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Opening extract from

The Glory

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PROLOGUE

Jonas B Ellington had the worst characteristic with which any businessman could be cursed: he was a romantic. He'd lasted just one semester at Harvard Business School, where the only lecturer not tempted to throttle him had suggested he pursue an alternate career in painting, writing or, failing that, landscape gardening.

Jonas had done none of those things. Instead he'd invested the $1,000 left to him by his father, another romantic, in creating a cheap, environmentally friendly floor cleaner he'd first mixed up in his kitchen. He'd reasoned that even in the toughest times people still need to clean their floors and that the cheaper the product, the more likely they were to buy it. The environmental bit was equally obvious to him. Jonas spent every minute he could in nature and was mystified by anyone who didn't have as

their life-mission a desire to save the planet for future generations.

It turned out that millions of people thought the same way, if not about trees and animals then certainly about low-cost floor wash. Not having a wife to object, Jonas transformed his kitchen into a makeshift factory. From there, his Green Power cleaning product company moved to a defunct Mexican restaurant, and now it filled an entire grain warehouse in Dinosaur, Colorado.

Jonas's business acumen had never improved, but at forty-seven he had an unerring instinct for making money. He'd given a small fortune to charity but still he was dissatisfied. As he sat in his office one Friday afternoon, he thought nostalgically of his grandfather, who'd enriched Jonas's boyhood with thrilling fireside tales of the Old West. They'd shared a passion for wild mustangs.

His granddad was fond of quoting Frank T Hopkins, a nineteenth century horseman believed by many to be the greatest distance rider of all time. 'You can't beat mustang intelligence in the entire equine race. These animals have had to shift themselves for generations. They had to work out their own destiny or be destroyed. Those that survived were animals of superior intelligence.'

On Jonas's office wall was an oil painting of Hopkins competing in the so-called Longest Race. Hopkins claimed that, in 1886, he rode his mustang stallion Joe, from Galveston, Texas to Rutland, Vermont – a distance of 1,800 miles – in just thirty-one days, thirteen ahead of the second-placed rider.

Jonas tipped back his chair and studied the picture. Opinion was divided as to whether Hopkins was a conman and a fraud. There were those who were convinced that he'd no more won four hundred distance races than he'd walked on the moon. To Jonas, it didn't matter either way. Mythical or not, he loved the idea of Hopkins pitting his wits and the strength and fiery will of his mustang against the elements.

There was a knock at the door. In came Wayne Turnbull, the new clerk, a thin man with a dramatically receding hairline.

'Scantily-clad celebrities,' mused Jonas.

The clerk was startled. 'Sir?'

Jonas righted his chair with a crash. 'Sorry - Wayne, is it? – I was just thinking aloud. Not about unclothed pop stars and actresses, I hasten to add, but about society's obsession with talentless Z list wannabes, famous for

being famous. Sometimes I long for the return of the bad old days – you know, the Wild West. I don't mean gunfighters and ambushes but the spirit of it.'

The clerk perked up. For reasons of his own, Turnbull regularly yearned for a time when the law was a crooked sheriff with a tin badge. He regarded his boss with more interest.

Jonas wore a dreamy expression. He gestured at the painting. 'Take Frank Hopkins. In the 19th century, he claimed to have raced a horse 1,800 miles across the United States, averaging 57 miles a day. No historical proof so it's probably nonsense, but that's not the point. Endurance riding is immensely popular today, but with the exception of the 250 mile Shahzada in Australia, the maximum distance of most races is around 100 miles. It's still a tough test, mind you. It still pushes competitors to the limit, but it can't be compared to the challenges faced by the distance horsemen of the Old West.'

Turnbull hated horses. In his experience, one end bit, the other end kicked and dispensed manure and the middle was both dangerous and uncomfortable. Still he saw no harm at all in indulging the boss's whims. One never knew when it might lead to a pay rise.

‘Seems to me, sir, that someone should revive Hopkins’ race. Retrace the route or something.’

