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Taking the Fall

Written by A. P. McCoy

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TAKING THE FALL

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December 1979

Duncan was hauled out of sleep by the sound of his bedside phone. It came into his dreams. As he sat up in bed, someone tapped him lightly on the head with a thirty-two-pound mallet. With eyes still pasted shut, he grabbed the phone and licked his dry lips.

A voice said, 'Duncan, you dog!'

Duncan made to check his surroundings, but as he moved, he took another light knock from the mallet. He winced. He was recovering from a Young Jockeys' Christmas party at the tail-end of 1979 that had started with them all getting thrown out of the Lamb and Flag and finished in the Wherever nightclub.

'What was the last thing I said to you last night, Duncan?'

Duncan smacked his dry lips. 'Goodbye?'

'Funny. Think again.'

Duncan actually tried to think sensibly, but his headache discouraged the effort of remembering. His tongue had sprouted a thick-pile carpet and that put him off speaking too.

The voice on the phone said, 'Platform two for the eight forty-five. Be there, I said. Didn't I? Well, didn't I? Now you just listen to this.'

There was a dull roar on the phone. Like the sound of a train approaching.

'Did you hear that, Duncan? Did you? That's the eight forty-five coming in, steaming.'

‘Kerry, you don’t fool me. That’s an electric train. Electric trains don’t steam.’

‘It’s the feckin’ eight forty-five whatever you say and I’m on it and you’re not; and you can forget about your ride today. For God’s sake don’t tell me you ended up with that red-headed bird you were flirting with all night.’

Duncan looked over his shoulder. Under the white cotton duvet a sleeping figure lay curled, but all he could see of her was a pale and elegant foot poked out from the bottom of the bed. Her toenails were painted flamingo-pink. He sniffed and delicately pulled back the corner of the duvet to reveal the shiny chestnut curls and slightly freckled brow of a very pretty red-headed girl.

‘No,’ he said. ‘It’s a blonde.’

‘You’re a lying toerag. I saw her climb into a cab with you when we left the Exchange Bar.’

‘Is that where we ended up?’

‘Oh yes. And she had to put you into the cab with a spoon.’

‘Kerry,’ Duncan said, ‘I’ll make it down for the next train. Sit tight. Wait for me. Be a good pal.’

‘Hell with that. You’re on your own, son. What was the last thing I said to you last night?’

‘Platform two. Eight forty-five.’

‘No, before that. The last thing before the last thing. I said don’t get mixed up with the redhead. Didn’t I? Do you know whose feckin’ daughter she is? Do you? Do you know? Now I’m on this train. You better get your arse there for the first race or you’re on the skids, pal, on the skids. I’ll cover for you as far as I can. Just like I always do. Jesus, man, do you know whose daughter that is?’

‘Kerry, I’ll get there.’

‘You’re a damned nuisance is what you are.’

Duncan heard a whistle blow and then the line went dead.

Both he and Kerry were jocked up for the first race at

Doncaster. The last time he'd raced there he'd been pulled up by the stewards for excessive use of the whip, which was just ridiculous because the ride he was on was already dead before they'd dragged it out of the stables. The steward, Pointer, was one of those failed trainers in green wellies: a by-the-book military type with a hatred of every promising young jockey who showed a high seat and a bit of style. Duncan had got lippy with him, and that bit of lip had cost him dear.

He didn't want to go back to Doncaster. He had the mother of all hangovers and there was a fine-looking girl in his bed whom he'd quite like to meet. No, he didn't want to go to Doncaster, but on days like this you had to take what you were given.

Unless you were at the top of the game, that is, front of the pack with plenty in hand, and then you could pick and choose. And the top of the game was where Duncan planned to be. Time was – for a while – when that looked to be exactly where he was heading. He'd been one of the most promising – no, scratch that – *the* most promising young jockey in the country. He was hacking up everywhere. Runner-up for the 1978 Conditional Jockey Championship; though he rode fewer winners, his strike rate was ten per cent higher than the champion's. Everyone knew damned well he was the better jockey. Then when he'd moved on to becoming a fully fledged jockey, he'd found out the hard way that the best jockeys didn't always come by the best rides, and that had cost him dearly.

There was just stuff in his way. Connections, for example: owner loves you, trainer hates you; or trainer likes you but owner for some reason won't even let you ride his prize pig. Other things counted too: old friendships, former stablemates, debts being paid, secrets protected. Jockey Club favours. Form; and not the form of the horses, either.

Then there was the darker stuff: arrangements, handshakes, bookies' specials, say nothin'. The whole lot of it nothing to do with who could gallop down that last straight with their nose

in front. It should be so simple, best jockey gets best horse, but it never was. You got what you were given, and if you had a bit of lip and a bit of spunk about you and spoke out of turn just occasionally, you might find yourself saddling a can of Pedigree Chum for all the chances you had.

