

Stormy Times for Thunder

Jade pedalled her bike as fast as she could on the road to Meadowbank Riding Academy. Just a bit further and she would be at the riding stables. The spring air felt warm on her face and the trees were already turning a luscious green. A few more days of this lovely sunshine would mean that spring had definitely arrived.

Jade rode on with enthusiasm. If she got to the stables before the others, she could choose which horse she wanted to ride. That meant she would be almost sure to ride Thunder. What she wouldn't do for that beautiful Anglo-Arab! As far as she was concerned, he had some of the best horse qualities in the world. He was intelligent and lively, yet friendly. He stayed the pace, and he was agile at jumping. And what's more, he was 12 years old just like Jade. She adored him.

Jade did not waste any time putting her bike in the rack. She propped it against the gate, on which was written in bold white letters "Meadowbank Riding School"; and hurried to the stables. "Too late, he's gone!" announced Lucy in a mischievous voice as she emerged from a loose box with a dandy brush in her hand. "Ha ha, very funny! And I suppose someone has gone off with Skylark too!" responded Jade, laughing.

It was a bit of a game between them. Lucy loved Skylark, a beautiful dapple-grey mare, as much as Jade loved Thunder. Jade knew that Lucy would never ride Thunder without telling her...and Lucy would do her best not to let anyone else ride Thunder if she knew Jade was on her way to the stables. Jade would do the same for Lucy and Skylark. That's what friends were for!

Before Lucy could say anything, Jade had rushed off. "Hannah, Thunder isn't in his box!" cried Jade in a worried voice, putting her head round the door of the tack room. Hannah was the girlfriend of Vincent Simons, the riding schools owner. She was pretty with blonde hair and clear blue eyes---and she was popular with everyone at the riding school. She was always cheerful and kind and had a special understanding of the horses and riders. She was also a perfectionist which made her seem quite strict at times.

“Thunder, are you sure?” Hannah asked in her usual calm voice, “Have you looked in the sand-school?” “I’ve been everywhere” replied Jade in frustration. If Thunder wasn’t there, it could only mean that someone had taken him for a ride. “Tom,” called Hannah, as she went over to the stables, “do you know who has taken Thunder out?” But Tom, the young groom knew no more than they did.

Jade had to be content with riding Tango, a young but spirited bay Morgan. She tacked him up and led him down to the school where Hannah was starting a lesson. There were only five riders that afternoon, which was good because it meant the horses had plenty of room to canter freely. The lesson was going well. Tango tried his best to buck a few times, but Jade wouldn’t let him. She was having heaps of fun with this crazy clown!

“Right girls, shall we have a bit of a canter?” suggested Hannah. Tom arrived next to the riding ring with a perplexed look on his face. “It really is quite peculiar,” he blurted out. “What’s that Tom? What’s peculiar?” asked Hannah who was puzzled by the groom’s behaviour, since it was very unusual for him to interrupt a lesson. “About Thunder. I didn’t notice before because we were getting the horses ready, but I’ve just realized his saddle and bridle are still here! If he’d gone out, he would have been saddled. I’ve checked and none of the other saddles or bridles are missing. I just don’t understand what’s happened.”

A strange silence hushed through the riding school. Hannah wiped her brow with her hand and said in an anguished voice, “But that’s crazy! Where on earth can he be?” Jade felt a big lump form in her throat. Her Thunder! Lost! “Let’s not panic!” Hannah said quickly, seeing the dumbstruck faces of the riders, “Perhaps Vincent had taken him somewhere. He said he was going into town, but maybe he changed his mind. A horse can’t just disappear. Come on, we’ll stop the lesson, stable the horses and fine-comb our way through the riding school.”

Half an hour later they were still no further ahead. The sand-school, hay barn, garage, loose boxes and even the vegetable garden had all been checked---

nothing. Additionally, the “horses-out” book had no mention of Thunder. Vincent, who had just come back from town, murmured “This is quite unbelievable, we have one of our best horses wandering around the riding school and no one even sees him!” Vincent Simons was a determined man. He was over forty by the time he had succeeded, through hard work and determination, in making Meadowbank Riding School a local land-mark, and he intended to keep his reputation. Everyone knew that Vincent was extremely demanding and could sometimes get angry. His temper was intense.

