



**RACING
MANHATTAN**

TERENCE BLACKER

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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In memory of my good pal Paul Sidey

DRESS-DOWN FRIDAY

A tall, gray-haired man in a heavy sheepskin coat is standing on the edge of his lawn. Beyond him are fields leading down to a wood. Now and then he puffs at a cigar.

My uncle. Bill Barton. Uncle Bill.

I watch him for a moment, a hay net over my shoulders, as I stand by his gold-and-black horsebox. The two ponies in the truck are racing today. There are three more ponies, and a horse belonging to Uncle Bill's wife, Elaine, in a row of stables beyond.

I can hear, above the early morning birdsong, the sound of Uncle Bill's groom, Ted, as he mucks out one of the stables.

Across a gravel yard stands Uncle Bill's big, modern house, Coddington Hall. An old, historic building with that name used to stand here, but shortly after my uncle bought

it, a fire just accidentally happened to break out in the kitchen and the place burned to the ground.

“Every cloud has a silver lining,” Uncle Bill says now when he talks about it. “Collected the insurance. Built a new house. Modern. Great facilities. Game room. More my style. Bish, bosh, done.”

That’s Uncle Bill’s way. He is a determined man. Things don’t stand in his way for long. If someone disagrees with him, he gives them the *look*. There’s something about Uncle Bill’s look that persuades people to change their mind.

He turns, zipping himself up (that’s what he was doing there, like a big silver fox marking his territory). I hurriedly put the hay net in the back of the horsebox.

A few moments later, Michaela—Uncle Bill’s daughter, my cousin and my most-of-the-time best friend—ambles from the house toward the horsebox. She looks amazing. Breeches. Shining boots. Silks in Uncle Bill’s black-and-gold colors. She could be a real jockey, except in miniature and with long blond hair.

She checks her reflection in one of the side mirrors.

“Looking good, M,” I say.

“Cheers, Jay.” She smiles, then notices what I’m wearing. Sneakers. Jeans. Faded black T-shirt. The helmet on my head has a moth-eaten velvet covering and an old-fashioned peak. It looks like something out of *Antiques Roadshow*.

“I could have lent you some stuff,” she says, frowning.

“No, it’s fine. I’m comfortable.”

Michaela does an odd little pouty thing with her mouth, a gesture she has picked up recently at her new school.

“*Comfortable?*” she murmurs. “What’s comfort got to do with it?”

Now Uncle Bill is by the horsebox. A proud-dad smile appears on his face when he looks at Michaela. It vanishes when he catches sight of me.

“Blimey, girl,” he says in that rasping voice of his. “Dress-down Friday, is it?”

“I had to get the ponies ready, Uncle Bill.”

He swears quietly and gets into the car.

I take one last look in the back of the horsebox.

“Hey, boys. Everything all right here?”

Marius is looking restless. Dusty munches sleepily at his hay net.

“That’s the way, Dusty.”

Uncle Bill impatiently toots the horn.

I close the horsebox door. A movement in one of the house’s upstairs windows catches my eye. My aunt Elaine stands there in a silk bathrobe, her hands around a mug of tea. She is Uncle Bill’s second wife, Michaela’s stepmother, and is not exactly thrilled by the idea of our going racing. I wave good-bye to her. She looks away.

I step into the cab, which is already thick with cigar smoke.

Uncle Bill looks across at us, grinning. “Ready for the races, girls?”

“Races, yay!” Michaela punches the air. “I’m so excited!”

“You’ve double-checked everything’s in the back, Jay?”
he asks, putting the horsebox into gear.

“Yes, Uncle Bill.”

Bish.

Bosh.

Done.

A PONY ON THE NOSE

We drive for an hour or so. Beside me, Michaela chatters about the ponies, about school, about her friends. I can tell she's nervous.

My mind is fixed on the race ahead. I've been around Uncle Bill long enough to know that whatever he is planning, there will probably be something dodgy about it. He calls it "working the system."

I turn toward him. "Tell us about the races, Uncle Bill," I say.

He draws on his fat cigar and exhales. Spluttering, Michaela waves the smoke away from her face.

"It's mainly a bit of fun," he says. "With a little betting on the side to make it interesting for the grown-ups."

