



Chapter 1

Families

The winged horse was covered in a layer of fine dust. It was in a corner of the crowded window of a little antique shop, where Georgia had been to look at it every day on the way home from school since it had first appeared. That was a month ago and she had saved up nearly enough money to pay the price on the little white label tied round its neck.

Saving had taken a while because most of her pocket money went on lessons at the riding school, which she could afford only once every two weeks.

‘Why does she have to have such an expensive hobby?’ her stepfather Ralph had grumbled to her mother, when they first kitted her out with hard-hat and jodhpurs. ‘Why can’t she be interested in the sort of things other girls like?’

‘And you think those are cheap?’ Georgia’s mother had mocked, in a rare moment of taking her daughter’s side. ‘Just be glad she doesn’t want new clothes every week or make-up and mobile phones and hair dye. Besides, she pays for the lessons herself.’

That had been two years ago, when Ralph had first married Maura and brought his son Russell to live with them. But at the thought of Russell, Georgia’s mouth went dry and she felt her palms sweating. Quick, concentrate on the winged horse.

If you could really find a horse with wings in nature, it would be so easy to take off into the sky on its back and ride away for ever. Georgia closed her eyes and imagined the movement of a horse beneath her, the moments of changing up from walking to trotting, trotting to a canter, cantering to galloping and then, yes, why not one more shift? Like feeling fifth gear on a motorway, there would be one more smooth transition and then the beating wings would lift horse and rider away from solid ground and up where no one could reach them.

A rapping on the glass made her eyes fly open. A face with grey hair and glasses was looking at her through the window and making beckoning gestures. Georgia recognised the antique shop’s owner – Mr Goldsmith, if his name was the same as the faded letters over the shop window. He beckoned again and she pushed the door open.



Paolo knew that the black filly had to be moved from the city as soon as possible. If news got out of the

miraculous birth, she would be at risk from kidnappers. It was a fantastic piece of luck that this had happened to their ward of the city, the Twelfth of the Ram, and a good omen for this summer's Race of the Stars, but Paolo was adamant that it should be kept secret.

'We can't race her,' he told Cesare. 'We'd never be allowed to get away with such an advantage.'

'But we wouldn't be able to race her this summer anyway,' said Cesare. 'She'll be too young.'

'Don't be so sure of that,' Paolo replied. 'These winged ones are said not to be like other horses. They grow at a different rate.'

Father and son kept guard all night, rubbing down foal and mare with straw and giving them clean bedding and fresh water. It was true that the black filly seemed strong and mature within a few hours of her birth, but horses were like that anyway. It was one of the many things Cesare liked about them, the way that their babies got up and got on with life. Not like his little sisters and brothers, who needed so much of his mother's attention and took such ages to turn into proper people.

He much preferred being in the stables with his father, with the warm smell of horses, to staying in their crowded house which always seemed to be full of washing and bubbling pots of baby semolina. Besides, this was the only place where he could get Paolo to talk, to tell him about miracles like the winged horse.

'Every hundred years or so,' said Paolo. 'That's how often it happens in Remora. It's the first one I've seen – and it came about in our Twelfth.' Paolo was

jubilant. 'It's the best thing that's happened to the Ram in my lifetime.'

'But *how* does it happen?' asked Cesare. 'I mean, we know the sire. You had Starlight covered by that stallion from Santa Fina – what's his name? Alessandro. There's nothing special about him, is there? A great horse, of course, and he won the Stellata in '68, but just a horse – no wings.'

'It doesn't work like that,' said Paolo slowly, looking at Cesare thoughtfully and weighing his words carefully. 'There's no way you can determine the arrival of a winged one by using a stud book. It happens when times are unstable – as indeed they are now – and it is a good omen for the Twelfth where the foal is born. But it doesn't guarantee success. And it carries its own dangers with it.'

They decided to move the mare and her filly the next night. It would be safe to take her to Santa Fina in the dark. Alessandro's owner, Roderigo, was someone they could trust and the filly could be kept hidden while she grew. If word of her presence got out, the Ram's rivals, particularly the Twelfths of the Twins and the Lady, would move heaven and earth to capture her and rob the Ram of their good luck omen. It would be safe enough to reveal her once this year's race was over.

'What shall we call her?' asked Cesare.

'Merla,' said his father decisively. 'Blackbird. May she ever fly true.'



