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Not Enough Time

Written by Henrietta Knight

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HENRIETTA KNIGHT

Not Enough Time



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Prologue

The worst day of my life was Sunday, 5 January 2014. Early in the morning, just after I had given him a little drink of water, my beloved husband, Terry Biddlecombe, lay back on his soft pillow and closed his eyes for the last time. I was alone with him in the farmhouse at West Lockinge in Oxfordshire, where we had lived together for twenty years. During that time we had been inseparable. We adored each other. He was my best friend and my *raison d'être*.

The previous August I had converted the drawing room into a bedroom, and it was there that I nursed Terry for the final months of his life. He had become desperately ill and, according to the medical profession, had been slowly dying for a number of weeks. We never talked about death and I never believed that I would lose him because, despite his illness, he remained optimistic for the future. His mind was always alert and he dreamed about the days when he would be better and able to stand up and walk again. All the same, he was a surprisingly good patient and resigned to

being unable to turn over in bed – thankfully, the hospital bed on which he slept could be altered to give him different positions. He appreciated all the help we gave him. He could not feed himself properly, due to the arthritis in his left hand, but he could still hold a glass of whisky with his right one and he kept smiling. He often asked me to give him a kiss, and in return he would stroke my face.

There was no one around when the end came. The house was quiet and peaceful: no telephone, no voices, no dogs… not even the cockerel crowing outside. It was just the two of us in the bedroom together. Throughout the night before he died, Terry was exceptionally lucid. As usual, I lay down on my little bed beside him and pushed it up close to him. We held hands and we talked quietly through many of the endless hours of darkness. His breathing was wheezy at times, but he was cheerful despite this recent discomfort. A determined person, he was always ready to fight any new adversity – no wonder he had been a champion steeplechase jockey. As dawn broke, however, he slept peacefully despite his breathing problems. When he woke again, it was all the more heartbreaking to see him struggle to swallow the pills that I gave him. He was noticeably weaker, but still talking and ready for the new day. Those last breaths came quickly and unexpectedly. It was devastating to see him lose his fight for life.

Terry's death hit me hard, yet at the time I was in shock and felt nothing but numbness. I would never see that special smile again, but at least his pain had gone and he was at peace. There would be no more suffering.

Nowadays, in the mornings, when I walk through the drawing room to venture out into the garden, the early sun shines brightly through the big window and I stop to look back at the place where Terry died. I can still see him lying there, in the corner of the room, his head beneath the picture of my father, which hangs on the wall. I loved them both, but between Terry and me there was a special chemistry that is impossible to define. I have wonderful memories and numerous photographs, but the tears still roll down my face whenever I think about him. He is never far away from me and everything I do reminds me of him. I dream about him at night and I dream about him by day, but I try to be strong. My life goes on and I owe it to my friends to have positive thoughts. Terry did not like people who dwelt on the past, but my days with him will never be forgotten.

They were special.

They are the reason I have written this book.

CHAPTER ONE

Early Memories

In the autumn of 1993, I was forty-seven years old, unmarried and living on my own at West Lockinge Farm. I had been training racehorses with a professional licence for four years. I was not looking to share my life with anyone. Yes, challenges lay ahead of me, but I was confident that I could tackle them on my own, with support from my parents and countless wonderful friends. My weeks were extremely busy and I was enjoying my chosen career. I had always wanted to train, even from my early childhood days, when I designed and built model stables in the nursery. I used to have imaginary racehorses even then, and my toy ponies were put to work every morning. I hated dolls.

In the early 1990s my constant companions were three white Labrador dogs. I was devoted to them. On the farm I was surrounded by animals, not only horses and ponies but also geese, ducks and bantams, together with a few pedigree Simmental cattle belonging to my mother: cows, calves and a steady old bull. I was never lonely; my adored parents lived in the same village and I often

spent time with them. I was resigned to being a spinster, but it didn't bother me. At that stage of my life, the idea of a husband did not enter my calculations. I had never wanted children of my own. I like them, but I had seen enough of them during my time as a schoolteacher and could never visualise myself pushing a pram.

