

HORSE COUNTRY

A Sampler of Equestrian Fiction



Natalie Keller Reinert

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Horse Country: Introduction

One of the most common questions I receive about my writing is “which one of your series should I start with?” That’s a loaded question, because while each series is about a different aspect of equestrian life, most horse-people have an interest in more than just the discipline they ride in every day. Dressage riders can love The Eventing Series best, and trail riders might think the Show Barn Blues Series is the greatest.

Plus, my characters have a tendency to wander in and out of different series. So if you find yourself in love with the character Grace in *Pride*, you will definitely want to read *Show Barn Blues*, which is her story.

In my head I’ve called the Alex & Alexander, Eventing, and Show Barn Blues Series the Horse Country Collection. I’ve put together this sampler with the first few chapters from each of my series openers, so you can decide which one is right for you, right now.

I’ve also included *The Hidden Horses of New York* and *Grabbing Mane*, although these books are not part of the Horse Country Collection’s shared universe.

And for those who are curious about the order of all of my Florida horse novels, here is their chronological line-up:

Horse Country Collection

1. The Head and Not The Heart (Alex & Alexander 1)
2. Other People’s Horses (Alex & Alexander 2)
3. Claiming Christmas (Alex & Alexander 3)

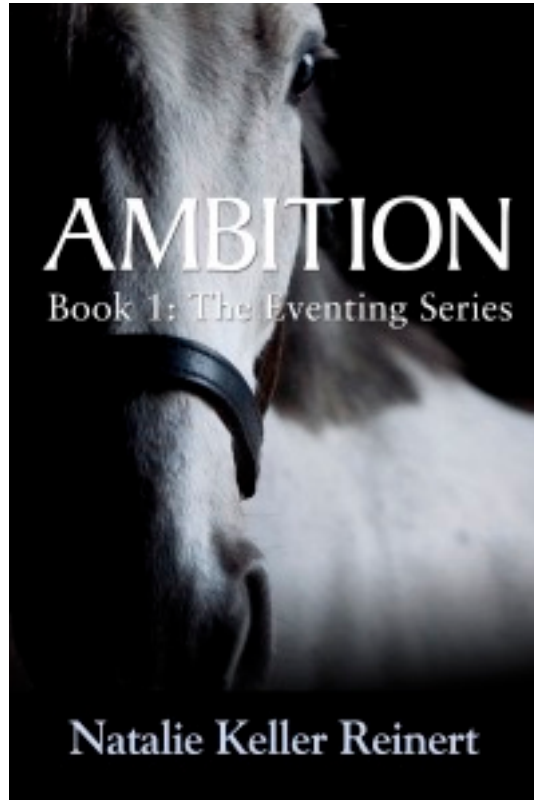
4. Turning for Home (Alex & Alexander 4)
5. Ambition* (Eventing Series 1)
6. Show Barn Blues* (Show Barn Blues 1)
7. Pride (Eventing Series 2)
8. Courage (Eventing Series 3)
9. Luck (Eventing Series 4)
10. Horses in Wonderland* (Show Barn Blues 2)
11. Forward* (Eventing Series 5)

**Action occurs more or less at the same time period as the adjacent book*

As you can see, there's some overlap but it isn't too bad. Everyone is introduced properly in each novel, so there's no requirement to read them in this order! It's just there if you're interested.

In 2020, this collection will expand by two with the introduction of *Runaway Alex*, the prequel to *The Head and Not The Heart*, and *Prospect*, Book 6 of The Eventing Series. [Learn more at Patreon.](#)

Ambition



Ambition

Introduction

Ambition is my most popular novel. It's also one of my most disliked novels. What can I say, I'm a people-pleaser. Jules most decidedly is not. Our heroine is tough, focused, and knows exactly where she wants to be — and no one is going to get in her way. The one chink in Jules Thornton's armor is her love of her horses. Even when she's willing to steamroll over anyone and anything standing between her and eventing glory, she does everything she can to keep her horses happy and well.

Jules is hard to love, but that doesn't stop Peter Morrison, local Hot Eventing Guy, from falling for her. There is a whole lot of storm between Jules and Pete, including one actual hurricane, but their relationship has since spawned the writing of four more novels, with Book Six on the way. If she makes you crazy in *Ambition*, I've done my job right — but hang on for *Pride*, *Courage*, *Luck* and *Forward*. Jules really does grow up... she

just needs a little time to get there.

Chapter One

Use one word to describe yourself.

Dynamo leaned over the stall webbing and nudged at my shoulder. I smiled and tickled his chin whiskers, prickly where I'd let them stay a little long. I didn't like to cut a horse's whiskers too short; they were little antennas, keeping a horse from bumping his nose in the dark. Of course, Dynamo rarely experienced total darkness. Even when he was outside at night, there was a light burning over his paddock. I liked to be able to see him, at any time, day or night.

"If I were to describe you with one word, Dyno, it would be *adorable*."

Dynamo retreated into the stall, clearly affronted. As well he should be, I figured—he was an athlete, he was a very manly horse. Not a kitten, but a panther.

Still adorable, though, no denying it.

