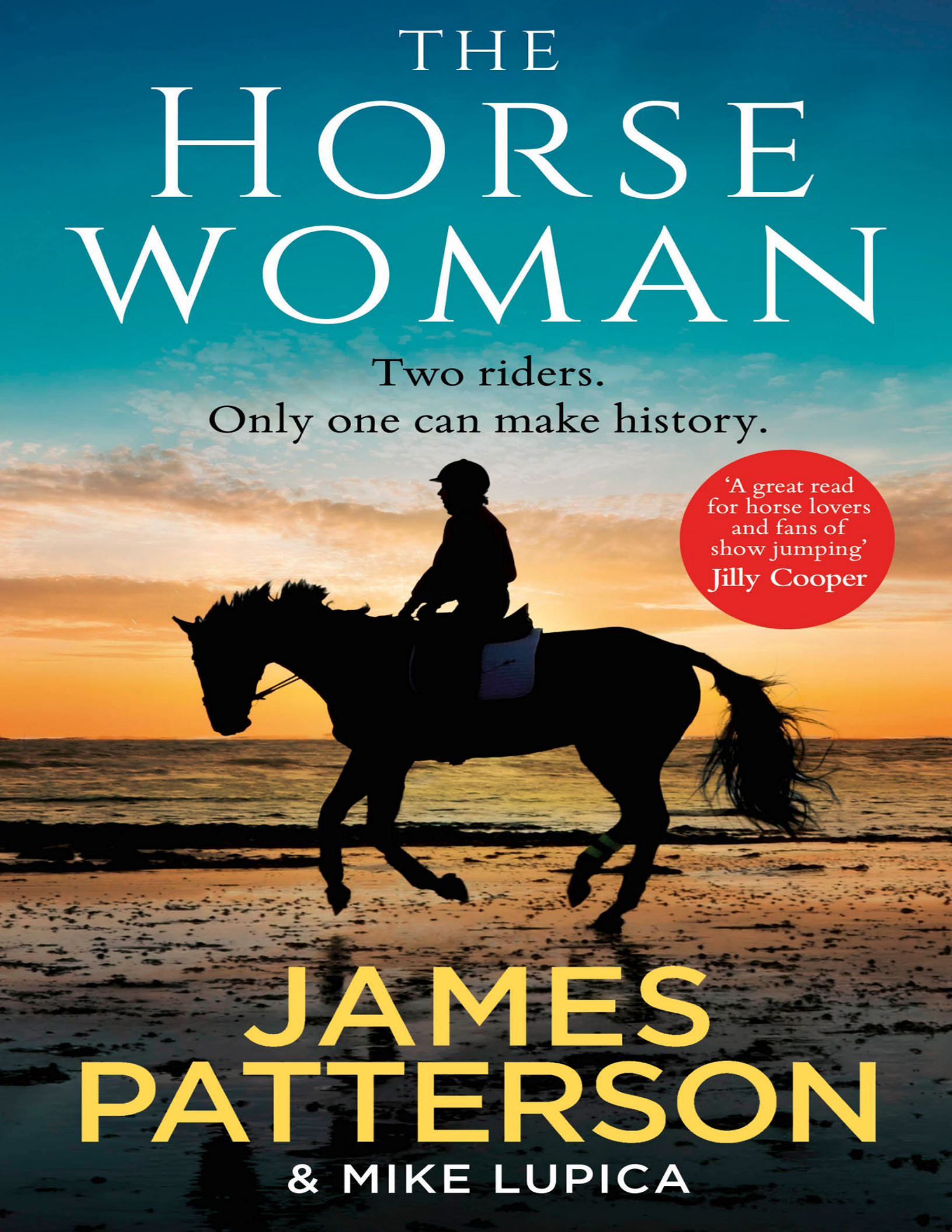
THE HORSE WOMAN

Two riders.
Only one can make history.



