

Travelling

GILLIAN
WELLS

CHAPTER 1

Sam woke with a start and drew the horse blanket she had wrapped herself in closer around her. Boy, was it cold out here in the centre passage of the American barn she was sitting in. She stood up from the folding chair stiffly and peeked over the loosebox door at the sick horse she was supposed to be minding; she hadn't meant to doze off, she was just so tired. The horse lay flat out, a beautiful big bay horse, he seemed to be snoring gently. He had been sedated not hugely but enough to keep him quiet and it was working it seemed. Unusually, he had meningitis which was something Sam hadn't really come across before and earlier in the day, it had been very scary with the horse throwing himself around and hitting his head on the wall. He had a massive temperature before that but no other symptoms. The vet had come quickly when this had happened for which Sally the stables owner had been grateful. The vet wasn't a hundred per cent sure of the cause but a blood test had been done. After taking a small amount of spinal fluid, the results would be back as soon as possible.

Sam, sighing, resumed her uncomfortable seat; she was under strict orders not to enter the loose box but to call for help if the horse's condition worsened.

Sam wriggled her toes, which she could hardly feel – they were so cold. Looking at her watch, she saw it was only one o'clock – ages till the morning. Oh well, she would just have to grin and bear

it. Her mind wandered to her current situation. She was twenty-five, a plain jane who loved horses and who had dropped out of university to be a glorified groom. Occasionally she regretted it, like now, but mostly she was happy enough. This was a hunting and point-to-point yard. She had recently worked in a showing yard and before that, a racing yard. She hoped to be here for a while. She had only been here a week and felt a bit hard done by to be asked to sit with this horse.

Hearing a movement in the loosebox, she got up and peered in. All the lights were out there was only a dim mobile light rigged up near her and her torch, which she now carefully used to see in again. She carefully shielded the beam as Mac the horse didn't like light, another symptom of the illness.

He was trying to get up but was too wobbly and couldn't quite make it. Sam watched anxiously. Should she call Sally on her mobile or wait and see what happens? She decided to wait. After several futile attempts, Mac flopped down again and resumed the funny snoring noises he was making before. Sam decided to leave him be, hoping it was the right decision. After a time though she changed her mind as she could hear his breathing becoming erratic and after picking up her mobile, she rang Sally who was only across the other side of the yard. Having spoken to Sally, she went into the box where Mac was again trying to stand. She had been told not to but she couldn't stand watching him struggle. Poor chap was soaked through with sweat and one front leg was curled under him and he didn't seem to have the strength to pull it out and get up. Sam pulled his leg forward and with a heave, Mac got to his feet and stood, swaying. He looked terrible with swollen eyes where he had hit himself and he was sweating so much it was running

down his legs. He staggered forward, seemingly not knowing what he wanted to do. Just then Sally appeared at the door.

‘What the hell are you doing? You were told to stay out of his stable.’

‘But he was struggling to get up and—’

No more was said then as with a huge groan Mac fell down again. As he did so, he hit Sam hard and sent her back against the padded stable wall. Sam wasn’t really hurt but a bit shaken and was thankful they had padded the walls earlier with loads of straw.

Sally glared at her and turning away, rang the vet again and told him Mac’s condition seemed to be worsening.

Half an hour later the vet arrived. In the meantime, Sally and Sam had stood and watched in tense silence as Mac seemed to be getting worse – *if that were possible*, thought Sam. It felt dreadful watching the poor horse but there was nothing they could do.

John the vet looked frowned and shook his head when he saw the state of Mac. ‘I can’t give him any more drugs. I think we may have to end his suffering.’

‘We can’t do that until I have spoken to the owners.’ Sally sounded desperate.

Just then, Mac had a huge convulsion and then lay still. John went and placed his stethoscope against his chest.

‘He’s gone,’ he said. ‘Sorry, Sally. I felt yesterday it was too late, but we tried.’

Sally shook her head, tears forming in the corner of her eyes. ‘You think it was definitely meningitis?’

‘I am as sure as I can be but of course, we won’t know for sure until the results are back.’

‘Is it contagious?’

‘Well, I am pretty certain it’s a bacterial infection. He may have had a small scrape or cut and the bug got into his system and settled in and around the brain and spinal cord. Even if he had recovered, he may not have been much good. Hunter and point to pointer, wasn’t he?’

Sally nodded, not able to speak. Sam stood by, feeling slightly sick, also tearful but as she had only been there such a short time, she hardly knew the horse much less the owners.

Sally drew a deep breath and seemingly remembering Sam was there, said, ‘You can go now and you needn’t get up first thing.’

‘Thank you,’ Sam mumbled, feeling even more upset at Sally’s brief dismissal but nevertheless, she thought Sally must need some time to come to terms with losing the horse in such a way.

