

Spiral of Hooves

By Roland Clarke

PREVIEW

SPMG

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Prologue

QUÉBEC, CANADA

The chair spun across the floor as Lina Jardero stood, fists punching the air.

“*Caramba*, the coward’s emailed more ridiculous demands,” she said, and then paused as if expecting answers. “Why does everyone interfere in my work? Doesn’t anyone realise that I’m the scientist? There has to be an end to this.”

Armand Sabatier swivelled in his chair and gestured towards the snow-covered fields outside the cabin. “It’s the Boissard way. This is their stud and they’ll continue to fight each other for control—whichever way we try to improve the situation.” He was reluctant to abandon the only family he had left, but withdrawal might be the sensible option. “We’ll be better off once we leave and start afresh.”

Her hands pierced the air again. “Someone may act sooner. Nothing has changed, although the last two years were okay—but we can’t let one person destroy everything we’ve struggled for.”

As her anger wavered, she broke from his native French into American. He had seen the explosion coming, but her vitriol, when delivered in choicest Mexican, could be implacable. He was accustomed to the raven-haired Chicana’s passion and glad her vehemence was restrained this time. Lina’s research at Du Noroît Stud was crucial and she could not afford to abandon the work.

He stood and put his arms around her, knowing that a friend’s embrace should calm the professional fury.

Her wolfdog, Mistico nuzzled between them, drawing her affection and breaking the fragile link.

“So you'll arrange everything today, Lina?” They needed a resolution, but Armand was concerned she took risks, even though she was capable of standing up for herself. One of the reasons he had given her Mistico had been his past failure to protect someone precious and accomplished.

“Tackling anyone would be useless. Anyway, I've things I can do 'round here. It's more peaceful than at the office where they're meeting, and probably arguing.” She walked over to her chair, pushed it back and sat down, fingers poised on the keyboard. “And you?”

“I want to stay but I must see someone... about my environmental survey. I need to justify my position at Du Noroît somehow.”

“You're always too willing and anxious to please. Sometimes I think you're not tough enough, Loup. I fear that nickname is inappropriate, despite your wolf pendant.”

Armand smiled and said, “I'm happier in the lone wolf role with no need to be macho. We're at the stud as friends, as support.” Enough had been said; his past had been buried forever along with his old Loup identity. He just wanted to concentrate on his current life working at the stud, helping care for the horses, assisting where he could with the breeding programmes.

He kissed Lina on both cheeks before putting on his skiing gear. The flurries outside were tapping the double-glazing at the front of the timber cabin. Any delay was risking the worst of the encroaching storm.

“You should take the Skidoo. This weather may get worse before you're finished.”

“I must take some exercise and skis are quieter. I'll manage. My meeting's only along the river trail where the horses are exercised. So I'll be back for lunch. Will you be okay?”

She pointed at her attentive companion, “Totally, I've

Mistico, and you always say he's my real wolf. Please be careful, Loup—it's treacherous out there.”



Savouring the tranquillity of the frozen world, Armand glided into the snow-laden trees. The first falls of the winter had buried the stud's paddocks, although the top rails of the fences marked them out. Passable tracks had been cut into the snow, and curved up to the horse barns nestled around the distant farm buildings. Despite the signs of hibernation, stud life at Du Noroît never ceased and any of the winter chores or the demanding workload could explain the head groom's insistence on the urgent rendezvous.

Odette must have a good reason. We trust each other—no one else. She alone can help me end the pain; heal the past.

The wind picked up, dampening any other sounds. Glancing at the foreboding sky, he quickened his pace; cross-country skis and sticks moving in unison.

If I had any sense I would've heeded Lina's warning and played my un-athletic role. An inept nonentity. But I can always be mistaken for reckless—and Odette sounded desperate to meet.

At least he could cope with sub-zero conditions. He was frustrated that this new life had been dragged down by one man's callous disregard for everyone.

