Fiona Walker

Country Secrets



An Aria Book

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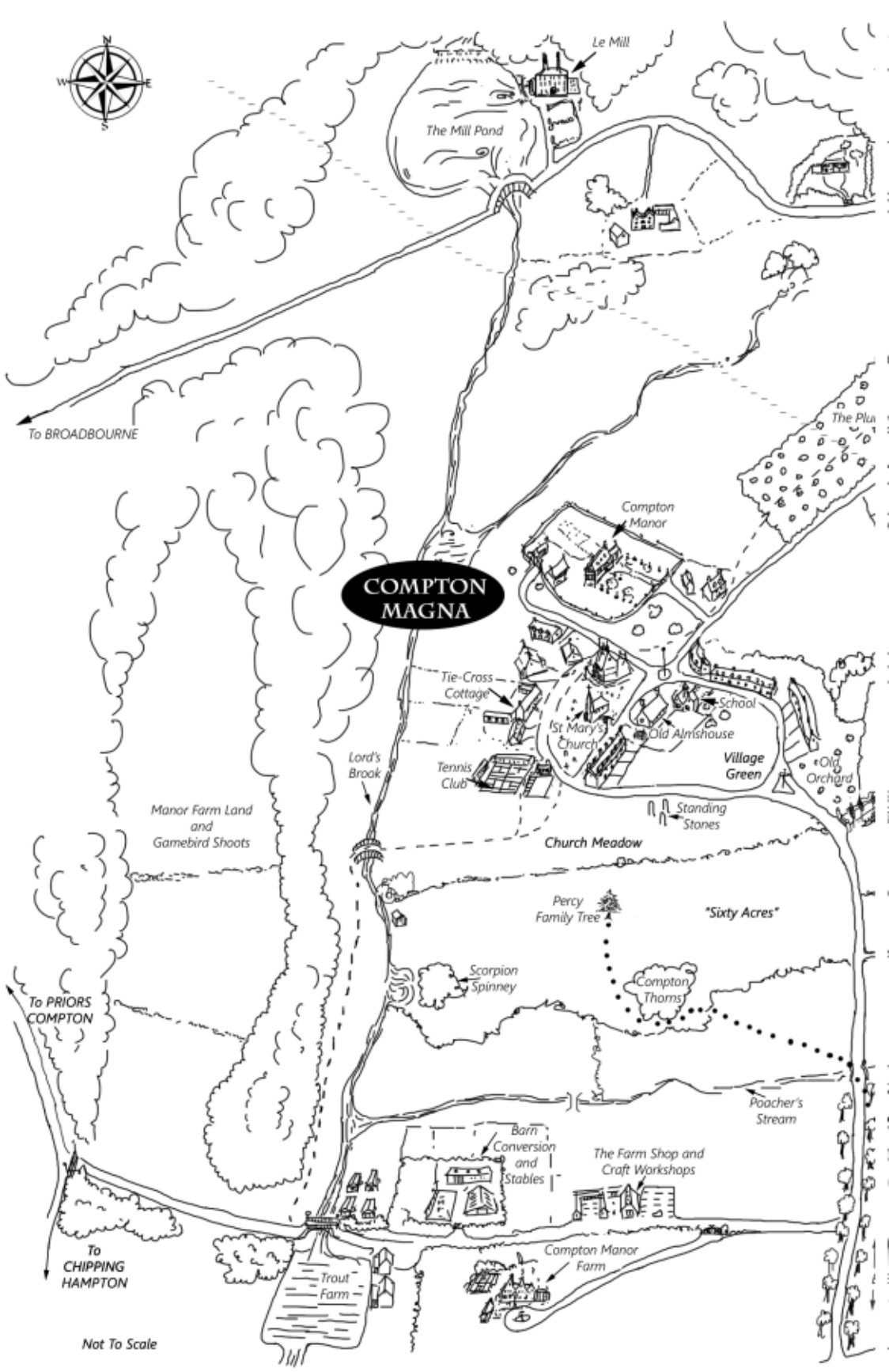