Here's a tip about my uncle: to get at the truth, you sometimes need to listen very carefully to what he says and then turn it upside down. Or inside out. Or back to front. Anything but the way he's told it.

These pony races, I'm now guessing, are mainly about betting. With a little racing fun on the side to make it interesting for the kids.

We bump down a long path until we reach a closed gate. Two men in combat jackets and dark glasses are standing in front of it. There is something about their body language that is not exactly welcoming. As we approach, they see who is driving and quickly stand back to open the gate.

A big, open field stretches before us.

"Where are we?" Michaela sounds a bit scared.

"This was once an air station," says Uncle Bill. "Now it's just derelict land. All sorts of naughty stuff goes on here. Races. Hunting with greyhounds. The odd bare-knuckle fight."

"*Bare-knuckle fight?*" I look to see whether he's joking. He isn't. "What about the police, Uncle Bill?"

He gives a little between-you-and-me laugh. "They don't seem to bother with this, for some reason." He winks at me. "It's a sort of no-man's-land, law-wise."

"Oh, right. I see." (I don't, but with Uncle Bill, it's best not to ask too many questions.)

A few hundred meters away, there is a strip of old road where horseboxes, trailers, and vans are parked. This is different from the gymkhanas Michaela and I have been to in the past. No tents. No ring surrounded by straw bales, no jolly picnics, no man with a posh voice making announcements, no proud parents leading small ponies with braided manes.

Around the outside of the field, I can see poles and a white tape. The racetrack.

“Looks a bit serious,” Michaela murmurs to me.

“It does.” I smile to myself.

I feel like I’ve come home.

I get into the horsebox to check the ponies. Marius, a light-chestnut Arabian gelding, is trembling with excitement, while Dusty—dark bay, hairy heeled, big bottomed (my favorite pony in the world)—shows no sign of waking up.

You can probably guess which one I’m riding.

From the outside, Uncle Bill calls out, “Let’s walk the course, jockeys.”

He strides toward the white tape. As the three of us follow the track around the field, he points out to Michaela where the good ground is. He tells her that our race is longer than most, that she must wait to make her move. Marius has a turn of foot—he can beat any pony for speed at the finish—but he gets bored when he’s in front.

I listen. Sometimes it can be useful, not being noticed.

There are three races before ours. Michaela stays at the horsebox with Marius. I watch the bigger ponies carefully. Most of the kid jockeys are going too fast too soon. They have forgotten that it rained during the week. The track is narrow in places, and already the ground is muddier there. With every race, the final bend is looking more and more like a plowed field in a thunderstorm.

Where the cars are parked, money is changing hands, and there seems to be quite a lot of drinking going on too. This isn’t playtime—that’s for sure. It’s serious.

I like that.

When we get Marius out of the horsebox and saddle him up, one or two of the gamblers come over to look at him.

“What race is he in, mate?” one calls out to Bill.

“The fourth.”

“Worth a pony on the nose, is he?”

Uncle Bill is tightening the girth. He ignores them.

“What’s a pony, Dad?” asks Michaela.

“Just a little bet, love—twenty-five pounds,” says the man watching us. “What d’you say, pal?” He calls out more loudly to Uncle Bill. “Worth a gamble, is he?”

“Save your money, mate,” says Uncle Bill. “He’s got no chance.”

The men lose interest and wander off.

“He might win, Dad,” mutters Michaela. “You never know.”

“Might?” Uncle Bill laughs. “Will, more like.”

“So why did you say he had no chance?”

There is a tight little smile on Uncle Bill’s face, and suddenly I understand his plan.

“The fewer people who bet on you, the better your odds will be at the bookmakers,” I say. “So if you win, anyone who bet on you makes more money.”

“Never mind all that.” Uncle Bill gives Michaela a leg up, and as she puts her feet in the stirrups, Marius looks around with a slightly superior air. Horse and jockey look magnificent.

“Jog him around a bit, love,” Uncle Bill says to Michaela. “Warm him up.” He watches her go, then turns to me. “You know too much, girl,” he mutters.