The Frenchman gritted his teeth and lowered his head against the gusts. He pushed for a rise and crested it, turning as Odette cantered along the cleared trail below on a young stallion. Focused on where the trees crushed the narrowing track towards the rocky bank and the turbulent water, she was oblivious of Armand, who traversed the steep slope past a ruined cabin towards the trail. He skied nearer, intending to meet her as arranged.

The stallion reared suddenly, as if bitten by an angry insect, and Odette fought to control the bucking animal. Clumps of snow dropped from the overhanging branches, splattering the woman's burgundy jacket. White snow merged with the red, creating a vision too much like seeping blood. Armand's head reeled.

A confusion of images hit him: an unseen force thrusting the rider towards the torrent; the horse bolting for home in a whirl of hooves; a white-clad figure with a crossbow dissolving into the blizzard.

The howl of a wolf echoed in his head.

The snow swept in and whipped around Armand as he fought against the storm in his brain, forcing back the terrors the cyclone might resurrect from his past. He struggled down the slope to reach Odette, but she had vanished.

The whiteout descended, blanketing any evidence that might have remained, leaving Armand bewildered and uncertain as to what he had witnessed. Now, his panic was building, reawakening the haunting memory that had never faded from his heart. He was back in another country, helpless, as he watched a broken body struggle for life, and the blood on his hands spilled on trampled snow.

One

Europe

The pale sun strove to reach through the mist to the frozen ground. In the dawn light, Carly Tanner rode her horse down the track and through the gate in the blackthorn hedge. Their breath sent out tendrils of steam as the pace quickened down the first pasture towards the fields beyond. The scrunch of frost mingled with the squeak from the well-polished saddle.

The home-bred grey mare responded to every subtle request from Carly, whose heart was beating to the rhythm of the hooves. Around her, the sounds of birds mingled in a tapestry of trills and melodies, with the call of a cock pheasant rising above the other songs. At times like this, Hazelmead was more like home than a workplace.

On the lower pastures, she slowed Sylvan Torc to a halt, and peered into the mist that rose in swirls from the stream flowing under the wooden bridge. She eased the horse into a walk along the banks of reeds, searching the gloom ahead.

A distinctive scent drifted on the air before the vixen appeared, majestic in her long coat and thick brush with black hairs streaking the tip. Dead rabbit in her jaws, the vixen stared at Carly and the horse with piercing eyes. Then, as though deciding they were no threat, the silent hunter turned away, trotted across the bridge, and vanished into the veil of white.

For a while, Carly considered how this devoted mother could become the quarry. Deserved perhaps if she had killed prized lambs and prolific egg-layers, but she dreaded the vixen's taste for forbidden flesh inviting either the jaws of hounds or the teeth of a gun. The vixen haunted these mists, a reminder of life's intricacies and cruelty.

Death was too close, although it had always been part of her life growing up on a farm. Her mother's death was still hard to bear, even after two years. Finding Marguerite face down in the mud had been a traumatic warning that their shared disorder killed if uncontrolled. So Carly controlled her diabetes, trying to accept it as normal, even if there were frustrating restrictions. Still, her loss remained, and tears too often escaped.

She cast a bouquet of winter aconites into the water and watched the flowers drift downstream like a Japanese lantern. This ritual soothed the pain, but before the memories overwhelmed her, she pressed Torc into a trot, concentrating on staying firm in the saddle.

As they passed the bramble-smothered gate on the edge of a copse, she remembered the chores that lay ahead. At least she had fed all the horses and cleaned the yard. For now she would enjoy this brief hour of freedom. She broke into a canter, blood racing and red hair streaming from under her hat.

Maybe the post would bring a letter from the French Equestrian Federation granting her mother's last wish, that Carly ride for France. Would her application succeed on just the maternal nationality? Or would she need to produce more prolific results to prove her credentials? Not that those were imminent.

At least on Sunday she'll be show jumping Torc. Perhaps an elusive win would end their run of poor performances. The mare had an amazing jump, but Carly's shortcomings as a rider held the partnership back.

Approaching the farm buildings, she reined Torc back and walked the mare past the tractor shed and the cattle shed, where slaughterhouse-destined bullocks had been overwintered—that was up until 2001 and Foot and Mouth, the darkest time for farming. The buildings were now

abandoned, left for grass and wildlife to reclaim.

