

An Extract From Kiss and Tell

Prologue

Melbourne Three Day Event, five years earlier

The mare was not the easiest of rides. She pulled hard, skewed left over fences and spooked away from the crowds. It was like riding a small, charging rhinoceros.

In Melbourne as part of a whistle-stop tour to promote their training manual, *Be Champions the Beauchamp Way*, Tash and her husband Hugo had taken up Australian rider Sandy Hunter's offer of rides at Victoria's legendary three day event, the second oldest in the world. Sandy had been sidelined by injury at the last minute and her horses, fit and ready to run, were at the Beauchamps' disposal. It was an irresistible offer; a top-ten result would be great for publicity. Hugo loved the challenge of chance rides, but Tash far preferred piloting her own horses, whom she knew and trusted after years working together.

Snort, snort, snort, thump, thumpety, thump – jump! The little mare was a rubber ball that bounced around before take-off and never landed the same way twice, but boy could she jump. She ballooned a fairly inconsequential ditch and wheeled left, leaving Tash dangling for a moment, all her weight off centre before those famously long, grippy lower legs and those iron-girder stomach muscles set her right and she kicked on towards the big crowds around the water.

Riding high on adrenalin and positive energy was familiar territory to Tash. She and Hugo had been on the crest of a wave all year, and today was no exception. As soon as she had finished riding across country they were booked for radio interviews, a lecture demonstration and then a sponsors' dinner, at which they would speak. Tomorrow morning they would sign copies of their book before the final show-jumping stage of the competition. As soon as that was over they were flying out to Perth to continue their book tour on the west coast. Garnering publicity was still an alien concept to Tash. This was what she knew best.

Snort, snort, snort. Snatch snatch snatch. Head flying up, duck, dart, crouch.

Utterly focused, contained between leg and hand, the mare prepared to take off at the big log in front of the water. Then, at the last minute, she spotted the wet expanse beyond and seemed to hang in the air, momentum dropping away from her, reluctant to get her feet wet.

With an almighty combination of willpower, voice and inner prayers, Tash propelled the black mare far enough forwards to tip her athletic body into the drink and through it in several sloshing strides until they were out the other side, skewing over a narrow log that would have unseated a lesser rider.

The spectators gave an appreciative roar and whooped applause at the sight of such good horsemanship.

Tash, who loved the Australian eventing crowd – so raucous yet knowledgeable – patted the mare on the neck and then held up her hand in gratitude to the banks of cheering faces just a few feet away, flying past as she galloped away.

A girl ran out of the crowd, the press later reported. A pretty girl: blonde, dressed in a vest, skirt and flip-flops, not the normal hardy spectator on a brisk June day. She ran straight in front of the mare.

All Tash could remember was a blur of blonde hair and pale skin in her path. She heard her own cries of warning, the crowd gasping and shouting, and felt the wrench of the rein in one hand as she

pulled the mare sharply left and the contradictory twist of half a ton of muscle, momentum and power beneath her as the mare swerved right. The girl was almost underneath them, so close that she must have felt the heat of the horse's skin and breath. The mare stumbled, flailed on her knees and struggled to stay upright.

A man in an All Blacks hoodie hurled himself from the crowd just in time to grapple the blonde girl to the ground and pull her away from the mare's dancing legs, the two of them rolling across the muddy turf to safety.

Thrown off balance, Tash was only stopped from falling over the horse's left shoulder by her solid black neck swinging suddenly upwards and smacking her firmly on the crown, knocking her back into the saddle as the mare scrambled to her feet. Disoriented, yet still moving forwards in a lurching canter, they carried on towards the next fence while the girl and her dark saviour disappeared into the throng as quickly as they had appeared. Soon another competitor was splashing through the water to distract the crowd.

Somehow Tash managed to get the mare around the rest of the course, but she had no memory of it. Amazingly she finished within the time and retained her top-ten position on the overnight leader board.

Her head injury wasn't spotted for almost twenty-four hours. She could walk, talk and function fairly normally, and insisted she was okay despite a screaming headache and increasing nausea, both of which she put down to the stress of their schedule and the early days of pregnancy. She didn't complain because she didn't want to let anybody down.

The radio interviews had passed in a blur, the demo even more so, but Hugo naturally took control and helped her out when she was tongue-tied, which was often the case in public, despite her private gregariousness.

He had also carried her through their after-dinner speech; he had always been the raconteur, his audience in stitches as he regaled them with scurrilous tales from ten years at the top of the sport. Nevertheless, immediately afterwards he took his wife to one side, blue eyes anxious, and said they must call a doctor. He'd never seen her so grey.

'No!' Tash was adamant, great yawns racking through her. 'I just need to go to bed.'

The next morning she felt as though she'd been drugged. Her contact lenses wobbled in her eyes and she couldn't see straight. There was a foul taste in her mouth. Her swollen breasts ached in sympathy with her pounding, pounding skull.