But Duncan was one for winning rather than whining, and he knew it would come good in the end. He was just going to have to work through it and prove himself. He had the touch. He could feel a ride quicken under him, and not every jockey knew when to tuck in and wait and when to let the horse open up. Sometimes he could even take a horse on the downgrade and flash past a favourite. He had it. He had what it took, and he knew it.

First he had to dig in and ride the gaff tracks, and ten dozen other gaff tracks, and learn to button his lip. His friend Kerry had that lips-sealed thing off much better than he did. Knew when to shut up. He and Kerry went way back, had been Conditional jockeys together, still a rivalry there, but good mates. They had looked out for each other, and after they had finished their time as Conditionals it had been Kerry who'd warned him he'd be disqualified for excessive use of the lip if he wasn't careful.

But so often he just couldn't help himself. His gob always ran away with him. 'Not exactly a pigeon-chaser, is it?' he might say to a trainer when given an outsider. 'Why am I so bloody lucky?'

'Just take the trip,' Kerry had told him. 'Ride what you're given and you'll get your chance one day.' But still Duncan would complain and mouth off to the trainer if he was told to do nothing more than get round.

And of course Kerry was right. He and Duncan were both twenty-one years old but still kids as far as the owners and the trainers were concerned. But knowing that you should shut your gob and doing it were two different things. Sometimes it seemed that his mouth worked independently of his brain. It

was like there was a little monkey-demon that got inside him and said the things he said, half in fun, half in jest, but usually at some cost to himself. Maybe he should have his jaw wired shut.

And maybe he should have his zipper wired shut, too. He turned to the girl sleeping beside him. Gently he tugged the covers from her, revealing her breasts. He leaned over and kissed a pink nipple and she woke up, blinking at him. She smiled happily and sat up, propping herself on one elbow.

‘Duncan, do it again, will you?’

‘Listen,’ Duncan said. ‘Do you have a car?’

‘A car?’

‘I’m late for a meeting at Doncaster. I was wondering if you could drive me.’

‘Drive you? How could I drive you? I don’t have a licence.’

‘What?’ Duncan’s head pounded again. ‘How old are you?’

‘Eighteen. In January.’

Only just the right side of legal. Duncan blinked. At least there wouldn’t be a stewards’ inquiry. ‘You might have told me.’

‘The subject never came up. Anyway, you’re not so much older.’

‘I feel like I’m a hundred this morning. And I’ve got to get to Doncaster.’ He swung his legs out of bed and found his way to the toilet. There was a bathroom scales on the floor and he weighed himself. It was close. He didn’t have a couple of hours for the sauna, so he was going to have to pop a pee pill to get rid of that extra two pounds. He got off the scales and inspected his face in the mirror. His eyes were bloodshot and he didn’t look like a winner today. But he would, soon. In a few hours’ time he would put on the silk and he would glow and he would fly.

He threw some cold water on his face. When he came out of the bathroom, patting his face dry with a towel, the girl pulled the sheets around herself but in a manner he knew was inviting

him to whisk them away from her. She shook her head coquettishly. 'Anyway, how come *you* don't have a car?' she said. 'You can't go everywhere on a horse.'

'It was repossessed last week. I'm sunk.'

'I can get you a car easily enough.'

'How's that, then?'

'My dad. He's got loads of cars.'

'Loads? What is he, the local Ford dealer?'

'Don't be silly, Duncan. He's in the same business you're in. Racing, I mean.'

'Oh I remember now.' *I could hardly forget, could I?* he thought. *Major scumbag number one.*

'And,' she laughed prettily, 'he's got about twelve cars in the garage. What do you like? There's a Lamba ... Lambra ...'

'Lamborghini?'

'That's it. And a Porsche. A shiny black one. And some others. He never uses most of them, so he won't miss one for a day.'

He flicked the towel at her buttock and she squealed. 'Get dressed. We're on our way!'

They took a taxi from Duncan's place to hers, and all the way Duncan tried to figure out a way of asking her name without sounding impolite. After all, if you've just had sex vigorous enough to make you lose half a pound, you really ought to know what she's called. 'Your dad,' he tried. 'Does he have a pet name for you?'

She made a face. 'No. Why do you ask?'

'Well, it's just that most dads have a special name for their daughter, don't they? I wondered if he called you Bunny or Pumpkin or some such thing.'

'Bunny?'

Duncan shrugged.

'You're weird,' she said. She looked out of the window at

the grey sky. After a while she said, 'He just calls me Lorna like everyone else. To be honest, he doesn't care about me enough to give me a pet name.'

Lorna. Of course. He'd thought it was Laura or Lara and it was important not to get it wrong. Now he remembered moving in on her in the nightclub and making her laugh, and Kerry beckoning to him and saying, 'Now you keep away from that if you ever want to ride for the Duke.'