'A great read for horse lovers and fans of show jumping'
Jilly Cooper

JAMES PATTERSON
& MIKE LUPICA

James Patterson
& Mike Lupica

THE HORSEWOMAN

Contents

EIGHTEEN

NINETEEN

TWENTY

TWENTY-ONE

TWENTY-TWO

TWENTY-THREE

TWENTY-FOUR

TWENTY-FIVE

TWENTY-SIX

TWENTY-SEVEN

TWENTY-EIGHT

TWENTY-NINE

THIRTY

THIRTY-ONE

THIRTY-TWO

THIRTY-THREE

THIRTY-FOUR

THIRTY-FIVE

THIRTY-SIX

THIRTY-SEVEN

THIRTY-EIGHT

THIRTY-NINE

FORTY

FORTY-ONE

FORTY-TWO

FORTY-THREE

FORTY-FOUR

FORTY-FIVE

FORTY-SIX

FORTY-SEVEN

FORTY-EIGHT

FORTY-NINE

FIFTY

FIFTY-ONE

FIFTY-TWO

FIFTY-THREE

FIFTY-FOUR

FIFTY-FIVE

FIFTY-SIX

FIFTY-SEVEN

FIFTY-EIGHT

FIFTY-NINE

SIXTY

SIXTY-ONE

SIXTY-TWO

SIXTY-THREE

SIXTY-FOUR

SIXTY-FIVE

SIXTY-SIX

SIXTY-SEVEN

SIXTY-EIGHT

SIXTY-NINE

SEVENTY

SEVENTY-ONE

SEVENTY-TWO

SEVENTY-THREE

SEVENTY-FOUR

SEVENTY-FIVE

SEVENTY-SIX

SEVENTY-SEVEN

SEVENTY-EIGHT

SEVENTY-NINE

EIGHTY

EIGHTY-ONE

EIGHTY-TWO

EIGHTY-THREE

EIGHTY-FOUR

EIGHTY-FIVE

EIGHTY-SIX

EIGHTY-SEVEN

EIGHTY-EIGHT

EIGHTY-NINE

NINETY

NINETY-ONE

NINETY-TWO

NINETY-THREE

NINETY-FOUR

NINETY-FIVE

NINETY-SIX

NINETY-SEVEN

NINETY-EIGHT

NINETY-NINE

ONE HUNDRED

ONE HUNDRED ONE

ONE HUNDRED TWO

ONE HUNDRED THREE

ONE HUNDRED FOUR

ONE HUNDRED FIVE

ONE HUNDRED SIX

ONE HUNDRED SEVEN

ONE HUNDRED EIGHT

ONE HUNDRED NINE

ONE HUNDRED TEN

ONE HUNDRED ELEVEN

ONE HUNDRED TWELVE

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEEN

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEEN

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEEN

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEEN

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEEN

ONE HUNDRED NINETEEN

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-ONE

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-TWO

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-THREE

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FOUR

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SIX

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SEVEN

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-EIGHT

ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-NINE

ONE HUNDRED THIRTY

ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-ONE

About the Authors

James Patterson is one of the best-known and biggest-selling writers of all time. His books have sold in excess of 400 million copies worldwide. He is the author of some of the most popular series of the past two decades – the Alex Cross, Women's Murder Club, Detective Michael Bennett and Private novels – and he has written many other number one bestsellers including non-fiction and stand-alone thrillers.

James is passionate about encouraging children to read. Inspired by his own son who was a reluctant reader, he also writes a range of books for young readers including the Middle School, Dog Diaries, Treasure Hunters and Max Einstein series. James has donated millions in grants to independent bookshops and has been the most borrowed author in UK libraries for the past thirteen years in a row. He lives in Florida with his family.

Mike Lupica is a veteran sports columnist – spending most of his career with the *New York Daily News* – who is now a member of the National Sports Media Association Hall of Fame. For three decades he was a panelist on ESPN's *The Sports Reporters*. As a novelist, he has written sixteen *New York Times* bestsellers. His daughter has been a competitive rider since the age of ten.

A list of titles by James Patterson appears at the back of this book

“Little (Horse) Woman”
YouTube.com
1.5 million views
Originally posted: January 15, 2012

THE VIDEO SHOWS a little girl alone in her bedroom. Maybe she is ten years old, maybe a bit older than that. As we watch her, she carefully places a small stool in front of her full-length mirror. The camera pans to shelves filled with trophies and walls papered with brightly colored ribbons, almost all imprinted with the image of a horse.