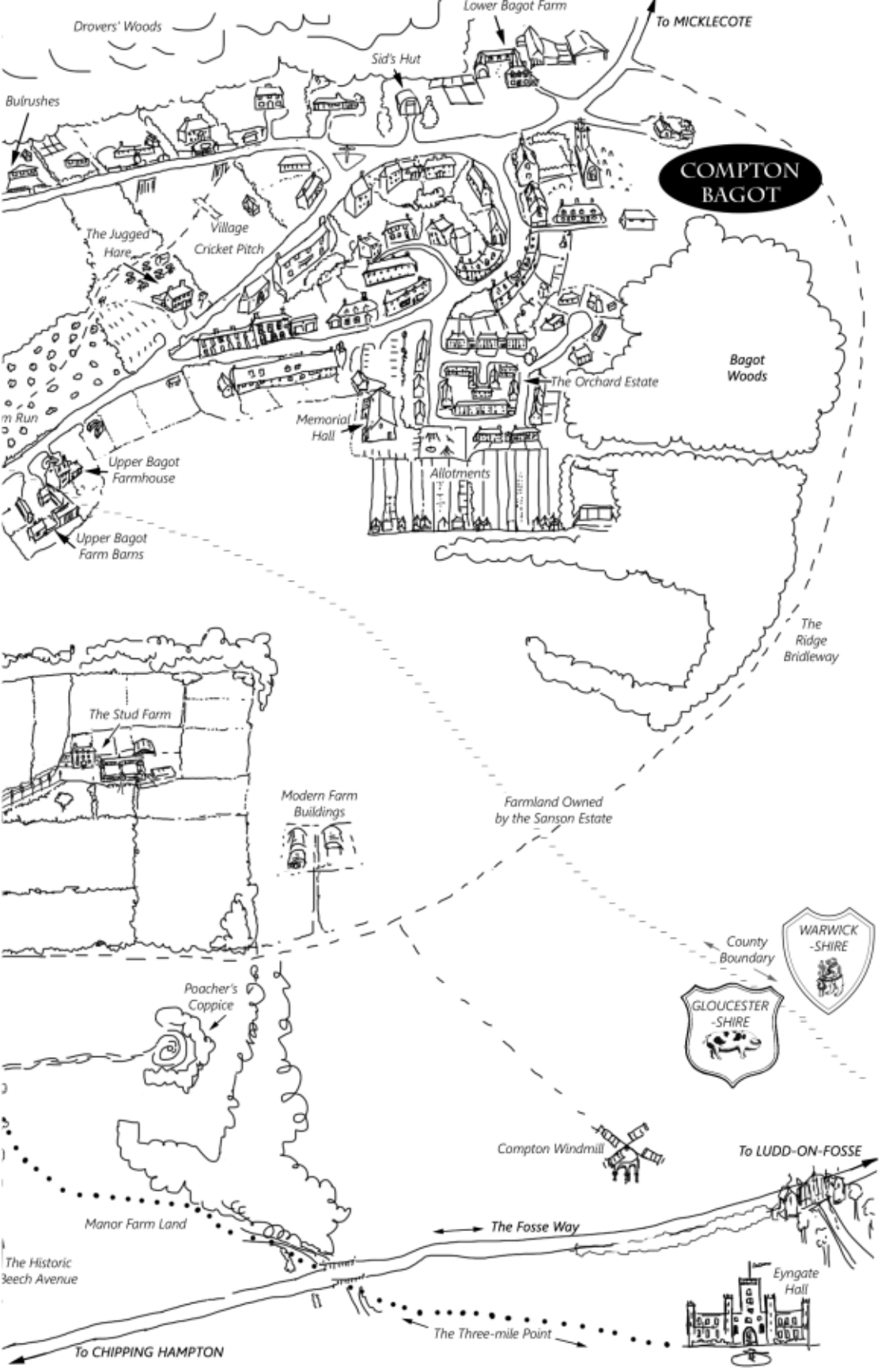
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For my dear Avalen inspirations,
Ruth and Christian, with love and thanks.
Here's to friendship, horse chestnuts,
apple orchards and limitless
happy endings.


N
W
E
S
Le Mill
The Mill Pond
To BROADBOURNE
The Plu
Compton Manor
COMPTON MAGNA
Tie-Cross Cottage
School
St Mary's Church
Old Almshouse
Village Green
Old Orchard
Lord's Brook
Tennis Club
Standing Stones
Manor Farm Land and Gamebird Shoots
Church Meadow
Percy Family Tree
"Sixty Acres"
Scorpion Spinney
Compton Thorns
To PRIORS COMPTON
Poacher's Stream
Barn Conversion and Stables
The Farm Shop and Craft Workshops
To CHIPPING HAMPTON
Compton Manor Farm
Trout Farm
Not To Scale


Drovers' Woods
Lower Bagot Farm
To MICKLECOTE
Sid's Hut
Bulrushes
COMPTON BAGOT
The Jugged Hare
Village Cricket Pitch
Bagot Woods
The Orchard Estate
Memorial Hall
Allotments
Upper Bagot Farmhouse
Upper Bagot Farm Barns
The Ridge Bridleway
The Stud Farm
Modern Farm Buildings
Farmland Owned by the Sanson Estate
County Boundary
WARWICK -SHIRE
GLOUCESTER -SHIRE
Poacher's Coppice
Compton Windmill
To LUDD-ON-FOSSE
Manor Farm Land
The Fosse Way
The Historic Beech Avenue
Eyngate Hall
The Three-mile Point
To CHIPPING HAMPTON

Veronica 'Ronnie Percy' Ledwell: chatelaine of Compton Magna Stud, a fast-riding blonde whose ill-fated marriage to handsome **Johnny Ledwell** ended with a swift exit in a lover's sports car.