She'd been wrong about her father. 'Duke' Cadogan wasn't exactly in the same business as Duncan. No more than a soldier fighting in Northern Ireland was in the same business as an international arms manufacturer. Where Duncan was a jockey, Cadogan was a racehorse owner, one further step removed than a trainer. He bought the horseflesh and sponsored a stable the way that a businessman might buy himself into being the chairman of a football team. His nickname had nothing to do with the English aristocracy.

When the taxi drew up at Lorna's house, Duncan got out, paid the cabbie and stepped back to take in the size of the property. 'Anyone home?' he said nervously.

'Only the staff,' Lorna said. 'I'll get the keys to the garage.'

She hurried off, leaving Duncan to take in the sweep of the lawns, the outbuildings and the great Georgian columns trumpeting the front of the house and its gravel driveway. Just one of those outhouses was bigger than the old cottage he'd shared with his dad as he'd grown up.

Dad it had been who had raised him and put him in the saddle. Dad who had taught him everything he knew, who'd showed him the way. Yes, he was a lot older than all the other lads' fathers, in his late forties when Duncan was born. And when his mother – who by all accounts was a screaming basket case – had upped and left when Duncan was only five years old, it had been Dad who had taken over and done the whole damned thing.

His dad, Charlie, was a small-time trainer. Not any more, but back then. Struggling to make it, always struggling. He didn't have big-time players investing in his tiny stables: no football managers, no business tycoons, no fake dukes. He did everything the hard way. Went over to Ireland, or even to France – something no one else was doing at the time – to find a prospect, bring it back, get it fit, race it and sell it on. Some of these trips Charlie pulled Duncan out of school and took the boy with him.

'I love you, Dad,' Duncan heard himself whisper as his eyes surveyed the four-million-pound property. 'And I will fucking get them. All of them.'

He was brought out of his reverie by the sound of Lorna trudging across the gravel. She beamed at him, dangling a big set of keys in front of her. 'Shall we see what's there?'

He followed her over to a modern garage with steel doors. She unlocked a side door, hit a switch and the doors rolled upwards, purring as they went. A row of lights flickered on, one after the other, to reveal Cadogan's collection of motors.

They walked slowly between the silent vehicles, Lorna lightly trailing a finger on the slightly dusty paintwork. She seemed to be waiting for him to choose. The motors looked sort of sad and sleepy and forgotten, like beautiful courtesans in a harem no one ever visited, losing their best years. There was a Mercedes-Benz 450 SL soft-top; the Porsche and the Lamborghini she'd mentioned; a 1960s American Dodge Dart and an early seventies Chevy Camaro. There were a couple of vintage classics like the 1939 Simca 5. Heck, there was even a new Volkswagen Beetle in the mix, and for a moment he felt like taking that just for perversity. But the Lamborghini had more curves than a *Playboy* centrefold.

'I think you'll look pretty in the sunflower,' he said.

'Oh good,' Lorna said. 'I've always fancied the yellow one.'

She went over to a cabinet, unlocked it and puzzled over

the rows of keys until she found the right set. She tossed them through the air and Duncan caught them. He weighed them in his hand for a moment before unlocking the Lamborghini doors. He stepped round to the passenger door and held it open for her.

She blushed. 'You're a gentleman!' She sank into the low-slung plush leather of the passenger seat and it made her skirt ride up her legs.

'Oh yes, every inch a gentleman.' He unclipped the seat belt and reached across her to fasten it in place. Then he pulled the strap across her chest.

'Not too tight!' she protested.

But he tightened it anyway, then leaned down and kissed her, putting his tongue in her mouth at the same time as he slipped his hand between her legs. She wore thin tights but no knickers.

Moments later he was outside the garage, listening to the motor purr. He depressed the accelerator and the purr turned to a big-cat snarl. He looked at his watch. This was going to be good.

'This has grunt!' he said. But then he was distracted by a whirring noise from overhead. He looked up through the tinted glass of the windscreen and saw a helicopter high in the sky. It looked like it was descending.

'That will be Daddy popping in for a few things,' Lorna said. 'Probably best if we shoot off.'

The Lamborghini did have grunt. It ate the motorway. They were so low in the seats that it was like riding in a snake's belly. Duncan felt his own body weight pressing on his kidneys, and the diuretic pills meant he was going to have to stop pretty soon. He wished he'd stopped at the last services, but time was short if he was going to make the race. He looked at his watch and gave the accelerator a little more toe. The motor spat in response.

He wished he could pile up enough money to give his old dad one of these things. Not that his father was at all interested in cars. There was only one kind of horsepower for Charlie, and that was the kind where you pumped oats in one end and shovelled shit from the other. But when he made it, he would give his dad one of these anyway.

He looked at his watch. He was going to have to floor it to make the race in time.

School had come and gone and had barely touched Duncan. It wasn't that he didn't get along with his teachers – though the old lippy problem had got him into a couple of scrapes with teachers and older boys alike – it was just that all that geography and maths and other stuff didn't seem to stick.

'Don't you worry,' his dad had told him. 'You're too sharp for 'em, that's the problem. You've got brains enough. It's just a different kind of brains.'