As she turns slightly, we see that one of the ribbons is hanging from a string around her neck. She squares herself in front of the plastic stool, as if about to step onto a medal stand, then pauses to reach down and press a button on her phone.

We hear our national anthem begin to play. Now the girl, her long hair in a ponytail, beautiful face solemn, places a hand over her heart, and stands at attention.

That girl was me once.

Then I grew up.

It’s like one of my trainers would tell me, much later:

Shit happens.

ONE

EVEN IN A HORSE FAMILY, I was the black sheep.

I was late getting to the barn the morning everything changed, for me and for all of us. Even the horses.

It was said at Atwood Farm that I was operating on Becky Standard Time. BST. Whenever I made excuses for being late, my trainer, Daniel, shortened it to BS.

New Year's Eve was still a few days away, but today my reason was simple enough: I'd been out way too late the night before and ended up crashing at a friend's house, where I'd blown through two alarms on my phone.

Sunday night was party night for the horse people in Wellington, a Florida town built around the horse business—the Winter Equestrian Festival, the dressage show across Southshore Boulevard, and the Masters Series for jumpers at Deeridge Farm.

There were no events at the WEF on Monday or Tuesday, so I headed out with riders and trainers and grooms and owners, even the polo players who'd spent the weekend competing at the International Polo Club. I was one of those college kids who liked to party.

I hadn't learned anything about riding last night. But I had woken up with the Monday-morning lesson that drinking tequila with polo players makes me feel as if one of them had taken a mallet and hit me in the head.

My name is Becky McCabe. Short for Rebecca. Just Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm—one of the stories my mom used to read to me when I was little—but Rebecca of Atwood Farm, owned by my grandmother, Caroline Atwood.

She'd never been a Granny or Gran or some other nickname. That wasn't her. She was just "Grandmother." Or "Caroline." Nothing more cuddly than that. "The grandmother," like it was her official position, was another way I thought of her, maybe the way that described her best.

“Your mother’s on her way to the Olympics,” Grandmother had said the night before. “And you’re on your way to the bar.”

I’d grown up watching her stop horses in the ring with just the snap of her voice, like she was cracking a whip. I once told her during an argument that she was a lot like those horses—only they were nicer.

“I’m not Mom,” I said.

“Not exactly breaking news at this point,” Grandmother said.

“You keep forgetting I’m twenty-one, Grandmother,” I said.

“And proud of it,” she said.

She was seventy-two, proud that she still owned the barn that she and her late husband, Clint, a legendary horseman, my grandfather, had built together. She was still a great beauty, even in an Atwood Farm navy windbreaker, jeans, and boots, her steel-gray hair pulled into a ponytail. I could see Mom in her. And myself.

Now I was pulling into the driveway at nine thirty—no one at Atwood Farm’s definition of an early start time—having just blown through a couple of lights on Southshore Boulevard, hoping this might be the one morning of the whole year—or of her whole life—when my mom, Maggie, had gotten a late start on her trail ride.

No chance.

Noticing again how run-down our barn looked from the outside, I ran for the tack room, where I kept spare riding clothes in a locker. One of our grooms, Emilio, was leaning against the wall where the bridles were hung, arms crossed in front of him and sadly shaking his head.

“You got left behind, *chiquita,*” Emilio said.

“How long ago did she leave?”

He pulled out his phone and squinted at it.

“Thirty-one minutes,” he said. “And counting.”

“How pissed was she?” I said.

“Not any more than usual,” he said.

“You think I should try to catch up with her?”

“Was me, *chiquita*?” Emilio said, grinning at me now. “I would saddle up on Sky and start riding south and maybe not be stopping until I got to the Florida Keys.”

Sky was my horse. My baby. Technically she was a gray, even dark gray as a colt. But more white now. A Dutch warmblood. Riding horse bred to be a jumper. Smaller than Mom’s horse, Coronado, by a lot. We’d found out

about her from a trainer moving back to Ireland. When I saw her, I'd fallen in love with her after riding her just one time. All it took.

Mom and Dad were divorced by then, and we couldn't afford to buy another horse. But when I told Dad about Sky, he bought her for me. Called it an early birthday present. Now the little horse was my best friend in the world.