As his groom, she had pleaded with the farmer for more horses to be brought on and sold to keep the yard going. Yet, as long as the liveries paid something, the farmer was deaf to any diversification that yielded anything but instant cash. But soon, he would find that all the liveries would be moving to better places, despite all of her efforts.

She turned past the barn where the aged horsebox was parked beside the dwindling stack of straw and hay. In the tidy yard decorated with hanging baskets and ringed on three sides by twelve covered stables—some with names on their doors—she untacked Torc. Eight of the stables were empty, as most of the horses were outside, rugged up for protection from the weather. Three liveries had already left, and nobody was clamouring to move in.

With a competition imminent, Carly had brought her mare in from the fields. She led her into the end stable, labelled *TORC*, and then checked that she had remembered to replenish the hay while re-doing the stable's straw bedding.

Back outside, her flat-coated retriever, Guinness, emerged from his siesta, exuberant again after his earlier exertions, helping Carly hack out horses for owners who required the full livery service. Guinness had been a twenty-first birthday present from her parents, arriving as a furry ball. Now five, he was the companion she could always depend on.

As she glanced around the refuge that she had claimed amidst the decay, she realised that this ordered home for the horses held most of the remnants of her life.

Two

The cobblestones sparkled with the remnants of morning rain fading in the sunlight. Change of country, change of weather, and change of job. Armand had learned to adapt and move on. Another day and having checked the horses in his charge, he collected the feed barrow and walked out of the yard under the clock tower. He gazed down the poplar-lined drive, past the white-railed paddocks and across the flat landscape, looking for some pleasure in the black fields. The new Boissard acquisition, Fenburgh Stud, appeared tranquil, but experience had taught him otherwise. England could hide danger as much as Canada.

Back on Du Noroît, death had been lurking in the whiteness. Something had stirred just out of sight, yet his rational mind had called it a paranoid delusion. The accident had not been suspicious, according to the police, but an unfortunate tragedy.

I must always remain alert to danger. I sense it, but who can I trust? Lina? Her work comes first. Gilles craves thrills. Can I find some peace here in England? I could end this all. I can find life in the dikes, hedges and windbreaks, but home will always be in the forests of the Cévennes... tangled in memories.

Yet, he had chosen to disconnect from that world in order to survive. He had tried to connect with his ancestral roots in Québec but that had only ended in more tragedy. This new existence was another chance to rebuild his life, although this time, he must remain aloof.

A throaty roar echoed across the paddocks, bringing Armand's attention back from the past. A red Subaru Cosworth Impreza swept into the drive, fishtailing as if the driver were rallying, not coming back late from a night in

the city. Gilles Boissard pulled the car to a stop, jumped out from behind the wheel, stretched his lanky frame, and then smoothed back his dark hair before walking around the limited edition car. He took the hand of a sleek blonde as she slid out from the passenger seat, and then draped a fur coat over his intended conquest's shoulders as he kissed her dark pink lips. She patted his cheek then followed him inside the pseudo-Georgian mansion. The butler would be sent out for the luggage.

Armand turned away. Gilles might not show his face in the yard for a few hours, and by then, most of the horses would have been exercised—apart from the stallion, Dragon Du Noroît. With rare exceptions, no one else but Gilles rode the twelve-year-old, known by the stable name Drac.

Heading past the mirrored indoor school, Armand wondered if Gilles's blonde catch rode, or was just another admirer devoted enough to watch from the tiered seating. Frustration at Gilles welled inside of Armand and pulled at the threads of their friendship.

Back in the modernised Victorian stable yard, the cooing doves and the contented horses calmed him, but the sounds did not alleviate the exasperation at how much his work was ignored. Not just his efforts at ensuring a spotless yard, but also in hacking out the horses he was permitted to ride. But Armand would bend to every whim and errand now that they had moved to Fenburgh Stud and created a new direction.

