

## Chapter 7

Four years had passed and Simon was now twelve. He finished his homework at the kitchen table as his parents walked in. They shook the rain from their coats. Crystal and Caitlin followed with soaked school uniforms.

Caitlin cried. Crystal smiled, but it was more of a sarcastic smile. They went to their separate bedrooms.

Simon stared at his parents. They glowered at him. He put his books away and walked up the garden. Standing at the paddock fence he called to the horse. "Come on, Rusty."

The gelding strolled over and nuzzled Simon's hand. He patted the horse's neck. "Something's happened, Rusty. Worse than usual, I'd guess. I wish I could ride you." He pressed his brow against Rusty's forehead. The horse snickered. Simon stroked the horse until his tension eased. "I'd better see what's happened."

In the kitchen, Alan and Caitlin sat at the table.

Jan stood at the stove. "Where's Crystal?"

Caitlin had red eyes. "She's not coming."

Jan glared at Alan but said nothing. She put the meal on the table. Simon looked at them all in turn, but they looked away. Caitlin couldn't hold back her tears, and ran to her room. Alan shook his head throughout the meal.

Simon retired to his pallet and picked up his copy of *Tarka the Otter*. He loved books about animals, a welcome retreat from the family at war.

In the morning, he found Caitlin at the kitchen table with a note in her hand and a cat on her knee. She wasn't wearing her uniform.

Simon filled a bowl with cereal. "What's happened? Aren't you going to school?"

Caitlin shook her head and sniffed. She wiped a tear from her face. "Not anymore. We've been expelled."

"Expelled! Why?"

"You don't want to know." She wiped her face on her sleeve and grinned. "Weed, actually. Like our Mum does sometimes? At her ban-the-bomb parties?"

Only I got caught." She sniffed and shook her head. "Oh, and you can wave goodbye to your pallet in the wash-house."

Simon looked up from his breakfast. "What do you mean?"

Caitlin read the note. "Caitlin can have her room back. I've gone to stay with Marcus in Gloucester. Crystal."

"Has she been expelled too?"

Caitlin nodded. "Dealing. That's what it's called. She made quite a business out of it. You know she wanted to buy a car? That's how." She grinned. "I get her room, and you get mine."

"What will you do? Will you go to another school?"

"Mum and Dad have gone to find out. Crystal's over sixteen, so she doesn't have to."

Simon put his bowl in the sink. "Mum looks really angry."

Caitlin imitated Jan's shrill voice. "I don't care if I never see either of you again!" In her normal voice, Caitlin said, "She screamed the place down. I wouldn't want to go back to that school anyway. Not after her

performance." She stroked the cat, and her tears dropped onto its fur.

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The following summer, Simon dumped his school bag on the kitchen floor and raided the bread bin.

Alan looked up from the paper. "Hello, Simon. I've got a surprise for you."

Simon wiped his forehead with his arm—it had been a stinking day and he wasn't expecting it to improve. "Yeah, what's that?"

"Well, I did think you'd be a bit more interested. One of the parents bought a pony for their little girl, but it's too big. Wondered if we'd like it."

"What? Oh, great, that's wonderful!" With a mouthful of bread, he wrapped his arms around his father's neck. "Oh, thank you, Dad." He pulled back, "You did say yes, didn't you?"

Alan nodded. "Best of all, we can trial her for a month, and only pay when we're able."

"What about the paddock?"

"We can have it in a month's time."

Simon did a little dance around the kitchen.  
“Where’s Mum?”

“Gone to Gloucester with Caitlin.”

The front door opened and Jan and Caitlin walked in.

Alan smiled at Jan. “Is it true?”

Jan put down her bag. “He’s the cutest little thing. Ozzy she called him, I can’t think why.”

“After Ozzy Osbourne, Mum,” Caitlin said. “Has a band called Black Sabbath. Don’t you know anything?”

Simon wished they’d stop talking in riddles. “Can someone tell me what’s going on.”

Jan grinned. “Crystal had a baby boy last month. So that makes you an uncle.”

“Didn’t you know before?”

