

Chapter One

Leya Martin nervously placed her freshly polished, black leather boot into the stirrup and gingerly mounted the young horse. Her heart was pounding. She tried to swallow but instead coughed. Her mouth was bone dry. She eased herself into the saddle and felt a cold wet feeling between her legs. Del moved sideways as she reached for the other stirrup and placed her foot on the iron. She adjusted the girth for the umpteenth time, as she had been instructed. She moved her hands gingerly along his neck and gently patted it in reassurance for Del but mainly for herself. She tried to swallow again but made a gulping sound. She moved him into an active walk. He responded instantly. She looked around, trying to focus across the course. Her vision was hampered by the driving rain that lashed hard against her face, driven by the howling, relentless wind that enveloped the entire field. It was devoid of any form of shelter bar the copse. The wind scooped at the trees, like an enormous invisible hand. It made them lean and arch with its power. She heard a voice from beside her. It was her friend *LB*.

“You’ll be fine, man! Don’t be scared. It’s only a few jumps.” *LB*, dressed in smart trainers and fashionable skinny jeans, smiled up at her from beneath her pink hoodie. The rain lashed hard against her face.

LB wasn’t that interested in horses but she was keen to support Leya; particularly as this was the first time Leya was

riding one of Manna Jacob's promising eventers at a local competition. Manna had high hopes for Del and was giving Leya the opportunity to ride him around a novice course. Manna had told Leya it would be the ideal competition to introduce the young horse to cross-country and perhaps in the future, he might make it as an event horse. Manna was also competing with another young hopeful, six-year-old Figaro. She was already out on the course.

Leya turned Del into the wind. In protest, he moved swiftly backwards and dug his hooves into the sticky ground. LB who was stood behind him, sending a text on her mobile phone, leapt out of the way, straight into a pile of droppings, previously deposited by Del. She groaned and looked down at her white trainers where a green mass oozed from beneath her feet.

"Oh man! I only got these a few days ago!" she whimpered. She indicated for Leya to hand over her riding crop so she could attempt to scrape off the large clod of muck. She winced in disappointment and frowned. "They are gonna be stained for life! I will lose my swag, wearing shitty trainers!"

Looking down at what LB was trying to achieve, Leya yelled, "LB! Don't do that! I need to use that stick!" She indicated in annoyance for LB to hand it over. "Don't make such a fuss! They will clean up; it's only muck!"

"Come on!" she hissed at Del, "We've got to go...now!"

She squeezed her legs against his Del's wet body and urged him forward. "We've got to do this...trust me! Why I am doing this! It should have been called off. Come on..." she pleaded. She slammed her legs on. Her spurs brushed his sides and Del obeyed. He moved into a hesitant sideways trot into the starting box.

A voice called out in the distance, “It’s a bit hairy out there. No-one has gone clear! The course is a real bitch! Glad *I’m* back safely!” Another sounded the death knell, “It should be cancelled. No-one can ride a decent round in this. It’s atrocious out there!”

Ignoring the doom and the gloom, Leya blinked away the rain from her eyes and tried to breathe. In, out, in out; her nerves were in tatters. She cantered Del in a tight circle and waited for her countdown...*three, two, one...go!*

“Here is Leya Martin riding Delaware!” boomed the loud speaker to the handful of spectators who had braved the foul weather.

“Shit! Why am I doing this?” Leya asked herself as she and Del approached the first fence – straw bales, designed to encourage the horse over a simple low jump. Del took one look at the bales in horror. His eyes were on stalks: he reacted like he had never encountered straw in his life, let alone eaten it or laid on it in his stable. He believed the bales to be alive and tried his very best to run out. Leya turned his head at the last minute and he leapt over them from a near standstill, his head on a level with the bales as he refused to take his eyes off them. He jumped at least six feet into the air in unsightly fashion. Leya was thrust onto Del’s neck and she forced herself back into the saddle. Del thought it was great fun and proceeded to canter sideways in banana fashion to the next fence, the drop. Leya gathered the reins to collect Del as he skidded to a halt at the edge of the grassy bank. It was already churned up by the many hooves that had passed through before. Del momentarily looked at the other side, his head bent down low. He cat jumped again from a standstill. Again, he threw Leya on to his neck and she found herself in between the saddle and his withers. She blinked away more rain from her eyes and cantered on towards the next fence,

the rider frightener! This was so called because the upturned pheasant feeder appeared larger and wider than it actually was. Leya was feeling less nervous and they cleared the feeder with ease. Del had settled down and wasn't pulling quite so enthusiastically. He jumped the next two jumps, the rustic upright and the hurdles very cleanly; they galloped on towards the open ditch. Leya hated water jumps but she tried not to transmit her nerves to Del. She closed her eyes tightly as the jump loomed large and daunting in front of them. She felt Del take off and breathed a huge sigh of relief as he safely reached the other side. Losing his balance momentarily under the slippery ground, he faltered. Leya patted his sodden neck, still holding firmly on to the reins. She looked for the next jump. It was under the cover of the copse. An 'in and out'. The wind blew fiercely into Leya's face as they rounded the course towards the foliage. Spatters of mud flew around them as the turf had been cut up by previous competitors and was beyond boggy. The trees were thrust from left to right by the incessant wind. Del strengthened his speed and decided to gallop erratically, unaware of exactly where he was being asked to go. He wasn't happy about galloping into a black hole, which was the impression the thrashing trees gave him. Leya put her leg on and collected her reins; she half-halted Del to prevent him from running out. He slowed to a canter and pensively entered the woods. Once in, he saw the in and out and gallantly jumped over it. He landed in a sticky mud bog, disguised by a pool of water the other side of the jump but cantered on enthusiastically.