She let herself out of the sliding door and crossed the stable yard, which was built in a square. Above the administration offices, there were two tiny flats for staff. Sam was sharing with two other girls: Lisa and Ann. It was pretty cramped but warm and the bed was comfortable. However, Sam knew she was too wound up to sleep so tiptoed into the kitchenette and filled the kettle before putting it on to boil. Try as she might, she ended up waking the other two girls.

Ann just called out, ‘Keep the noise down, can’t you?’

Lisa appeared, pulling on an old dressing gown.

‘What’s happened? I thought you would be there most of the night.’

‘Mac died.’ Sam’s eyes filled with tears.

‘Oh no.’ It was Lisa’s turn to cry.

Sam made tea for them both and they sat at the bench; there was no table to sit at and talking in whispers mulled over what had happened.

Sam hadn't really had much chance to talk properly to either of the girls and she soon found out that Ann had been there the longest and then the three young men who shared the other flat and then Lisa who had been there for about six months.

'Most of the horses we have in now are turned away during the summer months then in that time Sally gets in youngsters to break in and others that need schooling.'

'Yes, I knew that from what she said when I applied for the job. Sounds interesting,' said Sam.

'What made you come here? You were in a showing yard before, weren't you?' Lisa asked.

Sam shifted uncomfortably on her stool; she didn't want to go into details. 'Uhm, well, I just thought I would like to experience other disciplines – that is all.' Sam felt very uncomfortable; she didn't want to tell Lisa the real reason if she could help it.

Lisa yawned. 'I better get back to bed else I will be late in the morning and the boss won't be happy.' With that, she headed for the bedroom they all shared.

Sam would have loved a shower but decided against it or else it would disturb everyone – the pipes made no end of noise.

Finally, she crawled into bed but her mind had her tossing and turning for a long time. Should she have opened up to Lisa and told her the real reason why she left her previous employment? Finally, she decided that no it was nothing to do with anyone else so best to let sleeping dogs lie. It was too personal and too emotional but sometimes she felt she really needed to offload on someone.

CHAPTER 2

Sam squinted at the small clock by her bed. She had switched the alarm off last night, though she had vaguely heard the others' alarms go off, she thought, hours ago. However, when she got her eyes to focus, she found it was still only six-thirty. Not much of a sleep-in. Her body clock seemed to think she should be up. She went to the bathroom and then snuggled back under the covers. No need to surface yet! After trying to go back to sleep for about half an hour, she got up. It may be warm in bed but when wide awake, it was boring!

She made herself some coffee and toast and then wrapping up warmly, she went out to face the day.

She had two horses that were her special ones to look after though in truth, everybody helped everybody so apart from exercising them, she didn't really have more to do with them than any of the others. She walked across to Bobby's stable and found that Ann was busy grooming him; they had just come back from exercise.

'Oh, hello, Sam. Didn't expect to see you yet Sally said you had the morning off – bit grim about Mac, isn't it?'

'Yes, it was horrible watching him die. We felt so helpless John said that there wasn't any hope and was going to put him down if the owners agreed.'

'Hurrumph.' Ann made a noise not unlike a horse. 'Doubt they would have agreed; they are only after the glory of the race track,

not the horses' welfare. They would love to own a steeplechaser to do the big time but I don't think they are quite well off enough for that. Takes a lot of dosh for it to be worthwhile.'

'We had owners like that in the last yard I worked in, only after the glory. Thought maybe this would be a little different,' replied Sam.

'On the whole, yes. The clients who only hunt are caring on the whole. Sometimes they do silly things and most who have pointers are good too but you get the odd owner.' Ann shrugged.

Just then Sally rode into the yard with Jake and Roy: two of the lads that worked there on Hunters that they had taken out for exercise. The hunting season proper had hardly started with the opening meet only three days before. The days were getting shorter and shorter and soon it would be too dark to take the horses out very early in the morning though everyone would still get up early to muck out and do as many jobs as possible before exercise. Hunting mornings; there was much to do readying the horses that were needed that day. They had to be plaited up, hooves shone tack pristine then rugged and transported to where ever the meet was.

The point-to-point horses of which there were several didn't stay out for a full day's hunting as they only had to make an appearance really to qualify for racing. Since the hunting ban too, it was very different to the old days. On the whole, people didn't stay out all day like they used to.

Sally looked across at Sam and said, 'When you have finished gossiping, I would like a word in the office.' She dismounted and handed the reins of the horse she had ridden to Lisa, who had been mucking out that horse's box, and then walked across towards her office.

Ann raised her eyebrows at Sam but said nothing so Sam walked across to the office, wondering what it was all about. She wasn't worried; she had only been there five minutes and couldn't think she had done anything wrong.