Schooling the little black mare before breakfast, she had to get off to throw up three times. She felt increasingly spaced out and couldn't purely blame it on morning sickness and nerves. She disliked being the focus of so much attention, not all of it positive. Talk at Werribee Park was all of the 'Melbourne Martyr' and who she might be, a blurred photo of the man in the hoodie pulling the blonde from under the mare's hooves was on the front of every newspaper sports section, his identity as mysterious as the girl whose life he had saved. The media were hasty to draw comparisons with suffragette Emily Wilding Davison, who had run out in front of a Derby field, yet nobody knew what, if anything, this girl had been protesting about. In the gossip-loving lorry park, malicious tongues had already started wagging, suggesting that the blonde might be a spurned mistress of Hugo's.

Any rumours certainly didn't put off the crowds that flocked to the trade stands later that morning, eager to meet the sport's golden couple, the legendary 'Beauchampions'.

'I'm such a dolt, I can't even spell my own name right,' Tash joked as she battled nausea throughout the book signing, painful cramps starting to claw at her belly.

'Remember me?' one buyer asked as he thrust his book towards her.

His face swam in front of Tash's eyes. Lovely face. Big, dark eyes – very honest and appealing, like a young Robert Downey Junior, she thought vaguely as she took the book and wielded her pen.

'Who shall I sign this to?' Her own voice was getting smaller and smaller in her head.

She couldn't hear his reply at all.

'I'm sorry? Who did you say?'

'Like the Scottish loch, only spelt the Irish way.'

'The Scottish loch ... how lovely ...' She smiled up at him, pen twirling and eyes crossing.

Then she uncrossed her eyes with great effort. 'I know you.'

He nodded, the beautiful brown eyes so molten they could be fresh from a Lavazza machine.

The espresso eyes and Scottish lochs started swirling again.

She remembered nothing beyond that.

A few hours later the medical team broke it to Hugo that, as well as mild concussion, his wife had suffered a miscarriage.

Tash would dream of lochs quite a lot in coming weeks. In her childhood, when her parents had still been together, the French family had taken a house on the banks of Loch Fyne every August, where they had walked, talked, guzzled oysters and entertained vast groups of friends. Years later she and Niall – her ex – had once had a disastrous attempt at rapprochement on the edge of a loch. Most recently Hugo had taken her salmon fishing near Loch Lomond, and she had loved it with an unexpected passion – from the long walks along river banks, to delicious picnics, to the tweeds and kinky rubber waders, to the endless lovemaking during long evenings in the croft. Their baby had been conceived there.

She coped with the loss with what others took to be characteristic common sense, but in fact hid great well of sadness and self-blame.

She said all the right things if asked. She knew that almost all miscarriages were nature's way of preventing a wretched life. She knew that it was probably always going to happen with this particular pregnancy; it was nothing to do with carrying on competing and maintaining a hectic work schedule, it was just fate taking control. Yet still Tash secretly felt that it was her fault.

She lost a great deal of weight, became listless and withdrawn, stopped phoning friends or painting, and her riding became so unfocused and slapdash that Hugo banned her from top competitions for the rest of the season after a succession of three crashing falls at advanced events.

'We lost the first life we created.' He took her in his arms six weeks after Melbourne, as he did night after night, and enfolded her beneath the angle of his jaw. 'I loved that little shared bit of us, just as I love every bit of you. And I will fight for all of us more now, for you and for our children.

We *will* have children, Tash.'

Tash wanted to believe him so badly, and his words did help enormously, but some scales had fallen irretrievably from her eyes with that lost child and, with each barren month that passed after Melbourne, she mourned motherhood a little more.

The stray girl from the crowd and that moment of chance, of near-fatality, haunted her for years to come. She played what very little of it she remembered over and over again in her head but she could never remember enough to paint a full picture. As pregnancy continued to elude her she felt she was being punished for not stopping that day. She threw herself back into her riding, reaching the top-ten in the FEI world rankings for the first time and joining Hugo on the national squad. Her top horse and prolific stallion, The Foxy Snob, became the highest point-scoring horse in history and, to Hugo's mild pique, got more fan mail than any of them. Yet her lost chance at motherhood was never far from her mind, however momentous the highs, affectionate the support and prolific the accolades.

Almost three years later she received an anonymous letter, postmarked the Solomon Islands. Written on woven, hand-made paper, in a beautiful indigo script, it simply read:

A heart was lost in Melbourne; it will always be lost. So many locks and not enough keys; it's easier to be lost than found. But I will make amends. Pax nobiscum.

When he read it Hugo was all for calling in a private detective, believing his wife to be stalked. Tash told him not to be so silly and tucked the letter among her keepsakes in a shell-studded box she kept at the bottom of her wardrobe. Just days after receiving it she conceived Cora.

Chapter 1

When a small puddle suddenly appeared beneath her in the Waitrose queue, Tash Beauchamp thought that her waters had broken a fortnight before her due date.

It was only after her checkout lane had been closed, the in-store janitor and duty manager called, and half the neighbouring staff and customers alerted to the prospect of a live birth in aisle five, that the true cause of the ever-expanding pool beneath Tash's trolley was discovered.