"Good boy! Well done Del!" Leya praised him as they upped a gear. They galloped towards the coffin. Del was performing very well and Leya's confidence was boosted. As they approached the fence, a dog became loose from its owner and ran on to the course, directly in front of them. Del spooked

and his concentration became fixed on the dog. Leya took hold of Del and tried to detract his attention but, it was too late. Del wasn't listening to her and decided he didn't want to jump the coffin. The dog was much more interesting. He ran out at the jump, much to Leya's annoyance. She swiftly turned him, cantered in a circle and headed back at the jump. Del wasn't interested. He fought against Leya and planted his feet at the take off and skidded to a halt. Again she turned in a circle but made the decision to carry on to the next fence.

Del's momentum and enthusiasm immediately evaporated after the coffin. He had switched off. He decided he'd had enough jumping for one day. He refused the following two jumps and, in an attempt to please his rider, with one last effort, decided that he ought to jump one more fence albeit the wrong way! He approached the jump with much gusto and stopped dead at take off, launching Leya spectacularly into the air like puppet. Del watched with interest as Leya landed in a heap amongst copious amounts of mud and brushwood. The steward's flag was raised, a whistle blew in the distance; they were eliminated. Leya was angry with herself and very distraught. She shook her head in annoyance, got up and picked off hedge cuttings from her sodden, muddy clothes. Her back was hurting and she held on to her side and winced. She grabbed hold of Del's reins and limped solemnly off the course and back to the lorry park. She untacked him, placed his cooling rug over his soaked back and threw the tack into the lorry compartment. She dreaded Manna's reaction. Del put his head down to the ground as far as his lead rope would allow and proceeded to eat a circle of grass around him as he stood tethered to the lorry.

Manna returned to the lorry, riding Figaro. She was elated.

"Guess what? We went clear! Fig was brilliant! Took the jumps like a stag! Really gutsy, good boy! Shouldn't you be

walking Del round, to cool him off? How did you do, Leya?" she asked cheerfully and leapt off Fig's back.

Leya took a deep breath.

"Not so good. He ran out at the coffin, there was this dog..."

Leya began.

Manna interrupted.

"But you got him over it didn't you...? Tell me you got him over it, Leya?"

"Well...ummm. No...I didn't. I couldn't get him..."

"Oh, Leya you idiot! You *know* what I've told you. It is *so* important to get the horse over a fence that they have previously refused! The golden rule! And you blew it! Heavens! Will you *ever* learn anything? I am really disappointed in you. Why don't you just think for once in your life? You could have seriously ruined Del's eventing chances! Thinking he can refuse a jump and being allowed to get away with it! And he won't even qualify now!"

Manna angrily dragged a sodden Fig to the other side of the lorry. She was clearly furious with Leya. Leya shrugged her shoulders. She shook her head again in dismay. As always, Manna was on to her like a ton of bricks. It was never the horse's fault. It was never the situation; it was always Leya's fault. She felt utterly deflated. Leya didn't get the opportunity to tell Manna that she had fallen off and hurt herself.

"Hey!" LB returned to the horsebox. Her trainers were covered in mud and she had yanked her jeans high above her knees. Her legs were scalded by the wind and rain in shades of mottled red. "That was real bad luck, man! That woman with the dog should be shot! Still, as I said, it's only jumping." She walked past a fuming Manna and promptly climbed into the dry cab. She placed her MP3 player on her lap, fiddled with the earpiece and started nodding her head to the music.

Manna went on to win the class and was presented with a beautiful silver salver and a glossy rosette emblazoned with 1st in large gold letters. As she collected her prize in the collecting ring, Leya reluctantly congratulated her. Manna smirked at Leya.

“Perhaps one day, you might win. On the other hand, judging by your performance today, perhaps not!” She sauntered off to the lorry with the salver tucked under her arm. “I want those horses taken back to the yard now. Can you drive the lorry for me? I have just met someone who has a horse she wants me to have a look at with the possibility of training it. I am getting a lift with her. I’ll be back later on.”

Leya interrupted her, “But, Manna, I can’t...”

Manna scowled back at her, “Look, just drive the bloody horsebox, will you! Surely you can manage that?” She waved to her prospective client who was waiting in a 4X4 and turned her back on Leya.

“Okay; LB, help me load these two will you? LB!” she yelled, making her jump. “Come on!”

LB removed her earpiece, clambered down from the lorry and thrust her hands into her pockets.

“So where is Mrs J? Aint she gonna drive the lorry?”

“Apparently not,” Leya wrestled with Del as she tried to fasten travel boots on to his legs. “She is going to see someone about training their horse. Asked me to drive it back for her.”

“So that’s cool, innit?” LB held on to Del’s head collar. He tried to nudge her away from him.

Leya held her back, her hip and lower back were throbbing and she felt nauseous.

