

Second Chance

'Jenny, what shall we do? This is the last day for registration at Blair Castle Horse Trials.'

'Oh Mum, it's so unfair. And she was doing so well.'

'Well, there's no point in risking Pheona now, not with the Nationals coming up. What about Coppy? Do you think you could manage him?'

'Copenhagen', the six-year-old gelding had been bought as a successor to Pheona who was now eleven and had become increasingly injury prone. Keeping two topflight horses at livery was expensive, increasingly beyond Karen's budget now she was separated from Daniel.

As if he knew he was being considered for a reprieve, the big horse trotted over to join mother and daughter. Putting his head down, he nuzzled into Karen's jacket pocket, looking for a treat.

Jenny stood up, still looking at Pheona's left fetlock, held slightly off the ground. Despite many weeks of rest and several large Vet bills, the old girl was not making progress. The teenager turned to Copenhagen and he leaned forward, offering his ears which she scratched, bringing a burbled neigh in response.

'Well Coppy, what do you think? Shall we have another go?'

'No, Jenny, let me take him over the jumps a few times, get him going. Once he's settled, he'll be fine.'

'Mum, *please*, I need to do this for myself, right from the start. Anyway, if you break that right collarbone again, where will we be? Who needs a one-armed physiotherapist?'

'But Jenny, what if he throws you again? It was the worst day of my life. You were ten hours in a coma. I thought I might lose you.'

'Mum, that was last year, ancient history. I've grown taller and stronger and I'm not frightened of him now, honest. He's settled down quite a bit, you said so yourself just last week. And when he goes for it, Coppy's just as brilliant as Pheona.'

'Yes, he's settled down, but only a little. He still worries me. You can still see that wild streak in him when he's in company with other horses he's showing off, *not unlike somebody else I know!*

Karen winced and turned away from her daughter's accusing eyes, knowing that her 'perfect lone-parent' mask had slipped again.

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'Aw Mum, you *promised* you would never ever bring that up again. I only did that Hi-Ho Silver thing once, didn't I?'

'OK, Jenny, let's do it. You tack him up and I'll set the heights to medium, just to get him back into the way of it all. If this session goes well, I'll register you at Blair with Coppy but please, no more dramatics, just take it nice and easy.'

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The tannoy rang out:

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, here we are at last, the final of the under-sixteen show jumping competition, down to the last nine competitors, all with clear rounds. To start us off, we have Jennifer Wellington riding her younger horse called Copenhagen. It's great to have them back after last year's incident and we wish her every success.

In time-honoured tradition we start with Jenny, currently the slowest combo at three minutes and forty-nine seconds, chasing the leader Xavier Scott on Mansfield Star. Xavier is leading the field with a fantastic time of three minutes twenty-one.

So, let's have a big hand for Jenny and Copenhagen."

Jenny leaned forward:

'Coppy, let's show them. Now we know these jumps, let's take the brakes off, eh?'

The big horse whinnied, kicked back his heels then surged forward, crossing the start line at a steady canter.

Karen, standing beside her estranged husband Daniel, squealed:

'*Oh my God, Daniel, she's doing it again. Look at her!*

Quietly, under his breath, PC Daniel Wellington said:

'Yes, just like her mother.'

Copenhagen flew over the jumps and screeched round every turn.

As the combo steady for the final fence, the digital clock was showing two minutes fifty-seven.

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The crowd was screaming.

Karen was clutching Daniel's hand to her chest, unable to breathe.

Jenny shouted:

'Go for it Coppy, let's moon jump it!'

They flew over the huge fence and raced across the finishing line with a perfect round and a time of three minutes eight seconds.

Jenny kicked her heels and Coppy responded, rearing up on his hind legs as she called out:

'Hi-Ho, Silver, Away!'

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Jenny and Copenhagen disappeared into the competitor area.

Her parents, now the centre of attention for the other horsey families, turned to each other and hugged, rather self-consciously.

'Well, Karen, how are you getting on?'

'Just fine thanks. So, I hear you and Sara have split up?'

'Yes. Right out of the blue, kept me at the doorstep of her penthouse. Apparently, I had become *"insensitive and unsupportive"*. She had already packed all my bags and threw them at my feet with:

"Here, take your junk, loser. Get out of my life and never cross my path again".'

'When was this?'

'About six months ago, something like that. After a few nights in a *Travel Lodge*, I moved back into my old room with Mum and Dad. Even Rory gets better treatment than me.'

'Rory?'

'Mum's miniature dachshund. He's a *'rescue'*, a lockdown dog. Highly strung and frequently incontinent but Mum is besotted. Rory was old Mrs Bradley's dog but she

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caught Covid and passed away. There was no one else to take him. You know what Mum's like, too soft-hearted to let him go to the dog pound.'

'I thought Myra didn't approve of pets of any kind.'

'Well, she adores Rory but with her arthritis, Dad has to do the walking and poo picking up and he hates it.'

'So, you and Sara, it's definitely over, is it?'