Her fresh deli pork and sage kebab sticks had broken through their wrapping and speared a carton of pineapple juice, which was splashing everywhere. The smell was unmistakable.

'Shame,' the manager lamented as Tash, eighteen-month-old Cora and their shopping were relocated to another till. 'We've never had a birth here – a couple of deaths, several proposals and a nasty case of ABH in the freezer section just last month, but no babies. You could have called it Rose if it was a

girl. Imagine the ambulance arriving while you're in the last stages of labour, desperate to get to hospital – "Not yet, baby Rose. Wait. Wait, Rose!"; Waitrose. Getit?

Tash flashed a weak smile. 'Actually, it's a boy.'

'Oh, lovely,' the manager beamed at little Cora, who had a finger rammed in each nostril, her tongue poking out between pudgy thumbs. 'One of each. When's he due?'

Tash started heaving her canvas shopping bags in to the trolley, longing to sit down. 'First week of August.'

'Here – let me,' the manager took over. 'So he'll be an Olympic baby. You could name him after a gold medallist.'

'His father would certainly like that.'

'We've got a local hopeful here – lives up on the downs. Hugo something ... Beaumont or Butcher? Comes in here quite a lot. Everyone says he'll bring back gold this year. Rides horses, I gather – not really my thing. I'm allergic, and I always think the poor horse does most of the work, don't you? They should get the medals! This bloke's a right toff and a bit of an arrogant sod, to be honest, but you forget that when national pride's at stake, don't you?'

'You certainly try.'

'So do you have any names lined up?'

'His father wants to call him Hugo.'

'Does he? What a coincidence!'

'I've steered him towards Amery.'

'What?'

'Amery – it's a Beauchamp family name.'

'Beauchamp, you say?' The manager started to grow pale.

'Cora's daddy is Hugo Beauchamp, isn't he darling?' Tash smiled at her little girl and then laughed as she excitedly lisped: 'Daddy winth gold! Daddy winth gold!' as Hugo had taught her, although she didn't understand what it meant. Along with 'star', 'pig', 'hug' and 'dog', these were the only words she could say. To Tash's continual concern she had yet to say anything close to 'Mummy'.

The store manager was still blustering with embarrassment as she lifted the last of the shopping into the trolley. 'I'm sure he's not at all arrogant at home – busy man like him hasn't much time for pleasantries in a supermarket.'

'He's supremely arrogant at home.' Tash sighed fondly, eyeing the green bag that was spilling with ingredients for the intimate Olympic send-off meal she was planning for that evening.

'But romantic.' The manager was eyeing the groceries too – the clichéd champagne, truffles, smoked salmon and strawberries. 'You're a lucky couple. Once we had kids, the husband and I were lucky if we managed half an hour together to sit down in front of *EastEnders*, let alone fresh flowers every week and romantic candlelit meals.'

Tash removed the candles from Cora's sticky grip, as she was using them to smack the manager on the bottom. 'What flowers?'

'The ones your husband buys here every week,' she beamed cheerfully.

Tash swallowed, trying very hard to beam back.

Hugo never bought her flowers.

'His father was *just* the same,' Alicia sniffed disparagingly when Tash called in to drop off her fags and gin. 'He started taking mistresses as soon as I had the boys.'

Tash gaped at her mother-in-law, who was already pouring two vast gin and Its, even though it was barely midday.

'I'll stick to tea, thanks.' She headed for the kettle, waving away Alicia's offer of a Rothmans.

'You girls today!' She sparked up, but in a conciliatory gesture reached behind her to open a window. 'I smoked all the way through both my pregnancies and look at Hugo and Charles. Both marvellous specimens.'

'Hmm.' Tash topped up Cora's beaker of juice with water from the tap and handed it down to her, where she was playing with Granny Lish's elderly pug, Beefeater. Unlike his predecessor, Gordons – known universally as 'Thug the pug' – Beefy was as long-suffering and gentle as he was sad-eyed, creased and curlytailed. He and Cora adored one another.

'The secret to stopping him straying is to get your figure back as soon as you've had the baby,' Alicia commanded grandly, draining the first gin and It and starting on the second.

'Really?' Tash looked over her shoulder worriedly as she put a teabag into a chipped bone-china cup.

'Absolutely!' Alicia avowed, Spode-blue eyes briefly appearing through their curtains of pale, crepey skin as they stretched wide in Tash's direction and then cast their critical way down to her bottom.

'Men can't stand the great fat Hausfraus most women become after childbirth. I existed on gin, cigarettes and sultanas for six months after Charles.'

'You still do,' Tash muttered, having as usual filled her mother-in-law's fridge with ready meals that she knew would get thrown out by the char at the end of the week, when they had passed their sell-by dates. In the short time that she had been shopping for Alicia the week's list never altered – a litre

of Bombay Sapphire, a litre of Martini, two hundred Rothmans, two lemons, two packets of Ritz crackers, soft cheese and a biscuit assortment box.

'Can't manage sultanas nowadays – not with these teeth,' Alicia veiled her clever blue eyes behind their creases once more and bared her teeth instead – very expensive but ill-fitting bridgework in pale cream marbled with old gold nicotine stains, like antique ivory.

