

Dream Rider¹ - By Wilf Voss

This is an early draft preview of the first chapter of my new novel, a sequel to my first book 'Twice in a Blue Moon'. I hope you enjoy it.

Prologue

"Well if you have just joined us you do so at a pivotal time for the equestrian team." The commentator paused looking down at the arena, the coloured jumps had been arranged, and it was obvious that everything was ready. "There is just one rider left and that is Caroline Gibbs, she has the chance for both the individual and team gold medals. All she has to do is to jump clear. This is truly a unique situation and what a lot of responsibility Caroline has on her shoulders right now as she prepares to ride."

Caroline was obvious to the commentators words as she sat on her horse in the collecting ring, Mozart playing in her earphones, an idea from the team trainer to block out anything that could disturb her before she rode in such a nerve racking environment. She closed her eyes for a moment allowing the piano notes wash over her. She knew that she could do well, she had ridden well throughout the previous rounds and she had a wonderful horse, together they were unstoppable. She felt a hand on her knee and opened her eyes; her groom looked up to her smiling. Caroline pulled the earphones out from under her helmet and handed her iPod to her.

"You can do it..." The girl was close to tears in just another couple of

¹ This is currently a working title and is subject to change prior to publication

minutes it would be over, she paused, gulping in air. "Good luck!"

Caroline smiled taking up the reins and rode into the arena. If she had not been aware of the near deafening sound she was now, she briefly glanced up at the stands all filled to capacity and the many cameras which would be beaming the event around the world. It had been said that this had one of the largest audiences because of the unique situation that Caroline found herself in with the two gold medals in her grasp.

She cantered her horse on allowing the cheers and applause to bolster her, then there was the sound of the bell, a hush fell over the stadium and it was time for her to perform. She pushed the horse on and towards the first jump. It was a simple upright; she approached counting the strides before pushing on. There was a moment when she was hanging in the air, and then clear one jump cleared and ten more to go.

Caroline pushed on clearing jumps, she knew that she had to be quick but could not make a stupid mistake she just had to jump clear. She took a tight line into the next jump... 'Slow down' she said in her mind, she was showing off trying to trim strides on the approach, the jump was clear but it had been close.

It was now onto the last approach, it was towards a simple upright. She pulled the reins checking her horse's progress towards the simple fence, this was it, jump this clear... She put the thought from her mind.

Caroline counted the strides, four, three, two... Suddenly something

was wrong; there was someone in front of her. She blinked there was a woman standing in front of the jump, she was facing away from the approach, seeming to study the fence. There was only one stride left, she was about to hit the woman who seemed to be obvious to her approaching. The horse started his take-off stride, Caroline stared at the woman who was unflinching she could not hit her.

It was a split second decision; Caroline hauled on her horse's reins as he took off and leaned out of the saddle to the side dragging the horse to the right. The horse was unbalanced and hit the wings of the jump landing heavily, its legs buckled beneath it and Caroline felt herself hitting the ground hard before the full weight of the horse slammed into her body.

"...And at the last moment she seemed to pull out of the jump. Team captain Sebastian Bowen-Smyth was unwilling to comment..." The television was re-showing the show jumping and in particular Caroline's spectacular last jump.

Caroline slowly opened her eyes, the light blinding her as she blinked and tried to fathom where she was and what was happening. Caroline attempted to sit up but found that she was unable to move. Even her head was prevented from moving, her neck held in place with a solid brace.

"Oh, you are awake? What a shame..." Caroline froze she recognised the upper class drawl of Sebastian Bowen-Smyth. He sounded angry,

this was not difficult or unfamiliar as he was always angry with Caroline, she had risen through the ranks from the lower classes as he had once sneered at her. She did not fit into the moneyed nature of the team and he had made it his aim to ensure she knew her place even if it was that she was one of the best riders. She could hear footsteps moving around her bed and the scent of Sebastian's aftershave before he appeared in her line of sight.

