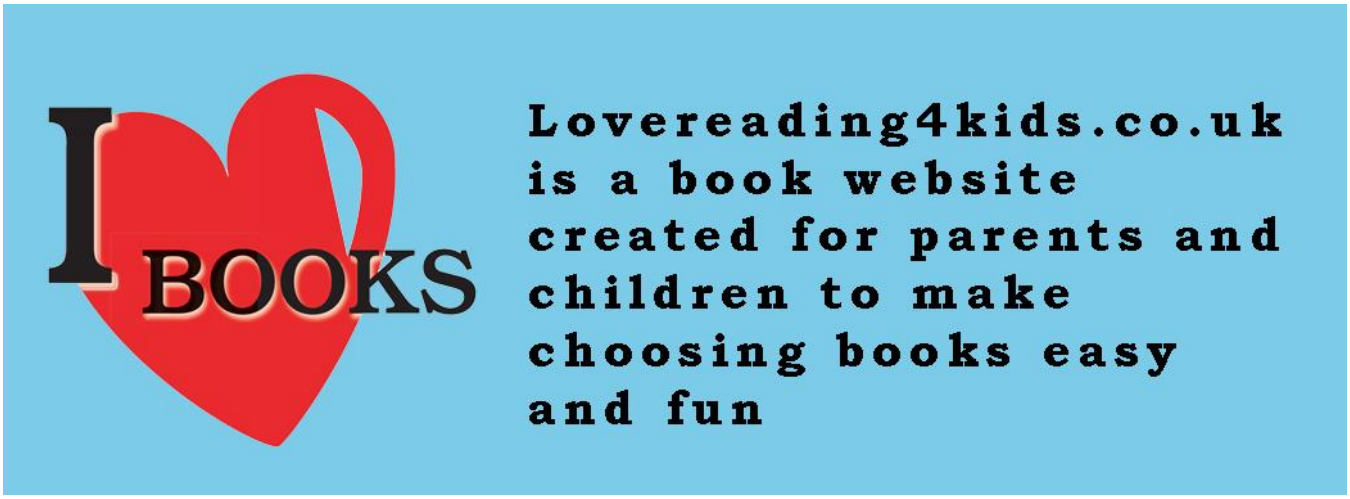


Opening extract from

Blue Moon

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Lovereading4kids.co.uk

To Jay Jay. May all his dreams come true.

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Chapter 1
A Secret Place

Anna rode Blue Moon across the creek. The hot sun shone down, and the water sparkled and splashed against her horse's legs.

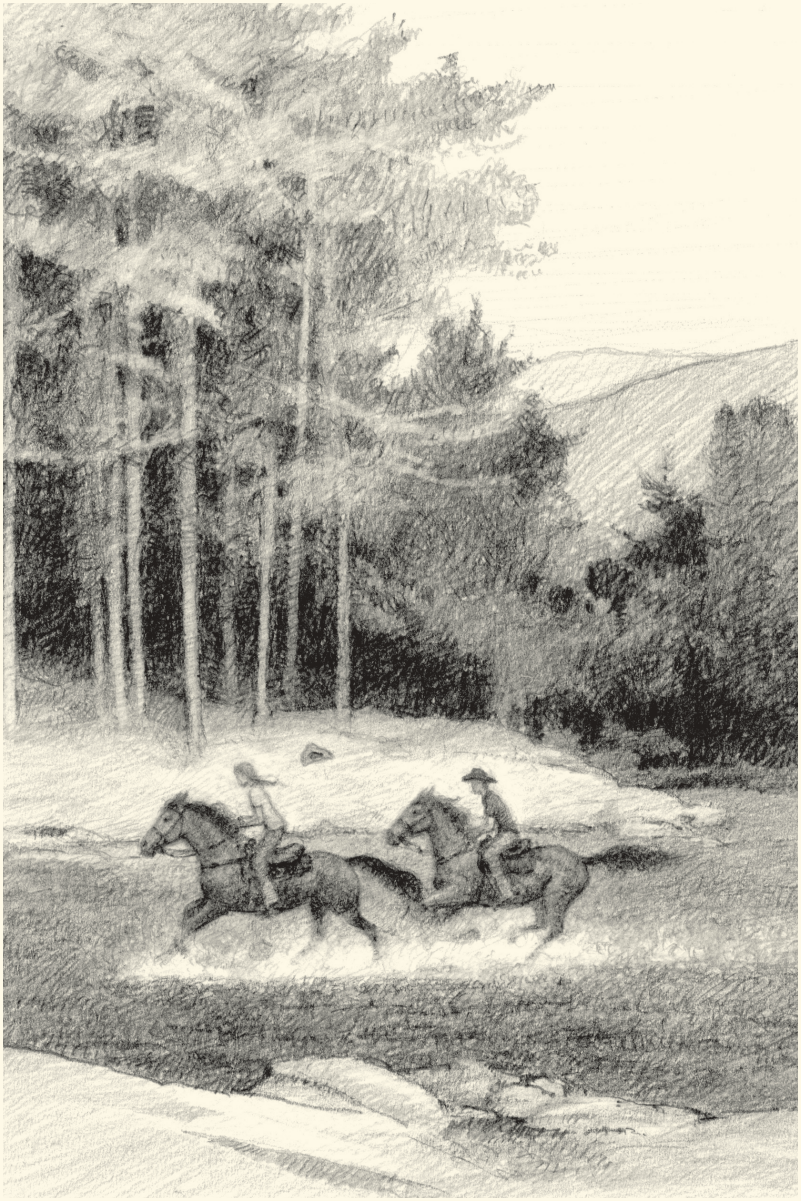
"Stormy and I will race you to Table Rock," Lee told her with a grin.