Sky seemed to love me just the way I was. I loved her even more fiercely back. She didn't want me to work harder, or win more, or party less. Or wake up earlier. It didn't matter to her that Maggie Atwood had been a champion from the time she'd been the age I was now.

She was Atwood, by the way, and I was McCabe because she'd given up my dad's name after the divorce. I'd kept it. People sometimes wondered if we were even related.

Oh, Sky and I had won our share of jumping events over the years. At our best, we were a perfect, fearless match. Even after Sky had knocked down a rail or two and taken us out of the running for a ribbon, I'd come out of the ring and see that our time was five seconds faster than anybody else's. And as hard as I tried, I couldn't feel sad about that.

It was why my trainer, Daniel, had taken to calling me Maverick, after the character Tom Cruise played in *Top Gun*.

"You have the need," he'd said, "for speed."

"I'm not still in pony camp," I'd said. "I just don't know what I want to be when I grow up."

"When?" he'd said. "Or if?"

Where I pushed boundaries, Mom was precise. We were all sure she'd be riding Coronado in the Olympics in Paris late next summer. She was one of the best riders in the country. Trying to prove she was one of the best in the world.

Mom only went as fast as she needed to when she was in the ring. Even when one of her horses refused a jump at the last second, I had never seen her fall off. Other riders, sure. It had happened to me plenty of times. Her? Never.

In every area of life, she stayed in her lane, and excelled there. She wasn't reckless. Didn't take chances. Even when she and Coronado got a bad start in the ring, I'd watch her figure things out in the next half minute. Sometimes sooner. Like she'd hit a reset button.

We didn't need a handyman at Atwood Farm as long as Mom was around. If something broke, she put it back together. A saddle. A bridle. A spur.

Wonder Woman, the horsewoman.

Don't get me wrong: We loved each other. A lot. We were just different.

A lot.

It's why Mom and Grandmother—and Daniel—believed that Sky and I weren't at our best often enough, that I wasn't the champion they needed me to be.

One of the beauties of our sport is that men and women compete against each other, from the time they're teenagers until some of them are past sixty.

Maggie Atwood didn't only aspire to being an Olympic equestrian, she was a serious gym rat. She was on the clock with an exercise class, followed by a session at the gym, and a massage booked for after that. She couldn't afford to waste precious minutes waiting for me.

Another time fault for Becky McCabe.

Emilio said he'd throw a saddle on Sky. In the bathroom next to the tack room, I got into my riding pants and boots and helmet, came out and took the reins from Emilio and started walking Sky toward the schooling ring. It was then that I heard shouting, saw Daniel and Emilio running toward the main road.

Then I saw why.

Mom's horse, Coronado, her ride to the Olympics, was coming straight for them, at full gallop, as if he were the one feeling the need for speed.

Daniel took charge, motioning for Emilio to fan out from the out-of-control horse, protect themselves from being trampled.

No shouting from them now. They had their arms out in front of them, trying to calm Coronado, slow him down.

Usually that would have been the rider's job.

Mom's job.

But Coronado's saddle was empty.

TWO

"HE KNEW ENOUGH to come home," Daniel said to me.

Home meant the barn.

One firm barn rule was that nobody went out on a trail ride alone. Mom had just done it—her idea of being a maverick. Now I had to break that same rule if I had any chance of saving her.

In my heart I knew that if the situation were reversed, Mom would jump on Sky and ride all the way to the Florida turnpike and back if that's what it took to find me.

Now I jumped off Sky, handed her reins to George, one of the other grooms, and moved closer to Daniel and Emilio, keeping my distance, not wanting Coronado to spook more than he already had.

Then Daniel slowly reached for the horse's bridle, talking softly to him in Spanish now. As he did, I came in behind them and put a foot in the stirrup closest to me.

"Let me go find her," Daniel said.

"No," I said.

He put his hand on my arm. I looked down, glaring his hand away.

"My mom," I said. "Her horse."

We had a brief stare-down, until he nodded and let go of the bridle.

Emilio gave me a leg up into the saddle. Mom's saddle. Her horse. They were connected in the same way I was connected to Sky.

