

*This is an extract of **Rocking Horse War**, as it might have been if I'd written it with Pearl's sister Emmie as the heroine, rather than Pearl. Emmie, of course, thinks she IS the heroine of the story (which sometimes made the novel hard to keep under control) so it's nice to let her have a chapter of her own!*

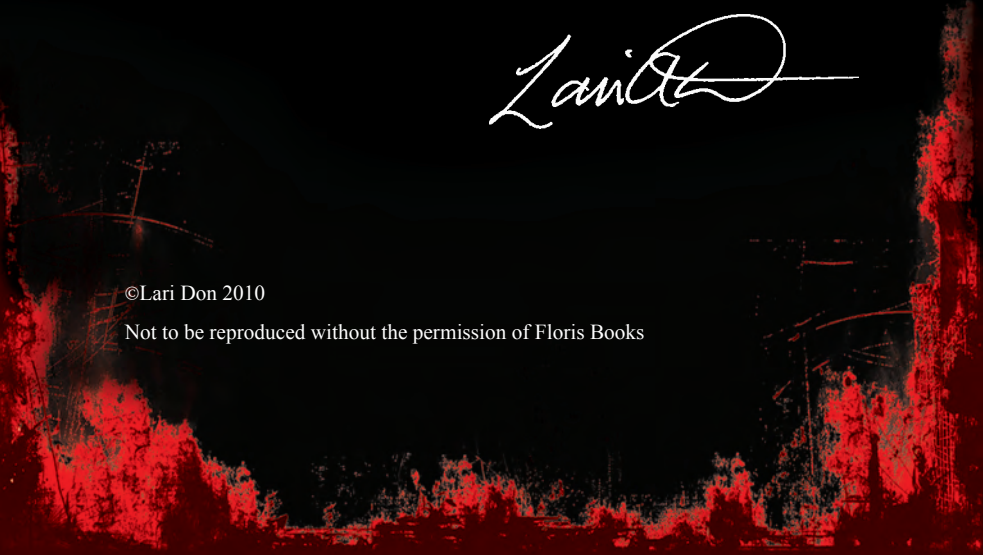
Emmie does tell the story of her morning to Pearl in the novel, but I don't think she told Pearl everything. She might not even have told her the truth!



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Blood Arrows

It started with blood.

Emmie's journey all on her own started with blood.

Not much blood. Just a few drops. But still enough lost blood to end a small life.

It started when Emmie's horse shied at a horse-chestnut tree. At first, Emmie wondered if the horse had been *carved* from chestnut wood. Perhaps that's why the horse was afraid. Remembering axes, saws and chisels.

But then, past the whirling of manes and hooves and in the midst of the chaos of her sister's and brother's yells from the backs of their horses, she saw a small brown body nailed to a tree. A rodent — a mouse or a vole or a baby rat — nailed up by its stringy tail, dripping tiny drops of blood down the rough bark of the tree.

Before Emmie could look closer, her white mare veered away to the left, and galloped off.

"Emmie! Come back!" screeched her brother.

"I can't, Jasper! I can't! The horse won't turn back!"

And the horse was galloping far too fast for Emmie to throw herself out of the saddle to the ground.

Anyway, she wanted to see where the horse was going. She spent far too much time in that boring, quiet, *safe* house with Ruby and Jasper. An adventure on her own might be fun.

“EMMIE! HELP!” her sister shrieked behind her.

“Just hold on tight, Ruby, you’ll be fine!”

“Help! Don’t leave me ...”

That was the last she heard, past the thump of hooves and the whirr of wind past her ears.

She was trying to turn the horse. Really she was. Hauling on the reins, pressing with her heels and her knees and her thighs. But the horse didn’t respond. The horse just kept galloping as fast as she could through the trees.

So Emmie stopped trying to persuade the horse to slow or turn. She just moved with the fast rhythm, and let the horse run.

The white horse. Her shining, gleaming, sweating white mare.

But the mare wasn’t sweating the hot salt sweat of the ponies in the stables. She was sweating an oily, shiny, nutty sweat.

It smelt like the nut oil they used to keep their rocking horses shiny and clean. To keep them healthy, the triplets said to their big sister Pearl when she complained about the smell in the schoolroom, to keep them fast and nimble. Though they hadn’t really been expecting the rocking horses to *become* fast and nimble.

But this rocking horse was fast. Fast, strong, and determined to stay on this path. At first Emmie thought the mare was galloping for fun or for freedom, but now that she had stopped fighting

the horse, she noticed the mare's flat back ears, her ragged breathing, her tense neck. This horse was afraid. She wasn't sweating because of the warm morning or the speed of her gait. She was sweating because she was frightened.

They were out of the pheasant woods now, and speeding along a narrow path by the river. A well-trodden path, but not trodden by Emmie, not even on a flesh and blood horse. She had never been here before, though they were not much more than a couple of miles from the house. Her mum didn't let the triplets out of the garden, and certainly not onto the lands of the neighbours to the south. "Odd people," her mother would say vaguely. "Unfriendly. Not to be trusted."

