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Opening extract from

Fire Storm

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IN A CORNER stable at White Oaks Equestrian Centre, Casey Blue was experiencing an unfamiliar and distinctly unwelcome sensation – that of being crushed by a one-ton horse. For reasons unknown, Lady Roxanne had taken exception to being saddled and was expressing her displeasure by trying to paste Casey against the wall.

'Excuse me!' Casey panted indignantly after wriggling free. She massaged her ribs. 'That's no way for a lady to behave.'

In weeks to come Casey would discover that she was just one of a long line of people who routinely used that phrase – and worse – in connection with Roxy, but for now she was in the dark. She assumed that she'd

inadvertently touched a sensitive spot on the horse's flank, or that Roxy was simply nervous in a new environment.

The 16.2hh bay mare had arrived the previous day when Casey was in London celebrating her father's birthday. It was especially important that she was with him because he'd only recently been released from prison for a crime he didn't commit. She'd asked her coach, Mrs Smith, to take care of things in her absence, but somehow that hadn't happened: when the lorry turned up neither Mrs Smith nor Casey had been there to welcome Storm's temporary replacement. Hardly surprising that Roxy was unimpressed.

Making encouraging noises, Casey reached for the girth. Roxy pinned her ears to her head, shifted her quarters and made a snapping noise with her teeth. She made it plain that if any attempt were made to fasten it, there would be consequences.

'Look, I know we've started out on the wrong foot, but I promise I'll make it up to you,' said Casey, leading the mare out into the yard where she was less likely to turn her new rider into a brick sandwich. 'You've obviously had a bad experience in the past, but it won't be like that here. I'm one of the good guys. Ask Storm.'

At the mention of Storm Warning, her champion horse, she felt a pang. She could see him in the far field, grazing peacefully with his friends. The other horses, mainly bays and a couple of chestnuts, blurred into one at this distance, but Storm's silver coat – the colour of

lightning blended with thundercloud was how Casey liked to think of it – set him apart from the crowd even on dull grey days like this one.

Usually he'd be at the gate as soon as he spotted her, as eager to go out for a gallop as he was for treats and love, but today he was enjoying his holiday. Casey didn't blame him. Barely two weeks had passed since they'd won the Badminton Horse Trials and Kentucky Three-Day Event back to back – a feat that had earned Casey a place in the record books as the youngest rider in history to complete the double.

It wasn't until the British Airways horse transport plane landed at London's Stansted airport at the end of a long, gruelling journey from the US that Casey had realised how exhausted she was. She was in bed and fast asleep within hours of arriving home at Peach Tree Cottage and didn't surface for nearly two days. Storm had done much the same, lying flat on his side and dreaming like a foal.

When at last Casey did emerge from her bedroom, she took a well-earned break. For twelve glorious days she rose late, read books and spent time with her dad, who'd been warmly welcomed back to his old job at the Half Moon Tailor Shop. His boss, Ravi Singh, had never doubted his innocence. Best of all were the long beach walks and romantic picnics that she enjoyed with Storm's farrier, Peter, who also happened to be her new boyfriend. She was so besotted with him that even the thought of him made the blood practically fizz in her veins.

Rested and restored ('rebooted' she'd joked to Peter), she was now ready for the season ahead. Her primary focus was the Burghley Horse Trials in September. Victory there would hand her eventing's greatest prize: the Rolex Grand Slam.

So ferocious was the competition for this triple that only one rider had ever achieved it: Pippa Funnell in 2003. Hers was a feat that could never be repeated, because she'd won Badminton, Kentucky and Burghley in the days when the long format, which included a steeplechase and roads and tracks, was still an integral part of any three-day event. Even without the extra mileage, no rider had managed it since, although Andrew Hoy, William Fox-Pitt and Andrew Nicholson had come close.

Casey, who considered the 'short format' of dressage, cross-country and show jumping tough enough, considered Pippa to be some kind of superhero. At seventeen, she was years away from being anywhere near as good as Pippa, but miracles did happen – especially when you had a horse like Storm Warning. And Casey had the Badminton and Kentucky trophies to prove it!

The only cloud on the horizon was that Storm needed to have six weeks' rest before being brought back into training. Hence Roxy. Casey had imagined that, on the back of her success in Gloucestershire and Kentucky, she'd have her choice of top horses to ride for a couple of months, until Storm was once more ready for action. But with less than a week to go before she was due to

resume work, nobody had come forward with a suitable mount.

Morag, White Oaks' acerbic manager, was unsympathetic. 'What did you expect? Your achievements this season are phenomenal, Casey Blue, and as a friend I'm in awe of you, but I wouldn't want you or Mrs Smith within a mile of one of my up-and-coming horses. Your unconventional – some would say downright batty – training methods are already the stuff of legend.'