"You two are really close," a voice said, sounding impressed. "That's nice."

I glanced down the stable aisle. A girl was sitting on her own tack trunk, dressed like I was in boots and breeches, polo shirt in her barn colors, hard hat at her side. The stall door next to her was closed; I saw a dark horse within, watching us through the stall bars. "He's my baby," I admitted reluctantly. "Doesn't yours like to socialize?"

"This princess?" The girl looked over her shoulder at the horse behind her, as if she hadn't known the horse was lurking there. She shook her head at the mare, and the horse disappeared into the depths of the stall. "She bit me an hour ago. I'm surprised you missed that. I shouted like a little kid. So now she's on time-out." She considered, then got up to undo the latch. "I should probably let her apologize, since our ride time is coming up soon. Otherwise she'll go out there swishing her tail and cranky, and we'll have a terrible ride."

I was sorry I'd said anything.

She slid the door open and leaned over the stall webbing. "Amber... come on over... come on, Amber."

The horse ignored her. The girl shook her head ruefully. "She's never really liked me." She watched Dynamo for a few seconds—he was rooting around in my pony-tail now, rubbing his upper lip around the elastic band. He loved to pull it down and make me look even messier than usual. "I'd love to have that kind of relationship with a horse," she said wistfully.

"We've been through a lot," I replied simply, and looked the other way, out the stable doors where the green grass and black-board fences of Ocala went rolling by in gentle swells. I wasn't here to make friends or tell my life story to nosey competitors.

I was here to win.

I didn't have enough money to be in the horse business, that was the simple truth. It didn't matter how many people told me that showing horses was a rich man's sport. There wasn't anything else for me to do. There wasn't anything else I cared about.

My parents caved early and paid for riding lessons. All through elementary school and middle school, I rode once a week, bouncing around a ring for an hour on a bored school-horse, and that was supposed to be enough. When it wasn't, I managed to find ways to work for riding lessons. My riding instructor, Laurie, knew a good thing when she saw it. I was willing to do anything at all to ride for an extra twenty minutes. Scrub out drains, clean out gutters, muck out stalls. I was child labor and I was proud of it.

Working at the riding stable ate any social time I might have had, and I didn't care. There were no parties, no dates, no prom nights. I wandered through my school years drawing windswept manes and pricked ears onto the brown paper covers of my textbooks, and, as soon as I realized no one was going to notice or care if I wasn't sitting slumped in the back of the room, I started skipping class to strip out stalls instead. Laurie was a fantastic rider, a decent riding instructor, and a very savvy businesswoman. She dangled rides on half-broke ponies in front of me in exchange for barn chores, and I snapped up every chance to climb onto her auction finds and rodeo rejects.

I didn't have the money to ride *good* horses, but I was willing to risk life and limb and scholastic expulsion to get on any horse I could. And so I happily agreed to ride outrageously bad horses: horses who bucked, horses who bolted, horses who flipped over and horses who lay down in the dirt when they were tired of working. But all that badness made me a supremely confident rider, able to stay in the saddle through just about any display of dangerous behavior.

My happiest hours were spent in the saddle, with brief time-outs when some auction bronc managed to get me out of it. I always got back on. Always. Laurie loved me. "I can put you on anything and in six weeks I have a lesson pony," she'd brag when she showed me off to friends. I'd shrug and blush and go get on another horse. I didn't know what else to do.

No one else at the barn loved me, of course. I was a working-class kid in a rich kid's world. Laurie financed her dressage and eventing career by teaching kids to ride on the auction ponies I had taught some manners, then selling their parents very expensive push-button show-horses. Osprey Ridge catered to extravagantly wealthy girls, and by the time we were teenagers together, the lines had been drawn. I was on one side, the hired help, and they were on the other, making my life difficult.

Those girls cemented my distrust of humankind. They delighted in nasty little teases like throwing their horse's sweaty tack in the dirt so that I'd have extra work to do in that night's clean-up, or "spilling" a drop of shampoo into a water trough I was filling so that

I had to spend twenty minutes rinsing out the ensuing foam volcano that came frothing over the trough's edges. The trouble they made for me was demoralizing like nothing else in my life. I was never ashamed to throw horse manure into a wheelbarrow in exchange for some saddle time. But those girls thought I should be, and they did everything in their power to let me know that I wasn't like them. I wasn't good enough for them.

All of which, in turn, made me more determined than anything to be the very best. If you can't join them, beat them and rub their noses in it, that was my motto. The horse show ribbons that I managed to bring home were strung up along the school-horse stalls for months. They grew flyspecked and mildewed, but I didn't care. I didn't need the ribbons in my bedroom where no one could admire them but me; I needed them at the barn, where the other girls could see them and be reminded that I could out-ride them on Laurie's auction nags any day of the week.

They laughed when I brought home Dynamo, too. They didn't laugh so hard when we won the Novice Regional Championships two years later, or the Training Regional Championships the following year. By the Preliminary Regionals, most of them had gone off to college in Tallahassee or Gainesville or farther afield. I won anyway, for fun. With any luck, a few of them still had subscriptions to *The Chronicle of the Horse*. I smiled very, very broadly for the camera. You could open up to the Eventing section and count my teeth, grinning at the world, but especially at Ashleigh Cooper and Winnie Hill and Elizabeth Rothsberg, busy failing English 101 while I made my dreams come true.