“It’s my fault,” Tom accused himself feebly, “when I fed Thunder earlier, I mustn’t have shut the door properly. I remember having to run and get the phone because no one was in the office. If anything has happened to Thunder, I’ll never forgive myself.” “Nor will I” mumbled Jade as she shot daggers at Tom with her stare. Her eyes, which were usually a soft green, were now a sombre grey.

“He can’t have gone far” Lucy proffered, as much as to cheer herself up as her friend. “It’s obvious. Thunder must have knocked the door with his hoof and, to his surprise it opened. I can see how it happened,” she added, laughing to try and defuse the atmosphere, “then off he went on a little jaunt.” “A horse doesn’t go off like that without any reason,” Hannah butted in. “Perhaps he was frightened by something” Jade suggested. “That’s possible” Hannah replied, thoughtfully. She was trying to put all the facts together and work out how Thunder would have reacted. “Let’s assume Thunder was frightened by a noise or a door banging. He then bolted that way” Hannah pointed towards the school entrance gate. “But when a horse knows the danger has passed, he generally comes back to the stable. After all, it’s his home!” Lucy added. “That’s right, he goes back to his favourite place, where he feels safe and knows he’s out of harm’s way” explained Jade, suddenly full of hope again. “What other “safe” place could he have gone to?” demanded Vincent, not sounding at all convinced.

“The river!” chorused Jade and Lucy in unison. Everyone stared at the two girls in surprise. “There’s a little beach by the river where we used to take Skylark and Thunder,” Lucy explained, smiling, “the water isn’t deep, and the

grass is delicious. It's perfectly sheltered, with sweet smelling flowers, and the horses love it! Now think about it, Thunder's obviously gone there for a little nap." Without waiting for Vincent's response, Lucy rushed off to find Jade who was already setting off on her bike.

The river was running quickly between the tree lined riverbanks. The water was so clear you could see the mosaic of little brown and gold pebbles on the river bottom. Jade and Lucy looked up and down the bank in despair. There was no sign of Thunder. Sadly, there were so many hoof prints near the water, it was impossible to see which ones could have been his. "I know this is weird, but I feel sure Thunder was here a short time ago," Lucy burst out, "I can sense it". Jade sat down dejectedly on the grass. "Wait for me here" Lucy said suddenly. Half a minute later, she was on the opposite bank, up to her knees in water.

"Hey, what did I tell you, come and look!" Lucy cried. On the opposite bank, by the water's edge, there were fresh hoof prints. A horse had obviously crossed the river. But it was impossible to make out which direction he had gone because the hoof prints were lost in the long grass. "Wait!" called Jade, "Thunder would have never crossed the river on his own. I know him, he's afraid of the current. You know as well as I do that horses don't like the unknown. We've never been on this side of the river." "In that case" Lucy declared, "someone must have helped him cross." "You mean...Oh no," choked Jade, holding back her tears, "someone could have stolen Thunder?" The evidence was clear. Lucy shrugged her shoulders, "Come on, there's no point in staying here, let's go tell the others."

"We must call the police", said Vincent after the girls had told him what they had discovered. He had been busy checking all the neighbouring fields in vain. When the police arrived, the atmosphere at the riding school could not have been more despairing. "A chestnut Anglo-Arab you say...." the police constable stammered. "With a white sock on his front right leg" Jade butted in.

The policeman's slowness was driving her mad. Since he had been there---which seemed like an eternity----he had been on a tour of the stables, and had endlessly gone over the facts when he could have been checking all the nearby farms! Jade was chomping at the bit.

The policeman muttered to himself, as he wrote in his notebook "A white paw." "Sock!" Jade cried out indignantly. How was this policeman ever going to find Thunder if he didn't know the first thing about horses? Jade looked at Vincent in exasperation, "Should we be putting Thunder at the mercy of this old plodder?" Her beautiful Thunder with his gleaming coat, princely head, and his gentle and intelligent look; so sweet and funny with that single white sock almost up to his knees.