Despite being a social person, I have always enjoyed independence. Many years ago I spent some good times with men, especially during my travels in Ireland, and I met some special people, a number of whom became great friends. Yet, I never had a proper boyfriend and I never fell in love with anybody. I used to think that having a man living in the house could easily get on my nerves and annoy me. A man might not agree with what I was doing with the horses. He might be a nuisance and take up too much of my time, as well as giving me extra work. No man had ever appealed to me as a likely husband nor had ever asked me to marry him. Perhaps I frightened men off, as I was always ambitious and always making plans for my future. I was not looking to change my lifestyle and I never wanted to leave Lockinge, the village where I had spent so many magical days as a child. It has always been my home and I am deeply attached to the place. It is a huge part of me.

My parents were married for many years and were devoted to each other, but they were often apart due to different commitments. My father, Guy, spent a large part of his early life in the army, was awarded a Military Cross for bravery in the Second World War and finished his career as a major in the Coldstream Guards. He began farming at West Lockinge in 1947. He liked horses

and could ride – albeit in a style of his own – but he was more interested in agriculture, cricket and shooting, as well as fulfilling his full social diary. It was as if he were making up time for those lost military years.

Dad rode a number of point-to-point winners (Mum trained the horses) and he enjoyed hunting. For a long time, he was secretary to the Old Berkshire Hunt. He was a strict father, but always fair. He was also extremely good-looking, had an excellent figure and a brilliant, dry sense of humour, yet he had a notable temper, and because I was the eldest daughter and did not leave home, there were plenty of times when I got on the wrong side of him. He could say some cruel and hurtful words to my mother and me. Maybe that is why I distrusted men and, as I grew up, did not want to share my life with one. Yet I was extremely fond of him and I knew that he loved me. Even though I clearly exasperated him at times, he was always proud of my achievements.

When my sister, Celia (known as 'Ce'), and I were growing up, Dad spent a considerable amount of time in London. For many years he was treasurer of the National Farmers Union (NFU) and its offices were in Knightsbridge. I always remember Mum saying how peaceful it was when he was away and how she could get on with her own life so much better when she was alone. Like me, she adored Lockinge; the little Oxfordshire village nestling at the foot of the Berkshire Downs. It was a haven of peace. Mum's family, the Loyds, had lived there since 1920, when Mum's father inherited the estate from a distant cousin, Lady Wantage. In more

recent years, Lockinge has provided settings for films, notably Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*.

My mother, Hester, was brought up in the village and although she never went to school, was superbly educated. She shared a governess with her friends and they had daily lessons in a little hut at the top of a hill overlooking Lockinge House, where she lived, and the beautiful lake in the park. Mum was passionate about country life and a very intelligent person. She read hundreds of books, and had a natural flair for writing, producing two children's books: *Escape to the Downs* and *The Donkey Derby*. She also kept amazing daily diaries but never let us read them while she was alive (I now have them in safekeeping, and they are real treasures). Mum spent a great deal of time working with charitable organisations, and for many years was chairman of the British Red Cross in Berkshire, as well as being chairman of the Magistrates Bench in Wantage.

I always looked up to Mum. I adored her and we shared many similar interests. She was a unique person, and had an extraordinary way with humans and animals. She could read people a mile off and was a great judge of character. She was also universally popular and did so much to help others less fortunate than herself. Her gift with animals meant that she could catch even the most difficult horse or pony in an open field when nobody else could get near it.

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From an early age, Ce and I were brought up surrounded by ponies, horses and dogs. We also had our rabbits and guinea pigs. Neither of us went to boarding school and we both had idyllic childhoods. Mum's determination and single-mindedness to pursue the aspects of life she most treasured moulded my future lifestyle. I often tried to model myself on her, but it wasn't easy. Like my father, she was strict with her children and she frightened me at times. Despite my admiration for her I found it hard to hug Mum, and now that she has gone I wish that I had been more affectionate and demonstrative.

I grew up in awe of both my parents. They had excellent values and high standards and I am grateful for all that they did for me. The warmth and friendliness of the home we all shared will never be forgotten. It was my stepping stone for the future.

