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Opening extract from

The Princess and the Foal

Written by

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Published by

HarperCollins Children's Books

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First published in hardback in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2013
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd,
77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London, W6 8JB

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ISBN 978-0-00-746902-4

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Printed and bound in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Midnight, 23 August 1986

Hello, Mama,

I am underneath my blankets with a torch as I write this. I don't dare turn the lights on because Frances might see and know that I am awake, and the last person I want to deal with right now is Frances.

I should be asleep, but I am too full of nerves about tomorrow. Santi has a calendar in his office at the stables and I have marked off the squares in red pen one by one, the knot in my belly tightening as the day grows closer. For a long time it seemed forever away. And now suddenly there is no more waiting. In a few hours it will be dawn and I will go down to the stables and prepare Bree. I'll braid her tail and bandage her legs and then we will load the horses on to the truck and travel across the desert, bound on a journey that

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must end in either defeat or honour and glory for the Royal Stables.

I am trembling as I write these words to you and I tell myself that it is not fear, it is excitement. In all the history of the King's Cup there has never been a girl rider. But I am not just a girl. I am a Bedouin of the Hashemite clan and I was born to ride. Thousands of years ago the women of my tribe sat astride their horses in battle and fought side by side with men. Well, I do not want to fight – all I want to do is win.

A thousand faces will stare down from the grandstand tomorrow. Baba will watch me from the Royal Box with Ali by his side, and no doubt Frances will have elbowed her way in too. She'll be waiting for me to fail, to make a fool of myself in front of all those people. All the time undermining me to Baba, saying it is not right for the daughter of the King of Jordan to spend her time hanging around the stables, mucking out the dung. She is always trying to make me into something I am not.

Frances wants me to be like some princess in the storybooks – confined to my tower, dressed in ball gowns and a golden crown and glass slippers. I mean, who in their right mind would wear glass slippers? If I

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had my way, I would wear jodhpurs all day long.

"Your mother always deported herself as a gracious lady." That is exactly what Frances says. She talks so posh sometimes it is as if she is the royal one not just my governess.

Frances is always telling me I should be more like you. It is so annoying because if you were actually here then I wouldn't have to listen to her. I would be allowed to do as I like and I would never have to wear stupid dresses to dinner or put up with any of the rules that Frances makes up.

I tell her that you were a Queen, but you wore a T-shirt and jeans. I remember your favourite pair of red jeans. The ones you bought in Rome when you were very young, before you married Baba.

You wore those red jeans and your long hair was always loose over your shoulders and swept back off your face. I have grown my hair long now too, but it is plain brown. Baba insists that I look just like you, but you always looked like a movie star to me with your green eyes and dark blonde hair. If I close my eyes sometimes, I can see your face and hear your laughter like music filling the palace at Al Nadwa.

I remember I would ask you, "Can I become a Queen

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one day?" and your answer was always the same. You would tell me, "Haya, you are a Princess of Jordan. Perhaps one day you will be a Queen, *Inshallah*. But remember your title is on a piece of paper, on a page of a history book, no more than that. It's what you have inside that means everything. You must always be yourself, Haya, never pretend. Do you understand?"

I would look at your face and you would be very serious, but then you would pick me up and smother me with kisses until I giggled and we would laugh together as you held me close in your arms.

The last time I asked you this question we were in the gardens at Al Nadwa. It was a summer day and you had spread a blanket on the lawn in the shade of the big pomegranate tree. Ali was there with us too, playing with his toys. At least I think Ali was there. Sometimes I wonder if I am making bits up. I am twelve now and that day has faded in my mind like an old photograph.

I have another memory and this one is very clear. We are outside Baba's office, you and me and Ali. You are kneeling down on the marble floor in front of Ali, grasping his tiny hands as he wobbles on his chubby little legs.

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He steadies himself and then gently, carefully, you let him go. You keep your arms encircling him as Ali rocks back and forth, but he doesn't fall and you smile with delight and pick him up and say, "Oh, my darling Ali. Now that you can stand on your own feet I can leave you for a while."

Mama, I have been doing my best to stand up, to find my feet without you there to hold my hands. My two legs were not strong enough at first, but then Bree came along with four legs to carry us both. Her heart and courage gave me the strength that I needed.

I wish you could be there to see me ride her tomorrow. Baba says that if I have something important to tell you, I should write to you. But I could never do it. Not until tonight. I have so much to tell you, about me and Bree and everything that has happened since you've been gone. But it is very late and my hand is getting cramp. It is quite hard writing on a mattress when you are holding a torch in one hand and trying to breathe under the blankets. If you were here, you would tell me to finish the letter tomorrow and get some sleep.

Mama, you know how I said I wasn't afraid? Well, maybe I am, just a little. This is the greatest contest in the kingdom; what if Bree and I are not good enough?

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I do not care that Frances and her supporters think it is wrong for a princess to ride. But I know how important this is to our people and I feel the weight of expectation upon me. When I ride into that arena, I carry their hopes along with me and I am determined that I will not let them down. I do this to make Baba proud, but also to prove myself, to show them that when I am on a horse I am the equal of any man.

I am a princess, but this is no fairy tale. If it were then I would know what is to come, my happy-ever-after. But I do not yet know how the story will end. All I know is that this story of me and Bree begins like fairy tales do:

Many years ago, once upon a time in Arabia…

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