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Back Hander

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Prologue

As Max left the flat, the temptation to slam the door so hard it shattered the wall was almost irresistible. If there'd been a cat on the stairs he would have kicked its head off. There are good days and bad days, he told himself, and then there are days like this. Total crap.

He punched the light switch on the thinly carpeted stairwell and went down fast, eager to leave the evening behind. He'd lost again; he should have known better than to go gambling on a day when his luck was plainly out. He'd woken to the news he'd been jocked off a stone-cold certainty at the weekend, then he'd lost a race on the run-in at Newbury when his horse's bridle had snapped, and he'd arrived home to a phone message that he'd been dumped by his twice-weekly secret shag. At least, that's what he thought Crystal's message had amounted to, she'd sounded so hysterical he couldn't make out much. Well, good riddance to her.

The light timed out just as he reached the front door. Jesus Christ, what kind of cheapskates ran this building? He'd half a mind not to come back again – he could find classier games even on a Tuesday night. Except that would mean settling his debts with Paul, the ex-jockey who hosted the card school. At present, Max's liability was in paper form only and if he baled out he'd have to stump up the cash. Laying his hands on six

grand plus would not be easy – it was three months' allowance, for God's sake. Of course, he could try and get it off his father but he didn't want to go that route again. As Dad had said last time, the point of the allowance was so he didn't have to keep asking for a handout.

But Paul wasn't giving him grief, he was cool about the money Max owed him. And why wouldn't he be? Paul might be a devious little wide boy operating out of a tatty gaff in Kilburn but he knew all about the *Sunday Times* Rich List and exactly where Max's father came in the Top Hundred. Number sixty-three, as it happened, just behind a mail-order fashion king and ahead of a mobile-phone millionaire. Lewis Ashwood: property and leisure. Estimated net worth £481 million. No wonder Paul wasn't all that bothered about Max owing him a few quid.

Outside, the autumn night was warm and starless. The thick clouds that had dulled the afternoon at Newbury had rolled in from the west and Max, with a horseman's appreciation of the weather, calculated it would rain soon. He rounded the corner into the high street, relieved to see his Lexus parked where he'd left it, on a yellow line in front of a boarded-up off-licence and an Asian dry-cleaners. Frankly, this area of inner-city north London was such a dump it was a miracle it was still there.

He pointed the remote-control and the car's sidelights blinked and the lock clicked open in recognition of his signal. He couldn't wait to get home.

'Hey, wait up.'

A big shambling figure was lumbering after him, Tortoise Jacobs, the oldest of the punters and former racecourse reprobates who made up Paul's card school. Max had seen quite enough of Tortoise for the night. As usual, he'd pocketed almost all of Max's gambling money. What's more, Max knew what was coming next.

'Give us a lift, mate, will you?'

'No.' The only lift Max felt like giving him was under his jaw

with his fist. He'd once made the mistake of allowing Tortoise into his car and it had stunk of his unwashed tobacco-smoked presence for days afterwards.

'I'm not going your way,' he added.

The big man had his hand on the passenger-side door.

'Just to the tube station. It won't take you a minute.'

'Get a taxi.'

'I've got one right here,' and Tortoise opened the car door with a giggle, an irritating sound that Max had heard a lot of during the last four hours. Most things about Basil Jacobs irritated Max – the length of time it took him to make his play (hence his nickname), the way crisp crumbs clung to his dirty grey beard, and the fact that the jammy sod rarely lost.

Max wedged himself between Jacobs and the vehicle. 'You're not getting in my car, fat man.'

The grin faded from Tortoise's face. 'Daddy didn't teach you any manners, did he?'

'Get lost.'

'Just like he didn't teach you how to lose. You really shouldn't play poker, Max. I can read the cards in your face every time you pick them up.'

Tortoise's bulk was pressing him against the Lexus and his whisky breath soured the air. Max tried to push him away.

'Get off me, you useless tub of lard.'

Jacobs didn't budge. 'If I'm so useless, ask yourself why I'm walking away with your money in my pocket. I do it every week. You know what, Max, I'm thrilled every time I see you at the table. You're like a blank cheque in my name. Goodie, I say to myself, that's the gas bill paid and the phone bill – and maybe I'll have filet mignon tomorrow. Little Maxie's paying.'