CHAPTER TWO

My Background

When Terry and I began seeing each other on a regular basis, there were plenty of raised eyebrows. Many people thought that our relationship would never last, because of our different backgrounds. 'Oh yes, Terry Biddlecombe,' they would say, 'he's already had two wives and two failed marriages, plus countless girlfriends. He's hardly likely to stay with Hen for long. They are complete opposites.' Yet, in reality, our upbringings were remarkably similar. Our early childhood and schooldays may not have been on a par, but there were plenty of common threads. We both loved the countryside and riding our ponies, and we were really no different to many other children brought up on farms. As we grew up, we both became fascinated by horses and horse racing. When Terry turned into a superstar jockey, I was one of his greatest fans. I would read all the racing pages in the daily newspapers. Steeplechasing was my passion.

As children, my sister, Ce, and I had ponies from an early age. I suppose we were spoilt, but we did enjoy our lives to the full

and rewarded our parents by being hugely enthusiastic in all our activities. We were also competitive and loved variety. All our pets had to have a purpose in life. We even sent our poor rabbits to special shows in London, packing them off from Didcot station to Paddington on a Friday afternoon, for a 'fur and feather' contest at the weekend. Looking back on those days now, I feel extremely sorry for the rabbits. Mine was called Fatty: a white, pink-eyed, Netherland Dwarf. Ce's was Mopsy: a beautifully marked black-and-white Dutch rabbit, who was often a champion. On Sunday evenings, Mum would drive us back to the station and we would collect them from the stationmaster's office. We would peer inside the lids of the travelling boxes to see if they had won any of the highly prized coloured cards or challenge certificates. Goodness knows what would happen to rabbits or guinea pigs today if they were sent off on a train to London. I doubt they would ever be seen again.

When Ce and I were teenagers, Mum bred Shetland ponies and built up a highly regarded stud. By 1970, there were over sixty ponies on the farm, comprising brood mares, their offspring and three stallions – Ce and I learned the facts of life at an early age. We also helped out as much as possible through those character-building years, and we were kept extremely busy. Nevertheless, along with the fun there were plenty of heartaches. Good days taught us to appreciate how lucky we were, but disasters rapidly brought us down to earth – and there were plenty of tears. With animals, accidents can occur at any time. Shetland ponies are not

the easiest of breeders and we lost many unborn foals. We were delighted when Mum changed her allegiance to Connemara ponies in the 1980s. They seemed to have foals more easily.

My love for horses and fascination with training racehorses developed further during my childhood years, when Reg Hobbs came to live in our village. He had been a most successful trainer, and Battleship, a little 15-hand stallion ridden by his son, Bruce, had won the 1938 Grand National. Reg was a fine horseman and had a tremendous understanding with horses. He was quiet and patient, but very firm. I remember being struck by the way he used his voice and sang to his charges. I used to watch him for hours, spellbound, as he lunged, long-reined and backed the many youngsters.

After his retirement from racing, Reg advised my uncle, Christopher 'Larch' Loyd, to convert a disused double tennis court into a loose-jumping school, well sited in the former gardens of Lockinge House. We still use it today for the racehorses, and there is no finer place to teach a horse to jump.

Reg would stand in the middle and quietly encourage the horses to show off their paces and develop their jumping techniques. Sometimes he wanted the horses to be ridden, and it was on these occasions I gained valuable experience. He would leg me up onto the three- and four-year-olds and I would canter around, over the poles, in a complete dream. I loved my lessons. Reg later helped my mother train her point-to-point horses and was always on call to offer his advice. I often rode along the Downs with him,

listening to him reminisce about his training days, but one thing always surprised me. He would happily canter up the middle of a tarmac road – something utterly frowned on by the Pony Club. But Reg maintained that it was safer to canter on a smooth, flat surface than on a softer, rough one. And it must be said that he never seemed to do any damage to his horses.

One spring in the late 1950s, during our rides after school, Ce and I decided to train our own donkey for the Donkey Derby, which was due to take place that summer in the neighbouring village of East Hendred. Sheba was huge, black and very stubborn; she was also extremely unpredictable, but we sweetened her up and, during her training sessions, used a Shetland pony called Florian to give her a lead. We cantered our charges bareback across the fields and up through the cleared pathways in the nearby woods. I usually carried a long stick broken off from an elder bush. I always left the leaves on the end. If I hit Sheba, she would stop completely, but if I shook the leaves, I could coax her forward. It was so much fun, and our excitement knew no bounds when she won the race, along with a huge silver cup. I felt as though I had already made it as a trainer.