The inside of Mr Goldsmith's shop was the untidiest,

most interesting place Georgia had ever seen. It was a complete jumble of furniture, ornaments, clothes, weapons, books, jewellery and cutlery, all mixed up together. The untidiness intensified in the area behind the cash-desk, where a brass umbrella-stand held two swords, a blunderbuss, a green silk parasol and a pair of crutches. Mr Goldsmith's chair was wedged between tottering heaps of sheet music and scuffed leather-bound books. He peered at Georgia from within his fortress.

'You've obviously taken a fancy to something in my window,' he said. 'I've seen you looking in most days at about this time. So, what's the problem? Not enough cash? Come on lad, spit it out!'

Georgia felt a blush beginning. She was always having this problem. It was her very short hair, plus the fact that she was flat as a pancake in front. It was embarrassing enough in her class where all the other girls were impressively endowed. She had taken to slouching forward and wearing baggy jumpers. And lately she had used the tomboy image as an excuse – as if she didn't *want* to look feminine. Hence the haircut. And the silver ring in her right eyebrow.

Mr Goldsmith was looking at her quizzically.

'It's the horse,' said Georgia. 'The winged one.'

'Ah,' he nodded. 'My little Etruscan beauty. A copy, of course. Probably from a museum shop in Italy.'

'Don't you know?' Georgia was surprised.

'Not for sure,' said Mr Goldsmith. 'Stuff finds its way here by all sorts of routes. I think that was from an old lady's house in Waverley Road. There was only a great-niece, who was in a hurry to sell up and get the money. She brought in boxes of knick-knacks.'

None of the furniture, unfortunately. Got a dealer on to that. Still, there was a very nice pair of silver candlesticks that brought in a fair profit.'

Georgia remembered the candlesticks. She had seen them in the window the day the winged horse had appeared. She never went straight home from school – she always dawdled, looking in shop windows and taking long detours. She never wanted to be at home alone with Russell before her mother got in from work.

'It's lovely,' she said quickly, to divert her thoughts. 'It looks old.'

'You're not a chap at all, are you?' said Mr Goldsmith suddenly. It was his turn to blush. 'Sorry. I can't keep up with you young people's fashions.'

'It's OK,' said Georgia. 'I should have said straightaway. My name's Georgia O'Grady. I go to Barnsbury Comprehensive in Waverley Road. I think I know the house you mean.'

'And I'm Mortimer Goldsmith,' said the old man, offering her his hand to shake. 'Well, now that we've been properly introduced, let's get that horse out of the window.'

He reached in and dropped the black horse into Georgia's palm. It was warm from the sun shining through the window, as if it were alive. She took a tissue from her jeans pocket and gently wiped the dust off. Mr Goldsmith was looking at her.

'How much have you got?' he asked quietly and, when Georgia mentioned a sum two pounds short of the amount on the ticket, he took the horse from her and began to wrap it in cotton wool.

'That'll do,' he said. And from that moment

Georgia felt she had found a friend.

By the time she got back, Russell was already at home, playing metal CDs very loudly in his room, so Georgia was able to sneak up to hers without being noticed. She locked the door as soon as she got inside and gave a sigh of relief. This was always the trickiest time of the day. Whenever Russell was there, it was always touch and go whether she'd make it to the sanctuary of her room before he realised she was back and started on her.

Mondays were all right, because he played football after school and on Tuesdays Georgia had a maths tutor. Fridays she went for violin lessons, but that still left Wednesdays and Thursdays with two hours between school and the return of their respective parents in which to avoid Russell.

He was two years older than her and two years above her at Barnsbury. From the moment they had first met, they had loathed one another. 'If you think I'm going to let your poxy mother get her claws into my dad, you're dead wrong,' he had hissed at her behind the grown-ups' backs.

But he hadn't been able to stop Ralph marrying Maura and he hadn't had a say in the matter when both the parents sold their flats and bought a house together. It hadn't helped that both Georgia and Russell were virtually only children. Russell had a very much older sister, Liz, who had gone with his mother when she left him and Ralph. And ever since then he had assumed that it would be him and his dad against the world.

Now it was just him against Georgia. Russell tolerated Maura because she put his dad into a

generally better mood than he had been in on his own. But he resented her for breaking up their twosome and, since he couldn't get away with being nasty to her, he took it all out on Georgia.

Georgia would have loved a proper older brother. She had had a little one once, but he died when he was only a few days old. Not long after that her own dad had left. Georgia had been very young at the time and didn't really remember either of them. She just had a vague memory of her mother always in floods of tears. And then one day, Maura had dried her eyes and said, 'That's that, then. We are just going to have to cope on our own.'

