

## Chapter 6

"No, you can't." Jan dried her hands on a grubby tea towel. "How the heck can we afford a horse? Anyway, you're too young. Even riding lessons cost a flippin' fortune."

"Dad promised," Simon said.

"Did he? Must have been in a moment of dire insanity, or in his cups, more likely." A cluster of cats and dogs squabbled at her ankles. She swung a foot. "Out of the way."

Simon retreated to the garden that was a scruff of shrubs and patchy lawn. Up the slope, a high fence surrounded the vegetable patch, keeping out Jan's chickens and wild rabbits. Simon made sure he closed the wire gate to keep the dogs out as well. It was holy ground.

His father was training tomatoes. "Hello, boy. What're you after then?" Green globes hung from the vines. Alan Archer was a regular prize-winner at the

Stroud and District Show.

"Oh, nothing."

Alan wore an old, tweed jacket that smelled of Clan tobacco. "Bit quieter out here, is it?" Alan nipped off some side shoots. His friends called him Dumpy. He would pat his tummy and laugh. "I must get it down," he would say. He never did. Jan always called him AA.

Simon twisted his fingers. "You said I could have a horse . . . You promised."

Alan pulled a pipe from his pocket and tamped the wad. "Ah, is that it? Well, of course you may. Certainly." He perched on a log, squinting against the smoke. "When I met your mother on the Aldermaston march, she was all fire and brimstone. I thought she was marvelous. We called her *Smithie*. Then your sisters arrived, and we had to settle down." He peered over the fumes. "She doesn't find it easy. Right now, I suspect she may have a different view about your horse. We'd better go along with that for the moment. Don't you think?"

"No, you promised!"

Simon fled to the top of the garden. He leaned on

the wooden fence that bordered the paddock. "Come on. Come on," he called out to his friend, the neighbor's chestnut gelding. He reached out and the horse nuzzled his hand. Simon loved his musty scent and his soft-velvet nose.

Simon could relax out here. Alan told Simon they bought the house before Simon was born. "Never mind it's a bit rough," Alan had said to him. "There was a big garden and a nice view. I can walk to school from here, you see. We'll soon get it fixed up." Simon shook his head. He didn't see much fixing up, except Alan's garden.

Shouting came from the house. Probably fighting over the dogs and cats again. Crystal hated them and Caitlin loved them. The noise grew worse. Even Jan joined in. Simon ran down toward the house.

A pile of clothes and bedding lay on the grass outside the girls' window. The house reeked of paint fumes.

His sister Caitlin stood in tears in the hallway cuddling a dog. Just thirteen, she had a round face and

thick, mousy hair she called a haystack.

Alan trudged indoors and Simon followed. "What now?"

Jan pounded on the girls' bedroom door. "Open this door, Crystal. At once."

"What on earth is happening?" Alan pulled her away. "Is someone hurt?"

"Leave this to me, AA." Jan pounded again, her voice shrill. "Crystal, I'm warning you."

"She's locked me out." Caitlin sniffed. "She . . . says it's *her* room now and . . . no one else can go in, especially *filthy animals*." She burst into sobs once more.

"But what's that smell?" Alan asked.

Caitlin wiped her face on her sleeve. "She's painting our room black."

"Crystal, stop that at once, do you hear?" Jan still pounded on the bedroom door.

"Black?" said Alan. "Why on earth?"

"Alan," Jan yelled. "Get something to break the door down."

"Are you sure?" Alan wandered off.

Jan picked up the phone and stabbed at the dials.

Alan returned with an ax and walked to the bedroom door. "Crystal? It's your dad. Now, look. I have an ax, but it seems a shame to use it. Only your mother says—"

The door flew open. Crystal held a paint brush like a sword. Tall and slim, Crystal had spattered her blonde hair. Furniture sat in a heap in the center of the room. Half the walls were black.

Alan's jaw dropped. "What on earth—"

"This is my room now, okay? No one else is allowed in here. *No one, do you hear?* If you don't like it, I'll go and live somewhere else."

"Crystal, don't be silly," Alan said. "Surely we can come to some arrangement?"

Jan pushed him aside. "Listen to me, Crystal, you b—"

Crystal slammed the door in her mother's face and turned the lock.

"Where am I going to sleep?" Caitlin wailed.

Jan's breathing slowed. "We'll put you in Simon's room. He'll have to sleep on the put-you-up in the

wash-house.”

In the morning, Crystal appeared in her school jacket as though nothing had happened. A few smudges still clung to her hair. “Are we catching the bus? Or is someone taking us?”

There wasn't a parent in sight. Caitlin sat in the lounge, gray around the eyes, chomping on cornflakes. A cat sprawled on her knee. “Bus.”

“Then we'd better get a move on.”