Smiling, I go to fetch Dusty. He looks around, taking an interest in his surroundings at last. Uncle Bill slips the bridle over his head, and I saddle him up, murmuring beneath my breath all the while: *This is your day, boy. You're the one nobody thinks will win. We've got a little surprise for them, haven't we?*

Dusty nuzzles me. A stranger might think he's after a sugar. I know it's because he's listening to me.

As Uncle Bill takes the reins and holds Dusty's head, I flick some straw out of his thick tail with a dandy brush, then run a hand down his flank behind the saddle. Half Connemara and half Thoroughbred, he is no beauty, but he is faster than he looks.

"Beauty is as beauty does," Ted likes to say.

I jump onto Dusty's back and put my feet in the stirrups.

"Looks aren't everything, are they, boy?"

Uncle Bill shakes his head. "You and that pony—you're as daft as each other," he says.

"Ignore him, Dusty. He doesn't know you like I know you."

"Listen up, kid." Uncle Bill speaks in a low, casual voice as he checks that my girth is tight enough. "You keep out of Michaela's way, right? If she's coming up on the inside, let her through. Do not take her ground. Just don't get in her way. Understood? Be a good girl. Today's Marius's day."

"You want me to lose?"

"I want Michaela to win." He gives one of his trademark winks.

I feel a familiar lurch of rage within me. It is like a match being put to gasoline.

“*Understood?*” Uncle Bill repeats the word with a don’t-mess-with-me harshness in his voice.

I clench my jaw and manage to nod. My hands are tight around the reins.

Red mist, it was called when I was younger. “Watch out for Jay when the red mist falls,” my mum used to say. “She becomes a different person.” But my anger, when it comes, is not like a mist at all. It’s a red fire, raging in a forest in a high wind. It’s dangerous, unstoppable.

Sitting there on Dusty, I hear in my mind the voices I have heard all my life at home and at school. Be a good girl. Know your place. Keep out of the way. Don’t worry about Jay. Ignore her. She’s nothing.

The red fire still burning within me, I canter Dusty down to the start. As we circle around, I breathe deeply and then, coldly and calmly, I pull my goggles down. There are eight runners in our race—five boys, a plump, scared-looking girl I recognize from gymkhanas, Michaela, and me.

Today’s not our day, is it? Well, it is now.

As we circle around at the starting line, I notice that most of the ponies are tough, shaggy customers, a bit like Dusty. Beside them, Marius looks like a film star who has just dropped into a local unemployment office.

But I like the way Dusty is feeling. He’s a moody old sort, and not the fastest, but I know one thing from riding him in gymkhanas: he likes to have his nose in front when it matters. He may not look the part, but he has racing in his blood. He feels alive beneath me, as if the fire that is still roaring quietly within me has somehow reached him.

Use your anger. That's what Mum used to say, Dusty.

I trace a heart shape with my finger on his shoulder.

We're about to give them all a surprise.

We line up beside a man holding a red flag. Michaela has been told to keep out of trouble, and now she takes Marius to the outside. Dusty and I, ignored by the others, are next to the tape.

When the flag falls, the starter roars, "Come on!"

"Go, boy!" I shout the words out loud.

I give him a dig in the ribs. He takes off as well as he can, but after a few strides, all we can see are tails. The boys are bumping and pushing for position, but it's the girl who has the inside rail. I notice Marius and Michaela going easily, slightly away from the pack to the right, as if the chestnut is enjoying his own private canter. I'm having to push Dusty along, like someone scrubbing the floor, just to keep in touch with the others.

Take your time. They'll come back to us. Let them run their race.

Dusty can't win. Of course he can't. The others are younger and faster than he is. Except . . .

They are going too fast for themselves. The boys are riding a finish and we've only just passed the halfway mark. The girl's pony, on the inside, is already losing ground. Marius, though, is still cantering, well within himself.

As we approach the final bend, I am three lengths behind the field, which is tightly bunched. The ponies are tiring, and so are some of the jockeys. They drift away from the inside tape toward the heavier ground. It's our moment.

Not that way, boy. Here we go.

The forest fire is raging now. It makes me stronger, more focused, than anyone could believe. I pull Dusty so close to the tape that I feel the posts banging against my left foot. I don't feel the pain. We've found a narrow strip of good ground that everyone else has missed.