Alice Petty: her estranged daughter, a bossy Pony Club stalwart.

Tim Ledwell: **Ronnie's** son, a debonair in South Africa.

Patricia 'Pax' Forsyth: their younger sister, the family peacemaker who has just left her battlefield of a marriage and returned to the stud where she grew up.

Mack Forsyth: her estranged husband, a tough property developer determined to come out tops.

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Kes: their five-year-old son.

Muir and Mairi: **Mack's** parents, granite-faced Scottish puritans.

Lizzie: **Pax's** friend from junior eventing days.

Lester: the stud's tight-lipped stallion man, dedicated to his horses, his routine, and a quiet life.

Luca O'Brien: a globe-trotting rider and Irish charmer with a heart-breaking reputation, known throughout the equestrian world as the Horsemaker.

Blair Robertson: craggy Australian three-day-event rider known as 'Mr Sit Tight'.

Verity Verney: his wife, a reclusive Wiltshire landowner.

Carly Turner: animal-loving young mum, adjusting to village life and job juggling.

Ash Turner: her ex-soldier husband whose family rule the Orchard Estate.

Ellis, Sienna and baby Jackson: their three children.

Janine Turner: **Ash's** older sister, queen of cleaning and nail art empires.

'Social' Norm: the emphysemic Turner family patriarch, a settled Romany.

Nat Turner: Norm's oldest son, absent father to **Ash** and **Janine**, a legendary fighter and traveller still living on the road.

Nana Turner: Nat's long-abandoned, kind-hearted wife, devoted to children, Beswick horses and daytime TV.

Flynn the farrier: the Bon Jovi of the anvil.

Auriol Bullock: battle-axe headmistress of Compton Magna Primary School.

Helen Beadle: divorce lawyer and sharp-minded chairman of the school's PTA.

Bridget Mazur: Belfast-born member of the village's Saddle Bags, a hipster young mum married to volatile Polish builder, **Aleš**.

Petra Gunn: historical novelist and neglected wife, founder of the Saddle Bags whose gossipy hacks keep her sane while philandering husband **Charlie** drives her mad.

Gill Walcote: straight-talking member of the Saddle Bags who runs a local veterinary practice with Kiwi husband **Paul**.

Mo Dawkins: the jolliest of the Saddle Bags, a tirelessly hard-working farmer's daughter, married to cheery agricultural contractor **Barry**.

Grace: their pony-mad daughter.

Sid and Joan Stokes: Mo's aging smallholder parents, who live with adult daughter **Jan** and a lot of horse brasses.

Bay Austen: dashing agricultural entrepreneur, hunt thruster and serial flirt.

Monique Austen: his steely Dutch ex-wife.

Tilly and Bram: their high octane, free-range children.

Kenny Kay: stand-up comedian turned 'accidental' Hollywood star, a leathery roue with fond memories of the Comptons.

Santiago Kay: his son, a smooth golf pro.

Sir Peter Sanson: tax exile leisure tycoon who owns great tracts of the Bardswolds including Eyngate Hall.

ANIMALS

Beck: an explosive warmblood stallion, once Germany's hotly-tipped new star, as stunning as he is screwed up.

Cruisoe: the stud's foundation stallion whose winning progeny inherit his lion heart.

Spirit: a wall-eyed cold with a big man attitude and a bright future.

Lottie: a Compton-bred mare eager to take on the world and win.

The stud's broodmares: an opinionated bunch of matriarchs.

Magpie: Mo's trusty coloured cob who only has one gear.

Craic: **Bridge's** nervouscited Connemara pony.

The Redhead: **Petra's** rabble-rousing mare.

Coll: a brutish greedy Shetland and **Beck's** companion.

Lester's cob: as mannerly and well-turned-out as its rider.

Olive and Enid: **Ronnie's** sprightly little Lancashire Heelers, a squabbling mother and daughter.

Stubbs: **Lester's** unswervingly loyal fox terrier.

Knott: **Pax's** cautious deerhound puppy.

Laurence: a rescued fox cub.

PART ONE

1

Ronnie loved flying into dusk, that sense of stealing across the sky to a faraway night-time galaxy, especially when horse-trading lay ahead. Descending through the clouds over Bremen, she admired the lights glittering below, imagining they were stars, jewelled curtains welcoming her on a stellar adventure.

And goodness, it was lovely to get away from home.

