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Opening extract from

Samphire Song

Written by

Jill Hucklesby

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I can hear his call above all the others. It's as if he's speaking to me . . . as if we've connected somehow.

Books by Jill Hucklesby

If I Could Fly
Samphire Song

Samphire Song



JILL HUCKLESBY

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Chapter One 

Hooves thundering on sand, across the wide sweep of the sun-washed bay. Salt-spray splashing up, stinging our eyes, matting our hair. The taste of the ocean on our tongues and the cry of gulls in our ears. Faces forward, almost nestling in warm manes. Knees gripping leather, feet taut in stirrups, bodies carried by an energy surge, like surfers balancing on boards, rushing at breakneck speed to shore.

We're riding into the warm July wind and my cheeks are streaming with tears, whipped up by the whoosh of air against lashes. I'm breathing in blue sky mixed with the muskiness of horse sweat. My heart feels like it's dancing to the deep *dada da dum* rhythm beneath my feet. Laughter hiccups from my throat.

I'm looking at Dad, who is focusing straight

ahead, brow furrowed in concentration. Now he's glancing at me and a massive smile is radiating from his mouth, causing creases to fan from the edges of his blue eyes.

'Yeeha!' he calls. 'Last one to the rock is a bandit . . .' He's lengthening his reins and urging Kaloo, a retired racehorse who is the fastest mount at the stables, to gallop to victory.

'In your dreams,' I yell back, asking Rambo, my favourite chestnut, to pick up the pace. He responds willingly, eager to please. I curl down further on his neck, jockey style, trying to make us more aerodynamic. Kaloo has taken off like a rocket, with Dad almost clinging to the curve of his arched neck. Dad usually rides like a cowboy, laid back in the saddle, but now, slumped forwards, he looks more like a highwayman, fleeing for his life.

'Hey, tough guy, what are you waiting for?' I whisper towards Rambo's ears, which flick back and forth like furry antennae.

And as my calves brush his belly gently, we push forwards in pursuit of Kaloo's impressive black tail, which is flying behind him regally. Lumps of wet sand splatter on to my nose and eyelids as our competitors veer a little to the left, directly ahead of us.

Rambo grunts and instinctively changes course, his feet following a deeper gully where the tide is oozing its way back in. His hooves smash down on the water like marbles clattering on to glass.

At fourteen hands, Rambo is struggling to gain ground against Kaloo, the mighty seventeen-hand colossus. But I can tell Kaloo is beginning to tire under the fifteen-stone weight round his neck and on his shoulders, and his pace is changing. His long, graceful legs are slowing to a comfortable canter, despite Dad's protestations and offers of extra carrots for supper.

I'm pulling my hat further down to protect my eyes as a barrage of shingle-studded ocean mud is propelled from Kaloo's hooves in our direction.

We're narrowing the gap and Rambo is holding his head steady and proud, without interference from me on the bit. I'm willing him on with every fibre of my being and it feels as if we're moving in perfect synchronicity.

Dad and Kaloo are close now, surrounded by salt mist. I can hear Dad calling me, his voice full of exhilaration and mock panic.

'Jodie . . . Jo-die . . .'

And the water vapour is enveloping him, blurring rider and horse into a silhouette, a mirage as faint as a memory.

'Jodie!' I jump at the sound of my name, coming from behind me. When I turn, I see the face of Rachel Holmes in the space above the half-closed loose-box door. As my mind tries to make the leap from past to present, a shudder ripples down my spine.

'Are you OK?' Rachel asks.

'Yeah,' I nod. 'I'm good, thanks,' and I thrust my fork into the pile of hay at my feet with surprising force.

Rachel, at sixteen, is the oldest of the volunteers who help out at Whitehawk Farm Stables in return for free hacks and lessons. She tries to keep a team spirit going, encouraging us to eat our packed lunches on bales in the yard in summer or upstairs in the sand school in winter. Lunchtimes are legendary for the swapping of pony gossip and funny stories. I listen in sometimes, on the periphery of the circle. I don't want to talk, though. I come here to *not* talk.

I prefer to be around the horses, keeping busy, mucking out, cleaning tack, getting things done. It helps me forget and helps me remember.

'Can you do Jiminy's box with me after this?' Rachel asks. I nod and smile. I know she's trying to be a friend and give me the chance to loosen up. But that's like asking Tutankhamun to open his own tomb. What would I say? That I miss my dad more than words can express? That my little brother, Ed, has kidney disease and Mum and I are worried sick?

Joyce, the bereavement counsellor who used to

visit, says that people are like animals. When we're wounded, we sometimes try to isolate ourselves from further harm. Animals look for a piece of high ground, a tall tree or a deep burrow. Mum, Ed and I feel like we've been shipwrecked on an island. Joyce says, in time, we'll build our own life raft. (Mum says she hopes we'll be rescued by Johnny Depp, but only if he's wearing his pirate costume.)

Horses, on the other hand, don't want explanations. Just care and respect. That's fine by me. When I look into their eyes, I can tell their life story. I can see whether there is trust or fear, playfulness or anger. Many have had several owners and homes. They all have different personalities. But they have one big thing in common – their destiny isn't their choice.

They know a thing or two about survival. They're very intuitive. And I'm sure they understand people very well. Unlike the girls here who think I'm just a geeky loner with 'family problems', the horses make no judgement and accept me as I am.

I wonder if they read the story in *my* eyes? If they do, they'll see that I'm Jodie Palmer. I'm fourteen years old. And I have a stone where my heart should be.