He stopped. Jonas’s eyes were lit with a diamond gleam. When he spoke his voice actually shook.

‘Wayne, you’re a genius. A total genius. We’ll revive the race. Not the original one. Not enough romance. Galveston and Alabama have their attractions, but they’re very built up. For our race, we’ll devise a route that cuts through the heart of the West - from Colorado to Oregon via Wyoming and Idaho.’

Jonas did a quick search on his laptop. ‘Twelve hundred miles. Now that sounds like a proper race. What do you think, Wayne? Green Power could sponsor it. We’ll offer an incentive worthy of the challenge. A gold buckle with an emblem of Hopkins riding a mustang on it, plus $100,000. No, better make it $250,000. Winner takes all.’

Turnbull’s mouth began to water. A cool quarter of a million dollars for a horse race. The boss was clearly mad.

‘I’d need a chief organiser, Wayne. A Right Hand Man. Any experience with setting up events?’

Turnbull took a moment to reflect. It was true he’d

organised the botched jewellery store robbery that had earned him and his accomplices a lengthy spell in Colorado State Penitentiary, but that wasn't down to any failure of leadership. It had to do with the unforeseen imbecility of the getaway driver who'd dropped the car keys down a storm drain as they were attempting to escape. Were it not for that, his carefully masterminded plan would have seen him sipping cocktails on a beach.

'As a matter of fact …'

'Consider yourself hired, Wayne. Before the year is out, we'll make this race a reality. It's May now. We could aim for October, on the cusp between fall and winter. Then the weather will come into play.'

'Good thinking, sir. There's nothing like floods, snow and a gale or two to sort the men from the boys.'

'And the women from the girls, Wayne. This is the 21st century and this is about finding the best rider. There are as many gifted horsewomen as there are men. More probably. I want it to appeal to teenagers too – the kind of youngsters who helped build this country. Too many teenagers today lack purpose. They're fixated with texting and the Internet. The closest they get to nature is a photograph on their screensaver. They need a real

challenge. Our race will give any kid over sixteen a chance to shine.'

His pale face glowed. 'What should we call it? A great race needs a great name.'

'The Green Power Distance Derby?' suggested Turnbull, who'd never been good with words.

Jonas's eye fell on the miniature US flag poking out of a mug on his desk. Old Glory. 'What do people race for, Wayne?'

'Money,' Turnbull said at once.

Jonas frowned. 'No, Wayne. Horses, people and even huskies race for the glory of it. They want to cross the finish line knowing that they've fought with every breath and are the best of the best.'

'I like it, sir. It has a certain ring.'

The dreamy expression returned to Jonas's face. 'The Glory it is.'

1.

Dovecote Equestrian Centre, Surrey, England

On a blustery September afternoon as bright as a new-minted coin, a teenage rider cantered towards a jump. Alexandra Blakewood was exercising her eighth horse of the day but there was nothing in her body language to suggest that she was in any way fatigued. She balanced lightly in the saddle as the dark bay thoroughbred cleared the double with room to spare and hurtled towards the next jump.

This was the part where everyone aside from Clare, Dovecote's owner and chief instructor, lost control of him, but Alex used a series of half halts to slow the horse enough to take the oxer, repeated the process with next two jumps as he attempted to rocket between each,

and completed the circuit with only one rolled pole. As she eased him to a walk, patting and praising him, her grin was so wide anyone would have thought she'd just won at Olympia.

She rides like an angel, Clare thought ruefully, well aware that in every other area of Alex's life she was anything but. At Dovecote Alex was a model pupil, hungry (almost desperate, Clare sometimes thought) to learn, hardworking and the only fifteen-year-old she knew even remotely talented enough or committed enough to volunteer to school seven or eight horses every Sunday, which she did come rain or shine. Nor did she shy away from dealing with difficult horses. If anything, those were the ones she bonded with most.