Tash made her tea and then settled at the kitchen table to watch Cora play, her back aching.

'When do your new couple arrive?' Alicia had noticed how much Tash was struggling in late pregnancy, although she hadn't offered to help at all. Since writing off her car when flying rather high on gin and winnings on the way back from a bridge night at Busty de Meeth's Wiltshire pile, Alicia had been in no hurry to replace it. Having relied upon a personal driver up until the age of fifty-three, she had loathed taking the wheel in recent years and was enjoying the return to delivered groceries, chauffeured transport and more visitors, even if that did put rather a lot of pressure on her already over-stretched and heavily pregnant daughter-in-law. Nor was Alicia keen to help out with childcare; having relied entirely upon nurses, nannies, housekeepers and cooks when bringing up her own sons, she had no real working knowledge of babies whatsoever, although she was pretty useful with foundling lambs, whelping dogs and foaling mares.

'The Czechs can't start until the end of August,' Tash sighed.

'The agency couldn't come up with anybody sooner. Radka and Todor really left us in the lurch.' The Bulgarian couple that had been working for Tash as au pairs for almost a year had done a moonlight flit a fortnight earlier, to go vegetable packing in Lincolnshire for three times the money.

'I thought they were called Ratty and Toad?' Alicia flicked her fag ash into the sink.

'That's what Hugo called them. No wonder they left. They came here to improve their English, poor things, and as soon as they learned enough to find out what we were calling them they buggered off.'

Tash felt absurdly hurt by the defection, having thought herself very close to Radka, who adored Cora and who shared a very giggly sense of humour with Tash. She and the easy-going but money-obsessed Todor had become like family, and now Tash felt as though a younger sister had run away from home. Added to which, she was really struggling to manage the house and riotous garden at Haydown with just the family's pensionable retainers Gwenda and Ron for help.

Totally wrapped up in the Olympic build-up, Hugo barely registered the Bulgarians' absence, whereas Tash mourned them like missing limbs.

'Isn't your mother supposed to be staying with you for the Olympics?'

'She cried off. Something came up and she can't get away – to do with Polly, I think.'

Tash's mother Alexandra lived in France with her second husband, Pascal, and their eighteen-year-old daughter Polly, who had deferred her place to study fashion at a Parisian college and was currently causing her parents a great many sleepless nights as she spent the year backpacking with a group of friends.

'Beautiful child.' Alicia was a great admirer of aesthetics and Polly was very aesthetic indeed, if completely untamed. 'Bound to be kidnapped by slave traders or suchlike.'

'God, don't say that!' Tash gulped, stooping awkwardly to gather Cora protectively to her bump. 'After what Daddy and Henrietta went through over Beccy, Mummy is fretting all the time.'

'Your stepsister? Wasn't she banged up for drug smuggling?'

'It was awful. Daddy had to fly out to Singapore four or five times. Poor Henrietta had sworn she'd never go there again – her first husband died out there, you see. She must think the place is cursed.'

'Rubbish. I adored Singapore. Henry and I were regulars. So much more evolved than Hong Kong, I found. The Martini bar at Raffles mixes a very game gin sling.' She reached for her drink with a nostalgic sigh.

The conversation had triggered a vague memory that Tash was grasping to retrieve. On cue her mobile phone rang in her bag. It was Hugo, the personalised ringtone set to galloping hooves, which he found hugely embarrassing.

Cora immediately started screeching excitedly, a trick she had recently developed to distract her mother during calls and draw attention back to herself.

'Hello ... Hi ... What? Sorry – I can't hear a thing; Cora's shouting and it sounds as though you're sitting on a tractor.'

'I am sit ... on a tract ... or!' he bellowed, though to Tash his voice was barely audible. 'The bloo ... muck ... eap needed emptying and ... know what Jenny's ... ike about revers ... this ... ing.' Their head girl was terrified of the old yard tractor. 'Your ... mother's here.' 'My mother?' She gasped in delight. Perhaps Alexandra had changed her mind about coming after all.

Hugo sounded far from delighted. 'And your sister. They ... to lunch, appar ... tly.'

'But Polly's in Vietnam- shh, Cora.' Tash lifted her chin up as the little girl tried to grab at the phone. Denied her target, she shrieked at the top of her voice.

'Not ... olly. Th ... sh ... Jailbird ... bloody inconvenient ...lympic ... bloody ... uck off.'

'What? I really can't hear anything, Hugo.'

Realising Tash needed help with Cora, Alicia lunged forwards and started to try to distract her granddaughter by waving her cigarette around in pretty patterns and clinking the ice in her glass, blowing kisses and humming 'Ain't Misbehavin". Cora, enchanted, fell silent and stared. Tash, appalled, couldn't concentrate on what Hugo was saying at all.

'Just get back here!' he ordered and rang off.

