

‘The horses? Where are the horses?’ shouted Jinny, but none of the circus people seemed to hear her. The van that had been hit was lying on its side with the trailer that it had been pulling concertina’d into it. From inside the trailer, Jinny could hear the crash of hooves and the screaming whinnying of terrified horses. Three men, one of whom Jinny recognised as the ringmaster, were trying to open the ramp at the back of the trailer.

‘Here it comes, Joe,’ one of them yelled, as the ramp yawned open.

‘Be ready to catch them in case they’re loose,’ the ringmaster warned.

‘Is the Arab in there?’ Jinny demanded, but again no one seemed to hear her.

When the ramp was down, they led out the two rosinbacks – one with a bleeding gash on its shoulder.

‘Get out of the way,’ the ringmaster swore at Jinny as she pushed past him, trying to see into the box. He swung his arm at her and she dodged back out of his reach, but she had had enough time to see that the horse still in the box was the Arab.

‘Look out for this brute,’ the ringmaster shouted, as one of his men went into the box to move the partition that had separated the Arab from the other two horses.

Jinny craned forward to watch the man unhook the slatted barrier. She caught a glimpse of the Arab’s head – sweated dark with fear, a frenzied eye rolling in a white socket, and ears clipped back – before the horse reared up, knocking the man aside, and came plunging desperately out of the box and down the ramp. From the end of the rope halter swung the metal bar to which the horse had been tied.

‘She’ll break her leg if she gets it caught in that,’ Jinny yelled. ‘Catch her. You’ve got to catch her.’

For a split second the Arab stood, dazzled by the light, then reared again. The ringmaster snatched at the halter rope but dodged aside to miss the swinging metal bar.

Jinny saw the man miss the rope and the other people jump out of the way.

*Her legs*, Jinny thought – and where the others jumped away, she threw herself against the Arab’s shoulder, smelling the acid stench of the horse against her face, as her hands gripped the cheek pieces of the halter and dragged it down over the Arab’s ears. The horse swerved and bucked, tossing her head violently. Jinny lost her balance and fell, but her hands were still knotted around the halter. The Arab was free.

With a piercing neigh, the horse surged up the hillside, rearing and bucking, standing for a moment of stillness like a heraldic beast, her head high and tail plumed. She screamed from the pits of her nostrils – and far up the hillside one of the Shetlands whickered shrilly in reply. The Arab gave one last tremendous buck, her hind hooves high in the air, crashing the gold cymbal of the sun, and then she was away – thundering, drumming – her galloping hooves beating their tattoo of freedom as she raced over the hillside.

Tears poured down Jinny’s face, her whole body shook with sobbing. Behind her, the ringmaster swore in useless anger, and a police car swung into the scene of the accident.