When I was on Sky and trying to get the distance between jumps exactly right, I was never really sure how much of it was me and how much of it was a combination of her breeding and training and instinct and even muscle memory. In those moments of trust between horse and rider, it was as if we were sharing one brain.

There was always a mystery, even some magic, to what horses knew. And didn't.

Now I wanted Coronado to know where Mom was, and take me to her.

THREE

I'D RIDDEN CORONADO plenty, worked him out when Mom and Caroline traveled to look at horses for the barn, even jumped him one time when Mom was down with the flu.

This time I was just along for the ride, headed back out the trail along the Palm Beach Point canal, past the Nason barn next to the huge new barn being built by Wellington newcomers, a Kentucky family with money to burn.

Usually I loved being out here, loved the solitude of it and the quiet and the open space. Mom said she did, too, though sometimes I got more enjoyment when Mom wasn't with me.

Not now. All I could think of was the question she'd once asked me about people who don't ride. "How can they really feel alive?"

Please let her ask me again.

If her horse came back to the barn alone and she was somewhere out here, it had to be bad.

Coronado and I weren't going fast. It's one of the myths of our sport that a horse has to be going fast to throw its rider.

We were out into one of the last undeveloped parts of Wellington. Someday there would be barns out here, too.

Where was she? Was she badly injured? I could feel the panic building inside me. If somebody hadn't found her by now, put her in a golf cart, or an ambulance, I was going to be the one. There had to be a damn good reason why she had ended up off her horse.

My eyes kept searching the narrow canal as we moved north, not wanting to see her down a glorified ditch.

If I hadn't been late this morning, none of this would have happened.

I saw her then.

Saw her and felt the air coming out of me all at once, as if I'd been the one who'd gotten thrown. She was maybe fifty yards ahead, between the

trail and the canal, on her side.

Motionless.

Except that her body seemed to be going in two different directions at once. The boots I'd ordered special from New York City, for her birthday a few weeks ago, were pointing toward the water, and her upper body was pointing toward the trail.

I was afraid my mother might have broken her neck. I'd seen it happen once before, in person, a Grand Prix event. A horse had refused a jump and threw his rider, who'd gone down and had stayed down until the ambulance was in the ring. He recovered from the injury to walk again, eventually. But he never rode again.

I walked Coronado to her, knelt down. Her eyes were closed, but I could see that she was breathing. She was still wearing her helmet, caked with dirt, like the rest of her.

I knew enough not to move her. I just leaned close.

"Mom," I said. "I got you."

Then I took the phone out of my back pocket and dialed 911 thinking, *Yeah, Becky, you got her*.

A half hour too late.

FOUR

AWAKE, IF NOT ALERT, Mom was telling us about the fox that had appeared out of nowhere.

She had come through the surgery to repair the small fracture in her pelvis and the torn medial collateral ligament in her left knee. She had narrowly missed puncturing a lung, but there was no treatment but the passage of time to heal the two broken ribs.

They had been going slowly, she said, but suddenly Coronado had reared up on his hind legs, making an unfamiliar, guttural sound. He threw her off to the side, then fell on her before she had the chance to roll away. She said she felt as if she were drowning. She tried to breathe, but couldn't, as if she were underwater, not underneath her horse. The last thing she remembered was the day going completely dark.

"You're lucky to be alive," Grandmother said, barely hiding the fear beneath her anger.

Daniel liked to say that Caroline Atwood wasn't just any tough old bird, she was the toughest of them all. Not tonight.

"I don't feel lucky," Mom said, her words dying in the air a few inches from her mouth.

"Well, you are," her mother said.

"People talk all the time about being strong in the broken places," Mom said. She paused, wincing as she took in a breath. "Except I feel like all my places are broken places right now."

She reached out. I took her hand, gently, afraid of squeezing hard enough to break it.

"Finally found something I can't fix myself," she said. "Me."

She managed a small smile then, though it appeared to take all the energy she had in her. I'd never seen her strength at such a low point.

I'd been lucky in my life, luckier than a lot of other riders I'd visited in the hospital when they had gotten hurt. Even with my share of spills, I'd

never broken anything.