Fat snowflakes clustered against the plane's tiny window as they landed, obscuring her view of the airport's familiar glowing expanse. She'd travelled through here routinely once, dealing sports horses around Europe, occasionally hopping home to the UK, or to the US to see a client, her Mulberry weekender thrown open on the four-poster of a schloss one night, a horsebox bunk the next. That lifestyle had ended abruptly several years ago when she'd split from then-lover Henk, a globe-trotting Dutch bloodstock agent, resuming a more genteel English country life amid her old eventing crowd.

Her years of valet airport parking and flying business class might be behind her, but Ronnie relished being back in Germany during peak stallion show season, the buzz in her veins again. She didn't care that she was disembarking the cheapest flight she could find, or that her budget hire car felt doll-sized amongst the night-haulage traffic roaring south on Autobahn One as she drove through Lower Saxony. Her heart

still soared when she reached the small city of Vechta, unofficial capital of warmblood breeding. This was where dynasties were formed.

February was the month the big German studs showed off their elite, some of the most beautiful sires in Europe on show. Tonight's was the hottest ticket of all, the Gestüt Fuchs Stallion Collection. Amongst the most valuable in Europe, Gestüt horses were the envy of the world.

But the most breathtaking Gestüt-bred horse was the one Ronnie had left behind at home in the Cotswolds: Bechstein, AKA Beck. Almost lost to the breeding world through a succession of bad deals, the former Olympic showjumper was standing at her family stud this season. His breeder, Paul Fuchs, wanted him back, and Ronnie was here to broker the deal. This evening she was a VIP guest at Fuchs' public show, followed by a personal backstage tour to meet its stars, then dinner afterwards with the great man himself.

If she played it right, the next few hours could turn around her family's fortunes completely.

It was snowing thickly by the time she arrived at her hotel a stone's throw from the Oldenburg Breed Centre, host to so many elite studs' showcases and sales that even the accommodation was horse-themed: the life-size sculptures of a mare and foal at its entrance bore icicle whiskers and snow rugs. The rooms here had been booked out weeks in advance, the stallion parades always drawing a big, knowledgeable crowd. Later tonight, the bar would thrum with chatter until the early hours. Right now, it was the *Marie Celeste* because everybody had already decamped across the road for the pre-parade buzz, cramming the marquee alongside the centre's big arena to talk horse over beer and Bratwurst. The Gestüt Fuchs' parade would begin at seven thirty.

It was already close to seven. Ronnie was cutting it ridiculously fine, but the money she'd saved getting a later flight paid for a lot of horse feed and arriving somewhere at

full tilt suited her. When she'd ridden professionally, she'd been notorious for entering the start box at the last possible moment to keep her nerves at bay.

She hurried straight to her room, which was small, clean and functional with framed photos of German's greatest sports horses on its walls. One of Beck's famous grandsires was amongst them, which she took to be a good sign.

She cleaned her teeth while messaging home to let them know she'd arrived safely. Then, adding layers of cashmere and tweed above the workmanlike merino and jersey, she fired off a customary message to her lover, Blair, not expecting a reply.

He rang straight back, his deep Australian voice raised above background hubbub. 'What the fuck are you doing coming over here without me, Ron?' She could hear voices and music at his end, not the customary quiet of his Wiltshire farm kitchen. 'I just spotted your name on a chair.'

She was thrilled. Blair had a brilliant eye. 'What are *you* doing here?'

'Last minute thing. Thought you might be here. You're late. It's about to kick off.'

'I'll be there before it does.' She dug around in her case for her make-up bag. 'Are you sitting near me?'

'Nah, I've the best seat in the house, mate.' He laughed, blunt as a cudgel.

'Paul promised that to me!' Her mirrored reflection widened its blue eyes indignantly.

Friends for three decades, lovers on and off throughout and competitors in the same sport, theirs was a combative as well as comforting love affair. They'd met in the eighties when Blair was a rookie rider freshly landed from New South Wales, Ronnie the pin-up girl of British three-day-eventing, the engagement ring on her finger quashing the fierce attraction between them. Over the years, their fortunes had reversed, but never their mutual respect. The fact that they'd never been single at the same time might be a mutual cause for regret, but

both acknowledged that it could also be why the chemistry still worked. Ronnie's marriage and riding career had peaked young, her subsequent adventures earning her a rolling stone reputation. Still at the top of his game in his fifties, veteran of multiple championships and hard knocks, Blair was a consistent legend in the sport, his nickname, Mr Sit Tight, well-earned both in the saddle and in wedlock. Although his marriage to a wealthy, older patron was sometimes viewed as one of convenience, his talent and drive were unrivalled.

His deep laugh rumbled. 'What hotel did his people get you a room in?'

'The horse one.' She found her mascara and spiked up her lashes.

'With the tourists?' He was offended on her behalf.

'It's perfect. I can catnap anywhere and it's going to be a late night.' Dabbing lipstick onto her cheeks before painting her mouth, Ronnie stifled a yawn. She'd been mucking out stables in Warwickshire at six thirty that morning. Reflected over her shoulder, the expanse of crisply made bed promised rare respite later.