In the early 1960s, my mother was given a good old chaser named Rowland Ward. He had been retired from racing proper and needed a good home. Luckily for me, she didn't particularly enjoy riding him because he frequently whipped round and, from time to time, dropped her on the floor, so she allowed me to exercise him in the winter months. I adored the horse, and even

got him fit enough to win the Old Berkshire Hunt Members' Race at Lockinge in 1964. This was my first training success (apart from the Donkey Derby) and I still proudly show off the engraved winner's tankard. That victory gave me another taste of things to come.

After successfully passing my school exams, I bought my first event horse, Borderline, in 1964. He was a big bay thoroughbred, and he cost me £500. He drained my Post Office savings, but I was immensely proud of him. He was only five years old, but we learned together and did quite well, winning several events. He was a very fast horse, and one spring I entered him for a couple of point-to-points. He was placed every time he ran, and later went into training with renowned National Hunt trainer Tim Forster.

In 1965, my parents sent me off to London and loosed me into the world of debutantes. They wanted me to broaden my horizons and wean myself away from Lockinge. That kind of party season does not happen any more, but in the sixties and seventies it was thought to be the best way to bring up 'young ladies'. The hope was that, through numerous cocktail parties and dances, they would meet Prince Charming, get engaged, be married and live happily ever after – all pretty dubious to my way of thinking. Hundreds of girls enjoyed the parties, but they seemed to have little ambition; getting married and having children were their priorities. As I look down the list of those of us who attended Queen Charlotte's Ball in

May, 1965, I see a lot of familiar household names, including that of my good friend Camilla Shand, now the Duchess of Cornwall. We were all there, in long dresses and long white gloves. What a ridiculous performance and hugely expensive. I'm surprised that my father tolerated it, because he was always extremely careful with his money.

Basically, I hated the whole thing. I was quite backward socially and shy at crowded parties, so I continued to pine for the country and for my horses. I had always been blissfully happy at Pony Club camps and rallies. I worked hard to pass my Pony Club 'A' Test and then helped Ce to get hers, with honours, a few years later. My school days had been at Didcot Girls' Grammar School – a wonderful school where we were made to work hard. I wanted to have a career from an early age. I never liked the idea of a boarding school and leaving my animals for any length of time. I did go to a weekly boarding school when I was nine years old, but I was unbelievably homesick.

Parties and dances in London, as well as balls held in beautiful stately homes throughout the country never appealed to me, spectacular though a number of them were. Up until I was twenty-one, I never had any success with, or interest in, the opposite sex. I spent a lot of my time at dances sitting with my girlfriends, waiting for the breakfast to be served around 2 a.m. – and delicious it was too. The men known as 'debs' delights' never appealed to me. I was the original wallflower, but I suppose it did me some good, in that I had to discipline myself to do something I did not enjoy. I

regarded my months in London, mostly spent in a dingy basement flat in Montagu Square, as a duty to Mum. I had been excused boarding school and now I had to go along with her wishes, even though I remember telling her she was wasting her money. I would have been far happier if my parents had bought me a new horse instead of lavishing their savings on yet another ballgown.

Fortunately, my spell in London did not last very long, and after the months of torture I enrolled in a four-year course at Westminster College in Oxford. This was a teacher training college, and it was here I obtained my Bachelor of Education degree. I was happy again – especially as I was able to commute from home. The London scene had not been for me. I do not like many towns or cities, except maybe those in Italy, such as Rome, Florence and Venice, which do not give me the same claustrophobic feeling. I also enjoyed Paris, where I was sent for six months after leaving school in order to improve my French.

But London? That was entirely different. I even have bad childhood memories of the place.

Before Ce and I were ten years old, we were regularly taken to a special dentist, Mr Endicott in Cavendish Square, close to Harley Street. We travelled up on the train from Didcot to Paddington and were then taken in a taxi to be tortured by this man who, I remember, had hairs on the back of his hand that tickled the roofs of our mouths. We were fitted with painful plates and wires to help realign our teeth and make them grow straight.