I remembered the first time I fell off a horse. Grandmother had been in the practice ring that day. She hadn't even made a move in my direction. When I'd finally cleaned myself off and walked over to her, she'd seen my red eyes and said, "If you want to cry, go watch a sad movie."

We'd always been big on tough love in our family, but now the injured rider was Mom.

"How's my horse?" Mom said now.

Now I felt myself smiling, for the first time since I'd found her.

"Pissed," I said. "He couldn't understand why he didn't get to come to the hospital, too."

"Don't make me laugh," she said, "or they'll be wheeling me back into surgery."

"I'll try," I said, gently squeezing her hand again. "But you know how hard it is for me to hold back the funny."

"None of this is funny!" my grandmother said.

She was on the other side of Mom's bed. In a gallant attempt at affording us privacy, Daniel stood in the corner.

"You'll ride him for me tomorrow?" Mom said to me.

"Don't worry about that right now, Maggie," Grandmother said.

"You worry about me," Mom said. "I'll worry about Coronado."

"I got you," I said.

"Could we stop worrying about the goddamn horse for one minute?" Grandmother snapped. "Good God, Maggie. He threw you. He fell on you. It wasn't the other way around."

"But then he led me right to her," I said.

Grandmother made a snorting sound, not unlike one of her own horses.

"Great," she said. "Million-dollar rescue animal. Just what we needed to bet the farm on."

"Mom," Maggie said, "that's a little dramatic."

"Maybe," Grandmother said. "But if not now, you tell me when?"

My mom closed her eyes now. For a moment, I thought she'd gone right to sleep with the rest of us still in the room.

"She needs rest," Grandmother said.

My mom opened her eyes.

"I need to get better," Mom said. "I asked Dr. Garry about the recovery time."

“Probably asked before the anesthesia wore off,” Grandmother said.

“I asked how many weeks,” Mom said. “Doc gave me one of those patronizing doctor smiles and said, ‘You mean months.’”

She squeezed my hand now, hard enough to surprise me.

“I told him I don’t have months,” she said.

My whole life, I had been watching Mom in and out of the ring. I’d seen her compete from here to Calgary and back. Seen her take on the most famous riders in the world and beat them, men and women. I knew how much pride she took in not showing her emotions, win or lose, especially after she lost. She was every bit as tough as her mother, even though she didn’t feel the need to broadcast that.

But I thought she might cry now.

“This was the one,” she said.

I didn’t have the words to make her feel better, or hurt less. Maybe no one did right now. I stood there holding her hand and wished it had been me who’d gotten thrown and not her. Wished that for once in my stupid life I’d been on time.

“Doctors can be wrong about the speed of athletes’ recovery time,” I said.

That was all I had.

She looked up at me and said, “Told you before. Don’t make me laugh, kiddo.”

Then she closed her eyes again. A few minutes later she was asleep. Grandmother led Daniel and me out of the room.

Once Daniel had gently shut the door behind us, Grandmother said, “I hate this sport.”

I looked at her.

“You know you don’t mean that,” I said.

“Don’t tell me what I mean,” she said.

“Sorry,” I said.

“You want to be sorry about something?” Grandmother snapped. “Be sorry you weren’t there.”

Then she walked away.

FIVE

Maggie

HAPPY NEW YEAR to me, Maggie Atwood thought bitterly.

No one in the room had spoken of the multiple Olympic qualifiers over the next several months that would decide which four riders—one an alternate—would represent the United States in jumping in Paris. Nobody had even spoken the word *Olympics*. But it was the thousand-pound horse in the room. Like her dream horse had tried to crush her whole world.

She'd gone out for a trail ride, an equestrian walk in the park, and ended up here.

Broken.

She'd been bred to her sport the way horses were bred to it. She aced the fractional calculations that made the difference between winning and losing—the split seconds of timing, the measure of an inside turn, the pressure of a horse's back leg on a rail that stayed in place versus one that fell, the numbers that measured the distance between first place and fifth. When she made mistakes in the ring, she owned them. Somebody else won. You lost.

And sometimes being the better rider was less important than riding the better horse. The more expensive horse. Simple, basic economics.