Could he ignore the return of the old nightmares when they plagued his sleep? The doctors had warned that they would, but drugs were not an option that Armand was willing to try. Therapy had taught him to recognize that guilt and suspicion only fed his perception of normal situations.

However, that was all in the past, in France.

Closing his eyes, he saw forests and a blue sky, heard birds and waterfalls, smelt flowers and the earth. Nature, experienced or remembered, that was the key to his self-therapy—along with the power and grace of the horses.

However, sometimes, snowstorms invaded his waking day, thrusting him back into his memories of Canada, of a day confused by rumours.

On that day, when he woke in his bed, he had thought a wolf was howling his name, but it was only Mistico licking his face. Lina had explained that she was concerned when the flurries had built into a blizzard. Supposedly, Mistico proved invaluable in helping her find Armand, who had fallen in a snowdrift on his way to work. She said his insistence on independence could have proved fatal. Did he need reminding?

Should I accept that by cheating death I defer an end to my guilt? What price will I pay for my failure? Is this the burden of surviving when I'm responsible?

Tragically, the storm had spared him, but at a price. Odette Fedon's horse had returned—riderless. After a fruitless search for the head groom, the Québec Provincial Police declared it another winter misadventure that must wait until the spring thaw for resolution. Another loss in the snow. Tears choked inside.

Everyone at Du Noroît Stud had been unnerved at losing such a popular member of the team; all except Gilles's father Roman, who remained unmoved by the tragedy. Gilles distracted himself with a spate of parties and long weekends away, while Lina locked herself into work, as did Armand. The others never knew about his personal

connection with Odette, but it added to his distress and tormented him, even now.

I've lost the only person I could share my pain with. Why her?

Yet, he was grateful for the support of Lina and Gilles when they persuaded him to move with them to England and make a new start, out of reach of Roman. Until a more suitable replacement could be employed, Armand was given Odette's grooming job. He found that the extra work distracted him from his mental anguish as the horses gave a noble purpose to life. His temporary role meant more duties, and the horses proved soothing companions, healing for his troubled mind. He was sometimes relieved if Lina, the team's nutritionist, helped out, even when Gilles exerted his authority as stud owner and deemed that Armand lacked the appropriate expertise.

Armand's desire for simplicity and normality allowed him to accept this situation, but in moments of paranoia, the troubled faces of his friends made him imagine a new crisis, even in tranquil England, far away from the snow. Could he trust them to resolve the problem if there was one beyond his imaginings?

Yet, two months after the accident, he had no basis for these irrational fears. Problems existed but nothing sinister, just the usual dynamics plaguing a family with money like the Boissards. After arriving in England, everything settled down without any interference from Gilles's father Roman—who was back in Canada—even Lina's nutrition programme. If her problems had continued, Armand wondered about checking out the stud's genetically modified feed trials, which Lina and Gilles had rejected. Perhaps Roman's obsession piqued Lina's professional

pride, which was understandable as she was the one amongst them who held the Animal Biology degree with Honours.

She'd be the first to challenge any feed issues. I'll let her judgement guide me, for now. I have to trust her. My hallucinations are false demons deluding me and feeding my suspicions. The medics in France insisted recovery would be gradual—and ongoing.



Half-an-hour later, Armand had put three horses into the walker, a horizontal wheel-like machine that exercised them as it slowly turned. He was in the tack room cleaning saddles and bridles when he heard Gilles and the blonde stroll into the yard, so he went outside to receive the expected order.

“Can you get Drac ready and—”

“Willow hasn’t been ridden yet,” said Armand.

“No way, I need something classier than her.”

Gilles walked towards a stallion that was watching them. “Pin is amazingly laid back but moves like a dream. He’ll be perfect. You’ll find he has beautiful paces, Tara *chérie*.”

Armand agreed since Gilles rode Pin at the intermediary level in pure dressage. The blonde’s nod indicated she knew what she liked. As groom, he was expected to ready both horses while Gilles continued his seduction to one side.

Mounted, the couple rode out towards the back drive, then Gilles stopped and turned towards Armand who standing by the empty stables, expecting more instructions.