It was a beautifully bright, blustery morning as Tash drove the short distance across Haydown land from Alicia's cottage, which her mother-in-law grandly insisted upon calling The Dower House, but was in fact the old gamekeeper's lodge. The avenue of beeches that led out of the woods was rustling feverishly overhead and casting dappled shadows through the open sunroof.

'... and on that farm he had a cow, ee eye ee eye oh!' Tash sang along to the nursery rhymes CD on the stereo. Behind her Cora was making 'moo' sounds from her car seat and pointing at a field of sheep through the window.

The land surrounding them was farmed by the same two tenant families that had maintained it when Henry Beauchamp had been alive. The fourth generations of the Bell and the Carroll families (the Ding Dongs and the Singalongs as they were affectionately known to the Beauchamps) were respectively custodians of a small mixed dairy, beef and sheep herd run on the sheltered and lush meadows of Lower Farm, and five hundred acres of arable on the fertile, open hills of Upper Farm. The rest of the estate was divided into huge tracts of dark, serried woodland and flinty, windswept downland that was variously leased out for shoots, timber production and grazing, plus the long tree-skirted valley of neglected parkland closer to the house, and the huge equestrian operation that Tash and Hugo ran from the main house and yard.

And Haydown House never failed to lift Tash's heart when she saw it. A brick-and-flint William and Mary country house with the show-stoppingly perfect symmetrical face of a great classical beauty and the broad shoulders of a paternal hug, it was an amazing place to call home. Perched high on the Berkshire Downs, on the edge of the pretty village of Maccombe, surrounded by protective high pinkbrick walls, beautiful gardens and its courtyards of old stables, coach house, cottages and barns, it was a daydream of a place to live.

Even though it was getting very ragged around the edges, cost a fortune to run and was impossible to keep remotely clean and ordered, Tash adored it with a passion second only to that for her family and animals.

As she drove along the farm track that led past the orchards and then beneath the clock-tower archway into the old coaching yard she could see Hugo's pack of dogs sunning themselves on the flagstones outside his office, but the door was wide open and the place deserted. Glancing left towards the biggest and oldest of the three stable yards she spotted Jenny, sporting a Team GB baseball cap, hosing one of the youngsters' legs. Waving, she drove on past the big open barn that housed straw and hay and along the back drive to the house itself, passing the overgrown grass tennis court and croquet lawn, and the lichen-flecked walls of the kitchen gardens. Behind the house, by the peeling black-gloss back door to the boot room that absolutely everybody used when calling at the house, apart from Jehovah's witnesses and travelling salesmen, a smart navy blue Golf was parked beside Hugo's dusty Discovery.

Tash let out a groan of recognition. It wasn't her mother that had arrived unexpectedly to lunch. It was her stepmother, Henrietta.

On cue, she appeared at Tash's own back door, the perfect hostess as opposed to a forgotten guest, all welcoming smiles and creamy blonde neatness in Berketex and pearls. Then a younger, pinker face topped with purple and green beaded dreadlocks appeared around the door behind her, and Tash realised that prodigal daughter and drug smuggler Beccy had come for lunch too.

'Oh Christ,' she covered her mouth in horrified recall.

She had issued the invitation weeks ago, without thinking how close to the Olympic and baby countdowns it would be. It hadn't been long after Beccy had finally made it back to the UK amid a spattering of press coverage and a huge wave of family relief. Tash had been so excited and pleased that all her father's hard work to exonerate Beccy and ensure her pardon from her fifteen-year sentence had paid off that she had picked a date at random. She must have forgotten to write it in the diary. Henrietta meanwhile – as organised a wife, mother and stepmother as she had been a PA to James all those years ago – had stuck faithfully to it, bringing Beccy, a basket of home-made jam and biscuits, a lift-the-flap book for Cora and a clutch of Babygros for the bump. She had even brought a lamb bone for Tash's dog, Beetroot.

'I never know what to do with them now that we don't have the Labs any more,' Henrietta apologised as she proffered the leg-bone wrapped in a Marks and Spencer bag, like a blood-encrusted caveman's club. 'It seems such a waste to throw them out.'

'I've told her she should get another dog' – Beccy resumed her position sitting at the kitchen table, poring over *Horse & Hound* – 'but she says James won't let her.'

'Your father says dogs tie us to the house,' Henrietta explained to Tash. 'He no longer shoots, after all – it plays havoc with his tinnitus. Now that he's retired and the girls have left home we do love to get away.' James had taken to whisking Henrietta away for lengthy golfing holidays in South Africa in the years since the last of their long line of Labradors had passed away.

'I'm back to house-sit now,' Beccy pointed out idly as she flipped to the classified section to look at Dogs for Sale. 'How about a Labradoodle?'

'You know it's not up for discussion, darling,' Henrietta smiled stiffly as she continued waving the lamb bone around, suddenly looking sad. Tash knew that her stepmother desperately missed having dogs, her many generations of yellow Labrador 'golden girls'. They had been her children, and even having her youngest daughter back was no match for the unconditional love of her Labs.

