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Opening extract from

There Must be Horses

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Chapter 1

Sasha was determined not to cry. She hadn't when she'd left any of the other places, and she didn't want to break that record now. So she kept her head high and stared straight ahead through the windscreen.

Fran switched on the engine and put the car into gear. "Don't you want to wave goodbye?" she asked.

Sasha shook her head and scowled. Trust a social worker to make a stupid suggestion like that. Didn't she realise there was no point in looking back? This part of her life was over, just like all the placements before it. If that lot didn't want her any more, she didn't want them either.

"How are you feeling?" asked Fran, as she drove out of the drive and turned right towards the main road.

Sasha ignored her. She was too busy trying to catch one last glimpse of the Shetland pony in the field opposite. He was close to the fence, as usual, and he pricked his ears forward as they drove past. Did he realise this was the last time she would ever see him?

She turned her head and watched him disappear into the distance. Talking to that pony had been one of the few good things about her stay with Georgina and Gerald. The others were the riding lessons, of course, but they stopped as soon as Cynthia fell off.

"I asked how you're feeling," said Fran.

Sasha rolled her eyes upward and sighed. Why were social workers so irritating? She'd lost count of how many she'd had since she first came into care. They bounded into her life, made out they were her best friend and then left again with barely a goodbye. Fran was the latest and, like all the others, she thought she had the right to know everything. But Sasha had only known her a month and had no intention of revealing her innermost secrets.

"I'm fine," she lied, still staring out of the side window. She hoped she'd spot some more horses, but she didn't. As the car sped along the main road and onto the motorway, the only animals she saw in the fields were cows and sheep.

They'd been driving for half an hour when Fran pulled into a motorway service station and parked. "Time for tea," she said as she turned off the engine.

Sasha's stomach told her this was a good idea, but her heart wasn't so sure. Everything she owned was in her rucksack and the black plastic sacks that filled the back of the car. She didn't want to risk losing any of

them. “Can’t we keep going? I’m sure they’ll find me something to eat at the home, even if I’ve missed supper.”

Fran shook her head. “I need a break from driving,” she explained. “And we need a little talk. Your stuff will be fine here – I’ll lock the car, I promise.”

The last comment took Sasha by surprise. She hadn’t expected Fran to be so tuned in to how she was feeling. But she still didn’t trust her – too many social workers had broken promises before, especially ones of the “It’ll be fine” variety. So she refused to walk away from the car until she’d tested the doors herself to make sure no one could get in. And she took her rucksack with her – her riding hat and her photos of her mum were too important to risk losing.

As they headed towards the main building, the setting sun painted pink edges on the dark clouds rolling in from the west. No wonder Sasha felt hungry. It was hours since lunch, and she hadn’t had much of that anyway. Her mouth had been too dry with anxiety to eat the cheese sandwich that Georgina, mother of the dreaded Cynthia, had given her alone in her room.

The inside of the service station was bright and cheerful in a plastic sort of way. It was also very busy. The queue in the food hall was long and slow-moving. Sasha still didn’t fancy talking so she turned her back on Fran and stared out across the crowded tables. To her relief, the social worker took the hint and didn’t say anything while they waited for their turn.

Eventually the weary girl behind the counter asked, "Can I help you?" A badge on her uniform announced that her name was Mavis.

"Two burgers and fries, please," said Fran.

"No!" snapped Sasha. "I hate burgers." That wasn't strictly true, but she already had too little control over her own life. She didn't want a social worker deciding what she ate as well.

Fran sighed. "What do you want instead?" she asked.

Sasha scanned the pictures of food on the wall. This was Fran's treat so she chose the most expensive and unusual meal she could see – goat's cheese something or other with some weird-looking vegetables.

"Absolutely not," said Fran. "It's a burger or a baguette or nothing. The choice is yours."

Sasha was tempted to pick nothing in a fit of temper. But her stomach stopped her just in time, and she settled for an egg and tomato baguette.

Mavis piled their order on a tray and pushed it across the counter. "Have a nice day," she said.

Some chance, thought Sasha as she carried the food to the only empty table she could see. This wasn't the worse day of her life, but it was definitely a close runner-up. And there was still Fran's little talk to come. Judging by her previous experience of social workers, Sasha suspected that wasn't likely to make things better.

She was right. After they'd eaten in silence for a while, Fran dropped the bombshell. "The home can't have you back. They're full."

Sasha stared at her, open-mouthed in shock. She'd lived at Mountback Children's Home for almost a year before she moved to Cynthia's. Now the adoption wasn't going to happen, she'd automatically assumed she'd be going back. "You're wrong. They've got to have room."

"I'm sorry. They haven't." Fran reached forward to give Sasha's hand a sympathetic pat.

Sasha shifted her arm out of the way so fast that the tomato fell out of the remains of her baguette. She didn't bother to pick it up. She had more important things to think about. "I'm not very big. I could sleep in the bath, or they could put a camp bed in the office."

"That's not possible," said Fran. She spoke slowly, emphasising each word to get her point across. "Believe me. I'd have taken you there if I could. It would have been much easier than trying to find an emergency placement for you on a Saturday."

Sasha's heart sank to the bottom of her trainers as she realised she wasn't going back to people she knew. She'd got to start again with strangers. "So where am I going to live?" she asked, hardly daring to listen to the reply.

"I've found a nice place," said Fran. "I'm sure you'll like it."

The false brightness in her voice made Sasha suspicious. She stared at the social worker through narrowed eyes and asked, "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing much. It's just temporary, that's all." Fran pushed away the remains of her meal and sat back in her chair. "Joe and Beth Turner weren't planning to foster anyone right now. But they've agreed to have you for a little while – just until we can find you somewhere else."

"Great," said Sasha with as much sarcasm as she could muster. "So you're dumping me with people who don't want me."

Fran sighed. "It's not that bad really. They're a lovely couple. I'm sure they'll make you welcome. And they were the best I could come up with at such short notice."

Sasha knew there was no point in arguing. Foster carers were thin on the ground, especially for twelve year olds. Georgina and Gerald had been the only people in the whole country who replied to the last "Sasha wants a home" advert.

But that didn't mean she liked what was happening. Moving in with strangers was always hard. But it was even worse when she knew she'd have to do it all over again soon.

She gulped down the last of her baguette, climbed wearily to her feet and swung her rucksack on her back. "Let's go," she said. The sooner this journey was over,

the sooner she'd find out what fate and Social Services had in store for her this time.

"Okay," said Fran, with a look of relief. She stood up and led the way outside into the semi-darkness.

Sasha grabbed the social worker's unfinished bag of fries from the table and munched its contents on the way to the car. There was no point in wasting good food, especially when she had no idea what would be on offer at the next place.

Fran walked back to the car in silence. It was only as she checked Sasha had done her seat belt up properly that she spoke again. "I hope you're going to behave this time."

"Me!" said Sasha, with faked innocence. "When did I ever not behave?"

"This morning! You'd still be at Georgina and Gerald's if you hadn't smashed all Cynthia's ornaments."

Sasha bristled with indignation. "She's lying. I didn't break them all." Even in the enormity of her rage, she'd left the china horse untouched.

"The exact details don't matter," said Fran. "What you did was wrong."

"And what she said was mean," added Sasha, with a scowl.

"Which was?"

"That's none of your business." Sasha folded her arms defiantly and turned away. She didn't want anyone

else to know what Cynthia had said. Suppose they thought the same. Suppose it was true.

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