Then Coronado came along, and she was the one with a top-tier horse, one that really did change everything, for all of them. He was a Belgian warmblood, sired by a famous stallion named Chaco-Blue, who had been an FEI champion—International Federation for Equestrian Sports—in his career. The mare was a Belgian warmblood who had one of those fancy show names that Maggie loved: Hypnose Van Paemel. She had won a half dozen FEI events in her career.

Atwood Farm had a solid enough reputation. Caroline Atwood liked to tell Maggie that she never imagined herself getting rich in the horse business. But now they were just getting by, struggling, even. Her mother

once told her that she'd retire the morning a groom or trainer found her facedown in a stall, because she planned to work until she died. In the past they'd travel with the horses to all the best shows—now it was only some of them.

"You know how they call equestrianism the sport of the rich and the poor rich?" Caroline asked Maggie, then answered her own question. "Sometimes I feel like we're just poor."

"I can do something else," Maggie said.

"No," her mother said, "you can't. And neither can I."

They couldn't afford a horse like Coronado on their own, no matter which way Caroline and the accountants ran the numbers.

A friend of a friend had told Caroline about the horse. A barn owner in Lexington had run out of money and decided to cash out. He was banking on Coronado, his best horse, to bring top dollar. Caroline and Maggie had worked Coronado out, fell in love with him the way they had his bloodline. Found a deep-pockets partner in Steve Gorton, a New York hedge-fund guy with a place in Palm Beach who'd followed his Florida friends into horses.

Caroline Atwood had explained to Gorton that she thought the horse had a chance to be special, and proposed a fifty-fifty split, even knowing that it would be a scramble to come up with her end, going into her savings, still needing help from the bank, feeling no different than a desperate bettor at the racetrack.

"You're the expert," Gorton had said, then asked, "And what exactly do I get for my half?"

"Half the profits," Caroline had said.

Most people, Maggie had observed, were intimidated by her mother. Not this guy.

He had laughed suddenly. The sound reminded Maggie of glass breaking.

"I was born at night, Caroline," Gorton had said. "But not last night."

"I'm not sure I understand," she'd said.

The joke on Wall Street, he'd said, was that nothing was more limited than being a limited partner of Steve Gorton. Take it or leave it: he'd take care of 60 percent of the asking price, and she could take care of the horse, and decide who rode him.

When Caroline resisted, Gorton had simplified the terms. If she didn't like the deal, she could find somebody else to write her a million-dollar check.

Maggie had watched them debate, but knowing the finances of Atwood Farm as well as her mother did, this particular movie had only one ending. Caroline and Gorton had finally shaken hands.

Gorton, Maggie knew, had no love for horses, only for money. When she started winning right away on Coronado, Steve Gorton happily envisioned the pot of gold the sale of the horse would bring him.

Maggie thought only of a gold medal. The one she'd been dreaming about her whole life. That and a dream horse. She'd never thought she was owed a ride like Coronado. She knew sports didn't work that way. Her sport certainly didn't.

She had never been much of a party girl in high school, or college at Florida Atlantic, just up the road from Wellington. She liked boys well enough, had never had much of a problem keeping a boyfriend, at least until she'd lose interest and move on to the next one.

That was until Jack McCabe came along. Jack, the funny, smart, cool young New York lawyer. Different from the riders she'd dated. They'd fallen in love and gotten married too soon. Then she'd gotten pregnant.

But all she really wanted to do was ride.

Jack had even taken a year off from his father's law firm in New York to travel the circuit with her, content to play Mr. Mom while she was competing, in Kentucky or North Carolina or Canada or DC or in the Hamptons. But as with many couples driven to be the best in their chosen professions, they drifted apart.

She was riding in the Hampton Classic, out on eastern Long Island, when they took a walk on the beach as a way of trying to clear the air. But suddenly they were standing in the dunes toe to toe, as if fighting for the title.

He finally told her he was leaving in the morning. Becky was three at the time, back in Florida with the nanny. Jack said he'd explain to her what was happening as best he could when he flew down to pack up his things.

"You're not even going to stay for the Grand Prix?" she'd said.

It had been the big event to cap off the week. Even then, her mind had gone right back to the ring.

"You'll be fine without me," he'd said, before adding, "But then you always were."

She'd won the next day, one of her biggest career victories to that point.