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Opening extract from

Lost Riders

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Preface

A city called Rahimyar Khan lies on the Indus plain in the Punjab region of Pakistan. The area is an important route for migrating birds, and a magnet for hunters. In the early 1970s, the ruling family of the United Arab Emirates – the sheikhs – built a palace at Rahimyar Khan. They have visited it for the annual hunting season ever since. Seeing how poor the area is, the sheikhs have built a big hospital, roads, housing colonies and even an airport to benefit the local people.

Back home in the Gulf, the sheikhs' most popular sport is camel racing. The fastest camels are small and light, and run best under little jockeys. In their eagerness to win the fabulous prizes on offer, camel owners began to employ smaller and smaller children as jockeys. Some were only three or four years old.

But where could such little boys be found to do this dangerous work? One obvious answer was Pakistan. Hundreds of thousands of Pakistani workers were already employed in the Gulf, and the links were strong. Unscrupulous traffickers toured the villages around Rahimyar Khan, persuading parents to send their children to the Gulf. Dazzled by the sheikhs' wealth and generosity, tricked by false promises, living in dire poverty and desperate for the wages that children could earn, many parents agreed to send their small sons. By 2005, at least three thousand boys were employed in hundreds of camel

farms. They came not only from Pakistan but also from Bangladesh, India, Sudan and the Yemen.

The children were bewildered, traumatized, subject to harsh punishments, underfed and in constant danger of injury. They received no schooling and little basic care. An international outcry began to build.

I first heard about the young camel jockeys from a friend who worked for Swedish Save the Children in Pakistan.

'Come on over,' she said. 'Let me take you to meet some of the boys who've come home.'

So I went to Pakistan.

I'll never forget my first sight of young camel jockeys. They stared at me unsmilingly out of old-young eyes. One by one, as their confidence grew, they told me their stories. I went to visit their homes, bumping from village to village on the back of a little motorbike, which Mr Tayyab, my translator, expertly steered around the potholes. We sat on string beds in courtyards, under neem trees, in little shops and living rooms, and I met the boys' parents and sisters and teachers. I even met a one-time trafficker, who regretted his past involvement in the trade of children.

Later I went to Dubai and met some camel racers. They proudly showed me the robots they now use instead of live jockeys, and I watched these little machines perform at a thrilling camel race. I was assured that no children are now employed, that strict laws are being implemented and that the practice has stopped throughout the Gulf.

The Government of the UAE has made great progress in stamping out the exploitation of children, but questions remain. Of the three thousand young boys known to have been working on the camel farms in 2005, only one thousand have been returned to Pakistan. Where are the others? Did they slip home somehow, or are they still out there in those hot desert farms, no longer racing, but training the camels and doing other work? Have they been moved on to new forms of slavery? Or are they still working as jockeys in neighbouring countries where racing with small children still goes on away from prying eyes?

Lost Riders *is many stories rolled into one. My characters are called Rashid, Shari, Iqbal, Amal and Puppo. But here are the names of the real heroes, the little riders I met in Rahimyar Khan, who were trafficked to the Gulf, braved terrifying dangers and have now returned home to rebuild their young lives:*

Muhammad Asif, Sujjad Ali, Muhammad Imran, Bilal Ahmed, Saddam Hussain, Fiaz Ahmed, Sajid Hussain, Akhtar Ali, Muhammed Arif, Allah Ditta, Ali Raza, Yasir Ali, Shan Ali, Ahsan Ali.

This book is dedicated to them, and to the increasing numbers of children throughout the world who are being trafficked away from their homes and families to work in far countries, including the UK, in many forms of slavery.

Acknowledgements

Lost Riders owes its existence to Angela Coleridge, adviser to Save the Children Sweden in Peshawar. Without her inspiration and encouragement I would never have dared undertake this mission.

In Peshawar I was greatly assisted by Syed Mehmood Asghar (Country Manager) and Ghulam Qadri of Save the Children Sweden, who made my visit possible and gave me unstinting help.

In Rahimyar Khan I was welcomed and looked after by PRWSWO (Pakistan Rural Workers Social Welfare Organisation). Its Secretary General, Sabir Farhat, made great efforts to help me, putting his time and resources at my disposal. His advice was invaluable. Tariq Choudhry, the Project Officer, organized the details of my visit and was endlessly patient with my many demands. Muhammad Ahmad, the Social Organizer, and Muhammad Pervaiz Khan, the Job Skills Supervisor, set up my visits to the rural areas and gave me very useful information and advice.

Nothing could have been done without the help and enthusiasm of my facilitator, Muhammad Tayyab Farooq, who took me out to the villages and spent many hours in the arduous work of translation, scrupulously answering all my questions and aiding me with his deep knowledge of the boys' lives and backgrounds.

Wolfgang Friedl of Unicef helped to arrange my visit to Dubai. Once there, I was greatly assisted by Issam Jamil Azouri, spokesman of the UAE Ministry of the Interior, who drove me all the way to Abu Dhabi to attend a camel race, introduced me to the President of the Camel Racing Association and took me to a camel farm. His passionate commitment to ending the exploitation of children in the Gulf was inspirational.