And his dad was right: Duncan did have a brain. What kind of brain that was became clear one day when he was just nine years old and Charlie took him along to a race meeting in Leicester in the East Midlands, not far from the stables. It was a day of sunshine and the jockeys' bright silks were shimmering and flying like flags at a gala. Duncan was mesmerised by the tic-tac men and the antics of the bookies' runners. His dad gave him a brief explanation of what the signs meant, explaining that some of the gestures were secret. Duncan went over and stood by the white-painted rail dividing Tattersalls from the Silver Ring. He watched the signs and observed the runners, and then he studied the bookies' chalkboards as the odds tumbled or went way out. Pretty soon he had it all worked out.

His dad was sceptical at first. 'You can't know that,' he said. 'Not for sure you can't.'

'Yes I can. It's a pattern.'

'I know it's a pattern, but—'

'I can tell when this one in Tattersalls is talking to his mate

in the Silver Ring. He's telling him too many people are backing one of the horses.'

His dad, who always wore a sporting trilby and a moth-eaten sheepskin coat, tipped his hat back on his head and thought for a moment. He studied the form in his folded newspaper. A minute later he said, 'You little beauty! You sodding little beauty!' and gave him a tenner.

Duncan, small for his years, had approached a bookie with the terrific name of Billy B. Bonsor. Billy B. Bonsor had a beautifully painted fairground-style board with the slogan 'Payment as a Matter of Honour'. Mr Bonsor (so Duncan took the man to be) stood on an upturned wooden crate and announced as if to the entire racetrack, 'Very young fellow says ten on Midnight at sevens and who knows it?' Another man standing behind the crate recorded the bet in a ledger and Duncan was handed a betting slip. Before he released the slip, Billy B. Bonsor gave Duncan a weird look. Then he ran a finger under his nose and wiped the board, dropping Midnight Rambler from 7-1 to 5-1. Then he wiped the board again and changed it to 9-2.

Duncan ran back to his dad and gave him the betting slip. 'Why did he drop the odds?' he asked.

'He thinks someone sent you with the bet.'

'But you did!'

'Yes.'

His dad told him that there was good money and mug's money in gambling and that theirs was mug's money, even though they were in the business. Mug's money it might have been, but Midnight Rambler strolled home, and after deducting the stake, his dad let Duncan split the take. Thirty-five pounds was an inconceivable amount of money for a nine-year-old boy.

But what mesmerised Duncan even more than the tic-tac men and the painted boards was the racing itself. There was something unearthly and magical about the jockeys. He got up as close as he could to them and studied them. Some were

tight-lipped before a race, and some would be wisecracking and all smiles. But Duncan knew it was the same thing. It was the tension. The excitement. They glowed with it.

And when he stood with his dad roaring them in near the whitewashed rail at the home stretch, there was something beyond beautiful in the growing rumble of the approaching riders. There was a moment when the silks flashed past, when the hooves thundered on the turf and the jockeys and their mounts seemed to be locked into position. If he could have frozen the world in time it would have been at that moment. It was perfection. It was life itself.

This was the obsession. Not so much with gambling, though that was part of it, but with the racing. He wanted in. He wanted to be bathed in that glowing thing.

He told his dad he wanted to start saving and would put his thirty-five pounds towards his own pony.

His dad laughed and tipped his trilby back on his head. 'Well, you're about the right size and weight,' he said, 'so long as you don't grow too much over the years. So long as you keep your weight down.'

'What is it?' Lorna said.

'It's no good. I need to pee. I'm going to have to pull over.'

'Can't you wait till the next services?'

'It's a desperate situation. I've got to go.' The pills didn't take any argument. He was already slowing down and indicating for the hard shoulder. He stopped the car, got out, went round and faced away from the motorway, and unzipped. The release of pressure was indescribable. His body sagged with relief. He stood there pissing heartily, in full view of passing traffic. He didn't care. It seemed to go on. And on. He looked at his watch. He was still pissing when he sensed another car cruising along the hard shoulder to draw up behind the Lamborghini.

The police officer was already getting out of his car. It made no difference.

The officer walked towards him with slow, measured strides. 'Not exactly discreet, is it?' he said. 'Not exactly discreet in a big yellow sports car, relieving yourself in full view on the Queen's highway, is it?'

Duncan finished the task in hand, vented a huge sigh and zippered himself up. He turned and offered the policeman a smile that went the full distance.

'I mean,' said the officer, 'it's all a bit of a circus, isn't it?'

'You're right, officer. And I'm not going to try to argue my way out of this one. Let me say this: you fellows do a fine job. I've always said so. So I can't complain when I'm found out myself, now can I? But in my own defence, I wouldn't be standing here like this if there was any other way on this earth. Believe me, I wouldn't. Now without taking anything away from you, or without trying to stop you from doing a proper job, will you give me permission to tell you how I came to be here, like this, on the Queen's highway and all that?'