“I don’t have much choice in the matter. Right, walk him round in a circle, turn him and walk him straight up the ramp. Watch your feet!”

“Why, in case I get shit on my trainers again?” LB remarked in sarcasm. “Cos as far as I’m concerned, these trainers are just shit now anyway! Wasted!”

“Just walk him up the ramp!” Leya was getting impatient. The rain pelted against the back of her head as she untied Fig and led him up the ramp. LB had tied Del up to a ring positioned on the side of the lorry where he began to munch on a hay net. Leya fastened the wooden partitions making sure both horses were secure.

“Okay, let’s get out of here. I’ve had enough for one day!” Leya started up the lorry and it boomed into life with a plume of smoke. They inched out of the sodden churned up mud. The wheels periodically spun in the last few strands of grass, but they were soon out of the field and heading for home.

LB reinserted her earpiece. Leya could hear the music above the drone of the lorry’s engine and shook her head.

“Can’t you shut that thing off?” she yelled.

LB jumped. She turned, clearly startled. She pulled at the earpiece and looked at Leya.

“Don’t get the arse with me, just cos you messed up! It wasn’t my fault you missed the jump. Blame the dog, man!”

“I can’t bear that noise you are listening to. It’s really irritating!” Leya crunched into third gear and the lorry lurched. Her passengers were thrust forward as she did so.

“Take it easy man or you’ll be wearing those horses!” LB looked at the road ahead. “Don’t worry about Mrs J, she’ll get over it. You may be in for a hard time for the next day or two, but chill!”

“I wish I shared your optimism. It’s easy for you to say; you don’t work for her,” returned Leya concentrating on the road.

“If I worked for Mrs J, then I wouldn’t mess up with her horse,” LB announced and looked out of the side window.

“Yeah right! You can’t even ride! So that would be something else to see. You wouldn’t last a day there!” Leya retorted.

“Wanna bet? I reckon I could get the gist of this riding lark and go round those jumps clear, man. It would be wicked!” LB flicked her index finger against her thumb as she spoke.

“I certainly wouldn’t take no rap from a dog! You gotta get over it, Leya. Move on!” LB smiled and resumed fiddling with her earpiece. The endless thump, thump racket of the music continued.

Leya was fuming. She reached across and lunged at LB’s MP3. LB grabbed Leya’s arm and they wrestled against each other.

“You are really pissing me off! Give it to me!” yelled Leya “Just.....give....it....oh noooooooooooooo!” She stared in horror at the road and screamed. “Oh shi.....”

A tractor and trailer had pulled out into the road. It was fully laden with large round straw bales. Leya slammed on the brakes and the lorry skidded violently sideways. The horses were thrown from one side of the box to the other with uncontrollable force. Leya could hear the sickening thud of their hooves as they desperately tried to regain their balance. She closed her eyes as the lorry swerved, mounted the grass verge and launched into the air. LB was screaming and trying to hold on in what seemed like slow motion; the lorry began to tilt, teetering momentarily on the edge of its tyres before it slammed down on to the road landing its side. The sound of metal scraping the road and splintering wood rang out as it eventually slowed and ground to a halt. There was an eerie silence as the bodywork of the lorry creaked. Its wheels continued to spin in mid air, squeaking intermittently, before they too became silent. Leya had been thrown sideways

and ended up suspended from her seatbelt across LB's lap. Still encapsulated by her seatbelt, she fumbled across to turn off the engine. She blinked and focussed on LB who was lying in a crumpled heap between the passenger seat and the foot well. The earpiece was lying on the floor, the music continued to play. LB wasn't moving.

Unclipping herself from the seatbelt, Leya inched her way up to the door and pushed against it. It was a difficult manoeuvre but she managed to clamber out. She was met by the farmer. His face was white and his expression was one of horror.

"Are you all right?" he choked. "Didn't you see me? You couldn't exactly miss me! The tractor isn't small, is it?"

Leya couldn't concentrate on what he was saying. Her concern was for LB.

"Can you ring for an ambulance? It's my friend, she's in there. She isn't moving?" Leya pointed to the foot well.

"Yes, course I will. I think we'll need the fire service as well, don't you? Are there any animals in the back?"

"Oh my god!" Leya, through shock, had momentarily forgotten the horses. She suddenly realised. "Yes, two horses. Oh no! I don't think I can bear to look at them. Can you check them for me, please? See how they are?" she pleaded with the farmer and dragged him to the back of the lorry.

"Can you get the ramp down for me? Oh! It's all twisted!" she screamed.

The farmer made a 999 call and reported the accident. He then attempted to open the ramp on the lorry. It was jammed and distorted. Leya indicated towards the groom's door. She stood aside as he carefully released the clasp. What met his eyes made him gulp in horror.

"You don't want to look in there, love. It aint a pretty sight. Best wait till the fire brigade gets here. They'll be able to deal

with this. We need to call a vet. Like *now*! Who is your vet?" He urged.

"Umm, Mike at the Malsham practise. He's an equine vet. But they're not my horses! His number is on my mobile." wailed Leya in confusion. She reached into her pocket and handed the phone to the farmer. "They are Manna's horses; they're only young; only babies!"

"Best wait here, love." The farmer gravely repeated.