In London, I was encouraged and given useful information by Catherine Turner of the Anti-Slavery Society.

I would like to thank them all.

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Rashid was squatting under the neem tree in the dusty courtyard of his home, pushing a pebble round in a circle while his tongue explored the empty space where another milk tooth had fallen out.

'Vroom!' he said. 'Vroo – vroo – No! Not like that, Shari.'

His four-year-old brother had been trying to copy him.

'Cars don't fly,' Rashid told him severely, pressing Shari's hand with the stone inside it down on to the ground. 'You have to push it along like this.'

Their mother was sitting cross-legged on a string bed outside the little two-roomed house at the far end of the courtyard. She was turning the handle of her ancient sewing machine. Its whirring stopped and started as she fed material through it.

Another sound came from the lane that ran along the far side of the courtyard wall. It made Rashid lift his head.

'That's a motorbike,' he said, looking at Shari to make sure he was impressed by this superior knowledge.

He ran across to the door and pulled it open. It squeaked on its ancient sagging hinges. As he looked out into the lane, the putter of the motorbike engine stopped.

'Uncle Bilal!' Rashid called out, running back to his mother. 'Ma, Uncle Bilal's come. With a man!'

Amir Bibi pushed the sewing machine aside and stood up, hastily drawing her scarf up to cover her hair.

'Who is it? What man? Not the landlord?'

Zabidah, Rashid's twelve-year-old sister, came out of the house.

'Take all this inside, Zabidah,' Amir Bibi said, dumping the bundle of clothes she'd been mending into the girl's arms.

Rashid and Shari were out in the lane, bouncing up and down with excitement.

'You've got a motorbike, Uncle Bilal,' Rashid said admiringly, watching as his uncle carefully parked the shiny black bike against the wall.

'I borrowed it.' Bilal took a mobile phone out of his pocket with a flourish and checked it ostentatiously for messages.

Rashid transferred his gaze to the man who had dismounted awkwardly from the back of the bike. He was short, with powerful shoulders. He wasn't wear-

ing the loose kameez shirt and shalwar trousers of the village men. His clothes were western: a shirt with buttons down the front, tight trousers and a belt with a shiny buckle. A big gold ring studded one thick finger and a row of pens was clipped to the inside of his shirt pocket. His hair was oiled back smartly from his forehead, and more hair sprouted from the backs of his hands.

He looked around as he stepped through the creaky old door from the lane into the courtyard, taking in the swirls of dead leaves in unswept corners, the second bed with its broken strings propped up against a wall and the chipped pots beside the outside oven.

He spoke quietly to Bilal, who nodded eagerly and ushered him across the courtyard to Amir Bibi, who was anxiously biting her lip. Few men had come to the house since her husband had died six months earlier. Rashid began to feel worried too, and moved closer to Shari, putting a protective arm round his shoulders.

The man sat down on the unbroken string bed beside the sewing machine, which Amir Bibi hadn't had time to move. He looked awkward, as if he was used to a proper chair. Amir Bibi sent Zabidah running inside for a glass of water, and the man drank it down in a single gulp. Then he lifted one foot and laid it across the other knee. Taking out of his pocket a string of beads, he began to play them through his

fingers, as if he had nothing to do and had all the time in the world.

Bilal took the glass from the man's hand and sent Zabidah scurrying for another. He was smiling uncertainly.

'Mr Gaman Khan has come all the way out of town to see you, sister-ji,' nodding at Amir Bibi. 'He wants to help you. He knows how hard life has been for you since you lost your husband.'

Amir Bibi lifted both hands in a gesture of despair and broke out into a bitter speech. The death of her husband, the greed of the landlord, the price of food, the poor wages in the cotton fields, clothes for the boys, a dowry for Zabidah, no money for this, no money for that, no money at all for anything – the litany went on and on.

'And what is a poor widow with three children to do?' she finished, her voice rising high and cracking with misery. 'Where will it all end? In the brick factories. Think of it! Little children in the brick factories! What kind of a life is that?'

Rashid and Shari had long since stopped listening. They had heard their mother recite her woes many times before. They squatted together against the door of the house, with Zabidah standing beside them. But at the mention of the brick factories, Rashid felt a shiver raise the hairs on his arms. He'd seen the brick factories from a distance but had never been close to them. Thin, ragged people, men, women and chil-

dren, their faces and clothes filthy with dust and soot, slaved over the piles of bricks, feeding them into the blackened mouths of the kilns in which, Rashid was sure, lived demons with eyes of fire.

But Gaman Khan was laughing.

'Oh, there's no fear of the brick factories.' His voice had a curiously harsh sound to it, as if he'd swallowed gravel. The crow on the wall took fright, and flapped off with a loud caw.

Gaman Khan didn't notice the crow. He had turned to look at Rashid and Shari, who had squashed themselves close together and were staring at him with their mouths open like a couple of hungry chicks.