“She didn’t tell us until today.” Jan looked at Alan. “Not exactly how we expected our first grandchild to arrive, but we’d better not tell Granny and Granddad Smith. I don’t think they’d understand, would they?”

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In the bottom corner of the paddock, Simon, his

father, and the local builder erected a lean-to shelter. One half of the stables served as a box, the other for hay and tack.

When the horse-box backed up the slope to the gate, Simon wanted to run around the paddock himself. She was a ten-year-old grey pony called Buttons, because she had two dark blotches on her withers.

Simon gazed in awe. "Dad, she's great!"

Ignoring the temptation of nuts, she stood at the top of the ramp for a long minute, eyes wide. Then picking her feet high, she inspected every fence until settling to graze in the furthest corner.

For the next week Simon spent an hour each evening calling to her, handing out carrots, apples and sugar lumps, but the pony wouldn't come close. She only lifted her head and stared at him before returning to her grass. One sultry evening, she finally strolled over to Simon. He leaned against the garden fence. Buttons nuzzled his shoulder, as if she were trying to say, "Let me teach you about horses."

Simon loved to mount her bareback and they'd race around the paddock until she found a patch of soft

mud. Then she'd spin around, throwing him off. She'd whinny and kick her heels sideways. Buttons would wait for him to jump on her back again. Over the months, he learned to read and anticipate her every move.

A steep path led from the paddock to the grassy slopes of Rodborough Common beyond. They rode there often, cantering through the gullies, charging at full speed in pretend battles against the fort, or simply enjoying the wildlife and the views.

Simon's new happiness overwhelmed him. "Mum, you'll never guess what Buttons did—"

"Oh, do stop talking about bleeding Buttons. It's driving us all mad."

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One December morning, Simon went early to feed her. The white grass crunched beneath his feet. He'd have to break the ice on her water. He picked up a short stick. "Hey, Buttons. Good morning." No head appeared at the box gate to greet him. Where was she?

He quickened his pace down to the stables. She lay on her left side on the straw, head thrown back,

motionless. Her right eye stared at the roof.

"Buttons?" He leaped the gate and knelt with his hand on her neck, but it was stiff and cool. "N-o-o-o!" He collapsed onto his friend. Sobs erupting from deep within. He felt like an empty shell. An hour later he stumbled into the house, shivering.

"Where the hell've you been?" Jan was at the kitchen sink. "You're late for school."

"Buttons is dead."

She looked at him for a long moment. Jan dried her hands, walked over and hugged him. "I'm sorry, son. It's a bloody world, isn't it?"

Simon's tears welled again.

"Best stay home today, Si. Don't you think? I'll call the vet." Jan picked up the phone.

After the vet arrived, they walked to the stables. The vet crouched over the body. "Probably an aneurysm," he said. "Or heart attack. It happens. Pity though. She was a nice little pony."

The knacker-man winched her into the back of his lorry. The carcass stuck against the frame. He levered it free with an iron bar and gave Simon ten quid.



"Cheers." He nodded and drove off, whistling.

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Simon hadn't been to Sunday School for years, but his pony's death left him solemn and empty. He stood in the doorway, silent.

Other children smiled at him, all much younger. "We're making a crib for Christmas," a boy said.

Simon didn't belong there anymore and turned to leave. Reverend Trew appeared and thrust out a hand.

"Why, Simon, how nice to see you. Gosh, you've grown. Well, of course, you're always welcome. But what's happened? You look like death."

"Buttons died."

"Oh, I see. Is that why . . ." Trew broke off and looked at Simon more closely. "I think you were rather fond of her, weren't you?"

Simon nodded. They stepped out into the road. It was empty, the trees black veins against a flat sky.

"Why, Reverend? Mother says the world's a mess. But why? Why do people kill each other? Why is there so much fighting and death? Why did she have to die? I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't neglect her or

anything.”

Trew put his hand on the young man's shoulder and they walked up the hill. “Ah, Simon, you're asking million-year-old questions. But when we're hurting, you see, we don't need answers. We need people. So I want you to know you can call me any time you like. There'll always be a cup of tea and a chat, waiting for you.”

Simon rested his head on Reverend Trew's shoulder and wept. The great weight in his soul eased a little.