'I'll give this to Beetroot when the rest of the pack's backs are turned,' Tash promised, taking the bone before handing Cora to 'Granny Hen' for a cuddle. She then mixed them all Buck's Fizzes from the champagne and freshly squeezed orange juice she'd just bought for her romantic evening with Hugo, before setting about transforming the rest of the ingredients lined up for that good-luck supper into a girls' lunch instead.

Watching her, Beccy vowed that she would never, ever get pregnant. Tash had once been really quite stunning – Beccy had certainly envied her height and athleticism over the years. With a fine-boned, striking face set on a long, elegant neck, she had always possessed head-turning looks, made all the more stunning by her mismatched eyes, one amber and one green. Admittedly, she'd never learned to tame that mop of rather bushy, wavy brown hair which every riding hat moulded into a different, rebellious shape, and her dress sense had always been very hit and miss, but Beccy – who had struggled to do anything with her limp blonde tresses and extensive range of pastel fleeces and pale jeans before discovering dreadlocks, hats and Indian silk kaftans – was not particularly critical on that front. What appalled her was the bulge.

It stuck out like the huge bonnet of an ugly American car, a great snarling radiator grille of checked maternity top leering over Tash's wrinkly navy leggings, emphasising her long, bandy legs and – horrors – a bottom that had spread far and wide since forfeiting the saddle for the birthing ball.

Rendered red in the face from just the simplest of exertions, like chopping salad or loading plates on a tray, Tash panted her way around the kitchen on swollen ankles. Beccy was too busy observing in appalled wonder to offer to help and Henrietta, chattering nonsensically with a giggling Cora, didn't seem to notice.

Tash's skin looked dry. She had bags under her eyes and her usually high, hollow cheeks were puffy and blotchy. She even has a bit of a double chin, Beccy realised. And aren't those upper arms just beginning to get a hint of dinner-lady bingo wing? Oh. My. God. I am *never* having a baby. Oblivious to the scrutiny, Tash had loaded two trays and was rubbing her wrists which were numb in parts and stinging with pain in others.

'We'll eat outside on the terrace,' she announced, unable to face clearing the huge scrubbed-pine table in the kitchen that was so overloaded with detritus these days that it had taken on the shape of a rhino. Nor could she face the dusty formality of the dining room proper. The house had really begun to go to pot since Radka's departure. She felt ashamed, doubly so because Henrietta always kept Benedict House so immaculate.

But Henrietta was far more concerned about safeguarding her expensively styled hair than encountering a little house dust. She had promised to look in on an old school-friend near Marlborough for tea and didn't want to arrive looking like Boris Johnson after a boozy lunch.

'Isn't it a bit breezy?' she worried.

'Nonsense. It's bracing!'

They ate lunch with their windswept hair and flapping clothing sticking to their food, forced to shout to make conversation above the sound of the groaning trees, flapping parasol and madly rustling leaves.

Only Cora was spared the elements. Hastily stuffed with an organic pouch meal and a satsuma, she now napped peacefully upstairs with the black-out blind lowered, a lullaby CD on autorepeat. Tash battled to keep her rocket and watercress salad on her plate as she alternately made small talk and apologised for Hugo's absence.

'The build up to the Olympics is always absolutely frantic,' she explained. 'He's hardly here, and when he is there's a mountain to do. Normally I can take the slack, but with this so huge' – she patted her unborn boy – 'I'm next to useless around the yard – I can't ride, I can hardly muck out and groom, he won't let me turn out or lunge.'

'Well that's one of the reasons we're here-' Henrietta started, but her daughter interrupted.

'It must be crap being sidelined after all the excitement of both going last time.'

Four years earlier, Tash was one of the Olympic team that had flown their horses half way around the world, hotly tipped for gold. It had been a thrilling time. The media had gone into overdrive following the glamorous husband and wife duo on the road to what was seen as almost guaranteed glory. They had been invincible for the two years beforehand, winning every principal event, rivalling one another for top slot and taking the sport into a new realm of popularity. Together they

had endorsed endless products with lucrative sponsorship deals, written two best-selling training books and a double-headed autobiography, held sell-out lecture-demonstration tours on both sides of the Atlantic, featured in their own TV series on a specialist countryside channel, sold countless DVDs on the back of it and become universally known as the Beauchampions.

Then, amid all this furore, they had gone to the Olympics and returned empty-handed. It was a crashing blow to mutual and national pride. Tash's superstar stallion The Foxy Snob, veteran of World and European Championship teams, had boiled over in the dressage, unable to handle the atmosphere and floodlights, which meant that she was too far from the top ten to make her score competitive, despite the double clear that followed. And Hugo, far more humiliatingly, had fallen off at one of the smallest fences on the course on cross-country day, live on worldwide satellite television streaming, catapulted from the saddle when his horse left a knee and pitched over, a fluke accident that could have happened to anyone. The resulting elimination – and the fact that his horse had then bugged off at speed back to the stables to leave him with a very long walk home to his team-mates – obsessed him to this day. Selected to represent Great Britain again at the upcoming Games, he was determined to defend the family's honour as well as that of his country.

