

PROLOGUE

The horse could smell their ill intentions. Three hundred years of inbreeding had produced a neurotic, nervous wreck of an animal that was good for only one thing: it could run like the wind. White-eyed, head swinging and teeth snapping, it strained and twisted to reach the hand gripping its halter.

‘Hold him steady,’ the older of the two men urged.

‘I can’t,’ the other protested as the horse, ears flat against its head, pulled away from him, almost jerking him over the half-door of the stable. He dropped the flashlight he was holding and took a two-handed grip on the animal’s leather halter strap, flinching as teeth clashed millimetres from his wrists and spittle sprayed his face.

‘Easy, boy, easy.’ The older man’s voice had calmed a hundred similar animals, but tonight the words were edged in fear and came up from his throat like a corncrake’s call. He was a dwarf of a man, small and bent but with shoulders like a weightlifter’s, topping out a body twisted by years of hard work. He was wearing overalls and wellington boots, and his hands and face were the colour of the saddles that he’d spent his lifetime polishing, fitting and adjusting and, years earlier, sitting astride. ‘Easy, boy. Good boy. There’s a good fellow.’ He slowly raised a hand and gently rubbed the horse’s nose, marvelling, as he always did, at its softness. The horse made a snuffling sound and the ones in the stables on either side snorted and their hooves clattered on concrete.

‘Now,’ the other man whispered when everything was quiet. ‘Just do it.’ He was dressed in a sports jacket and cavalry twill trousers that marked him down as a countryman, and his tan didn’t extend beyond his shirt cuffs and fastened collar. He could easily have passed as an auctioneer at a cattle market.

The older man lowered his hand from the horse’s muzzle and slowly bent down without removing his gaze from the animal. He groped on the ground for a second until he felt the cold metal of the humane killer he’d laid there in preparation, and his fingers closed around the grip. It was an Entwistle heavy-

duty horse killer, loaded with a single .32 calibre soft-nosed bullet and fitted with a silencer, as required by Jockey Club rules. He laid his trigger finger alongside the barrel and slowly raised himself upright.

The horse was edgy again, flaring its nostrils, but soon settled as the older man crooned his false reassurances. He lifted the heavy gun and placed the end of the barrel against the horse's head, but the angle was wrong. He wasn't tall enough. He stretched upwards and lifted the gun as high as he could. Horses have tiny brains, and a brain shot was essential.

'Do it!' the younger man urged. 'Pull the trigger.'

'I . . . I can't,' the older man protested.

'You're lined up. For God's sake do it.'

The horse was called Peccadillo and was the finest-looking animal he'd ever worked with. His hands were shaking, partly from the weight of the gun, more from nerves, but mostly from the sense of betrayal he felt. 'I can't do it, *meister*. I just can't.'

'Jesus friggin' Christ!' the younger man cursed. 'This is a fine time to back out. You know what this means, don't you? We'll never be able to run him.'

'I'm not backing out,' the older man protested. 'It's just that . . . just that . . . I can't do it. I can't pull the trigger.'

‘But you’ll hold him while I do it? Is that what you mean? You’re still *in*?’

‘Yeah, I’m still in.’

‘OK. So give me the gun.’

The horse pulled away as they argued, but the older man coaxed him back and the two men swapped roles. In a couple of minutes Peccadillo was settled again and the younger man raised the killer. He placed the muzzle between its eyes, at the top of the white stripe that ran down its face, and raised the back of the gun.

‘How’s that?’ he asked.

‘Perfect,’ he was told.

The crack of the gun was hardly more than the snapping of a dried branch, but the effect was devastating. Peccadillo’s body was shocked rigid for a moment, then his head fell and his legs collapsed under him, front ones an instant before the rear. In the neighbouring stables horses whinnied and their hooves rattled on walls and feed boxes as they kicked out. The older man unbolted the stall’s lower door and pulled it open so they could survey the results of their crime.

‘Shine the light,’ the younger man ordered. The horse’s eyes were wide open and blood was bubbling from the hole in his head.

‘Where are his legs?’

‘Jesus, he’s fallen on them. They’re under him.’

‘We need a leg.’

The two men entered the stable and tried pushing the dead weight of the horse to one side. It didn't move. The older man knelt down and groped under the front of the horse. 'I can feel a shoe,' he said. 'Help me with it.'

The younger man curled his lip in distaste as he knelt alongside his partner in crime. Together, they felt the horse's left front leg and managed to pull it free from under the steaming but inert body.

'That'll do,' the older man said. 'Let me get the crowbar.' A moment later he was telling the younger man to pull the leg as hard as he could.

'One blow,' he was told. 'You only get one blow.'

'I know. Are you ready?'

'Ready.'

The crowbar sliced through the air and smashed into the dead animal's cannon bone, shattering it in two.

'Tis done,' he said, wiping sweat and blood from his forehead.

'Yeah, well done.'

Both men were panting with exertion. They looked for a moment at the scene, horrified by the enormity of their deeds, until the younger man said: 'Now, you let the other horses out, then go home and put your pyjamas on. I'll start the fire and talk to you again after you ring me. OK?'

'Right, *meister*. It's been a good night's work.'

'We've hardly started,' he was told.