'Come to mine afterwards.' Pulling rank, he named the town's smartest boutique hotel. 'I'll see you right, Ron.'

'I'm having dinner with Paul.' It did no harm to keep Blair on his toes, especially when he was being imperious. 'We need to agree the deal for Beck returning here in the summer.'

'He'll try and screw you.'

'And I'll tell him to Fuchs right off.' She laughed, smacking her painted lips together and rubbing the pink into her cheeks. 'Besides, I'm too old for him.'

'I'm talking about the money, Ron.' Blair had moved away from the background noise, voice hushed and urgent. 'We both know he's mean as cat's piss.'

Blair didn't approve of her plan to sell Beck back to Germany, which she put down to sentiment, a secret vice he'd unexpectedly developed in middle age. It was his wife who had spotted Beck

in a British auction ring, unpapered and catalogued under a stable name, but still entire. Back home in Wiltshire the stallion proved too hot to handle and when his microchip revealed he was warmblood royalty, Blair had traded him with Ronnie, not imagining she'd sell him straight on after standing him just one season. They argued about it often.

'This is how our business works, Blair.' She doused herself in perfume. 'You and I know it.'

'Yeah, well, Paul Fuchs doesn't deserve Beck to land back in his lap any more than he did Conch.' Blair's other vested sentiment was seventeen hands of turbo-boosted Teutonic talent named Big Conch that he'd taken from unbroken colt to medal winner more than a decade earlier, before ignominiously losing the ride. Recently retired, Conch had also relocated to stand at Gestüt Fuchs.

'Is he parading?' Ronnie asked vaguely, stepping into her warmest boots.

'I don't want to see you selling out to Fuchs like everyone else.' His gravelly voice was at its most boulder-blasting, touching even her hardened horse-dealing heart. 'I care about you, Ron, and that batshit crazy horse.'

'If you're here to try to stop me dealing, it won't work.'

'You know me better than that, Ron. But you wouldn't listen to me, so I figured actions speak louder than words.'

'I'm glad you're here.' She shrugged on her coat and grabbed her hairbrush. 'I'll kiss you in my head when I see you.'

'Me too. Tongues, teeth and all.' It was a well-worn sign-off, decades of passion and sentiment seamed into their public rock face, like gold through quartz. 'Watch out for yourself, Ron.'

Sweeping the brush through her short blonde hair, she smiled at her reflection, its blue eyes bright with anticipation, still seeing the same face she had from early womanhood and the thrill of cutting a deal. She was a big girl now. 'I'll be fine.'

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Ronnie made it to her front row seat just in time, the arena lights already dimmed, Mozart blasting over the speakers and giant gold GF logos rotating on the big screens as Paul Fuchs strode out into the spotlights to welcome the capacity crowd, his audience jolly and pink-cheeked from the hospitality marquee. She couldn't see Blair anywhere, but she defied him to be any more ringside than this. All the seating tiers around the sand arena were jammed with eager faces. In front of them, on the big, golden rectangle of silica sand overhung with international flags and lit like a concert stage, Paul's figure glowed in criss-crossed spotlights, rounder and greyer than Ronnie remembered, but no less formidable and unsmiling. Dressed in a mandarin-collared shiny grey suit, flanked by two glamorous assistants in tight tailoring and black polo necks, he had a delightfully Bond-baddie air.

Ronnie's German was passable and she'd heard the sales spiel many times, so her eyes still hunted for Blair. As she searched, she spotted familiar faces: some leading British breeders, lots of the glitzy Euro-dressage crowd, her ex-partner Henk amongst a Dutch clutch. A few seats away from her sat Canadian legendary showjumping veteran, the Flying Maple Leaf, whose jutting jaw and fearsome reputation preceded him. There was no sign of Blair. Perhaps he'd been winding her up and was in his local pub in Wiltshire. It had been known.

The show began with young Fuchs' stallions, many unbroken and run up in hand or loose-schooled around a temporary oval track. Ronnie needed her wits about her if she was to secure one in part exchange for Becks at the end of this season, but of the three horses marked up in her catalogue as Paul's suggestions, none held a candle to Becks.

As Paul's small army of helpers in matching Gestüt Fuchs sweatshirts dismantled the white railings around the track, her attention wandered again, noticing the cameras panning along her row. The event was being streamed live on a specialist equestrian channel. Watching at home in the Cotswolds on his

iPad was her family's experienced stallion man, Lester, a recent convert to silver surfing while recovering from a broken hip. Remembering to check her phone, Ronnie found he'd messaged *none of those*. She sent a quick thumbs up emoji.

An hour of up-and-coming ridden stallions followed, dressage and jumping alternating every four or five horses to keep the audience alert and the sweatshirt-wearing work team busy.

