

TALENTED HORSEWOMAN

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TALENTED HORSEWOMAN

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Draumr Publishing, LLC
Maryland

Talented Horsewoman

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There is no ISBN associated with the electronic version of this book.

PUBLISHED BY DRAUMR PUBLISHING, LLC

www.draumrpublishing.com

Columbia, Maryland

Printed in the United States of America

DEDICATION

To my husband Bob, who always believes in me.

CHAPTER 1

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If only. Those two little words were to haunt me for weeks. If only I hadn't put off getting my hair trimmed, I wouldn't have had to spend so much time trying to tame what had become an unruly mop of brown curls. If only I hadn't paused to answer the phone, I wouldn't have wasted ten minutes on a telemarketer who repeated my name—Leigh McRae—twice in every sentence, as if that would prompt me to buy the magazines she was selling.

I finally cut her off and, still feeling no sense of urgency, sauntered out to my truck. Later I would wonder why I'd given in to a demon caffeine habit that had dictated I stop for coffee at Bo's Diner, and then linger stuffing my face with a jelly donut.

It wasn't until I'd licked the last bit of sugar from my fingers that I finally considered I'd be late for my appointment with Rita Cameron if I didn't hurry. I drove a few miles over the limit until I came to a construction zone, where I lost all the minutes I'd gained.

Cursing under my breath, I inched my way past a mile of traffic cones, then sped the rest of the way down a country road to whip the truck into Rita's driveway. I bounced through a pothole,

rounded a bend, and let out a muffled shriek when I registered a horse barreling toward me. In a microsecond I hit the brakes and jammed the shift lever into park, barely avoiding a nasty collision.

A sorrel filly streaked toward the truck at dazzling speed before sliding to a stop that left grooves in the dirt. Without pause she rolled on her hocks and changed direction, racing back toward the barn. After a quick circuit of the corral, she finally slowed from a gallop to a prance, flying her flame-red tail like a banner and holding her head as high as the prow of a sailing ship.

My breath whooshed out. The one horse stampede was over. Another second or two and the filly I knew as Sandstone Tinker Star would likely head for the patch of Bermuda grass near the hay barn and settle down to grazing—easy for me to catch her and put her back in her stall. But before I could act, a screaming woman brandishing a flimsy pine branch flashed into view from the left, and Tinker turned on the afterburners.

I leaped out of the truck and hit the ground running, my arms whirling like plane propellers. “Stop screaming and waving that stick around. You’re scaring her.”

The branch-wielding woman showed no signs of having heard and, as Tinker raced past, she planted her legs wide apart and landed a solid blow on the filly’s rump. Without missing a beat, Tinker fired with both hind legs, barely missing the woman’s head. The filly’s tail swished and she swerved toward the training arena.

By then I’d had time to conclude that the horse-chasing woman was Millie Destin, Rita’s neighbor from across the road. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to end up getting kicked or worse.

I turned to follow Tinker’s movement, hoping she wouldn’t head back toward Millie. As I tracked the galloping form past the barn, a bundle of rags on the ground hardly merited my attention—until an instant later when I realized the bundle wasn’t rags. With a jolt somewhere in the center of my chest, I forgot all about the horse and stumbled forward a few steps.

“Oh, my God, it’s Rita,” Millie sang out, echoing my thoughts. She scurried over to grab my arm, her fingers digging in

like pincers until I peeled her loose. I glanced sideways and noted her complexion was the color of an undercooked biscuit.

We moved closer and I saw that the figure was indeed Rita Cameron. Holding on to each other for support, Millie and I stared down at Rita. She lay on her stomach, her face pressed against the concrete that formed a parking pad in front of the hay barn. Blood had pooled around her head.

I dropped to my knees to feel for a pulse in her neck. Nothing. I knew it might be dangerous to move her if she were still alive, but she wasn't breathing. CPR might be her only chance, so with Millie's help I rolled her over. Then I wished I hadn't. Rita's blue eyes were wide open and had taken on the blankness of dolls' eyes. Her blood-caked face was tinged purple.