The officer blinked very slowly. 'Try me,' he said.

A few minutes later Duncan got back in the car, still smiling.

'Did he book you?' Lorna said.

'Nope.'

'What did you say to him?'

'What did I say to him? He's a racing fan. I gave him a winner.'

'You did? Isn't that a bribe?'

Duncan toed the accelerator and got another big-cat squeal out of the engine before pulling on to the motorway. 'Oh no. I just told him I was a jockey and that I was late for the two thirty at Doncaster and I was riding a mare called Trojan's Trumpet and that it was guaranteed to at least get a place but that I needed to get there and that I was really sorry. That's all I said.'

'He went off pretty quick.'

‘Oh yes. He’s off now to find the nearest bookie.’

She looked at Duncan with a mixture of admiration and disapproval. ‘How do you do it?’

‘How do I do what?’

‘That. People like you, doesn’t matter where you fall, you come up smelling of roses, don’t you? How do you do it?’

‘Ah,’ he smiled. ‘If only that were true.’ He pulled out into the fast lane and put his foot down to the board.

Doesn’t matter where you fall, she’d said. He’d fallen off horses enough times, that much was certain. He’d forgotten falling off more times than he remembered. Duncan started riding when he was five and owned his first pony shortly after that first day at the races. He’d ridden gymkhanas and juvenile events until he was impatient for the real thing. He was always falling off. But it wasn’t all roses.

Keeping a small training concern going was hard for his old man. It broke your heart and it broke your back. They had occasional help but mostly they had to do everything themselves. Even so, his old man always put Duncan before himself.

Then one year things started to look up. His dad’s hard work began to pay off and in one great season he had a slew of point-to-point winners. Then in the next season he started competing with the National Hunt big boys. He had winners at Cheltenham, took fourth place over the giant fences of the celebrated Grand National and finished a great run with victories at Punchestown in Ireland and at Sandown. People started looking their way. Owners were always dissatisfied if their expensive animals weren’t pulling in the prizes, and it was easy and lazy to blame the trainer; and so one or two owners were always moving their horses along. Some started to come to Duncan’s father.

And one or two big-time trainers didn’t like it. Duncan wasn’t aware – at the time – how easy it was to make serious enemies in horse racing. Ugly enemies.

At the track, the stewards pointed him to the car park reserved for owners and trainers. With the Lamborghini purring, he crawled into the parking area. He could see Kerry, already in his jockey's silk, standing outside the entrance, puffing on a cigarette and anxiously looking the other way. He slipped on some dark glasses and inched the motor as close as he could to Kerry and wound down the window. Kerry glanced over. He obviously didn't recognise Duncan in his shades, nor the car, because he looked away again. Duncan hit the horn.

Kerry looked over again.

'How are we for time?' Duncan asked him.

Kerry's handsome Irish jaw opened but he didn't say anything. He tossed away his cigarette and stalked over to the car. He peered inside and the skin crinkled around his steely-blue eyes as he took in the red-headed Lorna in the passenger seat, and the plush interior of the car. Then he stepped back and folded his arms, shaking his head in disbelief. 'And you can wipe that bloody silly smirk off your face.'

'Was I smiling?' Duncan said. 'We'll have to stop that, then.'

'How in hell do you do it?' Kerry said. 'Go on. Tell me. I'd really like to know.'

'I've no idea what you're talking about.'

'Really? No? Well tell me something else. Is that a nippy car?'

'Lamborghini? You bet it is.'

'Good. Because when you've finished your race, with the amount of shit you're in today you're going to need to get away from this place very fast.'

2

He'd told that copper on the side of the motorway that Trojan's Trumpet would finish in the frame, and he thought he might. The race was a seller, and Kerry was riding the fancied horse, but there wasn't much in it across a field of six over two-miles-and-four. He got off to a poor, leaping start and was slowly away with four in front, the field already lit up by Kerry. After the second fence a horse called Mountain Block moved up close by and Duncan felt a sudden impulsion from his mount. He gave her a squeeze and she followed Mountain Block. Duncan sensed that she'd got a good turn of foot. He decided to wait and bide his time.

Trojan's trainer Billy Miles had told him to stay on the outside, but Mountain Block tracked to the inner. He was going with it; fuck Billy, it was him riding the horse, not the trainer. Trojan had enough to go past Mountain Block, but Duncan held her, kept her back. He knew she'd got plenty.

It was something his dad had once told him. *Never disappoint a horse*. What he'd meant was that although a horse would often want to leap to the front and you had to hold it back, there were other moments when its mood and form flashed like white heat and you needed to let it go.

It was still about his dad. Well, that and the fact that Duncan was a competitive, bloody-minded and obsessive son-of-a-bitch who didn't like getting beaten at anything, whether it was a donkey derby on Skegness sands or the Gold Cup at

Cheltenham. Not that he'd ridden in the Gold Cup. Not yet. But that was coming.

