It was nearly dark although it was only half past three. Squares of golden light shone into the gloom from the kitchen and sitting-room windows. Belinda longed to be back beside the fire but first they must fill the log basket and then take Snowy a little way down the lane. They had already thrown some hay over the fence for Bonnet, Izzy's small square pony, who stood stoically with water pouring down her woolly sides, bottom thrust into the shelter of the hedge. Jess was supposed to have left a hay net ready but, typically, she had forgotten, and Belinda was not going to hang about outside for any longer than was necessary.

She was surprised that Izzy had allowed her to get away with a short cut like that. She had only protested a bit, saying, 'But Granny, it's *wasteful*. Bonnet'll stand on the hay and it will get muddy and spoiled.'

'Oh bugger that!' Belinda said under her breath, and out loud, 'It won't matter, darling. Not just for once. Bonnet won't mind. She'll just be glad to have her tea.'

Calling Snowy, the cheerful white mongrel with a patch over one eye and one black ear, Belinda and Izzy let themselves out of the gate onto the lane. The gate was rotting, like everything else, thought Belinda, and had to be pushed hard to open. It was no use complaining to her landlord when she knew from bitter experience that he would do nothing about it. The rent of Rosebay Cottage was low in recognition of the fact that he spent as little as possible on maintenance.

The lane wound away between tall naked trees, oak and sycamore, and the blackthorn hedge reared up gloomily on either side. The ditches were full and overflowing so that the surface of the lane streamed with water and eddies of

small stones and twigs. Snowy trotted along gaily, undeterred by the weather, his tail in the air, his rather rude bottom looking cheerful as usual. Wreathed in smiles was how Belinda thought of it. Once an inner-city stray, Snowy treated every day of his rescued life with a determined and touching optimism.

Surreptitiously, Belinda consulted her watch. The last race would be over now and she could begin to relax. As far as she knew, Jess had three rides and, all being well, would now be drinking coffee and eating ham rolls in the lorry with the other yard staff, her job done for the day. She could imagine the steamed-up windows, the laughter, the horses rugged and bandaged, their manes crinkly from the loosened plaits.

Of course, it didn't always end like that. Belinda did not like to think of the horses which hobbled home or, worse, the empty space in the lorry, the empty stable on the yard. She had seen too many heartbreaking sights to want to go and watch her youngest daughter hurtle along at forty miles an hour on a ton of unpredictable muscle and bone. Three and a half miles over eighteen fences nearly four feet high. It was a mad, dangerous, perilous sport and she wished more than anything that Jess would not do it any more. But it was a waste of time wishing that Jess wouldn't do something that she wanted to do.

Thank goodness Izzy did not seem to worry. She had not asked what time her mother would be home or even what races she was riding in. Earlier she had been diverted by the jumble sale in the village hall. She'd bought some old-fashioned animal stories and a copy of *The Water Babies* which

had kept her happy all the afternoon. She's such a funny little thing, thought Belinda, looking down at the red hooded figure which bobbed along beside her. She could see that Izzy was walking in a special way, turning out her right boot at every other step and then giving a small hop, looking down at her feet and concentrating. Belinda wondered what interior, private game she was playing. She was such a serious, stolid sort of child with none of Jess's naughty, wild spirit. It was hard to believe that they were mother and daughter. Her father must have been a very different sort of character, Belinda thought, as she so often did. She had a pretty good idea who Izzy's father was but Jess's silence on the subject was permanent. It used to bother her in the early days. Partly it was the unfairness of it all – that Jess at nineteen should be wholly responsible for the furious, red-faced bawling bundle that was Izzy. But after swanking round the point-to-point yard with her new baby, giggling with the other girls about the indignity of childbirth and joking about bathing Izzy in a stable bucket, Jess shed the responsibility as soon as she could and it was only a matter of weeks before Izzy was left with Belinda for longer and longer periods.

'You're much better with her than me, Mum,' she'd said. 'I don't know what to do with a baby.' It was hard then not to retort, well, you should have thought of that nine months ago.