Max didn't think. He just hit him, putting as much weight into it as he could. It was like sinking his fist into a pillow. Tortoise grunted with pain as the breath gusted from his mouth and Max

shoved the big man away from the car, the key fob spilling from his grasp as he did so.

Jacobs doubled over, winded. He was obviously completely unfit. Max scanned the surface of the road, looking for the key. There it was, in the gutter, just a few inches from the drain. That was the day's one stroke of luck; if the key had gone down the drain, Tortoise would have got more than a thump in the bread basket. Max bent to retrieve it.

As he did so, he was grabbed from behind and hurled across the pavement. He looked up to see Tortoise running at him, arms swinging. It was out of character – Max couldn't believe the old lard bucket could move that fast – and took him by surprise. The first blow cuffed him on the ear but he dodged the second and ducked inside the big man's reach to whack him in the gut once more. This time the punch did not have such a dramatic effect. Instead Tortoise wrapped his arms round Max, enfolding him in a nauseating bear hug. It was like being embraced by some old wino.

'Teach you some manners,' Tortoise muttered.

Max said nothing, just jabbed with his elbows and tried to twist free. The pair of them stumbled in a grotesque dance down a pedestrian alleyway between the post office and a supermarket car park.

Max found himself wedged between a wall and some kind of obstruction against his thigh.

'Say you're sorry,' hissed Tortoise and began to squeeze.

Max hacked at the big man's ankles and, suddenly, the obstruction collapsed and the pair of them crashed to the ground. In the dim light Max registered a red and white painted barrier and a stack of new paving stones piled against the wall.

Tortoise was on top of him, one big mitt now fastened round Max's throat, his dead weight pinning Max to the ground like a huge smelly sandbag. All he could move was his right arm.

'You may think you're the bee's knees,' said Tortoise, 'but you're just a stupid boy, and I don't give a monkey's who your daddy is.'

Max's hand closed round something hard and jagged, a kind of stone, and he thrust his arm up from the ground like a shot-putter. He didn't have much of an angle to work with but the stone was a good weight. It made a funny clonk as it smacked against the side of Tortoise's head.

The big man gave a little grunt but still held Max fast.

'Let go of me!'

He swung his arm again and made a solid connection. Something wet dripped down.

Max struck again and the grip on his throat relaxed. With a sigh like the wind escaping a pair of bellows, Tortoise rolled sideways amongst the paving stones and bags of cement.

Now it was Max's turn. He had an unhampered swing this time. Smack!

Take that, you fat bastard.

And this.

It felt good, but he made himself stop.

His breath rasped in his ears and his heart was banging against his ribs.

Tortoise said nothing.

Not so full of it now, are you, fat man?

Max climbed shakily to his feet. A sudden acid rush of bile doubled him over and vomit spilled from his throat. He had to get away before the old fool came round.

The street was still deserted and his car awaited. He felt in his pocket for the key and remembered that it was lying somewhere on the road.

He couldn't see it! But it had been there – right next to the drain!

For a few seconds, he panicked. Tortoise would be back on his feet any moment now.

There it was! Under a piece of newspaper that had blown along the gutter.

Max's hand shook as he reached for the key and the fob seemed to squirm out of his grasp. His fingers were wet.

He held them up to his face. They were inky, stained with something.

He looked across at the piece of stone he'd used to get free from Tortoise. He'd dropped it by the car: a chunk of broken paving slab that glistened wetly in the pale street light.

Oh Lord, what had he done?

Whatever, he wasn't going back down that alleyway to have a look.

He wiped his hand on the newspaper and then used it to wrap the paving stone. On his way back to his flat in Holland Park, he stopped by a skip full of builder's rubble and chucked it in. He knew he was being silly but why take risks?

By the time he'd reached home the rain had come, drenching him thoroughly in the short walk to his front door. He welcomed it.

Part One

Chapter One

Alan Morrell woke in the darkness and reached for the bedside light. A lance of pain stilled his movement. Damn – he'd forgotten about the collarbone. As injuries went, it wasn't too bad, a sight better than the two broken legs he'd had in the past eighteen months. All the same, it wasn't much fun first thing in the morning. As a jump jockey you never got any sympathy with a broken collarbone. It was regarded as little more than a minor inconvenience. If you took any more than ten days off you were considered a sissy. The truth, however, was that getting your head off the pillow for the first few days after the break was incredibly painful.

