Nightstorm and the Grand Slam

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Chapter 1

It was day one of the Badminton Horse Trials. The first crucial phase of the three-day event was underway and throughout the morning, one after another, elite combinations of horse and rider had performed their dressage tests with precision and elegance as the crowds in the grandstand looked on.

The sun was high in the sky by the time the final competitor rode into the main stadium. Like the other riders before her, she was dressed in a long black tailcoat and a silk topper. Underneath the top hat, her startlingly youthful face was fixed in a serious expression as she took her last warm-up lap, cantering her magnificent bay horse around the perimeter of the arena.
“Ladies and gentlemen,” commentator Mike Partridge began his introduction, “our last rider of the day is only seventeen years old and this is her first time here at the Badminton Horse Trials. However, do not dismiss this young equestrienne just because of her age. Two weeks ago this talented girl rode at the prestigious international Kentucky Four-Star in Lexington, USA and took home the winner’s medal in an astonishing performance on a horse that she had ridden for the first time just two days before!”

Mike Partridge’s voice shrank to a whisper as he watched the rider on the bay stallion line up ready to begin her test.

“We have already seen her in the arena this morning, putting in a very good performance on Victory, the Australian-bred gelding owned by Mrs Tulia Disbrowe. This is her second ride of the day, on her own horse this time…” Mike Partridge paused for dramatic effect, “…ladies and gentlemen, this is Isadora Brown riding Nightstorm!”

As she cantered down the centre line, Issie tried to keep her composure. To the crowds in the stands she might have looked calm and collected, but beneath the
heavy tailcoat her shirt was soaked with sweat. She was exhausted and shaken, having just spent the past hour in a heated battle of wills in the warm-up arena with Nightstorm – a fight that had ended emphatically when the stallion finally threw a massive hissy fit and bucked her off!

“Easy boy,” she murmured as they halted. “Please don’t lose it again, not now…”

Storm was the most talented horse she’d ever ridden – but the counterbalance to his genius was a hot temper which surfaced at moments like this one. She’d been trying to practise their flying changes when Storm had decided he’d had enough of this dressage stuff. Putting in a swift and violent buck, he’d taken Issie totally by surprise, and before she knew what was happening the ground was rushing up to meet her.

The sand of the arena made for a soft landing and there was no damage done – apart from a slight dent to her top hat. Still, it was the last thing her nerves needed right before going in to perform her test and as she dusted herself off and mounted up to enter the arena she felt very rattled indeed.

As she saluted the judges and cast a glance around
the crowded stands of the main stadium, she hoped that Storm had got it out of his system. If he threw her again here in the arena – with thousands of eyes upon her and everything they’d worked for on the line – it would be another matter entirely.

Urging Storm forward into an extended trot, she had a sick sensation in her belly. They were about to cross the centre of the arena and execute the first of three flying changes. This was the moment of truth! Would Storm fight her again, in front of everyone?

Bracing herself for the worst, Issie put her legs on and asked the stallion to perform the first change. There was a moment of terror when Storm swished his tail – but he didn’t buck. He changed legs perfectly at her command and Issie felt a wave of confidence surge through her. Storm was on her side and he was moving magnificently as she urged him on through two more flying changes and then came down the long side of the arena in a graceful extended canter.

“My word!” Mike Partridge sounded frightfully impressed. “A stunning extended canter – just look at the paces on this young horse!”

In the arena, Storm was performing a half-pass,
crossing his legs like a ballerina. The stallion seemed to float above the ground, neck arched in submission, muscles and sinews flexing and trembling as he carried himself across the sand surface.

“Nightstorm has the most remarkable bloodlines for an eventer,” Mike Partridge continued. “He was bred from Isadora’s pony-club mare – a chestnut Anglo-Arab named Blaze. Nightstorm’s sire was the great Marius, one of the legendary horses of the performing Andalusian troupe – El Caballo Danza Magnifico – and certainly you can see from the way this young stallion moves that he has inherited his father’s incredible movement and grace.”

As Mike Partridge was speaking, the bay stallion flew through the last flying change, and then cantered once more up the centre line to complete the final manoeuvre of the dressage test.

Issie halted the horse square, saluting in three directions to the judges who were placed around the sides of the arena, and then, dropping her reins, she bent down over her horse’s neck with a huge grin covering her face and gave him a massive, slappy pat.

“And she has every reason to be happy with that!”
Mike Partridge enthused. “That superb test will put her right up there on the leaderboard!”

As she exited the arena to the applause of the crowd, Issie was shaking from the adrenalin rush of performing. At the start of her test she had been genuinely worried that she might be publicly dumped to the ground by her temperamental, difficult horse. Instead, Storm had shocked her completely by delivering his best-ever dressage performance!

Outside of the arena and out of view of the crowds, Issie threw her arms around Storm’s neck, able to give him a proper hug at last.

“You are a super-clever boy!” she said proudly.

“Don’t give him all the credit!”

Issie turned around to see Tom Avery smiling at her.

“You deserve the lion’s share of the praise,” Avery insisted. “It was your riding that saved the day in there. Storm was on a hair trigger the whole time but you handled him perfectly.”

Issie brushed off the compliment. “He’s not trying to be naughty, Tom, he’s just got too much energy.”

“Well, he’ll need all of it tomorrow,” Avery said. “That cross-country course is over six kilometres long.”
Badminton’s infamous cross-country phase was considered to be the most difficult four-star track in the world. For the riders who survived and made it all the way round, the showjumping would follow the day after. It would take a clear round in both of these disciplines, as well as an excellent dressage test score, to bring home the coveted trophy.

Despite her stellar performance at Kentucky, Issie was far from the favourite to claim glory here at this prestigious British horse trials.