'Last week,' Sally said without preamble, 'you cleaned Mac up after cubbing?' It was a rhetorical question as Sally knew Sam had.

'Yes, I did.'

'You didn't see any cuts or abrasions?'

Sam started to feel both worried and angry she could see where this was going.

'No, none at all. One heel was slightly sore but the skin wasn't actually broken; I sprayed it with antiseptic just to be certain. Why? Am I being blamed for something?'

'Well, Mac's owners are not happy, having been told by John that an infection may have got into his bloodstream they are out to blame someone and—'

'And the someone is me.' Sam was angry now – very angry.

Sally had taken her helmet off as she spoke and now pushed her hands through her hair in a desperate fashion.

'I am sorry, Sam, but I am going to terminate your employment. I can't afford them suing and that is what they are threatening if I don't find a scapegoat. You have only been here two weeks as they know and they asked lots of questions last night when I rang to tell them Mac had died. I think it's best this way. I rather gather you have a history that isn't so great anyway.'

'In the middle of the night! You had a discussion like this in the middle of the night.' Sam was incredulous. 'Why not wait until this morning when everyone would feel calmer?'

It was Sally's turn to feel uncomfortable and she wriggled on

her chair. 'Yes, it does seem rather a knee-jerk reaction. I could have another word, I suppose. They aren't the easiest to deal with though so don't hold your breath. If their attitude is the same, you will have to go, Sam. I am sorry. I just can't afford to lose customers, which is something else they are threatening.'

Sam stood for a few moments, clenching and unclenching her hands. Finally, she said with a sigh, 'I suppose if that is what they want your hands are tied but it's very unfair. Please, give me another chance.'

'Go and help with the mucking out, Sam, I will see what I can do,' Sally said.

Tears of frustration and anger filling her eyes Sam turned and left the office. She had left her last employment in unhappy circumstances and she'd only been here two weeks; it really was very unfair. She didn't know what she would do if she lost this job. She certainly wouldn't go home. Her parents and brother had all been against her dropping out of college and becoming involved with horses anyway. They all said there was no future in it and it looked as if they were right.

Her father was an accountant and not remotely interested in any animals, dogs, cats, horses, nothing. Her mother quite liked cats but her brother was allergic to cats. He found this out when going to a friend's house as a child.

Lisa waved to her from across the yard and picked up a fork that was leaning by the wall. Sam walked over, desperately trying to stifle her tears.

'What's up? You look upset?' Lisa looked hard at her. This undid Sam and a few traitorous tears trickled down her cheeks. She always made out she was tough but everything and everybody

seemed to be against her.

Lisa put down the fork she was using and pulled Sam right into the loosebox she was cleaning. The horse was tied up outside the door. Lisa put her arms round Sam and hugged her, saying, 'You don't want the whole yard to see your tears, do you?'

Sam shook her head mutely, hugging Lisa back.

'I am guessing this is to do with the Sinclaires' horse, Mac, am I right?'

Sam nodded again, trying hard to stop the tears.

'They are not nice people. He is a feed merchant and I have a feeling Sally owes them money.'

'But she had their horse here,' Sam said, gaining control of herself.

'I know but I have heard lots of rumours since I have been here and Sally seems afraid of them.'

'I am getting the blame for Mac dying and I think I am going to lose my job, and I've only just come.'

Lisa frowned. 'Surely it's not that bad. Sally wouldn't just sack you on such a flimsy excuse as that.'

Sam shrugged and was still trying to gain control as she started to shake the bed up and break up the wedges of straw that Lisa had brought in to make a better bed for the horse. That stable was done and the horse outside was let back in. Lisa and Sam moved on to the next one. The two girls worked side by side until the stables that they had to do were finished; they worked well as a team, Sam thought.

When they had finished, they all walked across to Sally's house, which stood on one side of the yard. Loose boxes took up two sides of the square Sally's house a third and the fourth was a tack room, feed store, office and above that, the accommodation.

It was a given that when all the stables were done, they had a twenty-minute break in Sally's large kitchen. Coffee, tea and cake were on the menu. They all bustled into the kitchen; it was cold out and there were red noses though they were all wrapped up warmly and mucking out stables had warmed them all up. The dogs, of which there were several, begrudgingly moved away from the range, which was lovely and warm. Everybody gravitated as near it as possible. They were all well into their tea and coffee when Sally appeared.

Sally looked grim but she didn't say anything but sat down and started to give out instructions for the day and which horses the farrier was attending to and various other jobs that needed doing. However, she didn't give Sam anything specific to do and Sam's stomach, which had this knot of anxiety in it, started to make her feel sick. She sat tight and soon everybody had gone except Lisa who was hovering by the sink. She gathered up all the mugs and started to run water into the basin.

'Leave that, Lisa!' Sally spoke sharply.