And I went on making my dreams come true, while they were off studying or going to frat parties or whatever it was college students did. My grandfather had left me college money—the only stroke of luck I'd ever had.

I took it and bought a farm with it.

Of course there was a fight. I had been arguing with my parents about college for two solid years. They wanted me to go to school—anything would have pleased them at this point. Equine science, veterinary medicine, business administration... *anything*. I was working for Laurie full-time at Osprey Ridge, mucking in the morning, riding problem horses in the afternoon, and working with my own auction find, Dynamo, at night after evening feed.

Dressage in the moonlight: it sounds so romantic! But there are mosquitoes in the moonlight, too. We practiced our half-pirouettes and our tempi changes, swatting at bugs in between movements. We bathed in citronella and pyrethrins. But we got better, without anyone to bother us or tease me or demand my help *right away* or slam a car door at just the right moment to make my horse miss a distance or flub a transition. Aside from the occasional lesson from Laurie, who helped me get over the troublesome hurdles like flying lead changes and skinny fences, we worked alone.

We worked alone until that was the only kind of happiness I knew—just me and my horse.

I told my parents that Dynamo and I had something special, something that couldn't be put on ice while I wasted time at college. They disagreed, of course. How could I give

up the college fund? Did I know how lucky I was to have a college fund?

I saw that money as a cash prize, for getting through my childhood years as a rider without a dime to my name. And I knew exactly what I was going to do with that cash, too, as soon as I could get my hands on it.

I waited. I worked, and I rode, and I showed, and I waited. Until I turned twenty-one, took that money, and found a place to be alone with Dynamo... and a few other horses, to pay the bills, of course.

Green Winter Farm, my own little ten acres, a dryish patch of land on the outskirts of Florida's horse country. My own (used, slightly dented) dually pick-up. My own (used, slightly more dented) horse trailer. My own barn, my own paddocks, my own double-wide trailer. Or *manufactured home*, as the realtor put it. But who cared? It was a place for me to sleep. I would have taken a stall in the barn for a bedroom if only to have my own farm.

Green Winter Farm, my first great brush with luck. Here was where it would all begin: my stunning career, my name in lights, my magazine covers and my shiny medals, *The Star-Spangled Banner* playing in the background as the flag was raised on high. This was it.

And here I was, a year later, sitting cross-legged on a tack trunk with my head tipped back against the wall of Dynamo's stall in the show barn at Longacres, waiting for my audition ride in front of the judges for the Athletic Charities for Equestrians. Broke. Down on my luck. Jaw set with determination.

Ready to win.

The application hadn't been too long, in keeping with the common conception that horsemen and women were too busy with the everyday struggles of running a farm, training horses, and teaching snot-nosed kids how to ride, to be expected to spend anything more than twenty minutes or so word-smithing their talents in a desperate grab for all of their hopes and dreams on a platter. So there was no essay question or anything like that, despite the fact that most horse people are artistic, creative types who could write like a Rhodes Scholar if they'd spent any time paying attention in class instead of working out how they were going to turn babysitting money into a full season of events and how many favors they'd have to do for their trainer in order to bum a ride in the horse trailer to the next show.

Most of the questions were straight-forward: what level have you ridden at, what level have you trained a horse to, how many times have you competed, at what level, etc. But the one that had me stumped, the one that made me stand up and walk away from the clutter of papers and Diet Coke cans that passed for my kitchen table, was the one that couldn't be easily quantified or backed up with a file folder full of entry forms, dressage tests, and hand-scrawled receipts from event secretaries.

“Use one word to describe yourself.”

Were they *kidding*? I was stumped. I didn’t describe myself. I didn’t think about myself. I didn’t worry about myself. I worried about my riding, I worried about my horses.

But it had to be answered.

I finally sat back down at the table, picked up my pen, and wrote “*ambitious*.”

It’s not the worst thing in the world. It isn’t a bad word. *Ambitious* is kinder than ruthless, softer than self-absorbed, less damning than hard-hearted. *Ambitious* wants to get ahead and works hard, ambitious is dedicated and a go-getter. *Ambitious* doesn’t necessarily run rough-shod over the competition, doesn’t implicitly indicate a lack of compassion or empathy or normal human emotion.

Ambitious just wants to be at the top, to be the very best, more than anything else in the world.

And what’s wrong with that?

Chapter Two

A shadow fell over the barn aisle. I got up and inspected the sky: there was a big black thundercloud, promising the usual afternoon storm. They were the double-edged sword we all loved and hated here in Ocala. Whether you were a farm laborer or a horse trainer or a convenience-store-loiterer (all common jobs in northwest Marion County) you simultaneously longed for the break in the heat, and cursed the lightning and floods that came along for the ride. The temperature today was off the charts for June, the mercury pressing against the top of the thermometer somewhere near one hundred degrees, and the torpid air sat heavily in my lungs and clouded my vision. I kept waiting for the drumroll of fat raindrops on the steel roof, but it seemed to be hovering just out of range, keeping its cool breeze and its refreshing rainfall selfishly to itself. I sighed, hot breath on hot air.