He listened out for sounds of movement elsewhere in the old cottage. The luminous display on the alarm clock read 6:03 and he knew his companions would be stirring. When you worked at a training yard your day started early.

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs. The bedroom door opened, silhouetting the familiar curly head of Noel Dougherty, his friend, landlord and – for a few more weeks – his housemate. Soon Noel would be returning to Ireland to work at his father's yard. Alan and Lee, the other member of the household, would be sorry to see him go.

'Give me a hand, will you?' said Alan.

Noel stepped into the room and flicked on the light, grinning hugely.

'Are you not mended yet? I thought you jockeys healed overnight. You should be up making breakfast for us workers.'

Alan scowled at him but it wasn't possible to look fierce lying flat on your back with a six-foot tough guy looming over you. But Noel's touch was gentle as he eased Alan into a sitting position.

'Thanks, mate,' he said. 'I'll be OK now.'

'I'll fetch you some tea once Lee's finished brewing up. That might take a while, the state he's in.'

'Nervous, is he?'

'You could say that.'

Alan's broken bone, sustained after a fall at Taunton three days ago, had done more than put him on the sidelines, it had caused repercussions for his two friends. Lee, a keen amateur rider, had been offered Alan's ride today at Haydock on a horse who was well thought of at the Lambourn yard of Tim Davy, where Alan and Noel both worked. Lee had jumped at the opportunity but he was not the most confident of jockeys.

'He'll be fine,' Alan said. 'He's got the easy job compared to me.'

In return for taking his ride, Alan had agreed to fulfil Lee's role for the day and the prospect was much more daunting: he had to bid for a horse at Tattersalls' horses-in-training sales that afternoon.

Noel wasn't entirely sympathetic. 'For God's sake, if you want to be a bloodstock agent you've got to know how to bid for a horse.'

That was true enough – and there were loads of other things involved as well. Being a bloodstock agent was a bit like being an estate agent, only you were dealing with horses not houses.

The idea to set up Blades Bloodstock had come from Lee. He was a bit of a bookworm on the quiet and an expert on form and breeding; he'd also been doing business studies in his spare time and was the brains behind the whole venture. His first idea was that the three of them should operate as a team but Noel had

ducked out, being committed to a return to Ireland. Alan, however, had been swept along on the tide of Lee's enthusiasm and, for their first purchase, they'd earmarked a Flat horse in Tim Davy's yard. Having the inside track on a horse was a big advantage when it came to buying one. Just to be certain an animal was sound was a plus. But Alan had particular knowledge of Grain of Sand: he'd schooled the horse over some baby hurdles recently on the way home from the gallops and Grain of Sand had turned out to be a natural.

He rushed home to tell Lee, who had worked some magic with his contacts and soon announced that he'd got a buyer lined up. Then Alan had fallen off at Taunton and suddenly Lee was heading to Haydock and it was up to Alan to secure the horse. If Lee was nervous, he was petrified.

Noel seemed to know exactly what was running through Alan's mind.

'Cheer up, man. It'll be a piece of cake.'

'Yeah, sure.' Alan tried to sound positive.

'Anyway, I'll be there to hold your hand.' Noel had volunteered to drive him to the sales in Newmarket. 'Honestly, the pair of you would be lost without me.'

'Oh bog off,' said Alan. He wasn't going to admit that what the Irishman said was true.

He struggled into his clothes and went to look for Lee.

'Good luck, mate,' Alan said. 'He'll hack up.'

Lee gave him one of his sceptical looks. His thin face looked particularly pale and drawn this morning and his earring no longer seemed a jaunty adornment but a mistake. Then his usually perky grin reasserted itself. 'You just worry about yourself. I did mention the bidding was in guineas, didn't I?'

'You did.'

'And a guinea is worth how much?'

'We have been through this a dozen times, Lee, and I understand

about the bidding. What concerns me most is that this bloke Ian Redmond is prepared to let us spend a hundred grand of his money.'

'He gave me his word. I told him if he got the horse for that he'd have a bargain.'

'The word of a stockbroker. Shouldn't there be something in writing?'

Lee laughed. 'A lot of business is done on the nod. It's the way of the world, my friend.'

'And you're the expert?'

'More expert than you. And, excuse me, haven't we been through this a dozen times too?'

Alan nodded. They had indeed.