Duncan wanted to give it all back to his dad. He wanted to repay him for all the sacrifices, the loyalty, the things he'd gone without. But time was not on his side. Dad was showing early signs of losing his memory. His own father had been a victim of early dementia, and both Duncan and Charlie knew that he was going the same way. There had already been a clinical diagnosis, and it was not good. Duncan didn't know exactly how many years he would have before the idea of repayment became meaningless. He wanted to do things for his dad before it was too late. He only knew that if he was to achieve any of this and soon, he'd better make smart use of the whip.

He was very certain of what had quickened his father's professional demise. Three terrific seasons had started to pull in the good horses. His dad changed his business model. Instead of scouting, buying, training and selling on quickly, he started to hang on to his winners and look upwards on the National Hunt calendar. The top races brought big cash prizes, and that in turn would attract still more owners.

It was all going so well. Then in a single season it all crashed spectacularly. Failure followed failure. Bad luck stalked bad luck. Then came the doping charge that destroyed him. It was crazy: there wasn't a more honest trainer in the country, but Charlie was hauled up and found guilty. He became ill with the stress and the worry of it all. His burgeoning training business collapsed.

They hit the halfway, the pounding hooves picking up in tempo now, and took a fence together sweetly, Trojan still tucked in behind Mountain Block. From there he moved past two of the other runners, who were never going to be on terms. Kerry was still way out in the lead with the second horse just a length in

front, kicking up a lot of shit into Duncan's goggles, half blinding him. The jockey on Mountain Block must have thought the same thing, because he squeezed up, and Duncan followed, still with plenty in hand, and they were through the shit-storm with only Kerry out in front but starting to look tired.

Duncan felt a familiar blood-surge in his brain. This was the moment. He lived for this precise moment. The sound of the hooves blotted out all other sound; the smell of the sweat on the horse's flanks obliterated all other smells; the grip of the reins in his hands and the balance of his toes in the stirrups were the only things he could feel.

We go, thought Duncan, and the horse, picking up his message, just breezed in front of Mountain Block and was soon pressing on Kerry.

Kerry looked back at him. 'Where the fuck did you come from?' he shouted.

'You've fucked it!' Duncan shouted, and he laid his stick over Trojan's haunches. 'You dropped your pants!'

'You're not having this one!' Kerry yelled back.

Duncan was fifteen when he left school. His dad gave him the choice and he leapt right out of the ring. But Charlie figured he'd already taught Duncan everything he could. With things going well, he had taken on other hands, and could afford to send Duncan to a stables where he might learn some new tricks. He'd chosen Penderton, run by an old friend, Dick Sommers. But mainly he had wanted Duncan to work with Dick's head lad.

To call a man closing in on retirement a 'lad' was just one of the many odd things about the racing industry. Head lad Tommy was the wrong side of sixty. A former jockey himself, he'd seen pretty much everything from the days long before TV cameras had featured at the tracks and changed the game. He

knew horses, and he knew where all the bodies were buried. He was a fierce taskmaster and had little to say to anyone, preferring to communicate by means of a growl and a curse and a stinging slapped ear.

But it was Tommy who found Duncan crying behind one of the stables at Penderton the day after the doping charge was made to stick. Tommy knew exactly what it was about. The grizzled old boy came up to him and fixed him with his unblinking green and yellow eyes.

‘Stop your snivelling. Now listen. Charlie’s a good ’un. He didn’t let anyone down.’ He held his hand up and Duncan backed off a little, thinking he was going to get a slap from the old man. ‘See that hand? Your dad can have that hand any day. I owe him. But I’ll tell you this for nothing, son. For nothing. He was done over.’

Ashamed to be caught crying Duncan tried to dry his eyes on the back of his hand. ‘What?’

‘You heard me, son. They got at him.’

‘Who?’

Tommy shook his head. He had eyes like ice in a yard bucket on a frosty morning. He poked Duncan on the shoulder with a hard, leathery finger. ‘Your old man’s a good ’un, and don’t you ever forget it.’

But the next time Duncan went up to Penderton, Tommy sent him to bring out a horse called Stormbringer. There in the stable, on the wall, was a dead betting slip. On the reverse were three names. They were the names of three top players in the field: a trainer, an owner and a major jockey. The handwriting was clumsy, almost childlike. Duncan knew that Tommy could barely read or write, but could do so well enough to write down the names of horses. This note was his work.

The dead betting slip was one issued by none other than Billy B. Bonsor, the bookie who had taken Duncan’s first ever bet. There was his slogan. *Payment as a Matter of Honour*. Duncan

memorised the three names and then tore the slip into tiny pieces. Then he walked out Stormbringer and looked across the yard.

There was Tommy, watching, giving him a look that was as old as time.

Old mates that they were, after the race Kerry and Duncan always exchanged banter and occasionally offered a little flick of the whip when one bested the other. The competition between them as conditionals had been keen. By the time they were full jockeys it was mustard. Now they'd skin a horse with a thin whip to get in front of the other, even if it took them through the gates of hell.