But whoever owned it, the landscape was spectacular. They were hurtling by the side of a fast rushing river, curving round the base of high rocky mountains, which rose up into blue sky, wreathed with small wisps of smoky clouds. And flashing past at Emmie's head height were clumps of small bright rowans and silver birch trees growing by the water. Not that Emmie had time to enjoy the view, as the horse wasn't slowing down or calming down. The mare was racing, unwillingly, away from her companions, away from her home, and Emmie felt sorry for her.

She took a moment, as she leant forward and balanced her feet in the stirrups to take the jolting weight off her spine, to worry about herself too.

Where was she going? What or who was waiting for them at the end of this path? Because surely the horse couldn't gallop like this forever.

Emmie tried to summon up some appropriate nerves and fear for herself, but couldn't find any. She was excited. Exhilarated. Slightly confused, she would admit, riding on a newly living rocking horse, separated from her family, on land she had never been allowed to visit, and with no control over her destination. But surely there was no point in being scared, not until there was something to be scared of.

The horse was tiring. Emmie felt the hooves falter, the rhythm stutter.

This was her chance. She started to move her body in the rhythm of a rising trot, and the horse followed her lead, sinking into the slower motion, beginning to trot too.

As the speed lessened, so did the noise of the whistling wind and the drumming hooves. So Emmie was able to murmur to the horse, to hum and sing and chant to her, to slow the rhythm even more, until the horse was just walking.

It was good to discover that her songs had power even without Jasper and Ruby joining in, backing her up, harmonising with her. Perhaps she really could handle an adventure all on her own.

The horse was calmer now. Still pulled along the river path, still unwilling to turn round, even if Emmie gently put pressure on the reins, but much calmer. Emmie kept murmuring and singing. The horse's ears flicked forward and her neck muscles relaxed.

Then Emmie stopped singing, bringing the melody to a definite and clear end. The horse

stopped walking. She stood. Head hanging. Feet still. And Emmie slid off.

She went round to the horse's head, and soothed her. Stroked the mare's nose, as she had often done in the schoolroom, but reaching up much higher now that the horse had grown so tall. "Aren't you brave, girl. Aren't you doing well. Calm down, now, calm down."

She ran her hand down the smooth white length of the horse's long nose. Smooth and cold, not hot like a sweating horse. Smooth and hard, too, without the velvet softness of a horse's skin. This rocking horse hadn't come to life by turning into a real horse; this rocking horse was still made of wood! But it was wood which was moving and breathing.

And even though Emmie was sure she hadn't brought this mare to life, the mare was following her lead, letting her take charge.

So she tried to turn the horse round. It was all very well having a solo adventure, but it probably wasn't fair to leave Ruby on her own, nor sensible to leave Jasper in charge. Probably she should lead the horse back. But the mare couldn't move. Emmie had stopped the headlong gallop, but she couldn't change the mare's direction.

It was clear the horse was still distressed and frustrated; she didn't want to keep following the river south, but she just couldn't turn round. Emmie thought of leaving the horse here, and walking back herself. But that didn't seem fair. She'd known this animal for years, even if the horse had been a toy until this morning. Anyway,

what kind of power could bring a rocking horse to life and force it to follow a path? Emmie was curious to find out.

So with one last reassuring pat, she looped the horse's reins round a birch branch, and had a look around.

A calm swan on the river. An anxious moorhen fussing on the bank. Some ripples under water. The air was warm and still, now that she was standing still herself, rather than galloping through a storm made by the horse's speed. And apart from the sound of the water, and the waterbirds, the air was silent. No noise behind to scare the horse forward, no sounds ahead calling her onward. She looked up at the sky, and saw a pair of circling crows glinting in the soft low morning light.

She looked at the ground. The path was trodden earth, dotted with a few white pebbles and thorny twigs. And marked with an arrow. A damp, dark, arrow shape on the path.

Emmie knelt down. She hadn't her big sister's skill in tracking, because she lacked Pearl's interest in hunting, but even she could see that this wasn't natural. And even she could tell, with just a finger touch, that this was blood.

An arrow of blood pointing to the south. A blood arrow, drawn on the path, to draw a horse and her rider onwards.

Whose blood? Not the wee brown mouse earlier: it was far too small to have lost this much blood. So whose blood?

Emmie glanced around. The moorhen didn't stop twittering as she approached the river. She

peered onto the scrubby bank. The noisy moorhen flapped off, finally panicked into movement. One other moorhen stayed where it was. A sharp angular jumble of dusty black feathers. Flat and spiky and still on the ground.

What a waste of a life! Angry, Emmie used the heel of her ankle boot to mess up the arrow, to smudge it and erase it and obliterate it.

And as soon as the arrow was scraped off the path, the horse twitched, and turned her head to the right, and began to edge backwards, pulling on the reins.

“So *now* you can choose!” said Emmie. “Now the arrow is gone, you can choose back *or* forward. Or rather, because I’ve got the reins tied to a tree, I can choose. Wait a bit though.”

And she thought.

She thought about going back.