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A few days later, Simon answered the front door to a young man wearing a sports jacket and a bright-yellow cravat. He had a fresh face and a broad smile.

“Oh, hello, how do you do? I am Reverend Philip Ousby-Trew.” It sounded like a rhyme. “Is your father in? I have something for him.” He waved a book through the air.

“He'll be back in a few minutes.” Simon paused. “You could come in if you like, but there's no one here.”

Simon removed cats and papers from the sofa. The

man smiled. "I teach at your father's school, that's how I know him, you see. And I care for the Tabernacle up the hill. Do you know it? It's just across the paddock where the horses are. Is that your horse?" He leaned forward and spoke rather fast.

"No. But I'm going to have my own one day. Dad promised."

"You never know when you'll need a new skill these days." Trew nodded. "But owning a horse is a big responsibility. How old are you?"

"Seven . . . I'll be eight next month."

"You have plenty of life left." He laughed. "Let me tell you a funny story about a horse. Do you like riddles?"

Simon nodded.

"Tell me, where do you take a sick horse?"

"I know. To the vet."

"No, to the horse-pital."

Trew kept Simon amused for half an hour, by which time they'd become good friends. "Would you like to come to our Sunday School?"

"What's that?"

"Oh, we teach Bible stories, play games, and have lots of fun together."

The front door opened. "Oh, hello, Philip." Alan was puffing. "Sorry to be a bit late."

"Dad, I'm going to Sunday School."

"Are you? Is that all right, Philip?"

"Of course." Trew grinned at Simon. "I'll pick you up on Sunday at two o'clock."

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Simon was nervous the first day of Sunday School. The stories were rather bloodthirsty, but he loved the games. There were many children his own age.

Reverend Trew's full name was Philip Ousby-Trew. Because of his initials they called him *Potty* behind his back.

"Trew is a good name for a vicar," one boy said.

"Ha ha, quite right, but I'm not really a vicar, you see. You can call me Reverend."

On Sunday afternoons Simon walked up the tiny lane, hurrying past the giant ash tree with its face like a ghost to the Tabernacle. They drank orange squash and ate rich tea biscuits and spread crumbs across the

polished floor. It wasn't like the peace at his Granny and Granddad's house.

On the first Sunday School of the autumn term, Trew said, "Now, boys and girls, today we are going to write about what your parents do."

Simon used his best handwriting: "My mother is always wanting to sit-in, or climb trees, or chain herself to railings in London. It never happened, and they even stopped going on the Alder Master March after some people called Anarkists started fighting. They said the whole idea was peace, not war. My father is always writing letters about preserving the world. He also grows vegetables."

It earned him a gold star. Alan pinned the note to the wall of the wash-house above Simon's little pallet, jammed between the old, wobbly tub and the coats. Jan scowled at the note whenever she used the machine. "We must do something," she'd mutter.

It was then that the Irish Republican Army bombed London, and another year went by.

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One Saturday during breakfast, Jan tapped the newspaper. "You know, AA, Simon's right. We've got to do something about Northern Ireland. First it was Bloody Sunday, then Bloody Friday. Soon it'll be Bloody Every Day of the Week. We marched for peace against the bomb. We should organize a march across Ireland too."

"Well, I do agree. But getting involved in the fighting—" Alan shook his head. "I don't know, Smithie. It's always the marches that stir up the troubles. I think it would be very dangerous."

"But what if it was just women and children? Ten thousand women and children. They'd never throw bombs at us then."

That evening, the family watched the news. Caitlin sat on the floor with the dogs. Crystal was painting her nails, scenting the room with acetone.

"How is it," Jan waved a glass of beer, "that we sit here with our feet up, and people are dying out there? How is this going to change the world, AA? It's going to the dogs, and all we're doing is betting on the fastest dog. This isn't what we fought for. This isn't what we

marched for."

"You're right, my dear, but life has a way of taking over, doesn't it? There's the mortgage, and the school, and the garden, and the children to feed, and by then you're too tired to go marching for anything. Life plods along until one day we plod our last plod."

"Well, it's not good enough!" Jan stood and hurled the glass into the fire. The smash echoed through the house. "Somebody has to do something, and if it's not us, who's it going to be?" Tears streaked her face.

Cats and dogs slipped out of the room. Caitlin followed.

Crystal looked up from her nails. "It's getting very noisy in here."

Alan shrugged. "We did our bit, Smithie. But life moves on. There's a new generation. I suppose it's their turn."

Jan turned. "My God, Simon, you're still only a child, but you've got to do something. It's up to you kids now. Don't you see? The world can't go on downhill the way it is. Wars and bombs and killing and death. It's so ugly!"

Simon had never seen his mother like that. Prickling with fear, her passion lit a fire deep inside him. He was now determined to live differently, though he had no idea how.