But Alex had a tendency to ride recklessly and take too many chances. If she was told off, she became mutinous, although she was careful never to be rude. She knew that Clare operated a zero-tolerance policy when it came to insolence or swearing. From the terse exchanges Clare had overheard between Alex and her mum, she did not exercise the same restraint at home. Far from it. Clare had a feeling that trouble was brewing in the Blakewood household and that when it did it would come with

hurricane force.

'I can't think why Mrs Priestly complains about him,' she said as she rode up to the gate. 'He jumps like a dream. Maybe she'd be better off with an old cob. Personally, I like horses with a bit of fire.'

Clare hid her amusement with a scowl. 'There's a difference between a hot horse who loves to jump and one who's a health hazard to himself and his rider. Besides, he'll never improve his shape over fences unless you spend more time doing lateral work with him. He's weak in all the crucial muscles. As for your position on that last jump…'

'Yeah, but…'

Alex got no further. Her stepfather's 'winter gold' Jaguar came racing into the car park and skidded to a halt on the gravel. He exited the vehicle at high speed, followed by Alex's mother.

'I think they're looking for you,' began Clare, but she was talking to herself. Alex was galloping away in the other direction, approaching the first jump dangerously fast.

The hurricane Clare feared had just blown in.

* * *

‘What is it that we’re not giving you, Alex?’ demanded her stepfather. ‘Tell me that. I’d really like to know. So far this year we’ve bought you a second iPhone after you dropped the first in the bath, not to mention a new laptop and a wardrobe full of clothes and riding gear. We’ve also been on holiday to Devon and Tuscany and paid eye-wateringly expensive school fees.’

Despite repeated appeals not to do so, Alex sat with her feet up on the armchair. She buried her face in her knees to stifle a yawn. Her caramel-coloured hair, long and unruly, was still damp from her riding hat. Arguments with her parents always followed the same pattern. Her mum and stepdad would start out clearly furious but doing their best to be reasonable. Why, they’d want to know, had she done whatever it was she’d done.

At her last school, the teachers had been remarkably tolerant. Alex had regularly played truant and drawn horses on her exam papers with few consequences. At school, that is. Her parents were another story. Alex was prepared to accept that drawing eventers on test papers was not a proven route to academic success, but

she thought her mum should have been able to see past the truancy and appreciate that Alex had not been smoking, sneaking off with boys, or worse, she'd simply been holed up in a storeroom with a book. Instead her mum started leaving pamphlets about the catastrophic effects of taking drugs around the house.

At her current school they had no sense of humour. The head teacher had blown a gasket over Alex's latest escapade. Personally, Alex thought it was quite ingenious. When a new PE teacher started at the school Alex had reasoned that if she never showed up to a single class, he'd never know she was missing. Since she already bunked off music and drama, it meant she got to spend an hour or more most days with two horses in a nearby field. She'd overheard Clare telling someone that they belonged to a couple of bankers who worked long hours and rarely exercised them.

To begin with, she'd simply sat under a tree or, if it was raining, in a stable, reading a novel, but over the course of the term she'd progressed to experimenting with different Horse Whisperer-type techniques and riding the horses bareback. The whole thing had worked like a charm until the previous Friday when the owner of horses

had come home unexpectedly. Alex had managed to evade her grasp, but the uniform was a giveaway. It hadn't taken the school long to discover the culprit. Hence the current row.

'I know you love me,' said Alex tiredly. 'And I know that I have everything I could ever wish for – apart from the thing I want most, a horse – and, of course, you're the world's most perfect parents, blah, blah, blah.'

'Don't be insolent,' said her stepfather. 'Why do you want to upset me and hurt your mum?'

As always, Alex had the feeling of watching herself from a distance, as if she were staring in at the contents of a goldfish bowl. She saw a slender girl in black breeches and a baggy V-necked grey sweater hugging herself defensively in a room straight out of *Country Living,* all overstuffed white furniture, great vases of flowers and artfully arranged rugs and paintings. It was so clean that once a week the cleaner had to spend her whole four hours dreaming up things to do.