Marking her catalogue, Ronnie assessed each of these top prospects, glossy as riverbed pebbles under the lights, springing along with balletic extravagance or catapulting stag-like over coloured poles, and she found it easy to imagine each one improving her stud's Thoroughbred and Irish bloodlines. An injection of big-moving spring was precisely why she'd bought Beck. But the trouble was, none of them *were* Beck.

Emboldened by the emoji, Lester messaged Ronnie throughout with his thoughts, but his dislike of warmbloods was too entrenched to entirely trust his judgement and his mastery of predictive text still too primitive. *Don't lick this one* he wrote of a power-trotting rising dressage star, adding *wife behind*, which made her turn round and check before realizing he meant 'wide behind', the horse's hindlegs moving too far apart.

Where was Blair? He had the real eye.

Ignoring her phone vibrating, Ronnie settled back to enjoy the spectacle as the big-hitting sires started to parade: international team horses, Nations Cup superstars, multi-million-euro horseflesh. Now *these* were Beck's class. Blair was probably right; she might be mad to let him out of Britain. He was just what their sport needed on home soil – but not based with her at Compton Magna Stud.

Ronnie still firmly believed that Gestüt Fuchs huge, state-of-the-art Saxony base, which had already bred a jaw-dropping, headline-making crop from Beck as a young stallion, was the place the horse had been happiest. Far better equipped for his mindset than her historic, old-school farm, it's

temperature-controlled barns and AI facilities were precisely what suited highly-strung, anti-social Beck best.

Besides which, she was too cash strapped to hang onto him. When Blair had let her swap two talented young eventers for a six-figure horse and a lorry to transport him in, he'd known her dilemma.

The last half dozen horses on show from the Fuchs' elite were its most famous sporting descendants, legends in their own fields who had carried the stud's blood to highest victory, each one given an effusive introduction over the PA from Paul littered with *wunderbars* and *fantastischs*, and rapturous rounds of applause from the audience. The final horse of the evening, Paul told them with breathy excitement, was a special surprise not listed in the catalogue. An ambassador for the versatility of the stud's bloodline, he was standing at the stud to selected mares only, his appearance tonight a last-minute *glücklicher Zufall*. Born to a Fuchs-bred dam over twenty years earlier, he was the highest point-scoring event stallion in history, recently retired from competition and reunited here for the first time in six years with the man who had taken him from an unbroken youngster to two consecutive Olympics and two WEGs, stepping onto the podium every time…

Ronnie sat up. Now she knew why Blair said he had the best seat in the house.

The horse was quite simply a megastar, Paul went on, that had subsequently gone on to help Italy to individual Olympic and European glory, as well as its first Badminton and Kentucky victories.

The horse of Blair Robertson's lifetime was on show, Ronnie realized. The Australian had been devastated when the ride was sold out from under him just before their record-breaking third Olympics together, its owners making enough money to retire on. But that was all too often the nature of the sport, as was being reunited for a grand occasion, all the blood, sweat and tears forgotten. And who could blame him wanting to sit

on his greatest campaigner one last time in front of a roaring crowd like this?

They were already clapping in time as a jazzed-up instrumental version of INXS's 'New Sensation' started blasting over the speakers.

And there was Blair, trotting up the centre line in his finest bib and tucker, lights sparkling off his helmet, his big craggy smile aimed straight at her, reunited at last in the greatest eventing partnership lost to profiteering.

Actions speak louder than words, he'd said. This was some gesture.

She smiled back, wishing the bastard didn't always have to be so sportsmanlike in his one-upmanship. God, but she loved him. If they ever said it out loud, they immediately retracted it, but Ronnie had no doubt he felt it just as deeply as she did.

They powered around the arena, the INXS medley melding into 'Need You Tonight', then 'Never Tear Us Apart', an ironic touch. Big Conch, now in his twenties, looked glorious, halting to take his standing ovation.

On her feet, Ronnie clapped hardest of all and, smiling as Blair raised his eyebrows at her, shook her head.

Nice try, but she hadn't come here to watch Blair trot round proving a point.

To her frustration, Ronnie found the VIP Tour around the GF stalls after the parade was a whistlestop group one, conducted by a Fuchs' lacky who repeated everything in three different languages with the aid of a tablet to accommodate the trio of nationalities following her: German, Spanish and English for Ronnie's benefit, along with that of the Flying Maple Leaf, six feet four of question-barking self-importance, equally irritated not to be getting a personal tour with Paul Fuchs himself. After a polite introduction in which she was careful to use her married name, Ronnie kept her distance

from the Canadian legend, uncertain if he knew how close their connections were.

But then one of those connections stepped in beside them.