It seemed like hours before the distant peel of sirens pierced the silence of the road and its carnage. It was an ambulance. It drew to an abrupt halt and two paramedics emerged. They ran to the scene. The farmer gave his account of what happened as Leya sat in shock on the wet grass verge. Her hands covered her face. She felt a gentle, warm hand on hers.

"Come on love. Let's have a look at you. Can you tell me your name? Can you remember what happened?"

Leya looked at the paramedic and closed her eyes. She didn't speak. The second paramedic joined them and whispered to his colleague.

"We need the fire service for this one." He indicated to the twisted remains of the lorry where LB lay trapped.

A second sound of sirens filled the air as two police cars arrived. One officer cordoned off the road with cones and placed a blue *Police Accident* sign in front of the lorry. He spoke briefly on his radio before walking over to where Leya was sitting.

"Hello. Can you tell me what happened?" he enquired. "Just to put us in the picture," he added. Leya blurted out what she could remember before breaking into sobs.

"It was my fault. I was trying to stop her...LB, my friend, from making the racket on her MP3 player. I was irritated by it;

it was so loud and then, I looked at the road and there was the tractor. I couldn't miss it!" she sobbed and held her head in her hands. "I should have told her. I should have *told* her that I couldn't do it!" she wailed.

"Couldn't do what?" the police officer probed.

"Drive the lorry," Leya whispered. "I shouldn't have driven the lorry; but she didn't listen to me! She was too angry with me. Too concerned about her new client. Angry with me for messing up on the cross country. She made me do it!" she yelled. "And, I didn't want to!"

The police officer nodded in silence as he made notes.

"Are you telling me you aren't insured to drive this vehicle?" he calmly asked.

"No. I am insured. I tried to tell her, but she wouldn't listen!"

"So, why couldn't you drive the lorry?" the officer plied.

"Cos my back is really killing me. I fell off around the course, onto one of the jumps, really hurt my back. But she wouldn't listen. She was too wrapped up in her own glory and her own self...as usual. It's always her! Her! Her!" Leya blurted and thrust her head into her hands.

"Who are you talking about?" asked the officer.

"My boss, Manna Jacobs, at Littlebridge Stables, Malsham." Leya replied in a muffled tone. She didn't take her hands from her face.

"Right. Let's check these horses in the back. The farmer says there are two horses, is that right?"

"Oh please; let them be okay!" Leya wailed. She shook her head in fear.

"We'll sort them out," reassured the officer. "Stay here please whilst we go and have a look at them."

Leya closed her eyes in despair. The body of the lorry laid silent with only the periodic creak of settling, splintered wood. He was met by the farmer who was standing by the groom's door. He bent forward and lowered his voice.

"It isn't good, officer. One horse doesn't appear to be moving. The second horse is alive. I'm not sure about the first one. He is pinned beneath the partition; the other horse is lying on top of him. And...look." He indicated to the side of the lorry where a trail of blood steadily trickled through the tangled metal and on to the road.

"Has anyone called a vet?" The officer asked.

"Yes, straightaway. I spoke to the local Malsham vet. The young girl gave me his name. He's coming over now."

Sirens pealed through the silence once more as the fire service arrived with two engines. Briefed by the police, they immediately attended to cutting LB from her metal tomb. Cutting equipment made short work of the metal frame of the horsebox and they deftly removed the windscreen so they could provide easy access for the paramedics. The drone of the equipment shocked Leya as she remained sitting on the verge. LB was gently manoeuvred into a position where she could be safely removed from the lorry and placed on to a flat orange board, her head was taped, to prevent her from moving. She was given painkillers intravenously and the two paramedics, aided by three fire-fighters, gently carried her to the waiting ambulance. She was whisked away with the sirens blaring and blue lights flashing into the distance.

The chief fire-fighter made his way over to Leya.

"The ambulance has taken your friend to Malsham General Hospital to A&E. She is in safe hands. Try not to worry." He

reassured an ashen-faced Leya. “We’re dealing with the horses now. The vet has arrived. He is assessing them. We should know what is happening soon. Stay here, I will come and find you.”

“Can you stay with her?” he asked a female police officer who had just arrived at the scene. She nodded and sat down beside Leya, who was staring at the ground.

The vet emerged from the groom’s door. He looked gravely at the chief fire-fighter.

“Not good,” he sighed. “The horse underneath is dead, crushed by the weight of the other one. I have checked for a pulse, but there is nothing. The other horse is badly injured but should survive. I have sedated him. It will prevent him from thrashing around causing more damage to himself. But we need to get him out of there. I will arrange for a horse ambulance to take him back to the practice. He’s going to need surgery. He is impaled on a piece of wood. It’s gone through his chest. We need to act fast. Can you brief your guys, please? And, we are going to need the knacker wagon. Can you ring Malsham Hunt for me? I’ll give you the number. They still take fallen stock. We need to remove the body as soon as possible.”

The chief fire officer nodded in silence and indicated for his crew to gather round as he explained.

“Has the owner been informed of all this?” asked Mike.

The police officer moved towards him.

“Yes, Mrs Jacobs is apparently on her way now. She’ll be a few minutes.”