In fact, she was a good mother in some ways, thought Belinda. Good at games and stories, good at bikes and swings and teaching Izzy to ride but it didn't help that Izzy grew up slow and cautious, careful and solemn, and it wasn't

long before Jess lost patience with the sort of games Izzy liked best

But oh, how Belinda loved her granddaughter. Just feeling the tug of her hand as she hopped down the lane overwhelmed her with such a weight of love that it was hard to breathe. Her solidness, the pink, freckled face, her often surprising humour, the slow smile which, when it came, bunched up and dimpled her round cheeks, her undemanding nature – sometimes Belinda could not think of these things without tears springing into her eyes, because what sort of future did the child have? She should have been growing up in a proper family, with a mother and a father and brothers and sisters, not brought up any old how by her grandmother and her profligate unmarried mother, who had not a bean between them.

'We'll turn back at the top of the lane, shall we?' she said. 'It's getting dark so quickly.'

Without replying, Izzy nodded her head. 'Granny,' she said, addressing her boots, 'is time always the same length? Are minutes always the same?'

Belinda considered. 'I expect a scientist would tell you they were,' she said. 'But some seem to go faster than others, don't they? There's an expression that talks about time dragging, and I certainly know what that feels like, don't you?'

Izzy looked up and nodded. 'Time dragging,' she said thoughtfully. 'Like as if you're pulling it along behind you and it's really heavy.'

'That's it,' said Belinda.

'Would you say that this afternoon you and me had been dragging time?'

Belinda looked down at her granddaughter. 'Well, it's been a dull sort of day because of the weather,' she said.

'And because of Mummy,' said Izzy in a little voice, looking down and concentrating on her hop and skip.

Belinda tightened her hold on the mitten in her hand and then said, 'Maybe. A bit. But then, Izzbug, I never think time spent with you is a drag.'

Izzy said nothing. What is she thinking? wondered Belinda. She was so undemanding and undemonstrative that it was hard to know what was going on beneath the placid exterior.

'Shall we toast some crumpets when we get home?' Belinda asked after a pause. Rather a greedy child, Izzy was always cheered by food.

'That's a good idea, Granny. Yum, yum. Come on, Snowy.'

When they got in, and as Belinda was stacking logs in the lean-to by the back door, she heard the telephone ring.

'Answer that, will you, darling,' she called and heard Izzy pick up the receiver.

Rhona started to run as soon as she realised that there had been an accident. Tom was in front of her, his long legs carrying him further and faster and when he glanced back for her, she waved him on and shouted, 'Don't wait for us!' Then she realised that Moira had left her side and melted away into the crowd. It was no surprise. She can't be bothered, she thought as she ran. She doesn't care what's happened to Jess.

Her legs felt weak and ungainly and her long mac caught round her thighs, slowing her down. The turf was cut up by the day's racing and she tripped and slithered on the

mud and ruts. Stopping to catch her breath, she saw with relief that the mare was up on her feet and two men were trying to catch her, running with spread arms while Fancy galloped about in front of the fence. Jess was still on the ground and Rhona could see that the two St John ambulance men were bending over her.

Rhona started to run again. Oh, please God, she prayed, let her be all right! Jess must be hurt not to have got to her feet and now Rhona saw that the field ambulance was bouncing slowly towards the fence. Nobody else standing along the rails seemed to be taking any notice of the drama that was Jess; their eyes were following the runners who were coming round again for a second time. Rhona could hear the growing thud of hooves behind her and she ducked under the rails as the horses flashed by, a blur of muddied colours and a rush of snorted breaths.

She was out of breath herself and the blood thumped in her ears, but she began to run again as soon as the horses had passed. She saw that Tom had caught the chestnut mare and was leading her round, away from the fence, and that it looked as if they had put Jess on a stretcher and were lifting her into the ambulance. She could see the doors open and a flash of red blanket and then the doors were slammed shut and the ambulance started to move, turning slowly and bumping its way across the field towards the first aid tent. Rhona stopped. There was no point in going on now. She saw Tom vault onto the mare and start to ride her back towards the lorry park, his long legs dangling free of the stirrups. At least the horse is all right, she thought. That, at least, was something.