I felt sleepy and stupid and useless.

It was the biggest day of my life.

I wandered back over to Dynamo’s stall and leaned against the wall. Dynamo leaned over his stall guard, straining the brass snaps and the blue vinyl with his chest, and pressed his big chestnut head against my shoulder.

“Sweet baby,” I murmured, cupping one hand over a fluttering nostril, “Stop nudging Mummy in her poor tired back.”

His boney face was damp in my hand. Even with a box fan blowing into the stall, Dynamo was hot just waiting for our audition ride. We were the last team on the schedule, and the weather had grown thicker and more Amazonian with every horse and rider combination who had gone clapping out of the barn and towards the arena at the

top of the hill. They'd all come back drenched with sweat, red-faced with heat, but I had a sinking feeling that it would be worst of all for Dynamo and me. The last ride, in the very middle of the hot afternoon—what kind of luck was that?

I'd always thought of myself as having pretty bad luck, and it looked like Dynamo shared it. *Poor boy, I'm so sorry.* In another life, I must have done things wrong. I must have refused to share my rag doll in some nineteenth-century nursery; I must have lied and cheated to get ahead when others were starving during the Great Depression or sacrificing all during great wars. If we are the same person born again and again, then I probably wheeled and dealt and lied and stole to get my paws on some big chunk of land or a particularly fine piece of horseflesh. I surely earned my champagne taste, my beer budget, and this afternoon's oppressive weather in another misspent life.

Ha-ha, the joke's on you, universe, I thought, running a finger down Dynamo's jagged white stripe, ear to nose between his dark eyes. *I'd do it all again. I will have horses, I will be the best, with or without the help of luck.*

The girl from down the aisle led her horse out, throwing me a lopsided grin as she went. Her horse was sweating between the hindquarters, already feeling the heat. "Good luck," I said without conviction, and she nodded her thanks. Just beyond the stable door, the rider who had just returned was throwing down her sweaty tack in a heap in the aisle before she dragged her tired horse towards the outside wash-rack.

"You'll be fine," I whispered to Dynamo. "You're a Florida-bred, and so am I. We can handle a little June heat, can't we?" And I kissed him on the nose.

"You love that horse," a male voice observed.

I'd forgotten there was anyone else in the barn and I jumped, startled. But I looked down the aisle and there he was, curled up with his feet on his tack trunk, flipping the pages of a dressage magazine. He appeared ridiculously calm, considering he was here for the same reason that all of us were: a big fat financial grant from ACE and the ride on an upper-level horse owned by a corporate sponsor. His name was Peter Morrison, according to the schedule the committee had sent, and his horse was Regina. They'd be the second-to-last to audition today, going before me.

I was dimly aware of his presence in the eventing world. We had competed against one another at the Preliminary level in a few events over the past year, but he hadn't been at the Southeast Championships. I supposed he might be from California, or New York. Not that it mattered. I didn't know him, and I didn't intend to get to know him. Other people were only a distraction from the prize—and he wanted the same prize that I did.

Still, I couldn't be rude. And, it must be said, his wide smile was the most welcoming expression I had seen on a human face in some time. To say nothing of his chiseled cheekbones and brown, suntanned skin. Peter Morrison was very easy on the eyes.

"I do love my horse," I admitted, a little embarrassed, a little disappointed in myself. I had to remind myself that it was *Dynamo*, a special case, not for sale. My number one rule in business was that horses come and horses go, always for sale and never for keeps. But I had been in love with Dynamo since day one, and therein lay the problem. I wanted,

needed, *had* to have a top-level horse, had to make a splash on the international scene, had to be the best of the best or I would never be content. And Dynamo... Well, he just wasn't good enough. Loving him wasn't enough to satisfy my ambition, but I couldn't bring myself to sell him and use the money to buy a young horse with more potential. It wasn't like me to be sentimental, but there we were.

Plus, and this was no small thing, competing Dynamo cost me money. Competing other people's horses cost other people money. I could hardly run a business chasing twenty-five cent ribbons that I financed out of my own checking account.

And so here we were. I needed the ACE horse and grant money more than anything. It was the only way that I could see to keep Dynamo in my barn *and* get hold of a horse with the potential to get to the four-star level. It was the only way that I could see to keep Dynamo in my barn and get hold of a horse who would raise my profile, get me a big sponsor, fill my barn with horses to train and sell, and pay the bills. It was the only way that I could see to keep competing, avoid teaching kids to post the trot, and still stay in the eventing business.

"It's nice to see someone who really loves their horse," Peter Morrison continued cheerfully. So cheerful! Didn't he realize he had to ride for the committee in thirty minutes? No nerves at all? It made a person wonder. "Regina here, I've had her since she was three years old, and didn't know anything but how to run very slowly around a racetrack." He laughed and put down his magazine, freeing up his hands to pull off his ball-cap and run his hands through a mop of reddish brown hair. "He's a Thoroughbred too, right?"