"She's dead, ain't she?" Millie stuck her hands in the pockets of her baggy overalls. She screwed up her mouth in an attempt at a smile as if we were simply discussing last night's rain, but I couldn't miss the wobble in her voice.

I nodded. I'd never seen a dead person up close, but there wasn't a shade of doubt. Living people have light in their eyes.

"Must of fell out of the hay loft." Millie bobbed her head to reinforce her conclusion.

I swallowed hard, barely able to take in that Rita was gone. "Looks that way."

A soft whicker drew my attention back to Rita's filly. After ending her race at the edge of the woods, she'd ambled back as far as the training arena gate where she stopped and watched us, her head lowered and her ears flicking back and forth. For the first time I saw a bright smear of crimson on her right shoulder.

"We better call someone," Millie said.

"Yeah." I scurried across the driveway to the stable, kicking up pale clouds of dust that didn't even have time to settle on my jeans. With shaking fingers I punched in 911 on the phone in Rita's office.

The authorities summoned, I walked back with a lead and snapped it onto Tinker's halter. Maybe I should have stayed with Rita, but I couldn't bring myself to look at her again and, after all, help was on the way. I led the filly into the stable and inspected her shoulder. A ten-inch long ragged gash ran from her chest at an

angle toward her withers. Not deep, but still nasty looking.

“Barbed wire,” I said out loud. But Rita didn’t have a foot of barbed wire on her property.

By this time Millie had left the arena to join me. “Horse got cut over at my place.” She jerked her thumb to indicate. “Galloped too close to my front fence.”

Rita had told me a few days ago that Tinker had managed to flip open the latch on her stall and she was going to have to get a clip for the latch to keep the filly from getting loose again. I glanced at the stall door. It looked like Rita hadn’t gotten around to the chore.

I put Tinker in the wash rack, using cross-ties to hold her. Then I hunted in Rita’s feed room until I found a tube of antibiotic ointment. I washed the wound, then layered on a generous amount of ointment.

I rejoined Millie in the yard and we waited—me still fighting back nausea and leaning against my truck with my arms wrapped around myself, Millie pacing in front of me, occasionally shaking her head. It was a beautiful March day, warmer than normal even for a Florida spring, and the sun was dazzling. The sky was as blue as I’d ever seen it, the color of Texas bluebonnets, without a wisp of a cloud anywhere. Still I shivered as if I were outside without a jacket in the middle of December.

“I didn’t know Rita was around,” Millie said, crossing her arms over her chest. “That horse—the one running loose—trotted into my yard right before you showed up. He trampled half my plants before I managed to chase him back across the road.”

But first she’d chased Tinker close enough to a barbed wire fence to rip her shoulder open. And then she’d almost gotten herself kicked in the head.

“You didn’t see Rita when you got here?” Of course she hadn’t. We’d spotted the body at the same time.

“Lawd, no. I was too busy trying to run that animal back into the barn. I was planning to give Rita a piece of my mind, too. Hey, ain’t I seen you around here?”

“I’m Leigh McRae, a friend of Rita’s from the horse club.”

“That’s it. I don’t have horses myself. Prefer hogs. But Rita never liked my hogs and I reckon they didn’t like her. Hogs are

smart as people, you know.”

I gritted my teeth. Why was she talking about hogs when all I could think about was Rita with half her skull crushed?

A siren screamed in the distance, and I turned to peer toward the road. But because of the bend in the marl-surfaced driveway, as well as a line of Brazilian pepper trees along the fence, I couldn't see the road from where we stood. Moments later the siren stopped, and a rattle of broken shell and loose dirt got louder as an ambulance and a car from the sheriff's department appeared around the bend.

I peeled myself away from the truck to intercept the two deputies heading for the stables. “Over there,” I said, pointing toward the larger barn where Rita stored her hay. They reversed direction.

I experienced an odd sense, I guess I'd call it surreal, as I watched the scene unfold in front of me. The ambulance crew, a man and two women, rushed up carrying cases of medical equipment. They snapped on rubber gloves and positioned themselves around Rita; one of the women whipped out a stethoscope.