"We're talking about a truly exceptional horse," Vincent continued, "We must find him as quickly as possible. Even if he hasn't been stolen, it will be terribly dangerous for him to be out loose at night. There is the main road, with people charging along like maniacs; the railway line; and Yews in the gardens." "Yews?" Jade asked, even more worried. "That's the most dangerous thing," Vincent explained, "a horse just has to eat a few twigs and he'll fall down dead".

"Come along, miss" said the policeman, "don't worry, we'll find the horse. We'll alert the neighbouring police stations and send descriptions to the local dealers." "What do you mean? Aren't you going to look for Thunder?" Jade pleaded. She was dumbstruck. Nobody said anything. Even Vincent kept quiet, yet Jade was certain he was boiling inside!

"It will be dark in less than an hour," Hannah explained; "We'll have to wait until tomorrow to look properly. But don't get yourself in a state, Jade, we'll find him tomorrow!" As she cycled home, Jade was crying so much she could hardly see the road. How could she go back to her nice, warm house when her beloved Thunder might be in danger? Or worse, imprisoned in some dirty hole by thieves who were about to sell him! It was unbearable!

As Jade climbed on the bus the next morning and sat down beside Lucy, she looked desperate. “I’ve had nightmares all night!” she exclaimed. “Shh”, Lucy cut her short. “Just give me five minutes. I’ve got Hannah’s first thing this morning and you know what she’s like with her horrible tests! I need to think!”

Test! Jade felt her legs turn to jelly. How could she have forgotten? She had a Level 2 riding test! This morning! At 10 o’ clock! “I planned to review yesterday afternoon, but with all that had happened I forgot!” exclaimed Jade. “Well then, you’ve got precisely 20 minutes to review for your test now!” said Lucy, laughing.

“Hey girls, you’ll never guess who I’ve just seen!” Alice blurted as she ran to meet them as they got off the bus, “Julie the helper from Meadowbank! She’s just been made a prefect in place of John. Isn’t that great?” “Oh yeah, I guess so,” Jade answered dispiritedly. “Hey, what’s up with you two? Why are you so down?” asked Alice.

Alice had not always been friendly with Jade and Lucy. Even in September when Alice and Jade were put in the same class together, they avoided each other. Alice was terribly shy and envied the way Jade was so relaxed and could make friends with everyone, pupils and teachers alike. Jade found Alice a bit too serious with her long brown hair neatly arranged in a pony tail and her small round glasses. But secretly, she admired the clever girl’s abilities. That was until the day Jade and Lucy saw Alice at Meadowbank, reluctantly following her father Dr. Lennox. He was mad about riding. Alice wasn’t very sporty and was easily frightened by horses. She probably would have given up if Jade and Lucy hadn’t been there to reassure her. They were thrilled to be converting the class brain to their favourite sport.

“As I see it” Alice summed up when she heard the full story from her friends, “I don’t think we can count too much on the police. They don’t seem to have a clue!” “No, and the worst thing is we are shut up in school when Thunder is in danger!” added Jade. “Hmm, we can do something about that,”

Alice said mysteriously. At that moment the bell rang for class and all she has time to say was “I have two calls to make and we’ll skip off school.”

At lunchtime, Alice took control and the three girls set to work. First, they managed to persuade Julie to let them out of class early and then they swapped the school canteen for Alice’s sitting room. Armed with a phone directory and two phones, they located and called all the equestrian centres, horse breeders, riding stables, and animal dealers in the area. “These last two numbers aren’t really equestrian centres,” Jade remarked about the last two names on the list Alice had drafted, “they’re more outdoor centres where they have a few ponies for kids to ride. I can’t see what Thunder would be doing at either of those places.” “Let’s call them anyway,” Lucy said, “You do one, and I’ll do the other”. For the umpteenth time Lucy dialled. The phone rang ten times before she heard a man’s voice. He sounded cross and irritated at being interrupted in the middle of his lunch. “Well, I’m interested in what you’re saying” the voice suddenly said in a very different tone, “because we have had a bit of a problem, too.”