Lisa turned around. 'I am waiting for Sam,' she said.

Sally sat, looking from one to the other a moment, then said, 'I am sorry, Sam, but I will have to let you go with immediate effect.'

'You can't do that – it's not legal! What about the contract? And it's not fair either,' Lisa said all this while Sam sat dumbfounded, not knowing what to think. She was only just settling in; it was beyond belief that the owners could be so unfair.

'Like the rest of you when you came here, Sam was on two months' probation so I can do this without infringing the contract and the Sinclaires want someone's head to roll. This way, it is easier for the rest of you. I admit, it's easier for me too. I will give you a month's wages to see you through, Sam, but I am afraid you will

have to find other accommodation as they want you gone.'

Anger took over in Sam then.

'How can you be so mean? It was nothing to do with me, the stupid horse getting ill. I didn't even look after him – I only helped Jake out the other night as he had so much to do. I wish I bloody well hadn't now and where am I supposed to go just like that?' Tears of anger and frustration were threatening again but Sam managed to hold them in check; she didn't want to humiliate herself in front of Lisa and Sally.

Then Lisa surprised them both by saying angrily, 'If Sam goes, I go.'

Sally looked aghast at this.

Sam too was shocked. 'Lisa, you don't need to do this. I will be okay, honestly.' Somehow, Lisa's statement had taken the fire out of Sam and she didn't want her to give up her job for her – no way.

'Don't be silly, Lisa, this is nothing to do with you. You are a valuable member of the team and I don't want to lose you. You are needed here.'

'I am not staying here when you treat your staff so badly or at least Sam. She has done nothing wrong so if that is how it is I am off too.'

Sally had a temper and now she lost it. 'Go then, I shall be glad to see the back of you both. Stupid bloody girls – I can find better staff than you any time.'

The three of them stood, glaring at each other for a moment then Sally turned on her heel. 'I will sort out your pay while you pack.'

Sam and Lisa walked across the yard and climbed the stair to their tiny flat; they were both surprised to find Ann already up there. She was supposed to be helping Roy clip a big horse.

‘Sorry you two but I was eavesdropping. Seems as if I am going to have this place to myself for a while. I will be sorry to see you go – especially you, Lisa. You’ve been here, what, three months now?’

Sam was surprised when she heard this as she had thought Lisa had been there much longer.

‘Lisa, I feel so bad about this. Why don’t you change your mind and stay?’ she now said.

‘Nah, I was fed up here, anyway. You were just an excuse really, so don’t feel bad.’

The girls set about packing. Neither of them had much stuff; mostly jeans, jodhpurs, boots and warm outdoor wear. Sam had a rather clapped-out old car but it had passed the statutory test so it was roadworthy. At least they had wheels but where to go? They were chewing this over when Jake came up to them with an envelope for them both from Sally – inside were the wages she owed them and a brief reference each.

Jake stood, hovering, then pushed a piece of paper into Sam’s hand. ‘That might help you two,’ he said and walked off without a goodbye good luck or anything.

As they were getting into the car, Lisa didn’t have transport. The others came up and wished them luck.

They drove off down the lane then Sam pulled into a gateway not far from the stables. ‘I can’t believe that in this day and age, we have just lost our jobs or rather I have – you resigned and we have nowhere to go. What are we doing and where are we going?’

Lisa was busy undoing her wage packet. She read the reference and swore.

‘Bloody woman was pretty mean with the truth,’ she said. ‘Not much of a ref, is this.’

Sam pulled hers out of her pocket and Jake's piece of paper fell out with it. Sam picked it up off her lap and smoothed it out. She read it twice before she said, 'Well, well, what do you know.'

'What is it? Let me see,' said Lisa.

Sam handed it over and Lisa read it then looked at Sam with a big grin on her face. 'How exciting is that?' she said.

Sam knew she was two or three years older than Lisa but just then she felt a lot older. 'It may be exciting but is it feasible? We can't just go and do it. We need visas, some sort of credentials... have you a passport?'

'Well, yes but it may be out of date as I was still at school just started high school in fact but it's easy enough to get one.'

'We will also need money to see us through, airfares and things. Have you any savings?'

Lisa looked a bit shamefaced. 'No, not really but my parents will lend me some I am sure... well, quite sure, or my brother. What about you?'

'I have saved a small amount and I can sell this old thing.' She patted the steering wheel. 'Not that it is worth much. Anyway, our immediate concern is finding a bed for the next few nights; it's too cold to sleep in the car.'

'My parents will put us up unless yours will or are closer.' Lisa looked at Sam expectantly.

'Mine live in Surrey. What about yours?' Sam held her breath as she said this. She certainly didn't want to go home.

'Oh, much nearer than that – they live about fifty miles away in Norfolk, let's go.'