And they had, until Ralph came along. Georgia didn't mind him so much. He loved Maura and he could be quite funny when he was in a good mood. But he worried a lot about money. And he brought Russell with him.

Georgia unwrapped the winged horse and put it on her chest of drawers. Then she went to her computer and logged on. 'Etruscan', she typed into the search engine, 'Etruscan+horse+flying.'

987 matching entries, her computer told her, but Georgia was an old hand at Internet research and looked at only the first hundred. The best sites included an American one showing a beautiful little gilt bronze ornament, which had been offered at auction three years ago but not sold. It was only just over three inches long and similar to the one that Georgia had just bought, but its reserve price was between \$2,000 and \$3,000 – rather more than she had paid.

Another good site told her about a bronze vase

from Monteleone, wherever that was, which had a chariot pulled by winged horses. There was no illustration unfortunately, but Georgia felt she could imagine it.



In the Twelfth of the Twins, Riccardo the Horsemaster was expecting an illustrious guest: Niccolò, Duke of Giglia and head of the powerful di Chimici family. He was staying with his younger brother Ferdinando, who was Pope and also Prince of Remora. Although Remora was the official centre of the di Chimici's growing Republic, it was to the north, in Giglia, that the real power lay, with the Duke and his heirs.

Niccolò, great-grandson of the founder of the di Chimici dynasty, had five living children, four of them sons, and was the most ambitious man in all Talia. Under his direction the di Chimici family had spread their network through all the major cities in the north of the country and now held power in most of them. Only the tiresome city-state of Bellezza off the north-east coast had held out against any alliance with him or his family. And Niccolò had a plan about that too.

But here in Remora, his position was secure. As he walked the few hundred yards from the Papal palace to the stables of the Twelfth of the Twins, he had to stop a dozen times to exchange pleasantries with wealthy merchants or accept the homage of poorer citizens who wanted to kiss his hand. Niccolò arrived at the stables in a very good mood.

Riccardo, the Horsemaster of the Twins, was bursting with pride. The Pope had visited the day

before and now here was the Duke of Giglia, reputed to be the richest man in Talia, coming to inspect the horses. He saved the best animal till last.

‘And this, your Grace, is the one we shall run in the Stellata.’

Niccolò looked at the highly-strung bay, who flared his nostrils and bucked slightly in his stall. He stroked the horse’s nose with his gloved hand and spoke soothingly to him, then turned to the Horsemaster.

‘What’s the competition this year?’

‘Well, your Grace, you know how secretive everyone is about their horses in the city,’ Riccardo began a little nervously.

Niccolò di Chimici fixed him with a cold stare. ‘But you are paid not just to tend horses but to find out such secrets, are you not?’ he said.

‘Yes, your Grace,’ muttered the Horsemaster. ‘And things will be easier now I have a new groom. He came specifically recommended by your Grace’s nephew, the ambassador to Bellezza. Signor Rinaldo tells me this man has done him some great service and is renowned for his ability to sniff out secrets.’

Niccolò smiled. He had heard something of the service done by this man in Bellezza. If it was the same man, he had rid the city of its fiercest opponent to the di Chimici family. And though the Duke’s nephew Rinaldo had failed to replace her with a puppet Duchess, surely the city’s new ruler – a mere chit of a girl – would be much easier to influence?

‘Does he know anything about horses?’ was all he said to the Horsemaster.

*

Gaetano di Chimici was restless. He was staying in his uncle's Papal palace while his father visited the city and he didn't know what he was doing here. He would have much rather been in Giglia continuing his studies at the University. And he had a growing feeling that his father had some plan he was not sharing with him.

Gaetano sighed. It was hard being part of the most important family in Talia. His father was at the centre of so many plots, always scheming how to get richer and more powerful. But Gaetano wasn't really interested in any of them. He wanted to be left to his books and to his friends who, like him, were interested in painting and sculpture and music; not caught up in schemes for financing petty wars between city factions or forging alliances with other mercantile and princely families.

It might have been different if he had been one of the older sons, but there was no one younger than him, except Falco, and poor Falco didn't really count, much as Gaetano and all the family loved him. Fabrizio the eldest brother would inherit the Dukedom of Giglia. Carlo would be Prince of Remora, since Uncle Ferdinando as Pope had no children. Beatrice would doubtless be married off to one of the cousins – Alfonso perhaps, so that she could be Duchessa of Volana now that Uncle Fabrizio had died.