Her win in the States had been put down to good fortune. Valmont Liberty was an eventing superstar and there were some on the eventing circuit who speculated that Issie had been handed a gift when she was given the last-minute chance to ride on a push-button mount.

In reality Liberty was far from easy to handle and her win at Kentucky had been hard-fought. But clearly the bookies believed that Issie was a one-hit wonder and had put her odds of winning at 50-1.

There was no chance of Issie repeating her dream ride with Liberty here. Kentucky was only two weeks before Badminton, which made it impossible to ride the same horse at both events as you couldn’t transport a horse
from the USA to England with enough recovery time to compete.

But Issie had never planned to ride Liberty, or her other Kentucky mount, Comet, at Badminton. Her plan had always been to keep two of her best horses back in England. Nightstorm and Victory had both been chosen over a year ago as her Badminton rides.

Victory had been an unexpected but very welcome addition, not long after they’d moved to England and set up their stables at The Laurels, a farm in the heart of Wiltshire.

Issie knew Victory from long ago. She had once ridden the athletic brown Thoroughbred at the Pony Club Express Eventing competition in Melbourne, Australia. Then, out of the blue, Victory’s owner Tulia Disbrowe got in touch to ask if Issie wanted to take over the ride on her horse.

“Victory’s rider had a bad fall at the Adelaide four-star,” Tulia explained over the phone from Australia. “He’s fractured his back so he’s out for the rest of the season. I’ve trialled several other jockeys but none of them really clicked – and then I thought of you. I hear you’re setting up training stables with Tom Avery and
Francoise and I was wondering if you'd like to take the horse to England with you.”

Issie couldn’t believe it. Over the years since she’d last ridden him, Victory had become an experienced advanced eventer. He was competing at four-star – the very top level. And Tulia was offering to sponsor him to the UK so that Issie could ride him!

One foggy morning in December, Avery, Issie and Francoise met Victory off the flight from Melbourne at Heathrow, and after the gelding had been through quarantine they took him home to The Laurels where he settled in as if he had been there all his life.

When the eventing season got underway a couple of months later, Issie began riding Victory on the circuit. It didn’t take long to rebuild their bond and by the following October they were in good enough form to place third at the prestigious Boekelo horse trials in the Netherlands.

By the season’s end, both Victory and Storm had clearly marked themselves out as the stars of The Laurels’ stables. When the call for entries for the Badminton Horse Trials rolled around, there was no doubt in Issie’s mind that they were the ones she wanted to ride.
Entering two horses was common practice at Badminton. However, Issie had her work cut out adapting her riding style between them.

Victory was a typical Thoroughbred – catlike and elegant with lean limbs and a gallop that swallowed the ground on a cross-country course – Nightstorm was burly and heavy-set with the strong haunches and powerful neck that spoke of his Andalusian bloodlines.

But it wasn’t just their physiques that were opposite. Their personalities were also worlds apart.

“When you ride Victory, you ride with your head,” Francoise once said. “Nightstorm is different – he must be ridden with your heart.”

The French dressage trainer was right. To get the best out of Storm, Issie needed more than technical perfection – she needed to emotionally connect with the stallion; to convince him that he wanted this as much as she did.

It wasn’t easy. Storm had a mind of his own – as he had proven today in the warm-up arena! Even as a young colt he had been headstrong, and now that the stallion was fully grown he had become even harder for Issie to manage. Issie would often end a schooling session
frustrated by the power struggle between her and the obstinate bay stallion. She would have given up on him entirely if Storm weren’t so ridiculously talented. His dressage paces were elevated and spectacular, his jumping ability was unrivalled, and despite his burly conformation he was speedy and agile across country. He was the perfect eventer. Or at least he would have been if it weren’t for his unpredictable dressage antics. At the Boekelo horse trials, he had thrown what could only be called a tantrum – kicking out his hindquarters in a dramatic buck every time Issie asked him to change his paces. Issie had stayed onboard but she had left the arena almost in tears.

“Storm’s problem is that he is too clever for his own good,” Francoise had consoled her back at the horse truck that day. “He knows all the dressage moves, but he is easily bored and some days he simply cannot be bothered! That is the price you pay for his genius. When he is bad he is horrid, but when he is in a good mood – he is unbeatable.”

Today had definitely been a ‘good mood’ day. It had been a fabulous test and as Issie rode back towards the stables Stella came running up to greet her.

“They’ve posted your scores already!” she said.
“How did we do?” Issie asked as she vaulted down off Nightstorm’s back, passing Stella the reins.

“Guess!” Stella said brightly.

“Stella!”

“Come on!” The bubbly redhead grinned. “Take a guess.”

“Stella!” Issie took off her top hat and wiped her forehead. “I’m hot, I’m exhausted and I’m not in the mood for guessing games! What was my score?”

Stella pulled a face. “You know you were more fun before you turned pro…”

Issie shot her a glare and Stella laughed. “OK, no messing around. You really want to know? You got thirty-eight!”

Issie’s jaw dropped open. In eventing a low score was a good thing. She had been hoping for perhaps something in the forties. But thirty-eight? It was beyond her wildest dreams.

“So where does that put me?” she asked Stella. “Have I made the top ten?”

Stella smiled widely at her best friend. “Better than top ten,” she said. “Issie, you’re sitting at number three!”

Issie couldn’t believe it. A few minutes ago she’d been
on the ground dusting the arena sand off her top hat, and now she was on the leaderboard in third place with the cross-country and showjumping, Storm’s two best phases, still to come!

As they walked back to the stables, Issie tried to contain her excitement. After all, this was Badminton, the biggest four-star competition in the world, and there was so much that could still go wrong in this dangerous game.

She had no idea how right she was.