'What fine boys!' he said, his restless beads still clicking through his fingers. 'Rashid and Rasoul. Aren't those your names?'

'I'm not Rasoul. I'm Shari,' Shari said indignantly. Rashid gave him a sharp nudge, afraid that he was being cheeky.

Amir Bibi laughed.

'Shari's his pet name. His real name's Rasoul.'

Gaman Khan's free hand was feeling in his pocket. He extracted a couple of sweets wrapped in bright cellophane and held them out to the boys, who stared at them, not knowing what they were.

Bilal took the sweets from Gaman Khan's hand and squatted down in front of the boys. He unwrapped them and popped them into their opened mouths.

Grins of delight spread over their faces as the shock of sweetness hit their tongues.

Gaman Khan's eyes were fixed on Shari.

'How would you like to eat sweets every day,' he said, 'and live in a beautiful big house like the landlord's, and ride on a bicycle, and play with toys?'

Shari giggled and squirmed. He wasn't used to being addressed by strangers. He didn't know what to say. Rashid frowned and nudged him again.

'He means it,' Bilal said earnestly to Amir Bibi. 'He can fix it up. You'd be paid well too, if you let him take Shari.'

'Let him take Shari? Take him where?' Amir Bibi looked bewildered. 'What does he want with Shari? He's only a baby.'

'Dubai, sister-ji!' Bilal said reverently. 'He'll take Shari to Dubai! To the Gulf!'

'Dubai?' Amir Bibi repeated. 'But what . . .'

Gaman Khan held up a hand to silence Bilal.

'I'm sure there's no need to tell a knowledgeable person like yourself that fortunes are made every day in Dubai,' he said, smiling courteously at Amir Bibi.

Rashid glanced at his mother. Her eyes had opened wide and there was a dreamy look in them, as if she had glimpsed Paradise far away.

'What's Dubai?' he whispered to Uncle Bilal.

'It's where the sheikhs come from,' his uncle whispered back, his nineteen-year-old face glowing at the thought. 'It's where you go to get rich.'

Gaman Khan was watching Amir Bibi as the wistful look on her face was replaced by puzzlement.

'But what's Dubai got to do with Shari?' she asked, looking doubtfully at her little son, who was sticking his tongue out as far as it would go, cross-eyed in the attempt to lick up a dribble of melted toffee that was running down his chin.

'Those rich families over there,' Gaman Khan said, 'they've got everything. Houses like palaces, air con, big cars. You wouldn't believe it.'

He stopped, as if silenced by wonders.

The family waited, entranced by the images he had conjured up. Only Shari wasn't listening.

'The kids, of course, have got the best of everything,' he went on. 'Clothes, toys, good education – you name it.' The beads were falling ever faster through his fingers. 'But the one thing they don't have is playmates. Rich children in the Gulf don't run wild and play out in the open like kids do here. They're protected all the time. Cared for in their homes. But you know what children are. Never happier than playing games with each other. So these rich Arabs, they bring little friends for them into their families. Treat them like their own. Give them bicycles and toy cars and all the food they can eat. They pay very well for them too.'

The words 'toy cars' made Rashid shiver again, not with horror this time, but with desire. On a rare trip into town before his father had died, he had seen toy

cars in the bazaar. He had longed for one ever since, with his whole being.

Amir Bibi was listening to Gaman Khan's gravelly voice with painful concentration.

'Money means nothing to those people,' he was saying. 'Thousands of rupees every month flow into the pockets of families who send their sons, and the little chaps are cared for like princes. It's Pakistani children they want, of course, because they're so sturdy and intelligent and well brought up. They . . .'

'I couldn't,' Amir Bibi interrupted loudly, coming out of her dream with a jolt and throwing the end of her scarf over her shoulder as if she was throwing Gaman Khan's words away. 'It's bad enough losing my husband. Do you want to take my baby away as well?'

Gaman Khan lifted his hands, jokingly defending himself.

'Lose? Of course you won't lose him! You'll lend him for a while, that's all. A year – two years at the most, and you'd have enough money coming in to keep the family and put something aside for your daughter's dowry as well. But I quite understand your feelings, Amir Bibi. They do you credit.' He looked at his watch, and the sun, low in the horizon now, glinted so brightly off the gold strap that it made Rashid blink. 'Bilal, it's time we went.'

Amir Bibi watched him walk across the courtyard, biting her lower lip. Bilal turned at the door and

shook his head at her as if he couldn't believe how stupid she'd been. But Rashid, dazzled by the picture in his head of a toy car, a red one, with wheels that turned and little doors that opened, ran across to where the two men were disappearing out into the lane and caught hold of Gaman Khan's sleeve.

'I'll go, Gaman-ji,' he said. 'Why don't you take me?'

Gaman Khan looked down at him, his eyes narrowed, as if he was weighing him up and measuring him.

'Why not?' he said. 'We'll talk about it next time I come. Two for the price of one, eh?'