'Close thing.'

'Closer than you think.'

'No, I had you.'

'No you didn't.'

'You let me win, then?'

The stable lads led the horses away, and as Duncan carried his saddle back to the Weighing Room, Billy Miles came over. Billy was a decent trainer and Duncan didn't mind him, though he liked the owner of the horse, George Millichip, a lot less. Billy wore a brown fedora and a Berber coat and he had a way of squinting at you when he talked. 'Not bad,' he said.

'That's what I thought,' Duncan said.

'If you'd kept her on the outside you'd have won that race.'

'Not a chance, Billy.'

'You'll not be told, Duncan, will you?'

'Listen, I've just put a couple of thousand pounds' selling value on that horse for the owner and here you are looking like you've lost a fiver.'

'You can tell him yourself. He's on his way over and he's not best pleased with you.'

George Millichip, also wearing a brown fedora but with a camel-hair coat, came striding across the grass. He was already purple in the face. 'What sort of a game do you think you're playing?' There was spittle on his lip.

Duncan saw Billy look away. 'Well done, Duncan. You rode that nag to a good second place, Duncan. You made me a good few quid there, Duncan. Thank you, Duncan, here's a drink for you, Duncan.'

'I'm not talking about the race,' Millichip spat. 'I'm talking about your appalling behaviour. You were so late I was lining up another jockey. You left us no time for instructions. You made us look a pair of fools.'

'How about that! With no effort on my part!'

'What was that?' Millichip replied, angry.

Duncan stopped walking. From behind his saddle he said, 'You should never disappoint a horse. Did you know that?'

Millichip turned to his trainer. 'What the hell is he on about?'

'I'll tell you something else,' Duncan said. 'Did you realise you were breaking one of the rules of horse racing?'

'What?'

'You and Billy here. You're both wearing fedoras at the same time. You can't do that. Only one of you can wear a fedora. The other has to wear a flat cap or something.'

'What?'

'I mean, did you ever see Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin both wearing a fedora together? No. It looks wrong.'

Millichip stared back at him. Billy, chewing on his lip, squinted even harder and looked away again. Duncan hitched his saddle up. 'I've got to get weighed in, so's you can claim your prize money.'

They didn't follow him, but after a moment Duncan heard Millichip shout, 'That's your lot. That's the last ride you'll have for me.'

*

Duncan weighed in and started to strip off his sweat-soaked silks. As he was about to go into the shower, he got a message from his valet that another trainer, a man called Petie Quinn, wanted an urgent word.

Hair still wet and gleaming from the shower, he found Quinn waiting outside the Weighing Room. He was a stocky Irishman with a bullet head of close-cropped silver hair. He was a bruiser, but well-respected, if only middle-ranking. He pretty much kept himself to himself.

Quinn stepped up to Duncan, but from the side, as if he preferred to stand shoulder to shoulder. 'I saw how you rode that seller. Will you ride in the last race for me?' he asked.

'What's going on?'

Quinn looked round like there might be an enemy listening. 'I'm running Brighton Taxi in the last and she's good for a place at least, but my idiot jockey has broken his wrist.' He linked his arm through Duncan's and muscled him away from some eavesdroppers in the corridor. 'We're telling everyone he slipped in the shower, but the fuckin' idjit was making an early weigh and he dumped himself off the scales.'

'He did what?'

'Will you ride for me or not?'

'You're joking! He's riding steeplechasers and he fell off a weighing machine?'

'Yes or no?'

'You've got it.'

Quinn's big face broke into a huge grin. The skin crinkled around his eyes and he offered Duncan a shovel of a hand to shake. 'You do this favour for me and there'll be more rides for you. Plenty more rides.'

'One thing,' Duncan said. 'You'll have to tell George Millichip.'

'What? He doesn't have you exclusively.'

'No, you don't need his permission. Let's say it's a courtesy. Don't discuss it with him. Just let him know.'

Quinn shrugged. 'I'll find him in the owners' and trainers' bar and tell him right away. See you in the paddock.'

So it was one contact lost and another made. No change there then. But it did feel good to be driving out of the reserved car park in the sunflower Lamborghini with Lorna tipped back in the passenger seat as he toed the accelerator. The Lamborghini gargled fuel as he crept out of the gate, getting him attention he could take or leave. He'd made his mark on the card today.

'A first and a second,' Lorna said. 'Are you pleased?'

'It'll do nicely. I came here only expecting to get round on the first one.'

'What's it like to ride a winner?'

He looked at her as he edged out of the racetrack grounds and on to the high road. Her eyes were wide and she darted her tongue to moisten her lips. She wanted an answer to the question no one could ever really answer; the question posed by every lazy journalist who shoved a microphone or a notebook in your face. *How does it feel?* She was a beautiful and naive young thing; it didn't seem right or fair that he was going to have to hurt her just to get revenge on her father. He glanced at her again. Her hair was long and wavy and nut-brown, with natural red highlights; her skin was pale, but her lips were the same rosebud pink that appeared in her cheeks. Her hazel-brown eyes had a delicious sparkle, impossible not to see as an invitation.