Lee put his hand on Alan's good arm. 'Anyway, just suppose it went pear-shaped with Redmond, am I not the best horse salesman you know? I can drum up half a dozen guys in the City who'd kill for a chance at a horse like Grain of Sand.'

Alan cheered up. It was true Lee had produced their buyer like a rabbit out of a hat and he didn't doubt his friend could do it again. All Alan had to do was successfully bid for the horse and he had every confidence Lee's nous and enthusiasm would see them home with a profit on their first deal. Their fee for brokering the sale was five per cent of the selling price, which they would split between them.

If Lee could take half his positive attitude into his ride at Haydock, tonight the pair of them would be celebrating a double triumph.

Max found himself a half-decent mug from the dirty pile in the sink and spooned in coffee granules. The cleaner came today, thank God, so he could close the door on the squalor in the flat and return later to find the place smartened up and squeaky clean. It had been a good idea of Dad's to have the woman come in a

couple of times a week. Pity it wasn't possible to clean up the rest of his life so easily.

As he sipped his coffee he tried to get his head round the night before. He'd slept the sleep of the innocent, deep and dreamless, and it still blanketed his thoughts, making it difficult to focus. Too much vodka hadn't helped. Maybe he'd go back on the wagon for a bit. The booze always shortened the fuse on his temper.

He was clear about one thing though, he'd shown that sack of lard Tortoise that he wouldn't stand for being shoved around. Who did the fat man think he was, demanding a lift and making fun of Max's card skills? He was simply on a bad run – it happened to all poker players. Especially one who played a high-risk take-no-prisoners style like he did.

He'd definitely taught the fat man a lesson – he'd be feeling a little sore this morning. Served the smelly git right, making him lose his rag like that. Max hadn't been so wound up since that incident at Bangor when he'd laid into a stable lad with his whip after being touched off at the end of a three-mile chase – the little fool should have kept his sarky remarks to himself. The whole affair had turned out a complete pain in the neck and he'd lost a lot of rides.

All the same, in the circumstances Tortoise should think himself lucky he hadn't been hit a couple of times more.

There'd been blood and sick all over him when he got home. Max remembered washing it off his hands last night and sponging the stain on his jacket. Lucky he'd not been wearing his new suede one – you'd never get a bloodstain out of that.

He'd better have a thorough check through what he'd been wearing – get it all in the wash and down to the cleaners. And check out the car, too. Drop it in to the valet service and ask for their Gold Star top-to-toe clean.

Just in case.

*

Alan was still buzzing as he entered the crowded refreshment room at Tattersalls' horses-in-training sale at Newmarket. He was known as a good man in a crisis, able to keep a cool head when others were getting hot under the collar; it had always been one of his chief attributes as a jockey. In the crush of an oversubscribed novice hurdle or when it came to holding a horse up for a late challenge, Alan could be relied on to get the job done. So it was a shock to find himself getting nervous in these civilised surroundings.

'Tea?' suggested Noel.

'I'd rather have a brandy.'

Alan wondered if he'd ever get used to spending so much money. Ninety-five thousand guineas was a powerful amount to say goodbye to on the nod of a head, even if it wasn't his money.

Noel dived purposefully into the crush in front of the bar and Alan hung back, all too aware he had to protect his left arm which hung awkwardly in a sling under his jacket. Noel reappeared with unlikely speed and put a glass in Alan's good hand. He took a large gulp and savoured the fiery progress of the liquid down his throat. He only drank spirits on special occasions and this was certainly one of those. It would probably go straight to his head but that was OK, the tough part of the afternoon was over. He felt his mouth stretch into a grin.

'I got him, didn't I?'

'Only just, mate.' Noel had spotted a couple of seats and quickly manoeuvred Alan into position ahead of a couple of suited business types. 'Once the bidding went over ninety I thought you were going to freeze.'

The truth was, he *had* frozen. He'd never bid at an auction before and he'd found the atmosphere of the bidding ring intimidating. Everyone else seemed so familiar with the drama of the process: the well-oiled efficiency of the auctioneer, the nerveless concentration of the bidders and the flickering of the

electronic board, as bids in five currencies escalated like the score of some giant video game. He'd felt as if he were at the performance of a play – except that he knew he had lines of his own to speak. That's what had gripped him with fear.