What did that leave for him? He thought at one time that his father's plans might have him marrying one of his cousins – Alfonso's sister Caterina, maybe. As a child, Gaetano had been very close to another cousin, Francesca, whose father was Prince of Bellona,

but he had heard a rumour lately that she had been married off to some old man in Bellezza as part of one of the family's dynastic schemes.

Gaetano shook his head. What a family! And now he was anxious that his father's new plan might involve the church. Uncle Ferdinando would not live for ever and Niccolò must have decided who would succeed Ferdinando as Pope. Carlo had made it clear that he had no intention of going into the church – and that left Gaetano.

'Well, I won't do it,' he resolved. 'The church should be a vocation, not a political appointment. Why can't I just be left to my studies?'

But he knew the answer to that. All the di Chimici had to work for the success of the dynasty; even the women had to be prepared to marry where the head of the family decided they would. Their opinions and preferences didn't come into it. And it was no different for the sons. Receive this Princedom, marry this Princess, take an embassy to this city, be ordained – it was all the same.

Gaetano wondered if he could be the first di Chimici in five generations to say no.



'Families,' thought Georgia. 'Why isn't there another way of living together?' Dinner at their house was always fraught and Georgia couldn't see why her mother bothered. But Maura, who was a social worker, was completely opposed to people snacking and grazing or eating on their laps in front of the TV.

'It's the one time of the day we can sit down

together as a family,' she insisted, 'and catch up with one another's lives.'

There were two things wrong with that idea, thought Georgia. Firstly, they were not a family and never would be. Even if she ever came to see Ralph as a father, she would never accept Russell as her brother. And secondly Maura was a lousy cook. Ralph was no better, and often the all-important family meal was heated up supermarket pizza or fish and chips from down the road.

None of that made any difference to Maura. Off went the TV and radio, Georgia and Russell had to set the table with knives and forks even for food intended to be eaten with fingers, and the four of them sat down for twenty minutes of excruciating politeness and indigestion.

Conversation consisted of questions from the adults and replies from the teenagers. Georgia and Russell never spoke directly to one another at dinner. In fact, Georgia realised, they never spoke to one another when their parents were around at all.

On their own – a situation which she avoided as much as she could – Russell was much more communicative. He was that kind of bully. Sometimes Georgia wished he were less clever and more of a thug. If he had ever hit her, it would have been in some ways easier. If she'd had bruises on her body to show her mother, he would never have got away with it.

But his was the harassment of hate, which left no visible marks, but made her shrivel inside. He got hold of her deepest fears and insecurities and dragged them out into the light, turning the harsh spotlight of his

sarcasm on them.

‘Dog’ was his mildest epithet for her. He analysed in detail her unattractiveness, her lack of femininity, her obsession with horses. ‘We all know what that’s about, don’t we? Absolutely classic – a substitute for sex – all that muscular power between your legs. All horsey women are spinsters and dogs – just like you.’

On and on the poison would spew out of his mouth and Georgia had no defence. Of course she had told her mother, several times, and had even spoken to Ralph about it once. But they insisted that she was exaggerating, that she must expect some teasing from an older brother, that she was too sensitive. And afterwards Russell would be worse, taunting her with her weakness in running to her mother for protection.

Georgia would withdraw further into herself, hiding her vulnerability, hunching her shoulders further and speaking only in monosyllables, unable to understand why she inspired so much hatred in someone she hadn’t chosen to share her life with. After all, she had just as much reason – or as little – to hate him.

The day that the flying horse came into her life ended badly. Although she had escaped spending time with Russell after school, she was horrified to discover at dinner (Sainsbury’s shepherd’s pie with frozen peas) that Maura and Ralph were going out to the cinema. This happened about once a month and, since the sort of films they liked were art house movies, often shot in black and white, they had given up asking Georgia and Russell if they wanted to join them. And at fifteen and seventeen there was no question of a sitter to keep them company.

Georgia made for her room before the adults were

out of the front door. She was soon immersed in biology homework. But eventually her own biology betrayed her; she had to go to the loo.

Russell was on the landing. He lounged casually in front of the bathroom door, large and menacing. It crossed Georgia's mind that it wouldn't be beyond him to bar her access till she wet herself. That would give him wonderful new ammunition to ridicule her with. She was already mentally calculating a dash into Maura and Ralph's tiny en-suite, when he moved his bulk away from the door and she made it just in time.

When she came out of the bathroom, he was still there and he followed her into her bedroom; she wasn't quite quick enough to lock him out. Now she was stuck with him there in her room until he chose to leave – one of her worst nightmare scenarios. He said nothing for a while and suddenly she saw her room through Russell's eyes. It wasn't like the room of other fifteen-year-old girls. There were no posters of popstars or TV heroes or even a good-looking continental footballer.