'Yes. Finished. Look, Karen, honestly, I'm so sorry about hurting you and Jenny. She must hate me for what I did.'

'Well, no, actually, Jenny doesn't know anything about Sara. Not from me, anyway. Actually, I haven't told anyone - too ashamed at losing you.'

'Could you possibly forgive me, do you think?'

'Don't rush me, please. Anyway, Daniel, you look fit on it. You've lost that wee beer belly. Are you back running again?'

'Yip. Better than watching soaps on TV in a smelly flat in Broughty Ferry.'

'And Sara? Has she found another married man to lure into her fancy penthouse?'

'No. Sara's long gone, sold up and moved back to Glasgow's West End. Turns out on the back of her promotion to Inspector she landed a new job at Gartcosh as PA to Chief Superintendent Milo Jovovich, Head of Serious and Organised Crime.'

'Ah, so that's why she dumped you!'

'Yes, no need to pick my brains anymore. And, as a lowly PC plod, I'd have been a drag on her career progression. The word is that she and Milo are an item now. The wags say she's climbing the greasy Pole.'

Karen giggled, 'Daniel, that's so rude. So, so rude.'

'Yeah, and she dissed me with a terrible leaving report, said I was "suspect" and "too close to my informants".'

'Ah! That makes sense too, Daniel, so she can claim all the glory for the Brannigan bust herself.'

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'Yeah, so, bang went my hope of Sergeant stripes. But, hey, it's worked out OK, in the end. I moved from Dundee to Perth and I'm training to be a digital cop which means I'm office based most of the time with only the occasional late night or weekend. It turns out that I'm quite good at it and my new boss, Superintendent Jim Prentice has put me up for Sergeant again. My Board is next week.'

'So, Daniel, for months you have been driving right passed us in Auchterarder every day on your way from Broughty Ferry?'

'Yes, I always give a wee toot at the turn off. The new job is a cushy number really and interesting too. I really like it. And no more skulking around the dark streets of Dundee in the wind and rain tracking down drug dealers or long hours sitting in unmarked cars and vans.'

'Ha! And no more slipping under the duvet with Sara Croxley whenever my back was turned.'

'OK. OK. Point taken. But admit it Karen, you and Jenny were almost never home at weekends, were you? Always away competing. I mean, I was just an afterthought in your lives, wasn't I?'

'No, Daniel Wellington, you were never 'just an afterthought'. You are still the only man I've ever wanted. You broke my heart when I saw you kissing her in that doorway.'

'Well, anyway. That's history, Karen. Please, can't we just let it go? Please?'

'Mmm. Perhaps. I'm not sure how it would go down with Jenny. Let's see how she feels about it.'

'Karen, Mum says you've stopped answering her texts since we split up. She's desperate to see Jenny, both of you. Dad is too. They keep asking me why we've split.'

'Yes, well, I didn't know what to say to Myra. From what she said in her early texts, she seemed to be in the dark about your fancy woman. To be totally honest, I've been deleting her text messages unread. Tell her I'm sorry, please. I really miss your Mum and Dad and I know Jenny does too.'

'Karen, I know it's a big, big ask but do you think we could get together again. Give it another go?'

'Maybe, but we need to get Jenny onside. She doesn't know why I sent you away. To her, it's all my fault. I heard her talking to her friend Barbara on *FaceTime*. They have decided I'm 'early menopausal'. *Hey, look out, here she comes!*

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With Copenhagen rubbed down and back in his horse box with his nose bag on, Jenny returned, saw her Dad and raced towards him, throwing her arms around his neck and crushing into him.

'Dad! Oh Dad, it's so great to see you. Did you see us out there? Coppy was brill, wasn't he? And look at the leader board, I've still got the fastest time.'

The Tannoy announced the start of Xavier's jump off round, his attempt to beat Jenny's amazing time.

The early fences went well but skidding too tightly into the second last fence, Xavier did not get his run-up right. Star's right hoof trailed and clipped the top bar which rocked but did not fall. However, the effect was to unsettle both horse and rider. As they lined up for the final fence, Xavier lost his right stirrup and Star skittered to his left, careening towards the fence sideways, stopping short of hitting it.

In a low voice, Karen said:

'A refusal! Poor Xavier. Tough luck. Jenny, he might have just caught you but for that clip at the second last.'

'No, Mum, he was no where near my time. Were you not watching the splits? I would have won anyway, wouldn't I Dad?'

'Almost certainly.'

Karen said:

'Jenny, you had better go and get Coppy ready for the presentation.'

'OK. But Dad, you're not going, are you? You can stay, can't you? Can't he Mum?'

'Yes, of course, if he wants.'

'So Dad, why not trail us back home and we can get pizzas or a curry and celebrate. I'll ring Barbara, ask if she's free, OK Mum?'

Jenny was already off, trotting back to get Copenhagen ready.

'Are you OK with that, Daniel?'

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'Sounds like a plan. Thank you. Yes, let's celebrate.'