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Opening extract from

Mortal Chaos

Written by

Matt Dickinson

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MORTAL CHAOS



'I loved it. I read it cover to cover just in this weekend which I have never done before! I could not put it down as I always needed to know what happened next.' OLIVER

'An amazing story that hooked me from the first line. Breathtaking, exciting and terrifying. I loved it.' MAIRÉAD

'Seeing how a beat of a butterfly's wing can set in motion a chain of events that ends in catastrophe made me look more closely at the small things that happen in life. It was an intriguing concept in a fascinating story.' KIERAN

'*Mortal Chaos* was a gripping, rapid read that had me on tenterhooks. I would definitely recommend this book to friends.' DANIEL

'I never usually notice the little things that happen around me but this book shows just how important tiny happenings are . . . that a butterfly can change so much in the world. Matt made the story so exciting and thrilling.' EWAN

'It was gripping from the first page. Everything that happened was breathtaking and made you not want to put the book down.' DAISY

Matt Dickinson

MORTAL CHAOS



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regulations of the country of origin.

For my son,
Ali



1

07.37 GMT, SAUNCY WOOD, WILTSHIRE, UK

The butterfly was a Purple Hairstreak, a newborn female, still sticky from her chrysalis as she climbed the oak sapling and tested the morning air. It was a chill June start to the day, with the promise of summer heat to come, the silverweed and red campion around her spun with brilliant gossamer, tendrils of dawn mist still woven through the grass.

Proboscis unfurled, she fed for a while, then—sated on honeydew—opened her wings for the first time.

She was a dark, beautiful creature, almost perfectly black in this first moment of exposure, the velvet texture of her sharply tipped wings seeming to absorb the light. She shivered a little, her antennae vibrating as each hindwing fluttered in turn, drying out the dampness of her long incarceration.

Her scales began to change, the black yielding quite suddenly to create two shadowy pools of purple pigment on each forewing. They were dazzlingly iridescent, shaped like drop pearls, arrayed in perfect symmetry from the thorax.

The first rays of sunlight filtered through a nearby coppice of ash. Caught up in the wonder of what she had become, the butterfly launched herself from the sapling and flew.

2

MOOREND GALLOP, WILTSHIRE, UK

Keiron Wallace shortened the reins on Mazarine Town, raising himself expertly in the saddle as she moved smoothly into the gallop, the rhythmic pounding of her hooves drumming crisply on the turf, her breath coming in eager bursts. The jockey encouraged the thoroughbred with a few murmured words, enjoying the cold rush of morning air on his cheeks and the intoxicating sensation of power as the white furlong markers of the training run flashed by.

Moments later, Beaumont Boy was pulling even at his side, Keiron's stablemate Gary Price in the saddle. 'I thought this was just a warm up,' he called to Keiron as he tried to keep pace, 'we don't want to burn them out for the race.'

'Do 'em good to have a burst,' Keiron told him, 'it'll help 'em settle. Plus a fiver says I beat you to the woods.'

Gary couldn't resist the challenge, and put some pressure on Beaumont Boy with his knees, hoping that stable owner Mike Sampson wasn't spying on them with his binoculars. Both horses were racing at Newbury later that day and the owner would be furious if he thought his jockeys had pushed their mounts too hard on the training session.

'Get a move on,' Gary goaded him as he edged forward, 'what's wrong with you?'

The two jockeys pushed harder into the gallop, caught up now in the spirit of the duel.

Suddenly they were out of the windswept heath and entering the forested section of the ride, the trees flashing past as the two horses lengthened their strides and picked up their speed yet further.

3

SAUNCY WOOD, WILTSHIRE, UK

The rabbit was a doe, just twenty days old and barely weaned. The strongest of her litter, she was the first to brave the journey through the dark walls of the warren on her way to the verdant wonders of the outside world. Emerging warily from the hole, she blinked as her eyes adjusted to the morning light. Then her pink nose twitched with excitement as she saw others of her kind.

She took a hop towards them, then, losing her nerve, scuttled back into the hole. But the aroma of fresh vegetation was too enticing and she was soon back out to nibble at some fresh shoots of grass.

Then, in an instant, the mood around her changed. The rabbits stopped grazing as a thunderous beating noise began to fill the morning air. The very ground was vibrating as the drumming, pulsating beats resonated through the young doe's body. Thump. A buck beat an alarm with his hind legs as rabbits scattered in all directions.

Her heart jumping, the young rabbit scuttled first one way, then the other as the adults around her rushed for cover.

She could have controlled herself, in fact she was at the very moment of running into the nearest hole, when a dark fluttering creature descended from the sky and began to fly around her. The rabbit took a small hop, hoping to lose the tormentor; but the butterfly followed her, skipping and dancing on the morning air.

The rabbit took a few fast jumps into longer grass but the

butterfly followed again, fluttering unpredictably around her. Then the black butterfly brushed against the rabbit's back and that was when the young doe lost all sense of direction and bolted.

4

MOOREND GALLOP, WILTSHIRE, UK

Mazarine Town and Beaumont Boy were side by side on the fastest section of the gallop when the rabbit shot out of the woods beside them. It happened so fast that Keiron never really had a chance to register what was happening. All he saw was a flash of fur as the tiny creature ran at full tilt beneath the horses' hooves. Mazarine Town lost her footing for a startled second, bringing her head down, sending Keiron flying out of the saddle as she went into the fall.

Keiron put himself into a roll, cradling his head and neck in his hands and praying that Mazarine Town wouldn't land on top of him as she hit the ground. By good fortune the horse did miss him, her aluminium-clad hooves narrowly avoiding his head as she skidded sideways alongside him and came—wide-eyed and frothing—to a halt. Keiron was up on his feet in an instant, reaching for Mazarine Town's reins and calming her with a few words: 'Whoa, girl, take it easy, take it easy now.'

Gary had brought Beaumont Boy to a stop. Now he trotted back and dismounted next to Keiron as Mazarine Town climbed slightly shakily back to her feet.

'What the hell was that about?'

'I think it was a rabbit startled her.'

'Are you OK?'

Keiron rubbed his chest, feeling his ribs already sore from the fall. He'd had a lot worse.

'Yeah, got away with it.'

'And the rabbit?' Gary looked around but could see no sign.

'Stuff the bunny, mate. What about the horse? The Guv'nor'll lose it big time if she's lame.'

'Walk her round.'

Keiron let Mazarine Town regain some of her composure then led her by the nose, starting her at a walk and then breaking her into a gentle canter as he ran beside her.

5

SAUNCY WOOD, WILTSHIRE, UK

The rabbit was still running for her life, moving deeper into the woods on the far side of the gallop, instinctively trying to put distance between herself and those thundering, flashing hooves that had so nearly crushed the life out of her.

An acute stress reaction was setting in, the shock of the narrow escape quickly overwhelming the small animal. She began to shake as her heart went into tachycardia.

The rabbit stopped, crawled beneath some low-lying vegetation for cover and lay there panting as the sound of the creatures and their riders in the chase slowly faded.

There was pain in her flank. She licked tentatively at the fur and tasted blood. Branches above her suddenly moved as a gust of wind ran through the trees. The rustling unnerved her and she broke cover again, hopping erratically on a random path through the dark forest, wanting more than anything to find the welcoming burrows where she belonged.

Quickly she became hopelessly lost, moving continually in the wrong direction. Her disorientation was not surprising; the newborn creature had no experience of the outside world to draw upon. All she had ever known was the earthy embrace of the tunnels where she had been born. The world to her was a big, bright, bewildering mystery and her first outing had been a hostile encounter which had almost ended in a violent death.

No wonder the poor creature was utterly freaked out.