Leya sat in silence. She was in deep shock. Not long afterwards, she could hear a familiar voice but didn’t register that it was Manna who had arrived at the scene. She could hear a gasp and deafening cry as Manna was informed that Del was

dead. She listened to a lonely blackbird's afternoon lament. It was the end of the day and he was saying goodnight to it. Leya blinked away a tear as she thought of Del. The female police officer had broken the news to her that he was dead. Leya began to sway backwards and forwards. Her arms crossed her chest as she held on to her body. She heard the noise of machinery, cutting into the bodywork of the lorry. She heard the knacker wagon's winch as it lifted Del's body on to the flat bed, with its high sides, so you couldn't see or smell the stench of death. She rocked backwards and forwards as the vet worked to release Fig, who was heavily sedated. She listened as Manna screamed when Fig was cut free from the wooden stake. A piece of wood remained jammed in his chest.

She didn't even register when she was led to a waiting police car and taken to the hospital to be checked over. She was in a parallel world, which was being acted out in slow motion. It was a parallel world which she hoped she could stay in for the rest of her life.

Chapter Two

“Shouldn’t you be going?” Natalie Roberts whispered as she pushed against the masculine frame that peacefully slept beside her in the antique pine double bed. She repeatedly nudged him until he woke up. The bedstead squeaked and groaned as she moved her fingers under his arms, then onto his ribs until she received a response.

“Why...wh...what time is it?” He slowly moved beneath the faded blue gingham duvet cover; delicately lifted his head and hovered above the pillow, eyes blinking awake, trying to catch a glimpse of the clock radio that sat on the antique pine bedside cabinet.

“Not *exactly* the best time to be where you are,” she replied and pushed his warm body towards the edge of the bed.

“No, Nats,” he groaned. “I don’t wanna go!” He placed a protective arm around her shoulder and pulled her close to him. Opening his eyes, he took in the new morning. He blinked against the weak sunlight that had infiltrated the large, Victorian bedroom. It was decorated in faded primrose yellow emulsion paint, about the same time as the sheets and curtains were purchased; tired and in need of desperate new touches. Stray and age-old cobwebs hung haphazardly from the ceiling, with resident dead flies encapsulated around the curtains. The light fitting was captivated in dust like camouflage netting. He smiled at Natalie as he recalled their night of passionate lovemaking. He fondly kissed her on the forehead.

“*You...*” he sat up and wryly smiled, “are even *more* gorgeous...” He carefully moved a strand of blonde hair away from her hazel eyes.

“I know, so you keep telling me,” Natalie interrupted. “Now...get...out... you go!” She gently shoed away his slumbering advances.

“Okay, you win,” he conceded and reached out for the black moleskin trousers that lay on top of the duvet. They were in exactly the same position where he had thrown them the night before, crumpled but warm, alongside a checked shirt that also held its fair share of creases. He tried to organise his exit from the comfortable bed. He found great difficulty in achieving any sort of motivation. He complained loudly as he placed his feet on the floor, touching the bare floorboards. He stretched his arms upwards above his head, yawned and ran a hand lazily through his tousled hair.

“Ooh, it’s a bit nippy!” He remarked. He clutched his sides and rubbed them vigorously until he felt warmth running over his body.

He walked to the window, blinked a couple of times and then took in the view towards the downs. He could make out some sheep that grazed in the fields in the distance. They looked like early morning mushrooms scattering the fields, fresh for picking. He looked to the sky as the sun had climbed midway and set a warming, yellow hue over the valley. A pheasant in the leaf-filled copse rang out its warning trill with much flapping of its wings. He smiled and started to pull on his clothes amidst yawns and stretches. It was late spring.

Natalie lazily stretched; her body prepared itself for another day. She lifted her hands high above her head, exposing evenly tanned breasts. He stopped dressing and gazed at her slender,

toned body and then moved back towards the bed, entranced at her appearance.

“Why do you *always* do it?” He questioned and beckoned toward her breasts, urging them to move forward to him.

“To tease you; I know what you’re like,” she coyly replied. She moved seductively forward and dragged him back to the bed.

“I thought I was supposed to be going?” he softly mentioned as Natalie slowly unbuttoned his creased shirt. She fumbled with his trouser zip.

“No, I’m sorry, I’ve changed my mind,” she coaxed and lay back in the bed, awaiting his advances, which didn’t need to be awoken. They passionately began to make love. Natalie drew him close to her body, writhing beneath him. She draped her legs expertly across his back as he gently guided himself into her. She grabbed his head and drew him further into her as he kissed and probed her mouth with his tongue. She groaned in rapid anticipation. He lay back on the bed and caught his breath. His chest rose up and down revealing a mixture of rippling, well-toned muscles. Natalie smiled and kissed the top of his head. She athletically swung herself over his body and leapt off the bed.

“Told you, you should’ve *gone*, but instead... you *came*!” She grabbed her pink bathrobe that hung precariously on the back of the bedroom door and breezed purposefully out of the now sun-filled bedroom, swinging her robe in her arm.

“Do you want, tea or coffee?” she called from the bathroom.

“I think I need a shower first,” he called back. Glancing at his watch, he noticed it was nearly 8 a.m.

“I’ll have a coffee, then I must dash; need to be somewhere.”

“Somewhere nice, I hope,” she called from the shower amidst echoing splashing sounds of intense running water that pounded over her.