"Yes, he raced too... didn't win anything."

"Yeah, my Regina never saw anything but dirt in her face. It taught her to be a little ornery, I think. She's a gorgeous mover, but she'd be happier just doing dressage... she jumps for me because I ask her nicely, but if she isn't set up for a fence just so, forget it!" He hopped off the tack trunk and gave the watching mare a big, smacking kiss on her nose. Regina pinned her ears, outraged, and pulled back, ducking into the privacy of her stall. He watched her fondly. "Old bitch. Suppose I ought to throw her bridle on."

I watched him rummage in the tack trunk and pull out a hard hat, the thick shell personalized with a green and blue silk cover, and a pair of leather gloves, which he stuffed into the back pocket of his buff riding breeches: all the little rituals of bridling a horse, preparing to mount up immediately after the bit is in the mouth and the throat-latch and noseband are buckled. As English riders, we'd been trained in the same nuances and traditions that had been taught to horsemen and horsewomen for centuries. We were walking mirrors of one another, breathing facsimiles of history, reading all the latest scientific advancements in equine sports medicine and then strapping on our leather saddles and bridles as if it was still the eighteenth century.

He walked the mare out at last, saddled and bridled and booted and wrapped, ready for action, and gave us a cheerful wave as he led her past. "Good luck to you!" he said, and sounded as though he meant it.

I watched him walk outside of the barn and mount his mare, my eyes narrowed. I didn't understand how he could look so upbeat and excited about the audition. Certainly, no one else had. One by one, as the day dragged by, the other six applicants had gravely saddled their horses, tugging at their girth straps with grim, doomed faces and panicked eyes, fumbling with the clips on their hard hats with trembling, numb fingers. They ran clean towels over their shining horses' coats to remove every last imagined mote of dust, stuck a booted toe in the left stirrup and swung aboard, and then used that same towel to give one last desperate swipe to their polished boots. Every time someone mounted, one of the other applicants—once me, several times Peter Morrison—had stepped up and taken the towel from their gloved hands, to place neatly on their tack trunk in anticipation of their return, and then given them a stiff nod, a wooden smile, to send them on their way.

We'd all been barely able to manage even the simplest version of the fake courtesy that horsemen afford their competitors, pretending to be kindred spirits and admitting to having all the same likes and dislikes and histories and needs, all the while knowing that we competed against one another. Horse sports are about one person and one horse, not about teams of riders, and this constant life of rivalry shows in our limited social skills. (Or maybe I was only speaking for myself here? Maybe this was a personal problem.)

But Peter had seemed genuinely interested in every pair, wishing them well, patting riders on the thigh with friendly abandon, patting horses on the neck with companionable goodwill, and it just wasn't what I was used to. Or that total lack of nerves, in the face of one of the most important steps on all of our roads to stardom—it was pretty disconcerting.

Then again, I thought, as I got up to take Peter's towel and give him his mechanical wave good-bye, Peter Morrison was the only male applicant this year. And considering that there was only one male applicant last year, too, and that prominent eventing patriarch Damon Knox had publicly stated, in *The Chronicle of the Horse*, that there weren't enough young American men riding, compared to the hordes of girls who flocked to riding lessons as soon as they were big enough to wear a riding helmet safely, and that Damon Knox was the head of the ACE committee, and that two years ago, the only male applicant riding in front of Damon—"there aren't enough guys in eventing"—Knox won the ACE grant...

No wonder he was so happy. Statistics were on his side. Sex was on his side. The publicly-biased judge holding the purse strings was on his side. The eventing gods were on his side. And he knew it.

I shrugged my shoulders, adjusting the knot in my neck, the tag in the collar of my fitted blue polo shirt, the chip on my shoulder, and went back to Dynamo's stall to get the big red horse saddled up. We would be next.

Twenty minutes later, Dynamo was standing with his chest against the stall guard, brushed, bandaged, and tacked. Every hair lay perfectly in accordance with the next, the swirls and whorls of cowlicks red and gold like the grain of polished wood. The fox-

colored mane brushed flat against the muscles of his arched neck, a meticulous four inches long from ear to withers; his thick tail flowing like a waterfall before coming to a precise blunt ending halfway between his hocks and his ankles. “Banged,” it’s called, the way the English do it. We English riders are traditionalists, in every way.

Just as traditional, I stood before my horse in the barn aisle, fastening the button closure on my deerskin gloves. My blue-covered helmet sat snugly over my forehead, my polo shirt in matching navy just brushed the top of my buff riding breeches with their deerskin leather seat and my bridle-leather belt. My polished black boots were understated dress boots, without the fancy, extra-high Spanish cuff that so many riders were opting for. I couldn’t afford the extra decoration, for one thing. I thought it was a little over-the-top and circus-performer, for another. But I have always managed to disdain the things that I cannot afford, and the people who can.

There was a shadow in the barn entrance, and then Peter Morrison was walking in, a low-headed horse dragging behind him. Her hooves scraped along the concrete floor. He gave the mare a pat on the neck and smiled at me as he approached.

“Your horse looks knackered,” I observed.

