PROLOGUE

Tum tadda-dum, tum tadda-dum, tum tadda-dum. This is the gallop. Four beats. Less regimented than the two-beat trot, more earnest than the three of a canter. A primal rhythm, it massages the earth and soothes the soul surely as a mother's heartbeat, and every creature on the grounds went about their business embraced in its familiar cadence. All knew when it faltered.

Virginia summer-air is still and stifling, and a sharp crack bounces off the rusty clay hardpan and ricochets among dense hardwood like a sour note in a concert hall. The ubiquitous pack of Corgis and Jack Russells terrorizing the stabling area noticed first, halted their frenetic game of tag and cocked harried ears. Thoroughbreds skittered, bowling over handlers and displacing riders. Warmbloods, continental in blood and attitude, turned away from the sound and pretended disinterest. Riders, engaged in a battle between sweaty legs and cotton breeches, paused and balanced one-legged, like flamingos. Grooms stopped brushing, bathing, and braiding. Spectators, many of whom came hoping secretly for a dramatic fall, drifted toward the commotion.

Jordan Pascoe was parked in an ideal spot, shaded by a gargantuan oak that even a century ago must have so impressed a farmer that he chose to plow around the behemoth rather than topple it. The shade was nice, but more importantly, it provided the necessary solitude to scribble notes in the margins of *The Daily Racing Form,* where some nice odds were emerging from the eighth at Belmont. From his vantage point, a small rise in the geographic center of the lima bean shaped course, the noise sounded like a little leaguer putting good wood on a hanging curve. Most people would, by force of habit, search the sky for the high, arcing flight of a home run. Pascoe had no such inclination. No one was playing baseball on this grassy field, and the crack, now fading to echo, came not from ash on rawhide but the femur of Hunter Stuart's most promising three-day horse, Bathsheba.

The big, Irish-born mare was normally spectacular: nimble and forward

minded, and gifted with a knack for spotting jumps. She had won three Preliminary events so far this season, been in the ribbons in two others, and was expected to graduate to the Intermediate Division shortly. Today however, Sheba spooked at an inviting bench jump and been penalized for a refusal before catching her right hind over the second obstacle in a combination and going down, hard.

Pascoe set aside the paper and threw the truck into gear well before the public address system screeched out a call for the vet. It had not rained for weeks and the pickup navigated the rolling hayfields quickly, cut stems crunching like insect husks under the tires. Ahead, flashing red lights signaled that the county EMT unit attended to Hunter.

Pascoe grabbed the stethoscope hanging from the rearview mirror and considered drugs he might need: Rompun for sedation, Torbugesic and Bute for pain, Solu-Delta Cortef for shock. As the truck rolled to a stop it became obvious only one bottle was going to be necessary.

Bathsheba, driven by a fervent flight instinct, had thrashed upright. The effort had inflicted tremendous suffering. Sweat ran in torrents along the curves of her body and poured off her muzzle and belly, forming a muddy shadow on the ground. Every muscle quivered. Knees buckled and straightened, buckled and straightened, threatening to cast her to earth again. Yet Bathsheba would not yield. She planted her left hind leg under the center of her body like a tent pole and extended her neck to transfer weight to her undamaged front end. In this fashion she was able to keep her right hind, the source of pain, raised a couple of inches off the ground. The femur, thick as a man's arm and white as chalk, thrust upward through the mass of muscle covering the hip and burst through the skin. Its jagged end, speckled with bits of grass and mud and already gathering flies, oscillated like a metronome as the leg swung uselessly below.

Christ, Pascoe thought, *eleven months to create, seconds to destroy*.

It was hard to comprehend how much force was needed to generate a break this severe, harder still to acknowledge that nothing man-made was strong enough to repair it. There was only one solution: end the suffering, and do it soon.

"Sheba!"

Hunter, conscious now, shrugged off paramedics. Plugs of sod were planted in the ventilation holes of her helmet, forearms were scraped bloody to the elbow, and her britches had a ragged hole at the thigh. One boot was missing a heel. She hobbled to Sheba, threw an arm around the horse's great neck and, pressed her face tightly to sweat-soaked skin.

"It's all right baby, all right. Calm down now, shhhhhh," she whispered, voice hitching between words. "Relax, I know it hurts. Shhhhh."

For a wonder, the mare relaxed. Sheba's wide eyes softened and she nuzzled her rider as if apologizing for the fall. Pascoe was drawing up a second sixty cc syringe of euthanasia solution. The bright blue color was familiar to

horse people and Hunter's face blanched at the sight of it.

"There's nothing that can be done," she said, eyes as lost and frightened as Sheba's. Pascoe hated this.

"No," he said. "If it was below the stifle she might be salvaged as a broodmare. But a broken femur…putting her down is the only option." It was cold, discussing the taking of life as easy as popping the head off a dandelion, but distance allowed him to maintain composure and continue to drive to work every morning.

Hunter buried her face in her hands, and her helmet, chinstrap detached from the fall, tumbled to the ground. "Do it. Don't let her suffer while I come to grips with this."

Pascoe nodded and moved to the mare. Though in shock, Sheba's blood pressure was strong enough to fill the jugular when compressed at the base of the neck. Once the vein was pierced and blood ran freely from the needle's hub, both syringes of the thick blue barbiturate were injected. At first, as is often the case, there was no recognizable change. After a short time her head drooped and eyelids closed to slits. Then suddenly, as if yanked to earth by invisible hands, she pitched forward, drove her head into the dirt, toppled, and was still. Twelve hundred pounds of dead weight does not go to the ground gently. Pascoe placed stethoscope to the mare's chest and listened to her heart fade away like spent thunder.