This is where we start racing. Come on, boy—

Dusty seems to sense that the other ponies are faltering in the mud across the center of the track. As he feels the firmer ground beneath him, he lengthens his stride and puts his old head down, like a hound finding the scent.

“Go!”

I yell as I change my grip on the reins, and suddenly we're flying.

As we enter the final stretch, the other jockeys get their ponies back to the inside tape—and find themselves looking at the broad hindquarters of an old pony called Dusty. Before the bend we were last; now we're first. It is as if some strange magic trick has taken place.

Keep going. Don't break your stride, boy.

Dusty is tiring, but he's always been a brave little pony. Two hundred meters to the post. One hundred fifty. I know what to expect and am ready for it. I hear the pounding of hooves behind me and, out of the corner of my eye, a bright chestnut shape appears, gaining on us at speed.

As Marius's head reaches my right knee, instinct kicks in. I wave my arm and yell, “*Yaaaaahhhh!*” like a jockey riding a finish.

Marius may look good, but he's no hero. My waving

arm and my crazy battle cry spook him for a moment. He checks his stride, ears pricked in alarm. Michaela tries to get him going again, but by the time she does, it is too late. I flash past the winning post, a winner by half a length.

We did it, Dusty.

I pull up, patting my pony's neck as Michaela canters past me. Her shaded goggles are around her neck.

“What were you doing?” she shouts. “You scared Marius. You stopped us winning.”

I shake my head and shrug, as if I have no idea what she is talking about.

But I do. The fire within me is dying fast now, becoming no more than the warm glow of victory. In my heart, I know that what I have just done wasn't exactly fair—maybe I was even a bit out of control for a moment—but there is nothing in the rules about a jockey waving an arm and shouting a bit.

I hear mutterings as I trot past the spectators. It seems that no one had their money on Dusty and me. For the first time since I pulled up after the race, I'm aware that my left foot is throbbing with pain from where the wooden poles banged against my sneakers.

Uncle Bill appears from out of nowhere. His face and neck are flushed a dark, dangerous red. He grabs the reins so sharply that Dusty throws his head up in alarm.

“Get off,” he says to me.

I slide out of the saddle. My left foot hurts so much as I touch the ground that I almost fall over.

“What did I tell you?”

I shake my head, looking him straight in the eye.

“I said don’t get in her way, right?”

A large man in a sheepskin coat wanders up and lays a hand on Uncle Bill’s shoulder. “Well done, mate,” he says. “Your daughter rode a blinder.”

“Daughter? You’re joking.” The words are sharp, angry, like the crack of a whip.

Taken aback, the man holds up two hands in mock surrender and walks off.

“So.” Uncle Bill drops his voice. “Did you forget or what?”

“I was riding a finish, that’s all.”

“Waving your arm and shouting. That’s just . . . cheating.”

I dart him a look. Uncle Bill worrying about cheating? I’ve heard it all now.

“I got six to one on Michaela,” he hisses. “I could have bought another pony with my winnings.”

“Sorry about that.”

“*Sorry?*” He says the word between gritted teeth, his face close to mine. I can smell the sweat on him. “After everything I’ve done for you, the money I’ve spent on ponies, you’re *sorry*? You little—”

Without a word, I take the reins from his hand and hobble off with Dusty. My pony needs a drink. The fire has gone now. To tell the truth, I’m beginning to feel a twinge of guilt about what I’ve done—I never wanted to upset Michaela.

“You said you understood,” he calls after me. And I did.

I understood that I was going to do whatever it took to win.

I understood that if you're second, you're just the best loser.

I understood that no one was going to stop me from doing my best.

We drive home in the black-and-gold horsebox. There's silence in the cab—Michaela upset, Uncle Bill steaming, me a little bit frightened about what I've just done. My left little toe seems to be swelling up in my sneaker, but somehow it doesn't seem the moment to talk about a pain in my foot.

As we reach the village of Coddington, about a mile from the house, Michaela, sitting on the middle seat between her dad and me, murmurs something to her father about giving me some of the prize money.

Uncle Bill gives an angry little laugh. "You're joking, I hope."

"I don't want any money, Uncle Bill," I say. "It's OK."