“Littlebridge,” was the response.

“Shower’s free so you can cleanse your infidelity!” She teased.

Natalie Roberts looked considerably younger than her years, even though her complexion was weathered through endless exposure to the elements. She was confident, outgoing and passionately fond of the opposite sex. Her explanation to those who questioned her youthful looks was that she drank insensibly, didn’t work regularly and had a lover whom she seduced at least three times a day. Fun loving and young at heart, Natalie was the life and soul of the social scene; popular amongst friends and acquaintances of the neighbouring farming and equine fraternity. She was ambitious, bossy but level-headed and spent her days trying to run her farm albeit on a much-reduced scale, since the sudden death of her husband, Sam, months earlier.

The man arrived downstairs and slumped down into the large red armchair by the bottle-green Aga, which nestled in the large brick alcove of the kitchen. Natalie passed him a mug of black coffee and smiled. She leaned back on the wooden work surface, sipping her tea from a baby-pink floral encrusted china cup.

“Are you going to the show at Malsham on Sunday?”

“The dressage? No, not if I can get out of it,” he answered amidst gulps of coffee. He glanced briefly at the headlines on the front of the newspaper.

“Then there might be a chance we could meet up. What do you think?”

“I think that, if there is even the slightest chance, it should be taken. Anyway, it’s not like you to miss a horsey event, is it?” she whispered over her cup and seductively added, “I think we should slip away, don’t you?”

“I’ll text you with a time.”

“Great!” Natalie glanced at the pile of letters on the kitchen table and sipped her tea.

“Bills?” He queried, knowing the exact response that he would receive.

“Probably; there always seem to be lots of them,” she continued to nonchalantly drink, looking away as she did so. “I’ll look through them later.”

Running the farm had not been easy since the untimely death of her forty-two year old husband. Natalie has been left with a string of debts, favours and a teenage daughter who was halfway through university, studying law. Sam had suffered a fatal heart attack. It had been a dreadful shock, leaving Natalie in denial. Her daughter, Calico, had taken his death so badly that she hadn’t been able to bring herself to return to the family home. She had decided instead to throw herself into her studies and made various excuses to stay with friends during the holidays. This had deeply upset Natalie. As with most mothers, Natalie invariably had differences of opinion with teenage Calico. Sam, the mediator, had always managed to smooth things out between them, usually in Calico’s favour. Calico knew that life would never be the same without him and that she would struggle to get her own way in the future with her mother. Her resolution to this dilemma was to stay away. Natalie hoped that bridges would, in time, be rebuilt and that one day they might be able to pick up from where they had parted. She secretly knew this would take time with a lot of talking and

understanding. Not just from her, but also from Calico. Give and take would be the key to their much needed reunion.

“You know, I could...” he began.

“I don’t need your help,” Natalie interrupted, slamming her cup into the sink, a small piece of china chipped from the rim. “Look, it’s my problem, *I* need to sort it out, it’s up to *me!* Oh damn! That’s my favourite cup!” She angrily tried to find the missing chipped piece by thrusting her hands into the washing up bowl without success.

“Okay, but you don’t need to be a martyr, Nat. It won’t achieve anything, will it? The bills will still be there, you can’t bury your head in the sand forever.”

“I’ll find a way, I always do. But, thanks anyway. Look. I’m sorry for snapping at you... it just irritates me, all this bloody hassle!”

He stood up, gathered her into his arms and gently kissed her on the cheek. He stroked her hair away from her eyes.

“I’d better go. We’ll speak soon, okay? Take care and call me?”

He closed the door slowly behind him and stepped into the concrete exercise yard that was littered with a mixture of weeds, nettles and bindweed. Natalie watched him get into his 4X4 and, with a little encouragement, the old beast burst into life with a graceful puff of black smoke from its diesel engine. She watched it amble up the unmade, bumpy lane, lined with leafy elm trees. It reached the narrow road and chugged its way towards Malsham.

Natalie pushed herself away from the kitchen work surface and shuffled towards the pile of letters. She flicked with distaste through the first batch. She noticed most were final demands. One letter, however, immediately caught her attention. It was postmarked with her solicitor’s name and address emblazoned in

crimson across the top. She placed the other letters back on the table and glanced momentarily at the envelope she still had held in her hand.

“I *know* I need to open this one,” she murmured to herself. She turned the envelope over and, with apprehension, slid her fingers beneath the seal to reveal the contents. She slowly unfolded the letter and as she did so, a slip of paper fluttered onto the floor, printed side facing downwards. Her aged tortoiseshell cat, Nell, twitched briefly as the slip landed near her wicker basket. It wasn’t loud enough to wake her completely from her peaceful nap.

“Right!” Natalie prepared herself. She sat down and began to read, holding her breath as she took in its contents;

“Dear Mrs Roberts,

Re: The Estate of Mr Samuel Edward Roberts - Deceased

Further to our previous correspondence, please find details of the final settlement of your late husband’s estate of which you are a beneficiary. I apologise for the extended delay which was due to unforeseen circumstances... Please also find enclosed my account in respect of work carried out, which I hope you will find reasonable.....