At first, it had been OK. It was a relief to see Grain of Sand led into the ring. The sight of that familiar white-muzzled head was like recognising an old friend in a crowd. Others recognised him too, Alan could tell from the whispering and shuffling that greeted the horse's appearance. Grain of Sand had been a pretty useful performer on the Flat but the question was, did he have a career ahead of him over the sticks? Alan knew that the chances were good but, in truth, the only place to find out if the horse had the bottle for the job was on the racecourse.

The bidding had opened at fifty thousand guineas. He'd waved his catalogue at the middle-aged lady in the aisle whom Noel had identified as one of the auctioneer's spotters. There were a handful of people interested at that price but, as the bidding went over seventy-five, it was down to just two of them: Alan and a man in a camel-haired coat. It had taken Alan a moment or two to locate him.

The man seemed completely at ease, obviously accustomed to the business of blowing substantial sums of money on unpredictable animals. Alan tried not to look at him but couldn't help it. After each bid of his own, conveyed by a nervous flap of the catalogue, he'd turn anxiously towards his rival sitting in the front row. The man would pause just long enough to let Alan think he'd seen him off, then incline his head in a patrician nod and inch ahead again.

When the bidding reached ninety-four, the auctioneer turned expectantly in Alan's direction. Alan did not move. His mind was racing, trying to compute whether he could bid further. What had Lee said? A guinea amounted to £1–05. Or was it £1–10? He had an upper limit of £100,000 – if he bid on, would that take him through his ceiling? Lee would kill him if he got this wrong.

Noel had jabbed him in the ribs, hissing, 'Go on!' And he had, thrusting his arm out just as the auctioneer was about to bring down the hammer against him.

Alan stared anxiously at his opponent. He'd worked it out now: 95,000 guineas amounted to £99,750. It had to be his last bid.

You could have heard a pin drop in the small amphitheatre as all eyes settled on the man in the camel coat. He sat impassively, just as he had done throughout, and then, with heart-stopping deliberation, shook his head. Alan had won. It was then he'd started to shake, suddenly aware of the sweat beading in his armpits. He'd signed for his purchase in a daze as Noel had nipped off to arrange for Grain of Sand to travel back to Tim Davy's yard in Lambourn and then they'd made for the bar.

'Well done, Mr Morrell.' Alan looked up to see the man who had run him to his limit extend his hand. 'I only carried on bidding when I recognised you. I reckoned you must know the horse from Davy's yard and therefore he must be pretty promising.'

'Oh, he is,' said Alan just before their new acquaintance disappeared into the crowd. He'd introduced himself but Alan, the brandy already taking effect, had failed to catch the name.

'Pleasant sort of fellow,' said Noel. 'He probably just cost you twenty grand.'

Alan reflected on Noel's words. Let that be our first lesson: get someone else to bid for you when it's obvious you have inside information. But what did that matter? He was spending money on behalf of someone else, this contact of Lee's. Alan glanced at his watch and indicated to Noel the large-screen television in the corner. It was time to see if Lee could do his side of the business on Olympia.

Lee sat next to another amateur in the changing room. He loved the atmosphere and the banter between the riders, with amateurs and professionals mingling together, regardless of whether they'd

ridden one winner or a thousand. The only difference was that the jockeys at the top of the tree got the best seats, handy for the showers, the tea room, the exit – and, of course, the trial scales.

Lee didn't get many chances to ride a decent horse, especially one as good as Olympia. As an amateur rider, he'd only managed nine winners in five years and these days it was getting hard to wangle any rides at all. He'd taken up riding too late in life to be really good. He looked and felt stiff in the saddle but his enthusiasm and effort had never been in doubt. And when Tim Davy had offered him the chance to pilot Olympia, he'd jumped at it. Who knows, he might even take his winners into double figures.

He'd ridden at Haydock a couple of times. It was a fabulous galloping track where the fields were usually small but always competitive and where – there was no getting round it – you had to be on a quality horse or an exceptional jumper. The fences there were more upright than any others in the country and you slept a lot better the night before if you were on a horse as agile as Olympia.

He was confident that the race would mark a change in his fortunes. Olympia was an animal with real talent, one he'd been riding out on a regular basis. If he couldn't get this horse home first then he'd know for certain that he was destined never to win on this track. Well, he could live with that. Better men than him had drawn a blank at Haydock.