A black Jeep Wagoneer slid to a stop behind my truck and a plump woman wearing a platinum blonde wig eased out from behind the steering wheel. Paris Winslow. She used to be Olive Winslow before she gave herself an upgrade to a classier name. Real estate saleswoman and part-time newspaper reporter for the *Del Canto Star*.

I winced when I saw her lime green polyester pantsuit. In a moment of even more bad taste, she'd accessorized with neon pink shoes, pink purse, and pink plastic beads that matched her lipstick. She leaned inside her car and exchanged the purse for a gadget-encrusted camera, a mini tape recorder, and a notebook. Neither the paramedics nor the deputies objected when she started snapping pictures. Her husband was the county sheriff, Dude Winslow.

The dust had barely settled on Paris's Wagoneer before a generic, county-issued car rolled up and parked alongside the ambulance. If people kept showing up, we'd soon have the population of a small town milling around Rita's barn.

A man wearing a navy blue sports jacket, white shirt, and dark

tie emerged from the county car. A black woman in a navy pantsuit got out from the passenger side. After briefly checking out the scene next to the riding arena and consulting with the paramedics, the woman led Millie to the shade of an oak tree. The man—thin and with a severely receding hairline—strode over to me and said, “Hey, darlin’. I’m Art Frazier, detective with the sheriff’s department. Mind answering a few questions?”

I felt my back stiffen and the surreal feeling evaporated. How would he like it if I called him darlin’ or maybe honeypot? “I’m Leigh McRae. Millie Destin and I found Rita Cameron dead next to the arena.”

“You seem a little shook up. Want to sit down?” Detective Frazier flipped open a notepad and drew a pen out of his shirt pocket.

“I’m fine,” I said. It was a lie. I was still trembling and probably even paler than Millie’s biscuit color by now, maybe as pale as the white Del Canto, Florida Horse Club shirt I’d put on this morning. I took a deep breath just as a random breeze from the east floated the sour smell of Millie’s hog farm into my personal space.

“What time did you find the body?”

“Right before I made the call to 911—about nine. I came over to pick up a load of hay we’d split. The first thing I noticed was a horse running loose.” I pointed toward the barn as if Frazier could see through walls. “Millie was chasing the horse with a branch. When she galloped between the arena and the hay barn I turned to watch, and that’s when I saw Rita.”

“A loose horse? Could it have run her down or kicked her?” Unlike mine, his voice was flat, completely lacking in tell-tale trembles.

“No.” I shook my head. “A horse won’t deliberately run into something—or someone. And that filly is gentle.”

I’d bred and raised Tinker myself. Last week I’d sold her to Rita, and if there was a sweeter filly in the state, I didn’t know about it.

“So you don’t think the horse hurt Ms. Cameron?”

“Millie and I thought Rita must have fallen out of the loft. She knew I was coming to pick up my share of the hay and she was most likely up there getting a head start, throwing the bales down

for me to pick up.”

“Looks that way.” Detective Frazier shook his head. “She should have waited for help. Lot safer to do a job like that with a spotter. Especially at her age. How old was she, about sixty?”

“Fifty-nine. Rita always said the good Lord would come for her when it was time.”

“Reckon he showed up with a one way ticket this morning. Religious lady, was she?”

I nodded. “She once told me she’d read the Bible cover to cover five times.”

“Religion’s a nice thing, real comforting, but it can’t protect your skull if you don’t take precautions.” Frazier nodded sagely.

I didn’t know what precautions could prevent gravity from pulling someone to the ground really fast if they fell out of a loft twenty feet in the air. I was sick over Rita’s death and I wanted to go back and check on Tinker. I glanced at my watch.

Detective Frazier jotted in his notebook. Finally he snapped it shut and squinted at me. “I can see this is a real upsetting time for you, Ms. McRae. I’ll contact you again if I have any more questions.”

“Sure.” I didn’t expect to hear from him again. I supposed there would have to be an autopsy, but from what I’d seen and what Frazier had said, it seemed clear that Rita had fallen from the loft and landed on her head. Nothing but a tragic accident. Except...something about the scene didn’t seem quite right, but I couldn’t think what was wrong.