"Do you want to tell me what you were doing?" He paused, his usual sneer playing across his face, Caroline stuttered to afraid to answer. "No?" He sniffed. "Shall I tell you? I think that you tried to sabotage the team, I don't think you wanted to share the gold and wanted it all to yourself."

"No..." Caroline's voice croaked her mouth dry.

"Shut up!" He snarled. "I am not asking you Miss Gibbs. I know that you hated your team mates," He paused. "It is just good news that you are unlikely to be able to ride again."

"What?"

"Oh have they not told you..." Sebastian stared down into her face; a sudden smile crinkled his features. "You are not going to be able to walk again!" He laughed shaking his head. "Serves you right you stupid girl..." Caroline started to sob. "Oh shut up you snivelling bitch!"

"But the woman..." Caroline blinked. "There was a woman standing in front of the jump..." She gulped. "I had to stop, if I had hit her..."

"What are you babbling about?" Sebastian snarled. "There was nobody there. What are you trying to say?" He paused. "You pulled your horse through a jump for no reason." Caroline felt a sudden pain as Sebastian grabbed her neck brace and dragged her into a sitting position. "Look!" He gestured towards the television, which was high on the wall in the corner of the room. The screen showed the jumping again and a slow motion review of Caroline's last jump. She watched as the camera tracked showing her dragging her horse into the side of the jump. She gasped, there was nobody there. Sebastian let go of her and her body slammed back onto the bed. "There you vindictive bitch. You saw what you did. You had a clear jump and you blew it." He stood up. "You know they had to put it down?"

"What?"

"The horse... It had a broken leg. It had to be shot in front of the crowd." He stopped with his hand on the door. "Just think of the shame you have brought on us all. I pity you..." He paused and turned stepping back into Caroline's view. "I have a word of advice for you Miss Gibbs." He snarled. "Go away. And by that I mean get out of the UK. You will be a hunted person; you know the police are standing outside this room, for your protection." He laughed. "I should send them away, let the public at you." He stood up. "So my advices, get out, go and hide because you are no longer welcome here." He reached across to Caroline's show jacket and ripped the union jack badge from the pocket. With that, he stepped out of the door slamming it as he left.

Caroline tossed and turned in her bed, sobbing silently as she slept, Jacqui her roommate lay quietly snoring. In the shadows the woman stood unseen a smile playing across her face.

Chapter 1

Sunshine, warmth, the smell of horses, the sound of brushing and the laughter of grooms as they mucked out and swept down the yards. Adam Bishop stood at the foot of the yard and paused for a moment looking across the stable blocks, the horses and the staff. It never failed to make him happy, this was all his, even the responsibility for paying the bills in a recession, keeping staff and customers happy and constantly trying to make ends meet was pushed from his mind when he took the time to pause and take it all in.

An outside observer would probably see without Adam's rose tinted glasses and see the ramshackle stables some with peeling paint and rusting hinges, the unremarkable riding school horses, and the slightly shabby nature of the whole yard. However the staff were happy, the horses were well looked after and the contingent of clients and liveries kept coming back even if some of them could no longer afford weekly lessons.

Thirty-two years old, well-built and slim, brown haired and admired by the female staff and customers, spending his life working outdoors had left him tightly muscled and tanned, his regular uniform of tight black jodhpurs, long leather riding boots and polo-shirts often drew longing glances and lost moments. But he was obvious to his admirers as he was devoted to his wife Kate who often joked that he missed the effect he had on women around him. There was little jealousy and almost a sense of pride from her when she saw others spending time watching as he walked across the yard, however she was clear with others that he was hers. It was an

unspoken understanding on the yard, hands off, look but don't dare touch.

Kate was chief riding instructor and co-owner with her husband. She was thirty with messy blond hair and a similarly toned body borne of many hours each day riding horses and working hard. Although her face was always free from make-up she had a natural tone and warmth that made those that spent considerably more time and money on their appearance green with envy, however they would console themselves by looking at her short, cracked nails and rough hands.