But this was no time to think of failure. The owners, a couple of footballers, were waiting for him in the parade ring. Luckily it wasn't necessary to come up with a load of flannel for their benefit. They were here for a fun day out when the pressure, for once, was not on their shoulders. The three of them traded pleasantries for a couple of minutes before they wished him good luck.

As Lee turned to Tim Davy for some last-minute instructions, a steward appeared in front of them.

'Mr Davy, I've just had a phone call from Portman Square' – the headquarters of the Jockey Club, no wonder the steward was positively puffed up with importance. 'This horse of yours is drifting in the betting. Is there any reason to think he won't be running at his best?'

Lee stared at the man blankly, at a loss.

Tim was equally taken aback but spoke for both of them. 'As far as I know he's in great shape. We've come to win. Who's been laying him?'

'No one in particular and it might be nothing but we thought you should know.'

'Take no notice,' muttered Tim as he legged Lee up into the saddle.

'What was that all about?'

Tim shrugged. 'Don't worry about it – just concentrate on the race. Your father's here, by the way.'

His dad was here? They'd spoken just last night but the old man had said nothing about driving over to Haydock.

Tim was grinning. 'He said not to tell you in case it put you off, but I reckon that's bollocks. You're going to ride a blinder in any case, aren't you?'

'Sure.'

'You'd better. Your dad says he's put a pony on the nose.'

Jesus – his father never bet.

No pressure then.

Alan suppressed the jolt of jealousy that gripped him as on the television he watched the horses lining up for the start. Lee deserved the ride on Olympia and it wasn't fair to begrudge it. Besides, if he'd been fit to race himself then he wouldn't have had the satisfaction of securing Grain of Sand, no matter how ineptly he'd gone about it. He sincerely hoped that Lee would make a better job of piloting Olympia – though not so good that Tim

would prefer him to Alan next time out. It was a selfish business being a jockey and Lee's seven-pound allowance would always be useful off an easy ride with plenty of weight.

The camera dwelt for a moment on Olympia as the TV commentator announced that his price had lengthened once more; he was now two whole points bigger than at the start of the day.

'He's a powerful-looking beast,' said Noel. 'What's he like to ride?'

'Your granny could ride him.'

As the race began and the field set off away from the stands, Olympia had a perfect position on the inside, about four lengths off the leader. Lee did what Alan had told him and cut off the dog-leg to steer a direct line from the first to the fourth fence. You could only do that on a horse that was big and strong enough to ease other horses off their line. The ground looked soft and Lee had Olympia in a good rhythm. It was like clockwork. As Noel and Alan watched, they could count off the strides before each fence like a metronome: one, two three – ping! One, two, three – ping! With each fence they could see Lee's confidence growing. He began crouching lower in the saddle.

'This is the best I've seen him ride,' said Alan.

For a circuit Lee just let Olympia make ground at each fence and then took a pull, keeping him nicely on the bridle. But as they rounded the bend away from the stands, the horse's head began to get lower and his stride shortened.

Alan thought straight away that maybe the horse had broken a blood vessel.

At the next fence the horse made his first mistake – nothing serious but, instead of standing off, he got in close and was clumsy. He gave the fence a belt with his front end. Lee, who had been sitting further up his neck than he'd ever been before, suddenly found himself thrown right back on the buckle end of the reins

with legs locked out in front of him as if he were the anchor man in a tug of war.

Lee's confidence seemed to vanish in an instant. He tried urging the horse on but it didn't have much effect. It was as if Olympia had run out of petrol. Olympia wasn't a shirker, he never needed shaking up on a racecourse and it seemed unfair to bully him. If he wasn't performing, it wouldn't be because he didn't want to.

Lee felt sick about the whole thing. Here he was, in a good quality race on a rated horse with the whole world watching – well, a packed grandstand and a television audience, not to mention his dad – and Olympia was having an off day. And he knew who'd get the blame. People would be bound to think that Alan would have rung a tune out of the horse and that Lee had cocked up.

He pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He just had to do the best he could and avoid ignominy if he could. He decided to jump a couple more fences and, if nothing happened, he'd pull up.

They scrambled over the next fence but landed safely. A knot of three horses lay just a few lengths ahead and Lee gave his mount a slap on the shoulder, urging him to hunt them down. But the horse felt dead.