“Well, this is the place” said the director of the centre, “I think it must have happened yesterday evening after I checked everything, as I usually do”. A rather stocky, bearded man with a friendly smile opened the door to what looked like a garage and let the visitors in. Jade, Alice, and Lucy charged right in, followed by Alice’s father, who had agreed to go with them. Vincent and Hannah, whom they had phoned earlier, had also joined them. The room was dark and jammed full of an enormous amount of stuff. The floor was covered with bags spilling over with balls, bicycles, tents, fishing rods, paddles, and wetsuits...heaps of things haphazardly strewn about. Bridles and saddles were hooked onto the walls.

“They broke one pane of glass,” the director explained, pointing to a square of cardboard fixed to a window, “but the extraordinary thing is that despite the amount of stuff, they only took a saddle and bridle.” “Have you contacted the police?” Vincent asked. “No” he replied, “I just thought it was

some kids from the centre, out for a bit of fun---though it's not very amusing, I admit. I thought I could sort it out with them. You know how it is; some of those kids don't have an easy time at home, so I'm not too keen to put the police on them. But now you're telling me a horse has disappeared, that's another matter."

"Someone could have stolen the saddle to ride Thunder," said Vincent "but when you think about it, you'd have to have a lot nerve to pinch a horse like Thunder. I can't see any of your kids doing that." "On the other hand," Lucy retorted "they can't know a lot about horses if they think they can saddle an Anglo-Arab with a pony saddle." "In any case, it's someone who knows the centre" the director continued "because he went straight to the place where the saddles are kept." "And someone who isn't afraid of the dark," Alice suggested. "It's probably someone who lives round here" her father added. "How would he have gotten here?" Jade asked. "By bike, on foot, or by car," suggested the director, "nobody heard anything, but they could have easily parked in the back lane." "Well, that's just terrific!" exclaimed Dr. Lennox, "We've managed to build up an intriguing identikit picture!" Hearing this, everyone burst out laughing. Laughter of nervousness, but also of hope because everyone felt the two incidents were somehow linked. "Let's not give up," the director said, "let's talk some more over a cup of tea."

By nightfall they had a plan. With the theft of the saddle, it seemed that Thunder had been taken by someone who wanted to keep him. Urgent action was required! The decision was made to combine local forces and organize a thorough search. If this turned up nothing, it would then be a matter for the police. Tomorrow was Saturday, the perfect day to gather volunteers and organize a search party. It was decided that the teams from the riding school should be on horseback, so they would be able to reach more inaccessible areas without arousing too much suspicion, while teams from the centre should be in four-wheel-drives to be able to respond quickly if needed. A contact list was distributed and they all agreed to meet at the stables at seven o'clock the next morning. Everyone was told to bring food for what promised to be a long day.

Jade arrived at Meadowbank next morning in a state of great excitement. Cycling there, she had just seen the most beautiful sunrise of her life, and a massive wave of hope swept over her. Thunder had to be somewhere in the area and she was going to find him.

At the riding stables there was an atmosphere of exhilaration in the air. All of the horses were out of their loose boxes, and the riders were fussing around them. The stable yard was a hive of activity, full of people greeting each other, giving advice, passing curry combs and saddlecloths. The noise of animals shaking themselves or stomping their feet on the ground, added to the general feeling of excitement. “Girls, you go on the ponies,” Vincent called out when he saw Lucy and Jade. “We don’t have enough horses for everyone,” he said when he saw Lucy’s disappointment, “and Bingo’s almost as big as Skylark, and much tougher!” He went from one person to another, organizing people into teams, and telling them which routes to take.

Hannah’s job was to check the equipment. Every group had to take a picnic, oats for the horses, a first-aid kit and a mobile phone. In a corner of the yard, Alice was offering coffee to anyone who was ready. “Haven’t you tacked up your pony?” Lucy asked her in astonishment. “No,” answered Alice. “Someone has to stay here by the phone. And don’t look at me like that!” she added, laughing, “you know I wouldn’t be confident riding in the open country—and I might hold you back. I’ll be with Liz, the director’s wife. She’s staying behind as well. We’ll be your HQ.” “Right, everyone in the saddle!” Vincent suddenly called out, clapping his hands, “We’ll get into our teams, and then off we go!”