*Yours sincerely,
A & A Solicitors, Malsham.”*

Natalie placed the letter on the table and neglected to read further. She balanced awkwardly on her chair, leant down and

picked up the slip of paper. It was a statement which indicated the amount of money that was left in the Estate with a place for Natalie to sign in agreement of the amount. She stared for what seemed like hours whilst her brain took in the amount. £1,557,500.24! What a magical figure! She stared first at the slip and then at the letter which she scanned several times to make sure she hadn't made a terrible mistake. She checked the address on the envelope; yes, it was addressed to *her* and *her* alone. She glanced at the solicitor's fee account and started to laugh.

"Oh Sam, you've saved me! You won't know how much, but you've saved me! Oh...!"

She broke down into tears of disbelief. She lowered her head into her hands, her hair spread across her face like a golden veil. Tears of relief, sadness and every other emotion her body could muster. She sat up with a start; she thought of Calico. She grabbed hold of the statement again and carefully re-read it.

"How come you had *so* much?" she asked out loud, as though she was anticipating a reply from her deceased husband.

Nell stirred in her basket making it creak and shift. Natalie looked about her and tried to find a reason for her husband's immense wealth. She realised there would be *more* than enough money to ensure Calico would be able to stay on at university to complete her degree. This was one of the subjects Natalie needed to talk over with her, but now she would now be able to do it with renewed confidence and adequate financial backing. She reached across the table, wiping her tear-stained eyes swiftly with her bathrobe sleeve, grabbed a handful of the letters and threw them up high into the air in glee.

"Get stuffed the lot of you! You bastards! You won't ever cross my path again; hear me?" She whooped and watched the letters cascade from the air and scatter to the floor, like large square shaped snowflakes in slow motion.

Her heart beat very quickly and she felt her face redden. The realisation of a better and comfortable life began to sink in as she got up and started to dance around the kitchen, waking Nell as she accidentally kicked against the basket. The sudden thwack made Nell jump up in fright and disappear rapidly into the hallway. Sitting at a safe distance from the noise, Nell licked her foreleg and yawned in disgust at being rudely woken up. Natalie glanced back and apologised.

“Sorry, babe, I didn’t mean to frighten you!”

Clutching the letter firmly in her hand she swung it above her head and gyrated like a native engrossed in a frenzied tribal dance.

“Yes!” She punched the air in delight. “I *will* survive!”

When she had marginally composed herself, Natalie wanted to share her news and whom else should she phone but her best friend, Manna Jacobs, at Littlebridge Stables. She grabbed her mobile, scrolled down and found Manna’s name. She waited, hardly daring to breathe. She found it impossible to contain her excitement that welled inside her like a volcano about to erupt. She reached Manna’s voicemail and sighed in frustration.

The next phone call she made was to her bank manager. He was in a meeting, so Natalie begrudgingly left a message with one of the call centre operators. She prayed that a message would be left for him to call her and that a note wouldn’t be left lying in a filing basket in Mumbai. She wanted to get on with the next stage of her life now that she could envisage a positive future. She tapped the kitchen table impatiently with her fore and index fingers.

A few minutes later her mobile phone rang and Natalie jumped up with a start.

“Hello? Manna! Oh Jude, hi. What...oh shit! How terrible! Oh no! I’ll come over now! Bye!”

Natalie glanced at the morning paper that was propped against the side of the Aga. “*Promising Malsham Horse Dies*” was the headline. She shook her head in disbelief. Her own glory evaporated as she took in the tragic news.

She had so desperately wanted to tell Manna about the letter. She had wanted to gauge her reaction and revel in the glory that Manna would have surely have showered upon her. After all, it wasn’t every day that the sniff of £1.5 million dropped through one’s letterbox. She walked across to the welsh dresser and stopped to look at a photograph of Sam, dressed in his shooting garb, that was proudly displayed in a silver-plated frame. She smiled fondly at the photo. She reached for a corkscrew and retrieved a bottle of chilled Chablis from the fridge. She triumphantly poured herself a glass and glanced again at the photograph. She raised her glass in a personal toast.

“Cheers Sam! God bless you and Del too. You were a sweetie. What a waste of such potential.” She gulped a mouthful of wine. “And God help you, Leya!” The phone rang again. Swallowing quickly, she took the call before the ansaphone kicked in.

“Hi, Neil. You got the message then! The bank’s communications *are* good today! Yes, I need to see you...tomorrow? Yeah, that will be great. I’ll see you at three o’clock at the Malsham Branch. Bye!”

She quickly jotted down the appointment with her bank manager in her well-thumbed diary. She picked up the slip and

placed it against the page where she had written the time of their meeting.

Half an hour later, Natalie arrived at 'Littlebridge' in her 4X4. She drew up in the concrete yard. The air felt tinged in sadness as she walked to the house. Manna was stood in the doorway of her Georgian home. The successful horse trainer and semi-professional rider. Her slim body was hunched, hair uncombed, her eyes red with crying. Natalie put her arms out and greeted her in a hugged silence.

"Come on, let's go in. Where's Callum?" Natalie led Manna to the kitchen.

"I need a drink," she added looking around for alcohol.

"But it's still morning...isn't it?" Manna observed. She was still in shock. "I thought you were giving the *vino* a miss."

"No!" Natalie sat down with two glasses and a bottle of red wine. "In times of tragedy, it's this stuff that gets you through. Here have a sip." She poured the wine and handed a glass to Manna who sat, shell-shocked, staring at the table.