“Hot out there,” he acknowledged ruefully. “If it gets any hotter this summer we’re all going to have to move up north.”

“I wish.” The lucky ones did, of course. The riders with fat wallets and big strings of top horses went far north of the Mason-Dixon line to wait out Florida’s hellacious summer months in temperate comfort. The rest of us struggled not to melt in our sub-tropical hell. But hey, it was home.

“Yeah, that’s the jackpot, right?” He had the tiniest accent, just present in the flow of his words, a statement in his questions and an inquiry in his statements. An English or Irish trainer growing up, probably. That sort of thing rubbed off, and having the old country accent was good for business in the horse world, anyway. New money loved old accents, they wanted to feel continental or they wouldn’t have bought a horse as an investment (or tax shelter) in the first place. “We all want the yard somewhere in Vermont so we won’t have to break a sweat!”

The *yard*... definitely a UK trainer in his past.

That was fine. My old trainer was from Alabama and had the accent to match, but she was a USDF gold medalist as well, so not sounding posh didn’t make me less of a rider than this guy.

“Did they work you hard out there?” I asked. There was already sweat running down my cheeks and the back of my neck from beneath my hard hat. I shoved at the hairnet keeping my shoulder-length hair tucked discreetly above my ears and under the helmet. A boyish crop was definitely in my future. It didn’t matter what I looked like without a hard hat on, anyway.

“Pretty hard,” he admitted, stripping the sweat-soaked tack from his mare. “Dressage, show-jumping, the water complex on the cross-country course.” He grinned and tossed a mud-soaked girth on the ground. “Water was quite refreshing, of course.”

“Like doing an entire event in a half-hour!”

“All three phases. You ready?”

I wasn't ready. I was hot. I was so hot. I'd grown up in Florida, I'd been riding in this heat since I was seven years old, close enough to a lifetime to be the truth, but it had to be hotter today than ever before. This had to be a record-breaker. It might get this still and close and steamy on an August afternoon at about two o'clock, but no one would have scheduled us to ride then, either. We knew what we were in for in August. I wasn't ready for this in early June.

“I'm ready,” I said stiffly.

“Good luck,” he said earnestly, as if he really meant it, but maybe it was part of his all-around good guy schtick, how he got clients and students and girls. These guys on horseback were all the same, they had a groom at every farm. There weren't enough girls who had spent time on breeding farms with snorting-whinnying-prancing stallions chasing around mares in heat, or pregnant mares, or *goats* even, to recognize peacocking and showboating, and be disgusted by it when it was being displayed for their benefit.

I had, however, spent a little time around breeding stallions and long-suffering mares (and goats) and I wasn't interested in being courted, however casually, by another stud colt. There was too much li'l ladying going on in the horse business. Too much swagger and men walking into the barn crotch-first in riding breeches that were entirely too tight. Something about being with horses made women more understanding and empathetic, at least that's what all the self-help books masquerading as horse books seemed to suggest, but they just seemed to make men more macho and chauvinistic. I suppose it was tough on their egos that both sexes competed on equal footing in equestrian competition.

No lady's tee for us, and we look better in riding breeches, too.

Chapter Three

The dressage arena sat on top of a hill, and I loosened Dynamo's muscles by putting him through his paces: circles and serpentines, voltes and half-voltes, halts and changes-of-gait, while the judges sat, rather less than regally, perched atop a picnic table along the rail.

Beyond them, catching Dynamo's eye every time we passed, was a big oval jumping field, dotted with the kind of expensive, whimsical jumps—butterflies holding up orange and black striped rails, two wishing wells spanning a false brick wall—that only the top events can afford to put out for their show jumping phase. It was a reminder that the money behind Longacres was very significant. This was a rich man's game I was trying to play. Well, that's why I was here, I reminded myself. For the money. Every other rider here was in the same position I was—they possessed all of the skill and none of the cash.

I wasn't overwhelmed by the height of the show jumping course—the poles fall down if your horse hits them, and they weren't higher than four feet, anyway. But down the slope, opposite the stable where we'd spent the day in waiting, I could see the railroad ties and telephone poles, sculpted by chainsaw into their own forms of rustic art, that comprised the cross-country course. The stone wall out there wasn't painted rocks on a sheet of plywood—those were real stones, held together with real mortar. And the water complex had a particularly formidable drop. Once your horse was leaping over the fence in front of it, you were soaring seven feet above the pool of water below.

I had to look away from the water hazard, actually. I felt a wave of nausea wash over me and settle in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't scared, exactly—I'd done it all before, and cross-country riding is the heart and soul of eventing, the reason why we work so hard. But I was a *little* dizzy in the heat, perhaps just a little weak. I swallowed hard. Heat stroke was not an option. Balancing a horse around cross-country fences requires a clear head and a strong body.

And there was no turning back now. I brushed the back of one hand against my forehead, trying to sop up some of the damp, but my deerskin gloves were already soaked through with the sweat of Dynamo's withers and neck. All I accomplished was introducing a salty prickling into my eyes. Now I couldn't see, in addition to the nerves and nausea. This wasn't ideal.

Get it together.

