CHAPTER 1

Hollie

I'M FLYING.

It's a moment of perfection, of weightlessness, of freedom.

Then a slight bump, a readjustment as Milo's hooves hit the ground and we move together away from the jump.

I steady him, then canter smoothly around the arena, his hooves making rhythmic thuds against the sandy surface. Easing him down to a walk, I stroke his muscled sweat-damp neck, sweeping his mane to one side to scratch at his favourite spot. The horse shakes his head, stretching out his neck as I give him rein.

Beth climbs down from the fence surrounding the arena, awkward with her six-month-old baby, Thea, secured to her front in a carrier.

"Good work. You guys are looking great." She strokes Milo's nose as he reaches over to say hello to the baby. "Don't over-do the jumping this week; let yourselves have a break, but keep up the fitness. Take him out for a hack or something." She scratches behind his ears. "But you'd better hurry or you'll be late for school."

Thea fusses for a second, then lets out a full-bodied wail.

Beth sighs. "Here we go again."

I sigh too. The freedom, strength and power jumping gives me drain away, leaving me with the usual heavy feeling that now follows me everywhere. I slide off Milo, patting his neck and rubbing his nose when he turns to snuffle me.

"Thanks, Beth," I call after her. "I'll see you later."

The March sun is beating down and it's only 7:30 in the morning. I cool Milo down, then slide the saddle from the big horse's back and hose the sweat off him, getting soaked by the spray every time he shakes his head or swishes his tail.

I try to enjoy this time, because I'll have to spend the next six hours trapped in stuffy classrooms, surrounded by people that, on the whole, I hate being around. Of course, there are one or two exceptions, but the vast majority of students at my school are definitely not my kind of people. I'd much rather be here with Beth and Milo and the other horses.

Milo is Beth's horse - all of them are - but I like to pretend he's mine. He's a gorgeous dark bay: a chocolate-brown coat with a slight reddish tint, and a black mane, tail and legs. A splash of white across his head is the only marking on him. He's not even sixteen hands high, so not big for a competitive showjumper, but his size suits me fine.

Not that he's a particularly competitive showjumper with me on his back. Before Beth got pregnant with Thea, they were ranked second in the area circuit. But then Thea happened, and Beth stopped riding in the fall-out of whatever happened with the baby's father.

I don't know the details. I mean, why would Beth share her personal life with the random girl she was effectively guilt-tripped into giving a job to? But I have heard she gave him the

boot before anyone knew she was pregnant. Maybe *she* didn't even know. Either way, he's long gone.

When I needed a job, or anything to get me out of the house in the wake of the diagnosis, Mum arranged for me to start working for Beth. I know what I'm doing around horses, but I gave up riding my own horse last year.

It's a good job. I didn't realise how much I'd missed being around the animals until I started coming here.

As well as giving me something to do with my time, it checks off some other treatment requirements, including being outside, getting some sunshine and keeping active. And riding sure as hell beats running, though I still have to do that at least a couple of times a week.

"I promise I'd much rather be here with you," I murmur to Milo as I scrape the excess water away and dry him off. He nickers and lips at my sleeve. I rest my head against his neck and my hand finds his favourite spot for scratches under his mane.

An engine flares to life and I glance up. There's a dark green car rolling up the driveway. I've never seen it before. I definitely didn't see it when I arrived, so it must have been parked in the garage. Who could it belong to? Not that it's any of my business.

"C'mon Milo," I say, untying his lead rope. I'm going to be very late for school if I don't hurry up. He follows me towards the paddock. As soon as I unclip the rope he trots away, joining the few horses Beth has left.

Before Thea, she had a whole string of them, mostly belonging to other people who paid her to ride for them. It sounds like a dream job, except for living up to the crazy high expectations of the owners.

I grab my bag from the car and slip in the side door of Beth's house, through the laundry and into the downstairs bathroom. It's suddenly cool inside the old farmhouse, and I take a moment to savour it before stripping my horsey clothes off to step into the barely warm shower. I wash away the arena grime and sweat and try not to think about the day ahead.

The actual schoolwork is fine; it's the people, and having to bear the weight of their heavy expectations, that fills me with dread.

But there's nothing I can do about it. It must be done.

I shut off the shower, dry quickly and pull on school clothes. Tying my hair into a loose braid finishes it off. I check my phone for the time, and curse. I really am going to be late.

I'm most definitely not flying anymore.

CHAPTER 2

Jonathan

BREATHE.

Breathe.

In and out.

That's it.

That's all I have to do.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

I'm sitting in my car at the far end of the carpark staring at the buildings in front of me.

My new school.

Students are standing around in groups, and most are beginning to wander towards the classrooms. Girls are tossing their hair, guys are checking out the girls as they toss their hair. There's laughing. A lot of it. And more than one couple making out. God, it all looks so simple – like my life was only a few months ago.

I've been sitting here for at least half an hour. I slipped out of my aunt's house as soon as I could this morning. I didn't need the inquisition I know she had lined up for me, or the perplexed looks or over-the-top kindness while she tries to

figure out why I gave up my life to move here and shovel horse shit for her.

I study the crowds, the buildings, taking in my new surroundings. My hands clench the steering wheel. I only realise when my knuckles start to ache.

Five minutes to the bell.

There are only a few stragglers in the carpark now and I need to find the office, sign in, get my timetable, then start finding my classes.

Another deep breath.

Another.

I grab my backpack, slide out of the car and slam the door behind me.

Staring down the building, I stride across the carpark. A silver car comes hurtling down the row and I stumble as I throw myself out of the way. My palm hits the concrete and heat flares across my skin.

The hatchback is stopped now, beside where I'm sprawled on the ground. I climb to my feet and wince as I swipe my grazed palm across the denim of my jeans.

"What the bloody hell!" I slam my uninjured hand on the bonnet of the car and turn my angry glare on the driver.

The girl sits frozen for a second, hands grasping the steering wheel. The moment our eyes meet she leaps into action, jumping out of the car and rushing towards me.

"Oh my God. Are you okay?" She looks up at me and she must see anger in my expression, and frustration.

She stops. Takes a breath.

"I'm so sorry," she says, her voice quieter, less panicked. "I didn't see you. Are you okay?"

I study her for a moment, my feelings bubbling below the

surface. I take in the loose braid, wisps already escaping and falling around her face, her pink t-shirt and denim shorts, and take a breath myself.

"I'm fine," I mumble, no longer able to look at her, shame washing over me. Once upon a time I'd have laughed that off, made a joke and probably flirted with this girl. I definitely wouldn't have lost my shit. "I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have walked out in front of you."

"I was late, going too fast." She raises a hand towards me as if to touch my arm and I notice her trembling.

"It wasn't your fault. I need to go. Don't worry about it." I slide away from her, stride across the carpark and disappear into the sea of students congregating outside classrooms.