Adam and Kate had met some years before when they had both been instructors at the yard, thrown together by fate before a romance grew between them and fate and circumstance had allowed them to take the reins literally as the owners of the yard. It had been a great moment and both of them could remember it well; they had been married at the local church and had held the reception on this very yard. However, since then the responsibility had hit home, it was like growing up. The fun and simple life of waking, working and playing had been hit with paperwork, accounts, cash flow, health, and safety. Adam took the lions share by mutual arrangement and would spend many hours struggling with regulations and bank statements wishing he had spent less time staring out of school windows and more time learning maths. But for now, that was behind him with this moment of clarity as he took in the sights, his small empire.

His reverie was brought to an abrupt end as he was knocked from behind by a wheelbarrow slamming into the back of his legs. He

stumbled as the barrow toppled spilling its stinking contents over him as he lay on the yard.

"Oh shit!" Caroline scrambled to right the barrow. "Shit! Shit..." She took Adam's hand and helped him up. "Are you okay?" She started to brush him down. "Look. I am so sorry."

Adam smiled pushing her away. "Okay, no harm done." He paused. "Are you okay?" Caroline stepped back turning slightly and looking down. "What's up Caroline?" Adam took her hand and drew her closer. Caroline shivered involuntarily. "If something is wrong, you know you can tell me..."

Caroline glanced down at her boots. "Sorry. I have just been really tired for a few days. I haven't been sleeping too well." She paused. "I have been having nightmares." She shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry, I am just being stupid." She grabbed the handles of the wheel barrow and started to walk away. "I'll sweep that up."

"Caroline wait a moment..." Adam shook her head as she walked away. Caroline had been a member of staff and a good friend for as many years as he could remember. They had worked together as grooms and now she was one of the team of riding instructors. She was a hard working local girl, twenty-six years old with mousey brown hair which she pulled back into a ponytail. She had always been slightly flighty, always a little nervous but she was well respected by the rest of the staff and loved by her customers. Adam always ensured that nervous or unsure riders were taught by Caroline, she had the patience and caring nature to ensure that they built confidence.

"Morning scruffy!" Kate grabbed Adam round his waist and they kissed deeply, he held her in his arms. "You left early this morning, didn't want to wake me up then?" She laughed. "And what have you been doing?" She brushed wood chips and straw from his legs. "Been having an early roll in the hay have we?" She hardly finished her sentence when Adam grabbed her around her waist tipping her up and hefting her onto his shoulder. "Oi!" She laughed.

"Go on say that again..." Adam laughed as he strode across the yard until they were standing beside the muck heap. The heap was steaming and stood in a morass of thick black mud. He teased her pretending to drop her in a particularly deep puddle.

"Okay! You win..." Kate laughed, kicking her legs. "Put me down, I have my best jods on..."

"Put you down?" Adam paused looking innocently towards Kate.

"No..." She shrieked. "Don't you dare!" She struggled as he lowered her until she was just inches from the mud. "Adam!" He laughed and swung her from his shoulder and back onto the yard. She slapped him on the shoulder. "Oh, you would have regretted it if you had dropped me." She laughed.

"Promises, promises!" He laughed and kissed her lightly. "When are you teaching today?"

Kate glanced at her watch. "Oh shit! About five minutes ago! That's your fault!" She ran across the yard where there were five horses

being mounted by customers, Caroline was holding a piebald gelding for Kate to mount. "I am so sorry!" The women laughed, they had been kept amused by Adam's antics. Caroline gave Kate a leg-up and they walked their horses across the yard and towards a bridle path onto the moor.

Adam waved as Kate rode off and walked towards the office, there was work to be done. How he wished he could just spend his day riding and mucking out but there were important things to attend to.

'Mr Bishop - I feel we need to have a conversation'

Adam shuddered as the machine stopped and informed him that this was the end of messages. The voice was so familiar to him and it chilled him to the bone, it needed no number or further information he knew that he was being summoned and that he dare not refuse. He hit the delete button and slumped down into the chair.