"Come on, Dad," says Michaela. "It was a hundred-pound first prize."

"I lost a hell of a lot more than that betting on you."

Michaela looks away. "Jay didn't know that."

Uncle Bill shakes his head. "I can't believe you," he says. "You're actually sticking up for the person who beat you."

"Please, Dad. For me."

Uncle Bill sets his face, jaw clenched, and stares ahead. I watch him for a few moments, suddenly feeling sad at the distance he keeps from me. I used to wonder what it was like

being Michaela and having a dad to say yes and no in your life, helping you, making decisions. When I was younger, I even tried to pretend to myself that my uncle was a sort of father to me, that he filled the great dad-gap in my life, but it never really worked. Uncle Bill made sure of that.

I turn to Michaela and say out loud the words I have been thinking all the way home. "I'm sorry, M. I wasn't just riding a finish like I said. I knew what I was doing. I spooked Marius on purpose."

Michaela looks at her hands, frowning. I know that I have hurt her.

"Why would you want to do that?" she asks quietly.

"I just have to win. It's in me, like a disease. Even when I know it won't do me any good, I can't help myself."

Uncle Bill glances across at me. There is a curiosity in his eyes, as if he is seeing me for the first time. "And when someone tells you to lose, that just makes you more determined, right?" he asks quietly. "You've got the rage. You're going to show them. You couldn't lose if you tried."

"Yes." I nod. "How did you know that?"

He shrugs. "Just a guess," he mutters as we turn into Coddington Hall's long driveway. "All I know is it's cost me a bundle. Your aunt's right. You're a money pit. Everything you do costs us money."

"I won, Uncle Bill. What more could I do?"

The horsebox draws up in front of the stables. "In this life, doll," he says, "you can win and still lose." He stares at me. I stare back. "No need to sort the ponies, Michaela," he says, his eyes still fixed on me. "Jay will do it."

He gets out of the horsebox and walks away, his boots crunching on the gravel.

“That’s not fair, Dad,” Michaela calls out. “She’s got a bad foot.”

“Leave her.” He speaks the words without turning around.

With a little wince of apology to me, Michaela follows him.

I get out, gasping as my foot touches the ground. My toe feels so swollen that I don’t dare to take off my sneaker before the ponies have been unloaded, rubbed down, fed, and watered for the night.

I let down the ramp at the back of the horsebox, then the small door at the front. Dusty, mud spattered but content, is half-asleep. Marius is still warm and sweating.

“There you go, boys,” I say. “Let’s get you out.”

I back Marius out and lead him to his stall, then turn my attention to Dusty. It will be an hour or so before I can go to the house and wash my foot, but there is the trace of a smile on my face as Dusty backs down the ramp.

My.

First.

Winner.

CUCKOO IN THE NEST

Now, that is the most revolting thing I have seen in a long, long time.”

We are in the kitchen the following morning. Aunt Elaine and Michaela are inspecting the red-and-blue mess that used to be my little toe.

“It throbs a bit,” I say.

Aunt Elaine gives a weary sigh. I am used to that sound.

“It always happens to you, doesn’t it, Jay?” She stares down at my foot with an I-think-I’m-going-to-be-sick look on her face. “I do worry about you sometimes.”

That’s my step-aunt for you. The fact that I won a race means nothing to her. It is my messy toe that she sees. She believes that girls should be soft skinned and as ladylike as she thinks she is, and that is something I can never quite manage.

I am small, strong, and wear my dark hair cut short. I can carry a bale of hay on my shoulders as easily as an adult. When I ride the ponies, I like to go fast and jump logs around

the estate. I am most at home in the stables. Nothing about me is the slightest bit ladylike.

“Is it broken?” Michaela is looking more closely at the toe.

“Maybe,” I say.

Aunt Elaine winces. “Don’t get too close, darling.”

Michaela smiles at me. “I don’t think you can actually catch broken toes, Elaine,” she says, but returns to her seat.

“You know exactly what I mean.”

We all know what she means. I’m different from them. What she could catch is me.

It is as if I am a part of the Barton family’s past, which Aunt Elaine would prefer to forget. Michaela’s mother, Maria, ran off with a Brazilian pop star and now lives in South America. Uncle Bill was what she calls “a little rough around the edges.” His sister, Debs, my mother, had a life that was full of problems.