On the sofa, her mum, Natalie, and Alex's stepdad of two years were rigid with agitation. Jeremy, who was something big in insurance, was in his version of weekend casual – ironed jeans, pin-striped shirt and shiny black

shoes.

'I'm sorry,' said Alex. 'What more can I say? I've already apologised a million times. How was I supposed to know that the owner of the horses would sprain an ankle running after me? I'm sorry that she'd hurt but I had no way of predicting that.'

'No, but you shouldn't have trespassed on her property and ridden her horses in the first place,' said Jeremy. 'You should have focused on your schoolwork like everyone else. If I hadn't known her husband from the golf club, we might have had a lawsuit on our hands.'

Her mum regarded her despairingly. 'Why do you do it, darling?'

Alex stared out of the window at the landscaped garden, every inch of it tamed into submission. Why *did* she do it? The truth was, she didn't know. Partly it was to hide how shy she was and uncomfortable in her own skin. She'd never really felt as if she fitted in and that feeling had grown worse after the divorce.

When she played truant to be with horses, she got into trouble, but what mattered was that just for a while she felt less lonely. Just for a moment she felt the way only horses could make her feel. Warm inside. Needed.

Worth something.

For a while she felt less angry too, which was good because the slow burning fury that had started as an ember after her father had walked out of the door four years earlier now raged in her like a forest fire. Having her mum weeping and fuming one day and then planning her wedding to Jeremy the next, hadn't helped either.

Slowly, Alex had retreated inside herself. Her school reports painted a picture of a bright but withdrawn teenager who needed to try harder. Her parents fretted that she was distant. Cold. Unemotional about things that she should care about, such as exams. Too emotional about things that were unimportant, such as horses.

As if anything could matter more than horses.

'Answer your mother,' ordered Jeremy. 'Why do you do it? I mean, you're nearly sixteen. It's high time you grew up. Why are you always in trouble?'

Alex shrugged. 'It's a laugh.'

Jeremy jumped to his feet, black hair bristling. 'Well, let's see how funny you find it when your riding lessons stop. As of this minute, you're grounded for three months. No, there's no point in appealing to your mum. She and I have already discussed this. You will not be

allowed near any riding school until you learn to behave.'

Alex began to shake. 'No, please, anything but that. I'll do extra chores and study for hours every weekend. I'll work myself to the bone to get As in all my exams. I *need* to ride. I'll die if I don't.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Alex,' snapped her mum. 'Anyway, we don't have a choice. Clare had a word with me while you were collecting your bag from the tack room. I'm afraid you're no longer welcome at Dovecote after the stunt you pulled racing off on Mrs Priestly's thoroughbred and forcing Clare to cancel a lesson to go after you. She's not having the health of her horses and the reputation of her riding school ruined by a single pupil, even if you are one of the most talented.'

'And that's another thing,' said Jeremy, drowning out Alex's protests. 'Since you've demonstrated yet again that you can't be trusted, we are not going to take you to Paris next weekend. Nor are we going to leave you alone. You'll be staying with Rich and Barbara. You could do a lot worse than to watch how their daughters Chloe and Tiffany behave and try to emulate them.'

It was all Alex could do to stop herself from screaming. Rich was another big tuna in insurance and he

and his identikit wife and daughters, the three of whom glowed as if they'd been scrubbed with a brillo pad and fed on nothing but organic milk and honey from birth, were the most boring people in the universe.

After failing to persuade her parents to relent either about Paris or her riding lessons, Alex stormed up to her room, where she cried for over an hour. France she could live without but horses were her whole world. They were the first thing she thought about every morning and the last thing she thought about at night. To keep her from them was cruel beyond words.

There was no doubt in Alex's mind that, between them, her mum and Jeremy had ruined her life. By taking away the thing she loved most, they'd destroyed the best thing that ever happened to her.

Sitting up, she dried her eyes on her sleeve. She pulled her laptop out from under her pillow. The screen purred to life, casting a blue halo across the bed. Alex smiled as she opened up Facebook. She'd make her parents sorry. Boy, would they be sorry.