'They can't be that batty,' protested Casey. 'Our results speak for themselves.'

'Yes, but not everyone wants their horse ridden flat out along a public beach without a bridle, or paddled in their neighbour's swimming pool. And those were among your more sensible experiments.'

Unfortunately, Morag was right. No one else was blunt enough to say it to their faces, but the end result was the same: a distinct lack of offers of shiny warmbloods with impressive CVs. That didn't bother Mrs Smith, because from the outset she was fixated on getting a youngster.

'In a perfect world what we need is a novice eventer who is still pretty green. Something to challenge us.'

'What *I* need,' said Casey, 'is a two-star, or even a three-star horse with a proven track record in show jumping and dressage so I'll be able to stay competitive throughout the season.'

'And what is this paragon of a creature going to teach you? What are you going to learn? Might I remind you that, Storm aside, you have only ever ridden one horse,

and there'd be those who'd argue that Patchwork was at least three parts mule. The best riders on the circuit have ridden dozens of horses. They've also ridden and competed in many different arenas, from Pony Club competitions to local hunts and amateur racing. That's how great riders hone their skills. That's how they learn what makes horses tick.'

Casey, who was keenly aware that she lacked the riding experience that even the lowliest competitor on the circuit took for granted, said nothing.

Next day she was offered a couple of wildly unsuitable show jumpers by an ambitious couple who boarded their horses at White Oaks.

Just as she was beginning to despair, she'd received an email about Lady Roxanne, an Irish sporthorse who'd achieved reasonable results at intermediate level. Her owner, Jennifer Stewart, claimed that the mare had bags of potential but consistently underperformed. She begged Casey to consider taking her on. *As Badminton and Kentucky champion, you are among the world's best young riders and will undoubtedly help her to realise her potential,* she gushed in one email.

In another to Mrs Smith, she described Roxy as *gifted but challenging.*

Casey hadn't liked the sound of that at all.

'It has an ominous ring to it. Jennifer Stewart is like an estate agent describing a house as a dream home but needing a little work. I'll move in and discover that it's a crumbling ruin.'

Her teacher shook her head in wonder. 'Would you listen to yourself? Are you the same girl who, less than three years ago, paid a dollar for a bag-of-bones horse from a knacker's yard and shaped him into one of Britain's finest eventers? Now you're turning up your nose at a well-bred mare who has extensive competition experience just because her owner describes her as a little challenging?'

'She didn't use the word "little", said Casey, but she knew she was clutching at straws. And Mrs Smith did have a point. Taking on a mare who was a bit of a project could be both rewarding and educational. It might also distract her from missing Storm.

'You're right, as usual. I do need to ride more horses and this is the perfect opportunity for me to really get to know and understand a horse with a totally different temperament from Storm. Now that I think about it, I can't wait to get started.'

Recalling these words, Casey led Roxy to the hitching post in the yard. She stood for a moment admiring her new mount. The mare was the colour of toffee, with a shiny black mane and lustrous, intelligent eyes. When she wasn't scowling and snapping, she was pretty.

Distracted by the change of scene, Roxy stood perfectly still even when Casey adjusted the saddle. Her expression was positively serene. Casey relaxed. The crushing episode in the stable was obviously an aberration. Reaching for the girth, she started to pull it tight.

'Ow!'

Her screech of pain was so loud that it scared the birds from the nearby trees. Roxy had nipped her left arm, drawing blood.

As Casey swore beneath her breath and rubbed the purple flesh, she was shocked to see that Roxy's ears were pricked. The mare was staring into the distance as if the whimpering girl at her side was as inconsequential as a swatted fly.

Casey was relieved that the yard was empty and there was no one around to witness her humiliation. All the instructors were taking lessons and Morag and a couple of the stable girls were at a show. She glanced at her watch in annoyance. Where on earth was Mrs Smith? Her teacher had disappeared to Brighton the previous day on a mysterious errand and was now an hour and a half late, poor form when it was their first lesson back after a break and they had a tricky new horse to train. Casey had waited as long as she could before the delicious prospect of trying out her new mare had got the better of her.

If Mrs Smith had been a normal teacher, she could have rung her for an ETA, but Mrs Smith loathed mobile phones and had yet to answer the one Casey had bought her on their return from the US. That meant that Casey was on her own with the ironically named *Lady* Roxanne.

Adopting what she hoped was a stern but kindly tone, she explained to Roxy that biting, kicking and pasting

riders against walls were all unacceptable behaviour at White Oaks. The mare ignored her. Casey lifted the saddle flap cautiously and put a wary hand on the girth. Nothing happened. But as she leaned in to tighten it, Roxy's head whipped round and she went for the kill, biting Casey so hard on the bum that she leapt into the air with a squeal.