Jade mounted Pirouette, a brave and adorable Welsh mare. She was in a team with Lucy on Bingo, Dr. Lennox on his own horse Oscar and John, Lucy’s elder brother. John was to ride Desert, who was strong enough to carry him and all the teams’ provisions. By midday Jade’s group was beginning to slow down. They had been riding for four hours and had already visited two farms, and four isolated barns. “Perhaps the horses are starting to get hungry” Jade suggested.

Even though they had given the horses a chance to drink and rest their legs, they were starting to get seriously tired. The riders too, needed a break. With no sign of Thunder so far, they were all beginning to feel a little discouraged. “The Jefferson’s farm is only ten minutes away,” said Dr. Lennox, “we can stop there for a picnic.”

The farm yard was deserted when they got there. The doors and windows of the house were all closed, and a tractor was parked in front of the big, old barn. Only a cat curled up on the wall of a well pricked up an ear at their arrival. There didn’t seem to be another living soul around. Everything seemed to be in a deep slumber, scorched by the blinding rays of the midday sun. The riders gazed around, looking for signs of life.

Desert and Oscar twitched their ears backwards and forwards. They were both clearly bothered by something. Pirouette and Bingo, who were less timid, sniffed the ground in an interested way. “Strange,” said Lucy, to break the silence, “there aren’t even any chickens running about. That’s a pretty weird farm if you ask me!” “Here, have a handful of oats to calm your nerves,” said John, to tease Lucy as much as to reassure himself, “Go on, they won’t do you any harm!” At that very moment, a door burst open and two huge dogs rushed out at the visitors, barking ferociously.

“That’ll do!” shouted a young man, rushing out to restrain the dogs, “You’ll frighten the horses!” Without bothering to put his boots on, he leaped forward and managed to grab the two dogs by their collars. Oscar reared and Dr. Lennox tried to calm him down as Mr. and Mrs. Jefferson appeared on the doorstep. “Gently...there now....” Dr. Lennox was saying in a soothing voice to a frightened Oscar. “I’m really sorry, we were just having lunch, and we’re not used to having visitors at this time of day” Mrs Jefferson explained. “And we’ve shut all the doors and windows because of the weather” continued her husband, “It’s so hot and heavy, there’s defiantly a storm brewing.” John and Dr. Lennox dismounted. After introducing themselves, they explained the reason for their visit.

Mrs. Jefferson said they hadn't seen Thunder and added that they didn't have much to do with horses, but they were happy for the team to check all their barns and stables. "You must be hungry," Mrs. Jefferson said to the girls, "I could make you some lunch." "Oh, no thank you," Lucy answered, "that's very kind of you, but we've got packed lunches. But we do need water for our horses." "My son will help you," said Mrs. Jefferson. Andrew had not waited for his mother's instructions to be helpful. He was already coming back from the well with two clean buckets of water. He helped John and the girls take off the saddles and rub down the horses. They left the saddlecloths to dry in the sun while they tied up the horses in a shady spot and gave them each a bowl of oats.

An hour later, they were all back in the saddle again, making their way slowly along a winding path. The sky was getting heavier and darker. "That Andrew boy is a bit strange," said John, mulling things over, "he didn't open his mouth once. And he wasn't even there to say goodbye to us, yet he seemed to like the horses. In any case, he took a lot of care over them for someone who's never had a horse!" "Do you know him?" asked Jade. "Yes," said John, "we went to school together. But I don't know if he even recognized me. We weren't very nice to him at school. He was always a bit weird; never said much, and he was absent a lot. He just didn't get along at school. He left as soon as he possibly could."

"Speak of the devil," said Lucy, pulling Bingo to a halt, "I just saw him running into the woods. Hey! Andrew!" she shouted, waving her arms madly. "Leave him be," said John "we're behind schedule already. We don't want to hang around." "He's seen us!" Dr. Lennox said, crossly. The sky was getting darker, and he was worried the storm would break out before they could get back to Meadowbank, a two hour ride away. "But, look!" exclaimed Jade, "he's seen us, but he's running away. How strange!" "He looks frightened," Lucy observed "and what's that he's holding?"