Aunt Elaine had been at Coddington three years when I arrived. Looking back now, I think maybe she believed that the family was just beginning to change thanks to her ladylike ways.

Then, suddenly and without warning, my mum died and I was there—unrespectable, unable to change, fatherless, and now motherless, an everyday reminder of the way the Bartons used to be before she came along.

These days, she likes to describe Uncle Bill as “an entrepreneur,” while Michaela is becoming “quite the young lady.” They all live at “the hall,” which has “a bit of land” and “just a few horses.”

But there is nothing she can do about me. When my mother's name comes up in conversation, my step-aunt quickly changes the subject. My father is never mentioned.

Two years ago, when Michaela and I finished primary school, it was decided that Michaela would be sent off to a private weekly boarding school while I would go to the local high school. According to Aunt Elaine, Michaela had been picking up "unfortunate habits" from the "kids" (she used the word as if she were picking up something unpleasant with tongs). It was time for her to become "motivated," to learn how to be a lady.

And what about me? It was never spelled out, because it never had to be. I was one of the kids. My unfortunate habits were just part of me. There was nothing to be done about them.

These days I feel like an outsider at Coddington, a cuckoo in the nest. If it were not for the ponies and for Michaela, who is a real friend and always sticks up for me, I don't know what I would have done.

I finish my breakfast and hobble out of the kitchen. Behind me, I hear murmuring voices.

"One has to make allowances, I suppose," Aunt Elaine is saying. "Given the circumstances."

I do my chores. Feed the hens, collect the eggs, sweep the small yard in front of the stable, feed and water the five ponies and Elaine's horse, Humphrey. A constant refrain over the past year is how much looking after me has cost. Without

being asked, I have begun to do more work in the stables and around the fields. I try to earn my keep.

There was a time when Michaela and I did these things together. We both loved riding and going to the local shows and gymkhanas with Ted. Looking after the animals wasn't work. It was fun.

For a while we had quite a name in these parts, competing in pairs events in hunter trials. We were the Bartons—same age, same height, same last name but very different in every other way. Michaela used to ride Lysander, a brilliant half-Arabian bay, while I was on Tinker, slower, less fancy, but reliable. We were a good team.

There are photographs in the house of us receiving prizes—Michaela, blond, neat, smiling at the camera, and me, dark haired, scruffy, and straight-faced.

Things have changed a bit since then. These days Michaela rides with her new school friends on the weekends. She says she prefers riding around the fields to competing in shows. She has already told me that she will never race again. “It’s so *rough*” is the way she put it this morning. I laughed but felt sad. We used to do everything together.

I muck out Dusty, Marius, Humphrey, Cardsharp, Lucky, and Bantry Bay as they look out of their stalls. As I sweep the yard, I wonder if Michaela has begun to think of riding in the way Aunt Elaine does. Something to dress up for, to be seen doing by one’s friends, to talk about at fancy parties.

“No stopping the jockey, eh?”

I turn to see Uncle Bill watching me as he leans on the gate that leads from the garden to the stables. The first cigar of the day is in his hand. After what happened yesterday, I am surprised to see him.

“I can’t exercise them today,” I say. “My toe—”

“Never mind that.” Uncle Bill sounds impatient, but then, as if remembering his manners, he smiles at me.

Now I know he is up to no good.

“D’you mind doing this stuff?” He nods at the broom in my hand. “Looking after the animals?”

“Of course not. I love being with the ponies. It gets me out of the house.”

Uncle Bill raises his eyebrows. “It’s that bad, eh?”

“I mean, I like being in the house, but—”

“I know what you meant.” Uncle Bill opens the gate and wanders toward me. “I wanted to apologize to you, girl,” he says. “Spoke out of turn yesterday. Said stuff. Lost it for a moment. Sometimes I get a bit carried away.”

“I know how that feels.”

He laughs. “We noticed.”

“I’m sorry I upset Michaela.”

Uncle Bill shrugs. “You’re a winner. Found the best ground. Took your chance. That little pony had no right to win.”

“He’s faster than you think.”