"Across the creek?" Anna asked.

"Sure," Lee said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. Let's go!"





Anna's legs squeezed Blue Moon into action. He surged forward, ahead of Lee's grey horse. Water came up to Blue Moon's belly, and a cold spray landed on Anna's arms and cheeks. Her hat flew from her head. "Yee-hah!" she yelled.

Lee and Stormy were close behind. Stormy's hooves clattered over the smooth stones on the bed of the creek.

Blue Moon went faster around the bend. Now Table Rock was in sight. All Anna had to do was sit tight. "We won!" she cried as they crossed the finish line.

"Yeah, OK." Lee laughed. "Good job I caught your hat before it landed in the creek!" he said as he handed it to her.

Anna's T-shirt and jeans were soaked, her boots filled with water, but at least her hat was dry as she jammed it back on her head. "That was fun," she said.



Blue Moon seemed to agree. He pranced on the spot and tossed his dark mane. The water from the creek had turned his brown coat almost black.

"It was fun because I let you win," Lee joked, as he turned Stormy up the sandy bank. "Next time you and Blue Moon won't stand a chance."

"Hah!" Anna scoffed. She leaned forward to pat her horse's warm, damp neck. "Don't listen to him," she told Blue Moon. Then she called to Lee. "How about we go to the secret clearing? We still have time before I head home for supper."

"Race you!" Lee crowed. "You won't beat me this time."

Lee didn't wait for Blue Moon to join him on the trail. Instead, he kicked Stormy into action and galloped on up the rocky hillside towards some pine trees.

"That's not fair!" Anna cried. Blue Moon was fast, but not that fast.

"Yee-hah!" Lee cried from high above.

Anna steered Blue Moon out of the creek and then the two horses raced up the mountain. The sun shone and the young riders laughed.

'Life sure doesn't get much better than this,' Anna thought.

☾

The clearing was Anna and Lee's secret place – it was a meadow in the middle of pine trees that no one knew about. Silver aspens grew at its rim and Blue Moon and Stormy could graze on the sun-dappled grass there while their riders sat in the warm. Anna and Lee had found it by accident three years earlier and told no one. It was special, they'd decided. Just for them and the horses.



"The thing I like about riding a horse is you can't force him to do something he doesn't want to," Lee said. His face was thoughtful. He'd pulled his hat forward to keep the sun from his freckled face and he leaned against a rock as he watched the horses eat.

"It's team work," Anna agreed.

She and Lee always agreed about horses. He was her neighbour from Bear Creek Ranch and they were the same age – 12 – and shared the same point of view. "Blue Moon trusts me and I trust him," Anna said. "End of story."

It was true. Anna trusted her horse and loved him more than anything in the world and she always had.

"Hey, did you see the time?" Lee said as he looked at his watch. "It's almost six o'clock."

"Whoa!" Anna jumped up and ran towards Blue Moon. "Supper's at 6.30. I'll be in trouble if I'm late."

Seconds later, Anna had jumped in the saddle and she and Blue Moon were racing past the tall pine trees in the direction of home.

"See ya later, alligator!" Lee called after her, as he took up Stormy's reins and hopped into the saddle.

Anna turned and waved. "In a while, crocodile!" It was what they always said to each other – a daft joke, started ages ago by Anna's mum, Kerry.

There was a lot of ground for Anna and Blue Moon to cover – out of the trees and down the mountain, then two miles along the dirt road to the cattle guard at the gate to Low Ridge Ranch. But Blue Moon was sure footed and steady, as well as speedy. He would carry Anna safely home.



"What's wrong?" Anna asked. She'd kicked off her boots and left them on the ranch house porch. Now she sat – out of breath – at the supper table with her mum and dad. But, even after the whirlwind ride home, she knew straight away that something bad had happened.

Kerry didn't look up from her plate. Her face was pale and serious.