"I don't think I really want to drink it. I haven't slept a wink. I just keep thinking of poor Del and Fig. My lovely young boys...struck down, so young...so young." Manna continued to gaze at the table. Her hand reached out for the glass and she took a reluctant sip.

"How is Fig doing?" she gently asked and put her arm around Manna's shoulders.

Manna sniffed and sighed.

"Mike phoned me last night to say that he got through the op okay. The wood had pierced his shoulder, mainly muscle damage, no damaged or broken bones. But he will take time to heal. Mike said he's going to keep him in the equine hospital for the time being. To monitor him. It's going to be ages before he

can get back into some sort of normality. But at least he's alive. Not like my lovely, poor Del. I shall never forgive Leya for this. Never! That girl has ruined everything!"

"That's a bit harsh, isn't it? She didn't mean to do it. She's only young, Manna. You shouldn't have let her drive the lorry in the first place. Why did you?"

Natalie probed.

"Because I had a client to see, there and then. I couldn't miss the opportunity. But I suppose even that won't happen now. People will think my yard is incapable of transporting horses safely. Bloody Leya!" she gulped the wine and reached for the bottle to top up her glass.

"So what happens now?" Natalie asked. She held her breath.

"Now?" Manna simpered. "How should *I* know? I suppose I will have to deal with the police. They keep phoning up and wanting to ask loads of questions. Callum is fending them off for me. But I don't know how long for."

"What do they want to speak to you for? Surely they will pursue Leya with the dangerous driving thing?"

Manna shrugged her shoulders.

"Yes, they probably will but they are on to me because the silly bitch told them she couldn't drive the lorry. She told *plod* at the scene. She said she hurt her back when she fell off. Blurted it out apparently, according to them. So, my life is going to be hell now."

"Not necessarily. It was an accident. What about Leya's friend? How is she?" Natalie continued her barrage of questions.

"Don't know and I don't really care!" said Manna callously. "All I know is that I have one dead horse and one that is ruined. I can't think about anything else!"

Natalie decided to cool off her questioning. Manna was going to be answering enough questions with the police. She decided the time was right to tell Manna her news.

“Well, in amongst all this tragedy, I have some news. Take a look at *this!*” She thrust the letter into Manna’s hand and waited for the reaction. “Read it out loud to me! I need to *hear* it spoken out *loud!*”

Red-eyed and exhausted, Manna looked at her friend incredulously. She reluctantly agreed, took hold of the letter and began to read aloud. “Okay...Dear Mrs”

“Yes, I know *that* bit!” Natalie interrupted. “Go on; the next bit! Keep reading!” she instructed and bounced heavily up and down on her chair like an impatient child, making clouds of dust appear.

Manna read the letter out loud and Natalie slumped back on the chair, drew her legs up to her chin and closed her eyes. Manna stopped reading when she reached the sum of money.

“Wow, Nat!” Manna dropped the letter and stared in disbelief. “Did you have *any* idea Sam had *that* sort of money?”

Natalie shook her head.

“No! If I had known, I certainly would have enjoyed trying to spend it. At least so he could have had the pleasure of seeing me blow it, or maybe not...” she broke off in reflection; then burst out laughing.

“Bloody hell! I expect he’s spinning in his grave now. He couldn’t stand me even buying a new pair of knickers at M&S let alone letting me loose with £1.5 million!”

“Oh, Nat! That’s a horrible thing to say!” Manna appeared shocked but secretly knew that Sam and their historic confidential discussions, Natalie was telling the truth about her late husband. Sam Roberts had been obsessed with making money and lots of it. He had never spent a penny if he could help

it. He built up investments and reinvestment portfolios. It was part of his *secret* game. He had dabbled in the stock markets and gilts. His gambles had paid off. He had never told Natalie of his *business ventures* and had led her to believe that they weren't that well off and that they had to live on the bread line, hence the farm being rundown and overgrown and running at a loss. Sam's philosophy was, if a house looked unkempt, then one would never be pestered by burglars, con artists or hawkers because the impression of a rundown property meant the occupier wasn't worth much in monetary terms and would be left alone.

"So, what are your plans then, Nat?" Manna took another slug of wine.

"Seeing Neil, you know, the bank manager, tomorrow afternoon to have a chat and decide what to do. Do you know the first thing I'll do? I'm going to get rid of all my debts!" She smirked in distaste as she remembered the pile of unopened letters strewn across her kitchen floor. "And I'll make sure that Cally gets through University with a 2-1 or whatever the blazes you call it! A pass, graduate... you know! There's certainly enough dosh to pay her student fees now!"

She drained her glass until dry and indicated with outstretched fingers towards the bottle for Manna to refill her glass. Manna declined.

"No thanks, Nat. I've had enough. I need to have a clear mind. I'm going to visit Fig. Look, I am *really* pleased for you. Really I am. You deserve a break. Sam came up trumps, didn't he?" Manna picked up the letter and read through it again.

"He certainly did, Manna!" Natalie smiled as she thought of her eccentric late husband. "What about lunch sometime?"

"Yes, I'd love to. Just let me get today out of the way. Oh...have you read *all* of this letter?" asked Manna pointing at the final paragraph.