An explosive laugh startled them both. Casey squinted into the shadows. A stranger was leaning against the stable-block wall. He was so close it seemed impossible that she hadn't seen him, and yet with his black polo-shirt, dark brown breeches and black long boots he was all but invisible in the shade.

He straightened unhurriedly and stepped into the sunlight. Casey caught her breath. He was shorter than Peter – perhaps by as much as two inches – and was as fair as her boyfriend was dark, but he had the kind of looks that teen magazines call 'heart-stopping'.

'I think you'll find that if you give her a carrot next time she does that, she'll be so surprised that it'll diffuse her temper,' he said in a friendly tone. 'She'll try to nip you again, of course, but if you respond by offering her another carrot, she'll soon learn that what she's come to regard as a negative experience is really rather fun.'

What he said made sense, but Casey's hackles rose. She didn't appreciate being told what to do by a boy she didn't know from Adam, especially a good-looking one and when she was in pain. 'Is that so?' she said coldly.

He flashed a grin and his hand came up and swept

streaky blond hair out of his eyes. 'But I'm sure you already know that. You don't get to achieve what you've achieved, especially with a horse as complex and brilliant as Storm Warning, without having rare gifts of communication with animals.'

Casey immediately felt silly for having taken offence over something so trivial when he'd clearly been trying to help. Besides, anyone who praised Storm was all right by her. She smiled. 'Oh, I wouldn't go that far. My horse-whispering skills are really not working on Roxy.'

'Wanna try the carrot trick?'

Casey hesitated, but her arm and right buttock were killing her and she didn't fancy being chomped again. 'Why not?'

When Roxy swung round with her teeth bared, Casey surprised her by popping a carrot in her mouth. Roxy was too busy crunching to worry about the girth or anything else. With the help of another two carrots, Casey was able to adjust the bridle unmolested.

'Need a leg up?'

Casey hesitated. The mounting block was at the far end of the yard. She'd finally got Roxy settled. Maybe it would be better to mount her now while she was quiet. 'Sure. Uh, thanks.'

As the visitor moved to cup his hands beneath her boot, his bicep brushed her chest. Casey felt a shot of pure attraction go through her, followed, almost immediately, by an inexplicable feeling of dread and guilt. The combined feelings disturbed her so much that

she lost concentration and almost flew over the other side of Roxy.

'Don't mind me, I'm here for my first riding lesson,' she joked, struggling back into the saddle, red-faced.

'It was entirely my fault,' he said graciously. 'Don't know my own strength. Believe me, no one would ever mistake you for an amateur, Casey Blue.'

Casey gathered the reins. Now that she was gazing down on him, she felt more in control. It also occurred to her that there was something familiar about him. 'You obviously know my name. Mind telling me yours?'

'Apologies. I seem to have left my manners at home today. I'm Kyle. It's a pleasure to finally meet you. It's something I've wanted for a very long time.'

He said it as if he'd thought of nothing else for months.

'Why?' Casey asked before she could stop herself.

He grinned. 'Why not? You're the hottest young rider in the country.'

As he reached up to shake her hand, some sixth sense warned Casey that nothing good would come out of any association with him. She dragged her eyes away from his dark blue ones and glanced at the distant gate. Where *was* Mrs Smith?

Casey kept her voice cool. 'I'm hardly that, but thanks. You event?'

'Heavens, no. Not brave enough. On the whole, I find the ground a lot safer. Fewer broken bones. I teach a bit.'

It was then that the penny dropped. Casey hid her astonishment by allowing the restless mare to move forward a few paces. She could have echoed his compliment by saying, 'I know who you are. You're the hottest coach in Britain.' But there was something in the confident set of his shoulders that told her he already knew that. The previous October he had, at twenty, been the youngest person ever to be shortlisted for the Golden Horseshoe Riding Instructor of the Year Award, before being controversially beaten to the title. The eventing circuit had been abuzz with rumours about it afterwards. Since the winner was a close relative of one of the judges, the general consensus was that the result had been fixed and Kyle robbed.

She reined in Roxy. 'You're Kyle West?'

Again the laconic grin. 'Last time I checked.'

'Here to give someone a lesson?'

He stepped forward and pushed his blond fringe from his face as he looked up at her. 'Actually, I was hoping to see you.'

'Me?'

'Yes, I'd like a word with you if that's possible.'

Casey was as curious as a cat in a den of mice, but she didn't want to seem too eager. 'No problem at all, provided you don't mind hanging around for an hour or so. As you've probably gathered, Roxy and I are just getting to know one another and my coach, Mrs Smith, who should be here, isn't.'

Kyle kept pace with them as they left the yard. 'Sure

thing. Would it be okay if I watched you work? I mean, I don't want to intrude.'

'Be my guest,' said Casey, not knowing that those three words, so carelessly spoken, would change everything.