'Mind if I tag along? Good to see you, mate.' Blair lent forward to shake the Canadian's hand and that of his wife, then the rest of the group including Ronnie. 'Good evening, Mrs Ledwell.'

The group perked up now the star turn was with them.

Only Maple Leaf glowered at him. Their mutual animosity stretched back before even Ronnie's time, dating to the days Blair had competed internationally across two disciplines, his showjumping career bringing him into regular contact – and conflict – with the Flying Maple Leaf. As with many old rivalries, it came with a grudging admiration.

'Not a bad horse, that Big Conch,' Maple Leaf acknowledged gruffly.

'Yeah, I think so,' Blair replied even more gruffly, eyeing Ronnie.

She kept her focus on the tour. Closer inspection of the three stallions Paul had earmarked as potential trade-ins for Beck doubled down on her conviction that they weren't right for her stud, even with a generous balancing figure. Too young, unproven and heavy set.

'I need something more established,' she told Blair, 'and with more blood.'

Maple Leaf cut in. 'I might be able to help you there.'

'Oh, yes?' She looked up at the lantern jaw.

'Eventing's not my scene, lady, but we have a—'

His wife touched his arm. 'Honey, we're late to dine with Paul.'

'Then we can talk about it over dinner,' Ronnie realized, checking her watch. 'Although you're not late. We've half an hour yet.'

Maple Leaf was regarding her with amusement. 'You a rookie?'

'I need to borrow Mrs Ledwell for a moment,' Blair took her arm. 'Excuse me.'

'What d'you do that for?' she demanded when they were out of earshot.

'You're already trying to do a deal with one devil tonight, Ron, you don't want to do a second one. And everyone dines with Paul in ten-minute shifts, I thought you knew that?'

'Demystify me.' As a one-time part of the inner circle invited to share the Fuchs' legendary hospitality at home, she and Henk had never joined Paul after events like this, always too busy wooing clients of their own in luxury in central Vechta.

Blair took her to the bar, which was thick with cigarette smoke and horse-talk, old acquaintances hailing him from all sides. He bought them both a schnapps. At the opposite end of the marquee, Paul was holding court at his own high table, guests granted a brief audience over a beer and bratwurst.

'It's like speed dating or arm-wrestling,' Blair explained. 'Fuchs operates on a rigid timetable.' The German breeder liked to do business without pausing for breath, he told her, and take quick victories. 'You'll get told the deal, then you'll either shake hands or you'll walk away like Maple Leaf's about to.' They watched Paul and the Canadian black-slapping each other. 'He comes every year to lock horns. It's ritualistic. They're as bad as each other.'

'With a genius eye for horses.'

'Yeah.' Blair was still watching them. 'Maple Leaf flies over for the sales and stallion shows because his missus has family down in Munster, so it's a tax-deductible way for her to see her mother.'

'She looks nice.' She saw the pretty brunette with sad spaniel eyes glance across at them and smile. 'Is she the one he has a daughter with, the one he remarried?' She smiled back.

'How d'you know about that?'

'Someone told me they're the Burton and Taylor of Ontario,' she said vaguely, sensing his disquiet.

'Yeah, she's his first *and* fifth wife. He sows his wild oats on crop rotation.'

Ronnie laughed, then realized he wasn't joining in.

'He's a bully, Ron. He treats his family like staff. Ask your friend Luca O'Brien.'

Ronnie grimaced at the mention of her second – regrettably close – link with Maple Leaf. Luca O'Brien, the genius pro rider currently back at home bringing hot-headed Beck into work with infinite patience, was a recent ex-employee of the Canadian's. His departure had been very messy indeed. It was Luca who'd made the Burton–Taylor comparison, and Ronnie suspected he'd flirted with the daughter or wife – or both, knowing Luca. Thankfully, Maple Leaf didn't seem to have made the connection.

He was already back on his feet, making a big show of laughing and shaking his head at Paul, also on his feet, although a fraction of the big man's height. After a lot of extravagant forehead-slapping and upturned palms on both sides, the Canadian marched to the bar, pausing beside Ronnie to hand her a business card. 'Message me if you want info about that stallion. And remind that little Irish sack of shit you have working for you that I'll kill the bastard if he goes near my daughter again.'

She smiled defensively, tempted to point out that gorgeous, gentle Luca appeared far too captivated by her own daughter to spare his any thought, but he'd already moved away. A moment later, the card was plucked out of her hand. 'Oy!'

Blair ripped it into small pieces. 'You can't afford his horse. Go get what you want from Paul or walk away. Just treat Fuchs like he just did and you'll be fine.' He nodded towards the tall figure embracing friends at the bar.

'Take a maple leaf out of his books?' She couldn't resist it.

But Blair was still watching the Canadian, one arm round his wife, the other back-slapping and high-fiving.