That's enough, thought Lee and went to pull out from the next fence when a tailender came past and unintentionally kept him on line for the final ditch. Olympia had lost all momentum. Lee couldn't find a stride. Suddenly he was flying through the air on his own, instinctively curling into a ball to lessen the impact of slamming into the turf. Bang goes Dad's pony, he thought in the instant before he hit the ground.

There were groans of dismay from the crowd around Alan in the bar as Olympia somersaulted the fence and landed on top of his rider. These were horse people and they knew at once that this was no ordinary fall.

'That's a bad one,' said a voice and others murmured agreement. The TV coverage followed the progress of the race but Alan hardly noticed.

'He bloody buried him,' murmured Noel.

Alan said nothing, but scanned the screen above him, looking for clues to Lee's welfare. A long shot across the course to the scene of the accident showed an ambulance and other vehicles in attendance.

'There are screens up around Olympia,' said the TV commentator. 'Let's hope he's just winded. That looked pretty nasty.'

'What about Lee?' muttered Alan beneath his breath. He could make out two knots of people; one by the green canvas screens that surrounded the horse, the other grouped around a shape on the ground.

The television picture switched to a replay of the incident, with Olympia on the charge approaching the open ditch.

'You can see his front foot going over the guard rail ahead of the ditch,' said the other commentator, a well-known former jockey. He sounded as sick as Alan felt. 'He tries to push off but the ground's not there and he flips over. There's nothing the rider can do.'

'Except pray the horse doesn't land on top of you,' added his colleague as the screen showed the event in slow motion.

Alan turned away; it was too sickening to watch. He walked to the door past a cheerful crowd of drinkers and other sale-goers unaware of events at Haydock. Outside, away from the noise of their chatter, he groped in his pocket for his mobile and speed-dialled Tim Davy. Unsurprisingly, he was switched to a message centre; Tim would have his hands full right now.

Jesus, he hoped Lee was all right. The fall had probably looked worse than it was. Sometimes the most spectacular spills were the most innocuous. Anyhow, Lee was like a cork, always bobbing back up.

Ten minutes later, his mobile rang. Tim Davy's voice was brisk.
'The ambulance is taking him to hospital right now, Alan.'
'Is he serious?'
'Nobody knows, it's too early to say.'

There were roadworks on the M6. Alan admired the way Noel dealt with the frustrations of driving; the drive from East Anglia's flatlands up the A14 across the Midlands to this last flog up the motorway had taken over three hours, as dim day turned into a rain-filled evening. They'd not stopped for any kind of refreshment, in fact they'd hardly eaten all day, not that either of them cared. When Noel had heard what was happening to Lee, he'd simply said, 'Let's go.'

Doing his collarbone had had some bloody awful consequences, Alan reflected. Would Olympia have cocked up that fence if he'd been on board?

He was a better, more experienced rider than Lee. He'd ridden Olympia before and won on him too. He couldn't imagine the horse making the kind of mistake he'd made this afternoon. His whole performance had been out of character. Alan couldn't fathom it.

'Nearly there,' Noel said. They were off the motorway now, negotiating rain-slick urban streets. Noel appeared to know exactly where he was going and Alan didn't question it. It was like being in a dream.

'Wait till you tell him about Grain of Sand,' Noel murmured. 'That'll cheer him up.'

It would too. Alan found himself smiling. There was no need to get too down about things.

They pulled into the hospital car park and found a space. It was a relief to get out of the car and breathe the damp evening air.

Ahead of them, outside the glass doors of the hospital reception, a burly bare-headed figure stood in the rain, silhouetted by the

pale orange light. As he mounted the steps to the entrance, Alan recognised Lee's father, Geoff.

'Mr Finney,' he called.

The man turned towards him, his face a blank, but he gripped Alan's hand hard and held on to it. In the other, he held a cigarette burnt down to an unnoticed stub.

'How is he?' Alan asked.

Geoff opened his mouth but no words came out. He swallowed and tried again. 'They operated on him but they couldn't stop the bleeding.'

Alan saw Geoff's cheeks were wet and not with rain.

'Lee's dead, son.'

As the three of them stood in shock and silence, Alan's thoughts went from Lee to Grain of Sand and the unknown client who was supposed to be buying him. With his partner dead, Alan's exposure had suddenly doubled to a hundred thousand pounds.

He guiltily banished the thought from his mind. How could he be so selfish at a time like this?