At that moment the door swung open, Adam nervously looked up but it was just Jacqui, one of the younger grooms. She had left school last summer after having spend many years working as a helper during the weekends it was a natural progression to become a member of the team full-time. "Kate forgot her phone!" She grabbed the mobile from the desk. "Are you okay?" Adam looked up.

"Yes..." He paused. "Sorry, I'm fine Jac's, just a bit distracted that's all." He smiled and watched as she stepped from the room and dashed across the yard where Kate was waiting. Adam smiled she he

watched the other riders laugh and joke with Kate, she was blushing as they rode out onto the moor. It seemed to be a day for distraction.

Adam sat back down at the desk, he felt it was best to immerse himself in work. He grabbed a box file and started to sort through receipts and invoices.

Caroline turned the corner, she glanced up at the woman who was standing beside one of the stables, pausing, there was a moment of recognition but Caroline could not think where she had seen the woman before. She shook her head and stepped towards her. "Hello, can I help you?"

The woman turned round slowly. Caroline felt a sudden urge to run away, a chill running down her body. "Hello... Caroline."

"Do I know you?" Caroline stuttered.

"Not yet..." The woman smiled. "Oh but you will..."

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't be..." The woman reached forward and touched Caroline's cheek. Caroline pulled away, stepping back quickly as if from an electric shock. The woman laughed. "Oh Caroline... We are going to have such fun!" The woman turned and started to walk away.

“Are you okay?” Caroline jumped as she was touched on the shoulder, she span around and saw Sarah standing on the yard beside her. “Sorry, you were just standing there, you seemed to be lost in your own world.”

“Do you know who that woman was?”

“What woman?” Sarah frowned. “There was nobody here?”

“She was just here...” Caroline’s voice faded.

“I have been here for a minute or so, there was no one here Caroline.”

Caroline shrugged. “Sorry Sarah, just me being daft.”

Kate turned around in the saddle and saw that her riders were all keeping up. She enjoyed this group, they came once a week for a hack across the moor, supposedly an hour but over time Kate had ensured that they would stay out riding for at least a couple of hours. They were good company and there was always laughter and good conversation between them as they rode. The path in front of them opened out into a vast expanse of moorland. Kate took a deep breath, she had lived and worked around this part of Dartmoor all of her life but it still impressed her. She felt free when she was out here in the open with miles of open country before her. Of course it could be dangerous out here, the weather could change at a moment’s notice and there were cliffs, mine workings and bogs which

presented hazards to the unwary but that was part of the attraction. There was laughter from behind her, Kate pulled her horse across and rode beside the rest of the riders.

"Go on..." She laughed.

"Oh we were just laughing about you and Adam this morning..." Sue smiled putting her hand on Kate's thigh. "You are so lucky to have him."

"He has his moments you know..." Kate smirked. "He snores terribly you know..."

"Yeah! Well if you decide to push him out of your bed, just send him to me!" Sue winked, there was loud laughter from the other riders. Kate blushed.

"No chance ladies!" She laughed. "I've told you before. Hands off!" She pushed her horse on into a canter. "Come on girls; race you to the top of the ridge!"

The five women cantered and then galloped towards the top of the hill pulling up their horses at the ridge. They were all laughing and joking as the conversation moved on to a terrible blind date from one of the other women and deeply descriptive discussions of the date's failings in bed.

Caroline splashed cold water on her face, the meeting with the woman had left her shaken. She stared into the cracked mirror, she was looking gaunt and gray, she looked at her bloodshot blue eyes and there were bags beneath them showing her lack of sleep. She sighed, turning ready to face the world when she froze. She span back towards the mirror, blue eyes? Surely she was not going totally mad? She leaned forward staring into her eyes which had been brown. She suddenly felt a wave of fear flooding her body, she felt as if she was watching the world as if it was a film, her reality slipping away.

“Hello Caroline...” She spoke, watching her lips move and her voice filling the small bathroom but aware that this was not her. “It’s time for me to play now...” She laughed manically.

To be continued...