Back to her mother, always anxious like the moorhen. Back to Ruby and Jasper, always looking to her for ideas. Back to Pearl, always leaving them behind when she escaped to the hills. Back to her house, filled with toys, but no excitement.

And she thought about going forward.

Forward to find someone who could make a wooden horse gallop. Who drew blood arrows on the land.

She unlooped the horse’s reins from the tree, and walked slowly forward.

As she walked she kept murmuring and singing reassuringly to the horse, and she kept her eyes on the path. She found another blood arrow, and then another and another, each about 100 paces from

the last, and whenever she saw one, she rubbed it out thoroughly, and walked forward faster.

Once, as an experiment, when the path widened as the river curved, Emmie led the horse round in a full circle, just to prove that they could choose any direction they wanted once the blood arrows were wiped out.

And she justified her accelerating steps to the horse. "Well, if we can choose, let's choose adventure. If it starts to look like a foolish decision, we can always change our minds and go home."

She could feel the horse's reluctance in her slow steps, and heavy pull on the reins. "Perhaps you're right. I suppose if there is something stronger than those blood arrows up ahead we might not be able to turn back.

"And then would anyone come and find us, do you think? Would anyone come and rescue us? Well, Mother rarely leaves the house, Jasper won't put himself out for anyone else and Ruby doesn't have the backbone for it. So our best chance of rescue, if we need it, is probably Pearl. She can certainly follow a trail, and she won't be scared of a little blood or a big four-legged lump of wood like you. Yes, I'm pretty sure we can rescue ourselves, and if not, I'm sure Pearl will rescue us.

"And in the meantime I might get some answers, because a person who can bring a rocking horse to life, and make a path of blood, might be able to explain why I hear the rocks singing to me.

"So let's follow this bloody path to the answers, and if I don't like what I hear, I can always just go

home to Mother. On you, my big beautiful rocking horse, or on my own two feet!”

After rubbing out a dozen more blood arrows, she finally saw something ahead other than trees, bushes and calm cruising swans. She saw a bridge. A high humped bridge, with a low parapet, carrying a narrow road over the river.

Then she saw something else. A figure on the bridge, ducking down, peering up over the stone parapet, ducking down again.

So she jerked the horse into the shelter of a stand of trees.

That hidden figure might well be the artist who drew the arrows which led them here. Emmie wondered what the person wanted. But she knew she and the horse needed an escape route before she found out. She had to make sure there were no more blood arrows between her and the bridge, so the horse could turn and run if they wanted to get away. But she couldn't walk the horse up to the bridge in broad daylight. So she tied the horse up, and crawled forward herself.

Luckily her mother had a fairly simple attitude to names: Pearl Chayne, Ruby Chayne, Jasper Chayne and Emerald Chayne. Her little gems! Her shiny jewellery box!

And she had an even simpler attitude to colour. All Jasper's waistcoats were striped or spotted. All Ruby's dresses were red. All Pearl's dresses, poor thing, were pale grey and all Emerald's were green. So she was at least the same colour as the grass she was crawling through at the edge of the path. She scanned the path as she moved forward,

and she spotted one more blood arrow, only ten paces from the bridge. So this should be the last one.

She edged forward towards it, stopping dead when she heard a cough, starting again when there was silence. Then the shadowy figure suddenly stood up, above her, looking impatiently along the path, and Emmie held her breath. When the shape ducked down again, she scrambled to the blood arrow, reached out her hand, and rubbed it out, stifling a retch of horror at the gritty wet stickiness of the blood on her skin. Then she wiped her hand on the dew-damp grass, and slid back to the horse as fast as she could.

She climbed back on the white mare, thinking it was best to give the impression they had ridden fast and uncontrolled the whole way here, rather than stopping to think and to rub out the arrows.

She whispered, "Let's go and see what's over that bridge," and urged the horse into a sudden gallop.

As they burst out from the trees, there was a flurry of white. A massive v-shape of swans rose from behind the bridge like a spear thrown from deep under the river, and flew straight at them.

The horse screamed and reared, and Emmie was flung back so hard that she could see nothing but sky and feathers for a moment. But she clung on with her legs, leaned forward with all her weight, and she was still on the rocking horse's back when the mare crashed down to the ground.

They were surrounded by bright beaks, clawed feet and whiteness, and the noise of huge wings

beating the air was louder than wooden hooves on the path.

Then a sudden voice, "I'll save you. Stay calm, little girl! I'll save you." And a short knobbly ivory stick came slicing through the feathers. The swans flew off very suddenly, all settling on the water as if in prearranged formation, and a man stood there in front of Emmie and the terrified horse.

The horse clattered around for another few seconds, dancing on her nervous hooves, until Emmie got her under control.

She looked at the man, standing there with a desperately friendly smile.

"Goodness, my dear," he said, "you must have got such a fright. Just as well I was here to rescue you."

She looked at his fading grey grin. And his old-fashioned purple jacket. And his lacy white shirt, with its floppy cuffs.

Lacy white cuffs, flecked with dark red dots.
Blood.

*The End ...
of Emmie's chapter.
But only the start
of her adventure ...*