The only poster in fact was a tatty old one of Everest Milton at the Horse of the Year Show, which Maura had taken Georgia to when she was seven. There was a framed print of a black horse and a white one galloping beside a river in full flood. Georgia knew it wasn't a very good painting but she loved it anyway. The flying horse stood on her chest of drawers.

'You are seriously retarded, you know,' said Russell conversationally, almost pleasantly. 'Girls of your age grow out of the horse thing, you know. Except those saddoes at the stables. And they're all dykes.'

Georgia couldn't help herself. 'You've never been to the stables – you don't know anything about the people there!'

It was always a mistake to defy Russell. He laughed unpleasantly.

'I bet I do. I bet that's why you like going there. They've probably started hitting on you. And you're probably glad. After all, no bloke would ever look at you. Unless he was drunk and on a bet.'

He was wandering round her room, picking up her things and putting them down carelessly. Georgia inched round till she had her back to the chest of drawers, shielding the winged horse from his gaze. She was going to have to hide it; it was too precious to let Russell get hold of it.

'Actually, that's not a bad idea,' he was carrying on. 'Why don't you put up the money to get one of my friends hammered? And for a bet, to give you one? It'd be better than riding.'

Georgia clenched her hands. A wild rage was building inside her and she wanted to hurl herself at Russell and pound him with her fists, even though she knew she would just look ridiculous against his bulk.

Just then, the phone rang and Russell went off to answer it. She heard the casual supercool tone he adopted when talking to his friends. Georgia leapt to her door to lock it. Her hands were shaking. There was no way she would go back out to clean her teeth tonight; she would just go to bed and risk the plaque.



Cesare took his lunch out to the stable, relieving Paolo

from guard duty. He stroked Merla's nose and spoke soothingly to her mother. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We'll soon have you safe. No one will take your foal.'

He propped his back against a post and stretched his legs out in the straw. The grey cat emerged from nowhere and pushed her way on to his lap, purring and thrusting her wedge-shaped head into the hand holding his bread and cheese.



Georgia lay on her back in the dark, tears seeping out of the corners of her eyes and trickling down into her ears. She was clutching the flying horse. She had never been as unhappy as this. Even when her baby brother had died and her dad had disappeared and her mum had cried all the time, Georgia had not been miserable herself. She had been a kid then and more concerned about whether there would be cake at tea-time and what to call the new doll Mum had given her when Ben was born.

But now her life was a nightmare. She had few friends at school; most of the girls she had known at primary school seemed to have moved on in their lives. There was only one new girl, Alice, who seemed as if she might turn into a real friend. Russell was right in a way – Georgia was retarded, socially. She didn't get asked to parties and she knew that the in-crowd in her class went to pubs and clubs at the weekends – places she would never have got into. Even with make-up and a short skirt and heels and a top that showed her belly button. In the dark, Georgia managed a small smile at the thought.

And life at home had turned into one stratagem after the other to avoid Russell. But now keeping out of his way wasn't enough. He was actively seeking her out, never happy unless he was tormenting her. She simply couldn't carry on like this. If Mum wouldn't help her, she would have to run away.

Georgia fell asleep with the model of the flying horse in her hand, wishing she could find a place where horses had wings and she could fly away from her troubles for ever.



Cesare was dozing. It was the cat who woke him up. She suddenly tensed on his lap, sitting bolt upright, her fur sticking out in all directions and a growl rumbling in her throat.

He saw straightaway what had alarmed her. A boy, cowering in the corner, his eyes wide and terrified. Cesare leapt to his feet, amazed. He hadn't really believed that one of the Ram's enemies would send someone to kidnap Merla – least of all a skinny boy like a scared rabbit. But maybe he was just a spy?

Cesare stepped forwards and raised his fists.

'What do you want?' he asked roughly. 'You've got no business here – be off with you!'

Georgia understood nothing, except that she was in a stable. It was only the warmth and the familiar comforting smell of horses that was stopping her from screaming. She had no idea how she had got there or who the angry brown-haired boy was. He seemed to be deliberately blocking her view of something behind him. Something in his stance reminded her of herself

shielding her ornament from Russell. Slowly she unclenched her hand that was holding the winged horse.

The boy gasped. And as he moved forward to get a better look, she saw behind him a miraculous creature that could have been the model for the horse in her hand. A beautiful coal-black foal with two small feathery wings folded at its shoulders.