Without waiting to discuss the situation with her fellow riders, Lucy gave Bingo two kicks with her heels and charged off at a gallop towards the woods. "Wait!" shouted John, setting off to follow with Desert, "It's unbelievable, that girl just does as she pleases." Jade and Dr. Lennox had no alternative but to

follow as fast as they could. Suddenly, Lucy stopped just at the edge of a clearing. “What’s gotten into you, charging off like that?” John yelled at her when he caught up with his sister, “Are you crazy?”

“Shh!” Lucy cut him short. Without a word, she jumped off her pony and crouched behind a bush so she could see into the clearing without being spotted. Intrigued, the others leapt off their horses and crouched down next to Lucy. At the end of the clearing in the woods there was an old ramshackled woodman’s shed. Andrew was at the door undoing the padlock. He seemed to be looking left and right as if checking to see if anyone was watching. He opened the door just enough to quietly slipped into the shed.

“Come on! Forget it...you can see that it’s his shed,” John said, digging Lucy with his elbow, “We’ll get soaked because of you!” He got up and started towards his horse. Suddenly, a flash of lightning tore through the sky and, with a terrifying crash, the heavens opened up over the woods. At the same time, frantic neighing could be heard in the distance, followed by a muffled cracking, the sounds of a struggle and cries of pain.

“Thunder!” shrieked Jade, jumping up instantly. “Come on!” she shouted as she rushed toward the shed. John reached the shed first and kicked open the door. He stopped dead, frozen with horror. Thunder was struggling against a pile of wood. His eyes were sunken and he was foaming at the mouth. He was shaking with terror and rearing up in an effort to break free; he was panicking. “Oh, help!” exclaimed Jade, “He’ll kill himself if he carries on like this!” “Stay away from him,” ordered Dr. Lennox, “He’s half-crazed.” But Jade had already gone inside the shed, holding her hand out towards the horse, trying to calm him down with quiet comforting words. “There...my beautiful Thunder. We’re here with you. Let me come close...we’ll help you get out.”

As the storm gave its last rumble, Thunder threw his head back, but did not try to rear. Jade slipped nimbly towards him and wrapped her arms round his neck. “There...it’s over now...don’t move any more, we’ll get your leg out.” Jade whispered. Thunder shivered one last time, then, as if giving himself up to Jade’s embrace, he dropped his head on her shoulder. She had won his trust!

It was then that everyone heard a faint moaning from the other end of the shed. "It's Andrew!" cried Lucy, "He must have been kicked by Thunder." "I didn't mean to harm anyone," whimpered Andrew from the corner, "I was just so lonely; all I want was some company" his voice trailed off. "Right," said Dr. Lennox taking charge, "you three try to get Thunder free, while I take a closer look at Andrew. John, you'd better ring for help." Dr. Lennox tended to Andrew as the others freed Thunder, who was now much calmer. They were relieved to find that his leg was not broken, but he did have a horrid gash. "Listen!" cried Lucy, "I can hear a car; help has arrived!"

A few hours later, Jade and Lucy were sipping hot tea back at the riding stables. Jade was feeling much happier. The vet had rung to say that with two weeks of tender care, Thunder would be trotting again with no problem. "Well, thank goodness for that!" said Lucy. "Andrew's going to take a little longer to recover with his broken leg!" Lucy added, "Still, I can't help feeling sorry for him, so I'm pleased that the director persuaded Vincent not to go to the police". It happened that the director knew Andrew from working at the centre. He pleaded his case to Vincent, explaining that the boy was terribly lonely and he just hadn't understood the seriousness of his actions. The director even promised that, when Andrew was better, he would give him a job looking after three of the centre's ponies in his spare time. "I'm just so pleased to have Thunder back" said Jade. "And I suppose we've learnt one thing from this adventure," Jade said with a grin, "Thunder and lightning don't always go well together".