'Ronnie Percy!' Paul was just as baby-faced, dirty-blond eager

as she remembered despite the jowls and the silver wings above his ears, beckoning her to his table 'So punctual! So beautiful! You are my thirteenth dining companion. I have many, like your Mad Hatter, ya? *Bitte setzen Sie sich*. You like the horses I showed, yes? We can trade?'

Irritably aware that she was on a short timer, Ronnie settled in front of him and got straight down to business, outlining her plan again, and trying not to show how offended she was when he laughed uproariously and said '*nein*' nine times. 'You want me to pay big money for Bechstein *and* give you a proven stallion?'

'We agreed all this in principle.'

'And now we agree for real without principle.' Descended from a long line of cool-headed Saxony horse-dealers, Paul Fuchs was a notoriously smooth operator. 'Your price is too high'

Coming from similar Cotswolds lineage, Ronnie knew that selling Becks back to him risked undervaluing her biggest asset, but she wanted this deal. 'And your price?'

He named an offensively low figure.

'Your little stud is broke,' Paul said smoothly. 'And you have a very bad reputation personally and professionally, Ronnie. Gestüt Fuchs can help you if you help us.' Lowering his voice, he started outlining a plan that, even to Ronnie's untrained ear, involved importing horses illegally to avoid taxes and import costs. She was accustomed to some dirty horse-trading, but this was filthy. Blair's mistrust of Fuchs might be coloured by personal experience, but it was entirely justified.

She remembered too late to hold her hands up, press one to her forehead and laugh. 'Ha!'

'You have forgotten something?' he sneered. To either side, his lackies laughed.

'Now you mention it, yes, my moral compass.'

Ronnie felt the heart-kick of regret for not acknowledging just how much she needed Blair, her friend for more than half her lifetime, lover for much of that, wise counsel throughout.

He was right not to trust Paul Fuchs. She glanced over her shoulder. There was no sign of Blair, just another Fuchs client waiting to be invited to the table, diner fourteen queued and cued.

Ronnie determinedly pushed aside all second thoughts. There was no Plan B.

'You want Bechstein, you accept my original terms,' she told Paul, handing him her show catalogue. 'I've marked the stallions I'll consider in part exchange, with totals alongside. I'll need a 20 per cent cash deposit. You have until tomorrow morning to decide. Thank you for this evening.'

As she marched from the marquee, chin high, Blair fell in step with her. 'How d'it go?'

'I did jazz hands, stood up and sat down a bit and refused to negotiate. You were right about him. Has he got worse? Or have I got better?'

'I love you. I didn't say that.'

'Likewise. By the way, where *were* you?' she demanded.

'Getting this…' He held up a bottle of German sparkling wine. 'I thought you might fancy some mindless Sekt.'

'Your place or mine?'

'Mine's better.'

'Subjective. Mine's closer. Be a horse tourist.' She led the way. Outside the marquee it was sub-zero, a starry sky fighting against the orange gauze of light pollution. The snow had been cleared from all the walkways, but it creaked in the tree branches overhead and carpeted the verges ankle deep as they cut back towards her hotel by the quickest route.

The statue mare and foal were still wearing their white blankets; the bar was throbbing; the room was small, warm and basic – and everything they could want.

Overlooked by Beck's relatives, Ronnie didn't sleep a lot.

'I think I've lost my moral compass again,' she complained in the early hours, sweaty and sated.

'Let me see if I can find it…' Blair disappeared beneath the sheets.

'Ohmygod how do you always find it so *quickly*?' she laughed incredulously, shifting up the pillows.

'Neon signs.' Came the muffled reply.

Sex was almost always easy. It was sleeping together that was always the weirdest thing: the intimacy of their bodies, smooth and soft and hard and hairy and bony bits all slotted warmly together on these rarest of sleepover nights. It felt odd. Somehow right, but odd.

They couldn't do it for long, napping then loving, somehow aware that it was too precious to waste.

At three, she complained that they never went anywhere together as a couple. 'Just once, wouldn't it be great to be us, just us, doing something? Archery, zip-sliding, pottery, the cinema even?'

At four in the morning, returning from a clean-up-and-pee bathroom trip, she found Blair's face glowing in his phone screen light.

'I'm booking us a treat.'

When he showed her, she let out a whoop of delight.

Then she spotted the date. 'Really?'

'I'm not sentimental about it and the wife's certainly not. Would you rather I change it?'

'No, let's do it. I'd love that.'

Neither had the energy to make love again, but they kissed and stroked and loved all the smooth and soft and hard and hairy and bony bits fitting together.

At seven, her mobile rang.

'You can have any of the horses you marked,' Paul Fuchs told her. 'But half the cash.'

'That's not our deal.'

'It's my deal.'

'Then I'm afraid you'll be dealing with rejection.' She hung up on him and kissed Blair awake. 'It's contagious.'

'What?'

'Sentimentality.'