'It's a nice sort of sideline, being pregnant,' Tash told her stepsister carefully. 'I only wish I could be there to support the Brits and Hugo this time, but he insists I am far too close to giving birth and I'd only make him nervous.'

'Too right.' Beccy gave the monster bump another horror-filled glance across the table, noticing that Tash had to sit with her knees apart like an old man, vast belly thrust out between her and the table.

'Besides, I'm needed here.' Tash sighed, distractedly watching a piece of French bread fly off her plate in a gust of wind and land in Beccy's hair. Given all the other beads, ribbons and clips adorning the colourful dreads, it blended in quite nicely.

'I thought you just said you couldn't do anything around the yard?' Henrietta helped herself to more smoked salmon, which whipped around on the end of her fork like a jaunty orange flag.

'I can't physically do much, but I can oversee things. Jenny is going to be with Hugo and we're really short-staffed right now so we've got a couple of agency people along with the part-timers from the local villages and I'll have to muddle along as best I can.'

'That's exactly what we wanted to talk to you about-' Henrietta tried again, but again Beccy interrupted her.

'I'm glad your baby's going to be a Leo,' she told Tash, fingering the talismans around her neck. 'They're so positive and determined. Cora's an Aquarian like me, isn't she? We have a terrible time deciding what we want from life. I wanted to be a dog groomer for years, didn't I, Mum? James could never understand it.'

'And then a vet,' Henrietta concurred, 'then a riding instructor and an event rider, which is what we were going to-'

'I remember that!' Tash laughed. 'You did a stint with the Stantons as a working pupil, didn't you?'

Beccy nodded, eyes flashing.

'They're a lovely family.' Tash was hugely fond of the big local clan that had competed for several generations and were as synonymous with dressage and event riding as the Whitakers were with show-jumping.

'I didn't stay long enough to find out,' Beccy said quietly.

'Why ever not?' Tash had forgotten most of the details of her stepsister's attempt at a competitive career, which had been going on at about the time she and Hugo had first got together, almost ten years earlier, although she did recall her father buying Beccy a very expensive horse. And Beccy had definitely possessed a lot of talent as a jockey, she recalled, but as with most things she'd quickly lost interest once the going got tough.

'James and I had a falling out,' Beccy muttered now.

'Yes, well, he's always felt rather guilty about that.' Henrietta cleared her throat, hair whipping up from her face to reveal deep worry lines embossed on her brow.

'He sold my horse,' she gulped.

'That sounds familiar.' Tash sympathised, having fallen foul of her father's rather brutal brand of paternal vengeance several times in her early years.

'To Hugo,' Beccy was close to tears now.

'Which one was it?'

'Butternut Squash.'

'But he-'

'Was sold straight on to America for twice the money,' Beccy nodded forlornly. 'Hugo promised James that we would always have first refusal if he sold him.'

'Oh dear.' Tash watched as another piece of bread flew off her plate, this time wedging itself in the foliage of the golden hop climbing an upright of the pergola behind Beccy. 'It was a long time ago. Hugo has mellowed a lot since then. And the horse did really well, didn't he? Kirsty Johanssen bought him when she and Stefan moved out to Virginia, I remember. He was placed at Kentucky one year.'

'I could have gone four-star with him,' Beccy lamented, conveniently forgetting that the chances of herself at seventeen producing the horse to international level had been nil, whereas Hugo had spotted his potential and moved him on to a top-flight career path.

'Instead you went backpacking for a year and ended up staying away for almost a decade,' Henrietta muttered under her breath, 'half of it incarcerated in a potty bloody cult and then in prison.'

'Do not pass go, do not collect five hundred pounds,' Beccy sniffed, shooting her mother a dirty look.

'It cost your stepfather considerably more than that to secure your liberty,' her mother whispered, now holding her hair down with one hand and eating with the other.

Tash swallowed awkwardly. She was never sure whether the subject of her stepsister's jail sentence was off limits or not. It seemed impolite to casually drop it in to conversation – 'Now you're back from Changi Women's Prison, you must relish these cool summer days?' – yet to ignore it was ridiculous. Similarly, for several years before fatefully moving on to South-East Asia as a part of her travels, Beccy had sequestered herself in an ashram with a mystical guru who took all her money, but that long episode was also never mentioned, despite the many trips Henrietta had made at the time to try to talk her daughter into coming home. Back then Beccy had taken the clothes, the money and the Marmite on offer and stubbornly stayed put, claiming that she had seen the light. Thus her 'year out' had slowly become almost a decade's sabbatical of expensive selfdenial, self-discovery, self-satisfaction and self, self, self. She hadn't won many allies among the Frenches.

It was common knowledge in the family that, at Henrietta's behest, James had continually fed funds into his stepdaughter's account to safeguard her travels and enable her quick passage home whenever the need arose. Unfortunately that need had only presented itself when Beccy – finally leaving the safety of the ashram because the mystic suddenly closed it down to relocate to Epping Forest and buy himself a premier-league football team – travelled on to Singapore and found herself behind bars, her charmed travels coming to an abrupt end. As a result, that passage home had been very hard won and very, very expensive. Ten months in a Singapore women's prison had finally knocked the glitter off Beccy's globetrotting life. Now home amid mother comforts, she had re-dyed her dreadlocks, been to a few summer music festivals and tied fresh dream catchers up above her bed in the family home on the Surrey borders, as though she hadn't been away and the gap between seventeen and twenty-seven was non-existent.

