



Present Day

Chapter One

Failing the entrance exam on purpose had been the best thing Lottie had ever done, she reflected in satisfaction as she stuffed her blazer into her backpack and skipped out of the doors. Now, instead of being stuck at Telsteads, the fancy private school her parents wanted her to attend, she went to St Johns, renowned as one of the worst schools in the county. But Lottie didn't care about the dismal playground, or the tired buildings, or the teachers

that never stuck around for long, because it wasn't the school she was interested in. It was something far more important than that. Just fifteen minutes' walk away from the school lay Wild Hill, home to her grandparents, her very own paradise.

St Johns was on the edge of a tiny market town, beyond which the hills rose up mist-shrouded, a hue of browns and greens and purple. The hills lay between the sea and the farm, wrapping the fields in a protective embrace. There were ponies on the hills, little brown ones with mealy noses and fuzzy manes, an ancient breed that only added to the magic. The whole area was now criss-crossed with gallops, installed by racehorse trainers who used the undulating lie of the land to keep the thoroughbreds fit, just like Lottie's family had generations before. But there were no racehorses at Wild Hill any more, just an assortment of ponies belonging to livery clients. And then there was Patch. Her heart lifted as she thought about the beautiful, wildly talented skewbald pony with his bristly mane and enormous jump. She'd see him soon, she thought happily. In just a few minutes time...

"Dad!"

Lottie stopped in her tracks, startled to see a familiar figure waving at her. He was standing next

to his huge car parked in the school lane, wearing his work suit. He did something in banking, but Lottie wasn't exactly sure what. Her mum did something similar. Long hours, meetings all over the world, networking and mingling and crunching numbers. She crossed the road, feeling anxious. Her dad *never* collected her from school. What if he had bad news? Mum, or Granny, or her brother over in America? But Lottie's dad was looking positively cheerful.

"Great news, Lottie!" He beamed, and Lottie peered up at him. "I've just come from Telsteads. They're considering my appeal." Lottie swallowed, remembering how she'd failed the exam deliberately. She'd felt fine about it at the time, sitting in the hall, tracing the grains on the wood desk with her finger and gazing out of the window, hoping to spot some horses.

The fallout had been explosive, and her dad didn't even know that she'd done it on purpose, believing she just hadn't revised properly, which had been bad enough. He'd been on a one-man campaign ever since, determined to get Lottie a place at the school.

"So that's super, isn't it?" Lottie's dad continued, cutting into her thoughts. "If they agree, they'll want you to retake the exam soon, probably early in the

summer holidays. Then you can start there in the autumn. You'll have missed the first year, but you'll soon catch up. And you can leave this place at last." He looked up in undisguised disgust at the school, side-stepping a boy who lumbered past, football in hand. "Dreadful."

"It's all right." Lottie felt a flash of anger. The local comp suited her just fine. She could take the early bus, have an hour at Wild Hill before school, and then take the last bus home after an evening helping out in the yard. Homework would get done at lunchtime – or sometimes, Lottie admitted, not at all. But St Johns wasn't like Telsteads with its high academic standards, so she just about scraped by, with a mixture of luck and a quick brain.

"I'll be OK staying on here. I wouldn't fit in at Telsteads. It didn't suit Harry, and it wouldn't suit me!" Her voice was growing shriller as she referenced her older brother.

"It *did* suit Harry." Lottie's dad frowned. "And he could have succeeded there if he hadn't thrown it all in to go and live goodness knows where in America. Your granny filling his head with silly ideas, and now you too!"

Lottie felt her lip tremble. She missed her brother

terribly. Always on her side when it came to horses, he'd left almost two years ago, quitting sixth form and heading over to Florida to work in a fancy showjumping yard.

"There's nothing for me here, Lotts," he'd said at the time, using the nickname he'd given her when she was little. "Wild Hill's gone to pot. Just a load of eccentric horse ladies. I want the big time."

"It hasn't!" she'd protested, heavily defending her grandparents' livery yard. "It's perfect."

At first, Harry had kept in touch with lots of messages and photos, but now she hardly heard from him at all.

"So I'm your last hope then?" She brushed away an angry tear. "Harry didn't live up to your expectations, so now you're pinning them all on me?"

Lottie's dad sighed.

"No, it's not like that," he said, his tone slightly softer. "We just want the best for you, Lottie. And don't you remember, when we looked around Telsteads? The *horses*, Lottie. They do riding lessons. You even said how smart the equestrian centre was. Harry rode there."

Lottie thought back. Telsteads did indeed have horses, and offered lessons as part of the curriculum.

But it was all so regimented, so timetabled. Trotting around once or twice a week on the pale sand on a school horse she wouldn't have a connection with, not like Patch. She couldn't just hang around the stables, soaking it all in like she did at Wild Hill, or canter on her own up the russet hills. And she remembered how fierce and uptight the equestrian manager had been, nothing like her granny. Harry used to call the manager an old dragon.

"I don't want that," she muttered. "I just want Wild Hill. Please, please let me stay at St Johns."

Lottie's dad folded his arms.

"You know things aren't easy at Wild Hill. Your granny and grandad, they're getting older, and Grandad's suffering with his back. They won't be able to cope with that big house and all that land forever, and look." He paused. "Your mum and I have been doing a lot of thinking."

"What thinking?"

Lottie looked up sharply. This subject seemed to be cropping up a lot lately.

"I mean, they ought to be selling in the next couple of years. I know Granny always brushes us off, but it's got to happen at some point, and if they don't do it themselves, their hands are going to be forced anyway,

the way the business is going. Nothing's getting better there. Worse, in fact. And your mother and I can't take it on. It's a huge amount of work; an endless money drain. And what do we know about running a yard?"

Lottie shook her head. This conversation had been had already, and every time, Annie and William had rebuffed any thought of selling Wild Hill. It was just talk, Lottie thought desperately. The stables were full of livery yard clients. It was busy and, to Lottie, thriving.

"We'll look over some past exam papers again later, just in case." Her dad opened the passenger door, and Lottie shot him a confused look. She always went to the yard after school. "Your mum's got an evening meeting, so it'll just be you and me. We can have chips. I'll pick them up on the way home." Lottie felt a stab of guilt. It was rare her dad was around for her tea.

"But I'm off to Granny's," she said, and her dad shook his head.

"Not tonight," he said. "If we're going to have a chance with the resit, we need to take it seriously, don't we?" He raised an eyebrow and Lottie remembered how cross he'd been about the first exam. "I'll let Granny know."

“But, Dad,” Lottie started, but she knew it was no use. She climbed reluctantly into the car with a growing sense of dread. She’d deliberately failed her exam, but had she now made things ten times worse? Her dad wouldn’t stop until she was walking up those intimidating Telsteads steps. Wild Hill and the ponies and Patch would be the very least of his concerns.