I heaved a deep sigh, hoping the breath would stretch my diaphragm and back, and tilted my pelvis so that my seat bones would sink into the saddle, feeling his very spine. There's a moment that I'm sure must be the entire point of riding dressage, (the Olympic sport that takes decades to master and puts the masses to sleep), a moment when your muscles flow into your horse's muscles, and you cease to sit as a passenger on his back and find yourself floating, buoyed by his impulsion and glorious strength. Whoever first felt it—a Roman cavalryman, a French knight, a Bedouin nomad—they must have been forever addicted. It is the sort of sensation that a person feels once and spends the rest of their lives seeking out. It is perfect balance with a four-legged creature of speed and power, and I had never felt it so strongly with any horse besides Dynamo.

What was remarkable, though, and what I thought would impress the judges, was that while I could find perfect balance and enlightenment with Dynamo, he was naturally very bad at dressage.

His natural gaits were unbeautiful: he lifted his knees too high at the trot instead of swinging forward from the shoulder; he had a long back and a natural tendency to let his hind legs trail after him at the canter, instead of bringing them up beneath his body to create a springing, cat-like bounce with every step. All his mismatched parts required a particularly long warm-up to start flowing together in the tightly-sprung watch-works precision needed for a competitive dressage test, and for the first ten minutes or so of any warm-up, few onlookers would have believed me if I told them he was capable of upper-level movements. But he *could* do them, because I could put him together and coax

them out of him. I was counting on the judges to watch our warm-up, and see the transformation I created.

But the transformation took time, more time than a naturally gifted horse would have needed, and it was hot—have I mentioned that it was hot?—and so by the time Dynamo had finally managed to pull his hind legs underneath himself and started pushing off with his hindquarters, instead of pulling himself along with his forelegs in an undignified scrabble, his veins were bulging from his neck and sweat had been rubbed into white foam along the leather of the reins, the bridle, even behind my legs where my calves were constantly pushing, lifting, coaxing his abdominal muscles to lift up his back and meet my seat. When we halted at last, I let the reins fall loose and he turned his head; I could see the red rims of his flared nostrils, and I knew then that we didn't have long. I couldn't ask for much more in this airless swamp.

Along the rail, the trio of judges had begun beckoning, flagging me down with various gestures, flourishing a hat, brandishing a notepad, waving their arms. For all the motion, it took me a surprisingly long time to notice them. I was too absorbed in working Dynamo, I supposed then, but perhaps it was that I was already so overheated that my reaction times had begun to crawl more slowly, neurons firing sluggishly, brain literally fried.

I nudged the horse into a trot and we jogged over to the rail. A few strides before we reached the group, I squeezed my fingers closed on the reins and sat deep in the saddle, pushing Dynamo with my calves so that his forward momentum ran straight into the firm hold I had on his mouth, causing him to rock back and halt beautifully and square, a leg at each corner, like a general before his troops. It was time to show off what we had.

I gave him a quick pat on the neck, and felt the heat of his wet skin through my deerskin glove. He was broiling.

"We're going to make this brief," the lone man on the committee said. Tall and traditional, in breeches and damp polo shirt and a faded ACE ball cap perched on his bald head, Damon Knox had been making and breaking the dreams of penniless riders for ten years. I'd been gearing up for this moment for just as long. "It's just too hot," he continued. "We're risking your health and your horse's with this weather." He glanced up at the opaque sky, the thunderstorm that had stubbornly refused to budge and let loose its pent-up rain and wind upon us, to make his point. "Just jump a couple of warm-up fences, then do the stadium jumping course that we posted in the barn this morning and we'll call it a day."

I nodded, and blinked hard, because there seemed to be more sweat in my eyes. Why else would they be prickling? This wasn't a calamity, was it? So it was all going to come down to a twenty-minute warm-up in the dressage ring and a stadium jumping course. Everyone else had ridden for nearly an hour, showing off their dressage prowess, their cross-country bravery, their show-jumping discipline, and I was going to have to show I was worth twenty thousand dollars and a new horse by doing just a third of all that.

That was just *fine*.

It was a disaster.

They were handing this whole package to Peter Morrison. I just knew it.

My face flushed red at the idea, and if I had thought about crying with disappointment, rage replaced that despondency quickly enough. Resentment had always carried me further than jealousy; despising my enemies had always been more sustaining than envying my competition. These are the true lessons you learn in high school, when you spend all four years of it mucking out after your classmates' horses.

I hardened my jaw and then loosened it again, working my tongue around the insides of my dry mouth, as I realized that my unhappy tension had carried all the way down to my mount. His back had gone flat and his head had come up, losing the obedient, arch-necked stance that we prized in dressage. The hollow feeling was a reminder of what we needed to do. I could fight for this with everything I had, but if I slipped in my own composure, Dynamo would go around the arena like a plow horse after a long day in the fields. I had to go into this battle shod with ballet slippers, easy and light on the ground, on my horse, on the eyes.

And I'd show them that I was brave enough to take on the heat. A few extra degrees couldn't hurt *us*. We were *Florida-breds*. So I spoke up. "I think we could manage the whole ride. We're locals, you know. We were both brought up here in Florida."