Now Tash regarded her in wonder, memories creeping back of Beccy's teenage desire to be a professional rider, bankrolled by her reluctant stepfather as she joined the hundreds of hopeful young things who thought eventing could be a career. Surely James's bullheaded sale of her horse hadn't been the reason that she'd bulk-bought tie-dye, renewed her passport and taken her prolonged hippy trip? If so, it was a gross overreaction. But Beccy had always been as impetuous as she was ingenuous.

She certainly looked much the same, to Tash's surprise – fresh faced and pink cheeked, with those big, pale-lashed grey-blue eyes, an upturned nose and a dusting of freckles. It was a little-girl face, and seemed at odds with the hippy paraphernalia. Tash had envisaged her gaunt and weathered from her life on the road, her many adventures in far-flung climes. Much of the time that she had been travelling, especially those first years, remained unaccounted for, months having passed when she hadn't called, emailed or sent so much as a postcard, and when she had apparently crossed several time zones without explaining how or with whom. Yet Beccy's face still looked as innocent as a bisque doll that has been dressed in Bratz clothes and then covered with pen marks by the rebellious child playing with it.

'So what are you planning to do with yourself now?' she asked her.

'Come and work here.' Beccy laughed, her eyes sliding toward her mother. 'I thought it had all been arranged.'

'Yes, well I did mention something, but Tash has been very busy lately ...'

Tash briefly closed her eyes as another lost memory popped up to mortify her.

Not long after Beccy had returned home Henrietta had called Haydown to talk through the possibility of Tash and Hugo helping Beccy back on to the road towards a 'normal' life. Terrified of losing her daughter to the high seas again, Henrietta thought it would be good for her to return to one of the passions she'd held before the travelling bug had bitten. She had even persuaded James that it might be worth buying her a horse again. She had put him on the phone to Tash, who in turn had handed her father to Hugo to talk through options. Then she'd wandered off to go to the loo, got distracted and forgotten all about the call until now. She had no idea how Hugo had left it at all.

'He offered Beccy a job,' Henrietta explained, still frantically trying to keep her hair from blowing in her eyes. 'Said to leave the arrangements to you, but that she could start as soon as she felt ready.'

'He did?' Tash gulped. It sounded very unlike Hugo.

'He did,' Henrietta assured her. 'James was very clear on the detail.'

'Gosh.' Tash tried not to look too appalled. They could really do with an extra pair of hands around the yard, after all. 'And do I take it you're ready now?'

Shrugging, Beccy stared back, looking far from ready. She just looked cornered, fed up and willing to do anything to get away from her over-fussing mother and her stepfather's badgering.

'I want to bring a dog with me,' she said, sounding just like her seventeen-year-old self.

'You'd be better off bringing a horse if you want to compete again,' Tash pointed out.

'Hugo said I could ride yours while you're off the circuit.'

'He did?' She was staggered.

Beccy looked rather dreamy, clearly having not lost her teenage crush on her stepsister's husband.

'I think I'd better start with something easier than Snob, though,' she told Tash. 'I'm a bit rusty; I'll build up to him gradually.'

Tash looked away, the sudden lump in her throat choking her. 'You'll have to dig him up first.'

'Huh?'

'He died, Beccy. Three months ago. Colic.' It was still so raw, she felt winded with pain by the loss of her greatest campaigner and most loyal servant.

'I didn't know!' Beccy was mouthing stupidly.

'You were in-' about to say 'jail', Tash hastily changed it to 'Singapore at the time; you can't be expected to know.'

Looking across the table she saw huge tears in Beccy's eyes and suddenly realised that it could work out. Beccy understood what made them all tick; it had made her tick once too. She loved and understood horses and the sport. If she really had taken off around the world because her dreams of a riding career had been scuppered, she deserved a second chance.

'I have other horses that you might remember,' she told her. 'Hunk's retired now, but Mickey's still going strong, you'll like him. And a couple of the novices I was competing last year are really good, straightforward sorts to get your feel back.'

'So when does she start?' Henrietta asked, her hair now a lopsided beehive. 'Only James and I are going to the Algarve next week and were rather hoping she could be here by then.' She made it sound as though she was trying to offload a particularly troublesome pony that needed schooling on. They clearly didn't want Beccy left alone in the family house in their absence.

'It's the Olympics next week,' Tash said weakly, trying not to feel affronted that her father was leaving the country just as his son-in-law was riding for gold.

'Oh, yes – so you said. Well that's brilliant, isn't it? You can watch all the live coverage together.' Hair on end, Henrietta helped herself to another glass of champagne – totally unheard of when she was driving; she normally restricted herself to a thimble. 'This calls for a toast, I think, don't you?'

Tash and Beccy eyed one another with suspicion.