He'd pushed Brighton Taxi with hands and heels to an easy victory. All Quinn had said to him in the paddock was to keep him near the front, then give her a squeeze when he felt the time was right. He liked that: a trainer who trusted a jockey to do the job. And it was the horse itself who'd told him when she wanted to go. Duncan had whispered *go on, then* and had given her the squeeze, and it was enough to run out an easy

winner. Quinn had been overjoyed and had hugged him like a bear in the winners' enclosure – this man he'd only met an hour earlier – and stood for the champagne afterwards. Duncan had one glass and Lorna had three. But the best part of it was to be raising his glass to the purple-faced George Millichip across the carpet of the owners' bar.

'What's it like to win? I can't tell you,' he said.

'Try.'

'If I told you it was like Christmas Day and your birthday and the first day of the summer holiday all rolled into one, it still wouldn't get close. How does this thing work?' he asked, indicating the eight-track tape-cartridge player in the dashboard.

She flipped the glove compartment open and found a cartridge the size of a paperback book. It had never been played. 'Old stuff. Jimi Hendrix. Do you want to stick it in?'

He smiled at her and asked her to turn up the volume. He drove out of Doncaster towards the motorway, and as he took the country lane approaching the slip road he noticed a muddy old sunken track between the trees. He bounced off the road and bumped the Lamborghini along the track, which was just about wide enough.

'What are you doing?' Lorna shouted.

'You want to know how it feels to win? Wait there.'

He got out of the car and walked around to the passenger door. When he opened it, Lorna's eyes were blazing at him. There was a soft smile on her lips, like she knew exactly what was about to happen. Duncan reached down the side of her seat, pressed a catch and the seat fell back, taking Lorna with it. She screamed in surprise and then giggled. But she stopped giggling when he reached both hands under her skirt and hooked his thumbs around the waistband of her semi-opaque black tights, tearing them from her in one deft movement. Her exposed legs were milky white and the neat triangle of pubic hair confirmed she

was a genuine redhead. He parted her legs and stuck his tongue deep inside her.

She was shocked. 'Don't do that!' she shouted.

He ignored her. She grabbed his hair, trying to pull his head away from her pussy. He resisted. At last he came up for air and said, 'It's what grown-ups do.'

'Really?' she said. Then she surrendered. 'Jesus!'

He forced down his trousers and got into a tangle until she helped him. He lifted her ankles over his shoulders and plunged deep inside her. They both howled as the psychedelic sounds of Jimi Hendrix blasted from the open doors.

Pretty soon he turned her over so that her pale rump was sticking up in the air. The smell of new leather seats and the smell of sex somehow got mixed up in his mind. He was trying to work her dress free over her head so that he could grab her tits at the same time. He managed to get it over her freckled shoulders, but the unbuttoned neck stuck to her skull like some kind of exotic headdress and wouldn't go any further. He gave up trying to rip the thing free. At last he swelled to double his normal size and came inside her.

He lay across her, his head on her shoulder as they waited to recover.

Finally Lorna said, 'Is that what it's like to ride a winner?'

'Pfff mhhh,' he said.

'What?'

'Pretty much.'

He dropped Lorna back at her mansion, but only after checking that Daddy Cadogan's helicopter wasn't on the pad. He wasn't quite prepared to meet the Duke just yet. Lorna told him to come in while one of the staff summoned him a taxi, but he didn't much fancy hanging around for the small talk, so she said she'd get a cab to pick him up on the road.

‘When will I see you again?’ she asked with spaniel eyes.

‘I almost can’t wait,’ he said, kissing her. ‘I’ll call you.’

He walked up the long driveway and waited at the gates for the cab to appear. It started to rain, so he took shelter in the trees, looking back at the lights of the grand house. He was already feeling a little sorry for Lorna. He didn’t have to be a psychologist to see that a kid like that was throwing herself at him because she had no decent family life. She was sweet. *But don’t go soft on her*, a voice in his head warned. *You’re here for a reason.*

The headlights of an approaching car washed over him, but he was hidden under the trees as it slowed and turned into the driveway. It was driven by a chauffeur in livery. And not in a helicopter this time but there in the back seat was Duke Cadogan himself, living it large.

That was close, thought Duncan as he watched the red tail lights recede up the long drive. After a minute the cab arrived. He flagged it down and got in, giving the cabbie his address.

‘Had a good day, sir?’ asked the cheerful cabbie.

‘It’s a struggle,’ Duncan said. ‘But you mustn’t weaken.’

‘Quite right,’ said the cabbie, who then went on to tell him what was wrong with the country, the government, the tax he had to pay, the immigration policy and the lousy through-flow of traffic.

There were worse things you could be, Duncan thought, than a winning jockey.