“Oh, and you can ride the Witch. She won’t mind if you

just hack her out. Keep to the field verges in case she rears.”

Once again, Gilles was maligning the poor mare that had never attempted to buck Armand off. She reserved her rebellion purely for Gilles in a bad mood. Once, she had leant over her stable door and nipped Gilles, after he had sworn at her.

Armand put a bridle on the mare and she nuzzled him. He had tried to get the stud staff to call her Willow, instead of the derogatory stable-name Gilles deemed appropriate. Gilles dismissed the alternative name, even though it was also derived from her competition name of Sorcière des Saules—*Sorceress of the Willows* in French.

Should he remind Gilles that he had bought the mare believing she had great potential? It would be difficult because Odette Fedon helped find Willow, and contact with the French breeders resurrected too many memories. He had detached himself from those who were back in France, whom had lived with his failure. Distance might even heal the wounds he had inflicted; yet, the bond would never be broken. At least at Fenburgh, everyone was unaware of his past, and nobody ever needed to know.



An hour later, Armand was untacking Willow when Gilles and the blonde returned, straw-tangled hair betraying them. Gilles handed him the reins of the two stallions and then reached into his breeches' pocket, pulling out a sheet of paper.

“Nearly forgot, here’s the events I have to do. Can you send the entries? Not sure when the closing dates are, but find out.” He turned away, put an arm around Tara, and

sauntered off towards Fenburgh Hall.

Merde, why does he always risk leaving his entries until the last moment? He presumes he won't be balloted out.

Odette had once said that Gilles was forever depending on the goodwill of long-suffering entry secretaries and the presumption that his late entries would always be squeezed in. Glancing at the list, Armand smiled. He had already second-guessed his pleasure-distracted friend and entered the correct four horses in the season opener at Isleham. However, Gilles wanted to compete two more a week later at Poplar Park, another nearby venue that should favour local runners. Once again, the Canadian's organisational inefficiency would go unpunished, as entries remained open for another two days.

Once inside the yard office, Armand took three minutes to access the entries websites and complete the two forms for the later events, which left time to check through Fenburgh's extensive computerised records. Any files that would simplify his environmental impact assessment of proposed improvements to the equestrian facilities would be invaluable, since a visit to the local council had yielded basic plans but no more.

Scrolling through the morass, he noticed documents on a dozen Boissard horses placed in a "transit" folder, which all related to Canada. Curiosity kindled, he opened a few files and studied them. He struggled to find any irregularities, but the obsessive detail of the records could be obscuring the obvious. He hesitated and resisted re-filing the documents as re-organisations annoyed Gilles, who needed to remain in control. Obsessive like Roman, their common trait fed one area of their business feud.

Perhaps the jumble is intentional. Is Gilles's ongoing

search for new bloodstock or Lina's attempt to improve the horses' nutrition post-GM behind this? Although nothing appeared illegal, Armand had learnt to suspect anything secreted or camouflaged, except this appeared more akin to a filing error and was probably best ignored.

Gilles would deal with the mistake, as he was integral to the Boissard Équestre's setup and was determined for the enterprise to succeed. The year they had all met, Gilles had discovered Fenburgh as a potential UK base when he competed in Europe with Odette Fedon. She had only been employed as Gilles's groom for a few months when she was promoted and allowed to attend the international events.

She should be here with us. England was part of her dream. Another tragedy.

Three years later, the move to the stud in Suffolk was proving an invaluable chance to regroup beyond Roman's tyranny.

Armand glanced again at the documents and noticed some Du Noroît records. Had someone created a computer link to Du Noroît that allowed Roman to monitor the new stud in England? Roman was vindictive and irrational enough to undermine his own son's share of the business using any information gleaned. Any agreement that each stud would be independent of the other must have been ignored. Perhaps Gilles was hacking into his father's records instead?

Before his assumptions diverted him, Armand pulled back, forcing rational deductions to pull him free. Now was the time for careful surveillance; observations and hard facts were required, not gut reactions. Experience taught him to be prepared for all eventualities, but first, the horses

required his commitment as the proxy groom.