“Nah.” Uncle Bill takes a long pull at his cigar. “I was an idiot. I should have put my money on you. You would have won on any of the ponies in that race.”

“D’you really think that?” I look away and start

sweeping the concrete so that he won't notice the smile on my face.

“You showed the older kids how it's done.”

“Thanks, Uncle Bill.”

I wait. There is something else coming, I know. My uncle has never been one to stand around, handing out compliments for no reason.

“There are other meets like that.” He speaks casually. “Little pop-up events all year round, organized outside the system.”

“Are there?”

“I think you could do well in them. I'll get you a few rides. Drive you there. You'd have to skip school now and then. Is that a problem?”

It's my turn to shrug.

“We could make a bit of money between us.” He makes a chirpy little clicking noise with his teeth. “What d'you think, Jay? Are you in?”

Just.

Try.

To.

Stop.

Me.

A GHOST ON THE RACETRACK

For the next eighteen months, my life changes. I enter the world of what Uncle Bill calls “unofficial” pony races.

By unofficial, he means illegal.

Some of the most interesting hobbies are unofficial, Uncle Bill tells me. Hares are hunted by greyhounds. Men wrestle and fight. Ponies race. People gamble.

I go along with it, but the truth is, I don’t like the men and sometimes the children I meet at the unofficial pony races. They have a wild, dangerous look to them. When they get together, on some big field or abandoned airfield, it is as if they have stepped out of normal, everyday life for a few hours into a world where there is only one rule.

Winning. Making money.

They make jokes, slap each other on the back, but there is always that scary, hard look in their eyes.

Uncle Bill actually becomes more Uncle Bill-like when he is racing. Away from Aunt Elaine, he is louder, ruder,

swearier. He seems more alive. His light-blue eyes flash with pleasure.

“You know what I like about pony racing?” We’re in the car, driving home one day after I’ve ridden a walleyed piebald to victory on an abandoned greyhound track in deepest Essex. My uncle has the smile on his face that tells me his back pocket is bulging with twenty-pound notes.

“The money?”

He laughs. “More than that. It takes me back to when I was young, getting on in the world. Before life became all respectable and boring.”

I decide that it’s best to say nothing.

“I like it when you know where you stand.” He speaks as if he has forgotten I am there. “No messing around. No nannies. No rules about this and that. It’s—cleaner.”

“What were you doing then?” I ask the question that many people have wondered but very few have the nerve to ask.

“Hm?” He looks at me, as if surprised to hear my voice.

“You said you were getting on in the world. What were you doing?”

He shrugs. “Usual stuff. Import, export. Development. Bit of buying and selling. Same as anyone else, really. Only better.” He laughs again.

“And unofficial,” I say.

He gives an Uncle-Bill wink. “Attagirl,” he says, and switches on the sound system in the car. He likes disco tunes from the 1980s. Sometimes he sings along. He sounds like a performing seal.

Maybe, I think now and then, this is what a gangster looks like. He's not like in the movies—wearing dark glasses, with a big hat over his eyes and a pistol in his belt. In real life, a gangster might wear a sheepskin coat, listen to disco music, and have a big house in the country, with stables and ponies out back.

Uncle Bill seems to make a good living, but he worries about money all the time. On his way to and from races, he makes calls on his hands-free cell phone.

He has his own way of talking on the phone. It mainly involves long, threatening silences. Sometimes I hear the other person squawking away until he runs out of words or finally gets interrupted by Uncle Bill—just a few words, delivered in a low, angry tone like a punch to the stomach.

He never seems to lose these conversations. He talks about “merchandise” and “satisfactory financial arrangements.” When the squawking dies down, he'll ask, “So do we have a deal?” And he always does.

After the call ends, the cold look on his face remains for a few seconds, then slowly he remembers that I am there and that today is a race day.

“Thank you and good night,” he'll say.

Or: “Game over.”

Or: “Another one bites the dust.”

When Uncle Bill and I set off to the day's races, there are no ponies with us. They will be supplied by their trainers.

There is no telling what kind of pony will be standing in front of me in the paddock. A few (a very few) are

bright in the eye and well groomed. Most have that sorry, woebegone look of ponies whose lives have taught them that nothing good is likely to come from humans. Many are wild and shaggy, their coats crusty with mud or manure. Some, I swear, have hardly been broken in. They behave as if they have never been ridden before.