Other childhood days in London remain indelibly printed on

my mind for other reasons. We used to get dragged to the Adelphi Theatre every two years to perform in a special children's dancing matinée in aid of the NSPCC. From the ages of six and seven, Ce and I went weekly on Friday afternoons to Donnington Castle House, near Newbury, to have dancing lessons from Miss Violet Ballantyne. She was a very famous dancing teacher at that time: a perky, hearty individual who dressed herself in short, brightly coloured ballet-type dresses with frilly square collars and matching hairbands. Donnington was the home of the Parker Bowles family – Dad was Derek Parker Bowles's second cousin – and here we were drilled and regimented in all sorts of dances, while another powerful lady loudly played the grand piano in the corner of the ballroom. I was a poor dancer. I have never been very musical and I was usually feeling sick, as I was also a bad car-traveller. I remember that I always missed lunch on Friday and was given a 'quell' or some similar pill to counteract the effects of the bumpy car ride to Newbury.

On one occasion in the London matinée, I played the huntsman and my sister one of the hounds. My best friend, Mary Ann Parker Bowles (now Hanbury), was one of the followers. The costumes were excellent and we were plastered in red lipstick. The performances made good money for charity and I suppose it was fun when we got there, but I used to worry about the journey to London – more travelling in the car. There were no motorways in those days.

It pleased my parents when I took up teaching as a profession. At least it was something I could fall back on if all else failed. Ce trained as a nurse at Westminster Hospital in London and they were very proud of her. She had become less country-orientated than I and, despite the rigours of the medical world, she enjoyed London and came to know its streets like the back of her hand.

When I began teaching, I was given a job at St Mary's School in Wantage, where I stayed for nearly five years. Biology and history were my two main subjects. In later years, Terry often introduced me as 'the ex-human biology teacher, and barren mare who specialised in sex-education' – although nothing was further from the truth. Teaching locally suited me because I could always escape home at lunchtime to ride my horses; the school was barely two miles away.

I was blissfully happy and could continue training my event horses. I even rode at the Three Day Event at Badminton in 1973, finishing twelfth. In those days there was a phase called 'roads and tracks', which came before jumping the cross-country obstacles. On this part of the competition, the competitors rode a number of miles through woods and along the edges of fields, and there was a set time in which to complete the exercise. I remember walking round in the starting box with pupils from St Mary's cheering me on.

When I decided to end my career as a teacher and gave in my notice, I was surprised to be offered the post of headmistress. It

would have been a huge challenge and I did attend some interviews, but in the end I turned down the offer as it would have been too restricting and there would have been no time for my horses.

My interest in three-day events continued well into the eighties. In 1980 I was asked to join the senior selection committee under the chairmanship of Chris Collins, former Champion Amateur National Hunt rider who had himself become involved in the eventing world and had successfully ridden around Badminton on several occasions. It was an honour to be asked to go onto his committee, and when Chris retired in 1984, I took over as chairman. During my time in office, we selected the horses and riders for the Seoul Olympics in 1988 and I travelled over to support them in person and make the final decisions. It was an unforgettable experience. The team won the silver medal. I spent ten days in a rented house with team vet Peter Scott Dunn and his wife, plus several other officials. In the evenings I was sent out to buy supper from the local fast-food stores. I remember being surprised by the looks I got as I innocently walked down the streets, but I later learned that our lodgings were right in the middle of Seoul's red-light district. I enjoyed many travels as chief selector, and my visits to Australia, Germany and Poland were especially interesting.

My work with the event riders fitted in well with the activities in my livery yard. Most of my horses were at grass during the summer

months, and the point-to-point horses enjoyed their well-earned rests. I trained over 100 point-to-point winners in the eighties. They were memorable days and enormous fun. My runners were sponsored by Piper-Heidsieck Champagne, and apart from having the logo on the horsebox, we were regularly supplied with cases of champagne. It was not surprising that I made so many new friends when I took bottles of it to the point-to-points, where we had huge picnics for our supporters. Sadly, the sponsorship ended when I saddled my last point-to-point runner in 1989 – the same year that I started training racehorses with a licence – but I had definitely got a taste for champagne.

I was still drinking it when Terry entered my life in 1993.