Anna's dad, Rex, frowned. "Late again, Anna," he muttered.

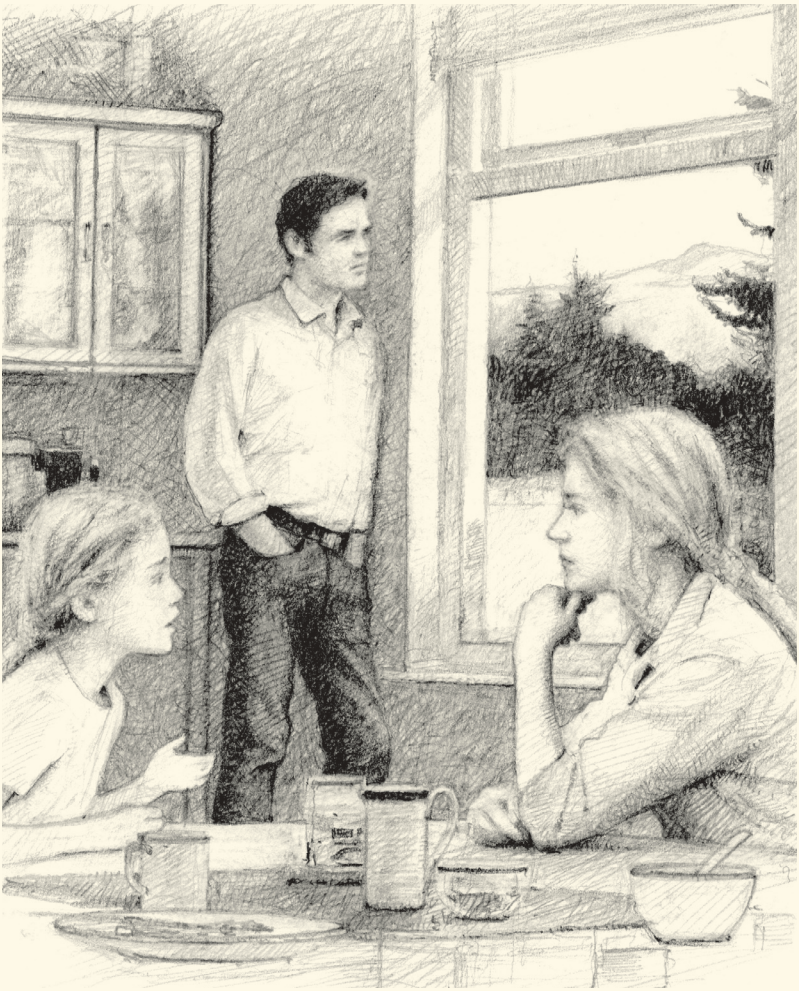
"Sorry," Anna said. "I lost track of the time."

"Did you put Blue Moon out in the meadow with the other horses?" he asked.

"Sure. And I gave him water and extra feed. He's one happy horse."

OK, if being late for supper was what this was about, Anna didn't feel too worried. "Sorry," she said again.

Rex shook his head, then he stood up and went to stare out of the window at the mountains.



"We've had some news," Kerry said, and her voice was so low that Anna struggled to catch her words. "I went to see the doctor today. She says I have to go to the hospital."

Anna's heart thudded and seemed to stop before it started up again faster than normal. "What doctor?" she asked. "When?"

"On Wednesday, the day after tomorrow. They found a lump – a tumour in my stomach. They have to take it out."

Anna stared at her mum. Kerry was never sick. Her job was training horses, which kept her really fit. She was lean and strong and wore her fair hair in a braid down her back, like Anna. She spent her days jumping in and out of the saddle like a teenager.

"A tumour," Anna repeated in a daze. "But what does that mean?"

"We don't know yet," Rex told her. "But it does mean you'll have to go and stay in Denver with Mary Curtis."

"Why?" Anna almost shouted. "For how long? I don't want to do that." Her heart thumped against her ribs. Mary Curtis was Kerry's friend from way back. She lived in the heart of the city, with skyscrapers and office blocks and traffic all around.

"It's for the best," Kerry said. "Just for a few weeks, I promise."

"But what about you?" Anna said. "And what about school?" Anna took classes in Hot Springs with Lee for two days a week. The rest of the time her mum taught her at home.

"Your mum will be fine." Rex's voice was firm. "And there are schools in Denver."



"What about Blue Moon?" Anna felt her voice – and her heart – almost break as she spoke his name. "Who'll take care of him?"

There was silence as Rex glanced at Kerry.

"Mum?"

"Dad?"

"The horse isn't top of our list right now." Rex's words broke the silence. He almost shouted his answer as he strode from the room. "Your mum is the one we have to think about. Not Blue Moon. Do I make myself clear?"