It's all right, pony. You're with me. I'll look after you in the race. Leave this to me.

I feel them trembling beneath me, and I calm them as we wait at the starting line with a method that Ted has taught me. With the finger of my right hand, I trace the shape of a heart on their shoulders, just below the withers.

“I call it the heart trick,” Ted says. “It’s where a mare nibbles her foal when they’re in a field. It’s comforting. Takes their mind off the job.”

And each of the ponies changes me. As soon as I am in the saddle, my feet in the stirrups, I am no longer a scrap, a wisp, the kid in the shadows that nobody notices. I draw strength from the shaggy, quivering body beneath me. Like the pony I’m riding, I may be nothing in the eyes of strangers, but I have my own strength. I look down on the world, clear-eyed and determined.

Uncle Bill has bought me a racing saddle and I begin to experiment, pulling up my leathers so that my knees are near the top of the saddle and I am lighter on the pony’s back. The other riders are told by their trainers not to ride short, like professional jockeys do, but it works for me. I can balance the pony better.

Almost by instinct, I learn how to get the best out of a

pony. Be quiet. Use soft hands on the reins. Don't let it use up energy fighting against you. Make it feel as if it is not at work at all but galloping free across a sunlit field. When a pony forgets that a human is on its back, it relaxes, settles. Only at the finish do I remind it that racing is work too.

I become an expert at avoiding trouble. The best way to ride, I discover, is not to be noticed, except where it matters—as we pass the winning post.

I am a ghost on the racetrack, a ghost that wins.

Now and then, in the early days, one of the older jockeys makes the mistake of thinking that because I'm small and young, I can be scared or pushed around on the track. They try to put me off by saying something nasty in the middle of a race, or they bump my pony deliberately, or they cross in front of me, causing me to snatch up my reins.

The red fire flares. They learn quickly that I can look after myself and my pony on the racetrack. The word spreads: don't mess with that one. She's a nutter. They keep clear of me.

My average is good. Most kid jockeys are too excited, too tense, to let their ponies settle, to wait for the moment, to be cool. I specialize in the longer-distance races—the ones where tactics count.

In the early days, Uncle Bill insists that I wear the same clothes, with the same tattered riding hat, that I wore on Dusty's day of glory. He can get fancy odds on a hairy nag ridden by a small, dark-haired nothing of a girl who looks as if she should be out herding sheep on a farm.

The regulars are not taken in for long. I hear them

muttering as I go past—“There she is, the little scruff”—and some of the other jockeys start dressing down too, as if what they wear will help their luck. Just for a while, untidy is the hot new look on the pony-racing circuit.

I love it all—when I am in the paddock, slipping my feet into the stirrups, checking the girths, getting the feel of the pony I’m riding (the way it moves, how fit and how strong, whether it is brave or scared). Soon the human world, with all its worries and problems, falls away. I enjoy the best view in the world: a racetrack, seen through the pricked ears of a pony.

“You know why I like you, girl?” In the car, on the way home from the races, he turns down the music and looks across at me as he drives.

“I hadn’t noticed you did like me, Uncle Bill.”

“You’re a funny little thing—not much to look at, a scruffy, snot-nosed kid with as much charm as an alley cat.”

“Thanks.”

“No offense, but you’ll never have what Michaela has. She just has to smile and doors open for her. She’s got the personality thing. Her mum had it too. It’s what I fell for.”

“I’ve got personality too.” I say the words quietly.

“Different kind of personality, doll. Everything about you says you’re just another no-hope kid. Your father did a runner. Your mother, God bless her, was a bit too easily led for her own good. You’ve got zilch going for you. And yet you’re a winner. It’s in your bones.” He looks across and smiles. “D’you know who you remind me of?”

“Surprise me, Uncle Bill.”

“Me. Yours truly. You’re a chip off the old block.”

“Oh, great. This just gets better and better.”

He laughs, and I can’t help it—I find myself laughing too.

I’m fourteen. I’ve skipped school. I’m doing what I was put on earth to do.

Riding.

Racing.

Winning.