Damon Knox's face clouded, and the two women sitting beside him narrowed their eyes. I saw my mistake instantly; their faces said it all. It was too hot for anyone to ask a horse for anything remotely strenuous. What sort of person was I?

Knox was a snowbird from Virginia. He'd be leaving for the summer in another week. No Florida summers or Virginia winters for his home-bred, never-been-raced Thoroughbreds; he shuttled them up and down the coast chasing the room temperature ideal. He raised his eyebrows at me, silently questioning my sanity, my humanity.

But it was Ronnie Gibbs, the woman sitting next to him on top of the picnic table, who spoke up. She had been a top rider before she fell at Badminton and broke her pelvis in three places. Now she coached and taught clinics, and her voice held that carefully rehearsed, encouraging tone that kept hopeless riders coming back again and again with their checkbooks open. "You have the right spirit," she said. "I'm very impressed with your spunk. But we have to be careful of what's best for our horses, don't we? After all, they should always come first. Without them, we're nothing."

My toes curled up in my boots at her empty platitudes. I hadn't been seen as brave and ambitious at all. I'd been seen as cutthroat and cruel to my horse and only interested in the win. Now I wasn't the next big rider on the scene, I was just a headstrong girl who couldn't take advice and didn't put her horse first. I *couldn't* come back from this; it was the eighth deadly sin, and the most grievous one of all. But I had to try. Maybe, if I passed it off as girlish excitement...

"I'm sorry," I said meekly. "You're right. I guess I'm so used to the heat that I didn't really realize it was worse than usual. I just got excited about running through that water complex, that's all."

Ronnie's lips curved into a smile that made her face pucker as though she'd bit into a lemon, every last inch of her skin sliding into a thousand wrinkles. Horsewomen polish and adore their saddles, but let their faces languish in the sun. I always put on sunblock—when I remembered—out of a terror of ending up like Ronnie and the entire generation of riding instructors, trainers, and competitive riders who looked just like her, with skin like a cowboy's saddle left in the desert. "It's natural to be excited," the lemon said kindly. "I like the water complex best, too."

I had the uncomfortable impression that she was speaking to me in the same voice she used for Pony Club seminars.

D-level Pony Club seminars.

The ones for eight-year-olds, who were *literally* riding *ponies*.

"Do you know the jumping course?" the other woman asked, rather more sharply. Kathy Britton, respected owner and amateur rider, was tall and thin, with a drawn, boney face, and she had propped her elbow on her knee and her chin on her fist, from which one perfectly manicured thumb nail emerged, tapping at her other fingers. I was mesmerized by the cherry-red lacquer on the nail for a moment, gazing at it while I tried to understand what sort of horsewoman had the time to maintain nail polish and cuticles in our world of oils, acids, and solvents. The rich sort, with people to do her dirty work, that was what sort. Like the girls back at Osprey Ridge, the girls whose parents paid boarding and grooming and training fees to Laurie, who passed all the messiest jobs down to me, the working student. The serf of the riding stable. I narrowed my eyes at those fingernails. Imagine *you* judging *me*, I thought viciously.

"Ms. Thornton?"

I tore my eyes away from her manicure and plastered a smile on my face. "Yes! Yes, I know the course."

"Go right ahead," Damon Knox said thinly. "Give us a circle and salute when you're ready to start."

Kathy sniffed and adjusted the bra strap peeking from her tank top.

I nodded and picked up the reins again, nudging Dynamo into wakefulness. He was sluggish as we moved off from the rail, and I gave the bit a jiggle in an attempt to bring his head up and get his attention back. But the air was thick and oppressive, weighing down on my shoulders, clogging up my tired lungs, and I could feel my own body rebelling against my demands as much as my horse was. He was lop-eared and low-headed as we trotted into the jumping arena, and as I turned him towards the first warm-up fence, a low vertical fence of a single pole, his gait stuttered a little, as if he couldn't quite believe what I was asking of him.

I couldn't quite believe it myself.

But we'd been set up for failure, and all the rage and resentment and ambition boiled up in me, and I bit down on my lip and swung my right leg, the one that the committee couldn't see, jabbing my horse hard in the ribcage with the blunt tip of one gleaming little spur. It couldn't have hurt, but it must have been a surprise.

Dynamo lurched forward, breaking into a canter twenty feet before the fence, and sprang over the jump with the fluidity and power that had always marked his jumping. As a jumper, at least, the horse was a natural, and after he had learned to carry himself efficiently in the dressage, the extra spring in his step and thrust in his hindquarters had earned him at least another two feet of jumping ability.

I let him canter in a big circle and then brought him back to the other fence, a big square oxer. He pricked his ears and rounded his back, looking at the fence with a hint of a spook in his step. “Are you *kidding?*” I hissed, and gave him another jab with my hidden leg, sending him forward in a crooked leap.

Dynamo straightened a stride out and launched himself over the fence, and I closed my legs and huddled over his wet neck, my hands on the crest of his mane, my chin close over them. I always did have a dramatic jumping style, born of learning to jump on the dregs of the local stock auctions, whatever little beast Laurie brought home for two hundred dollars or less. Those horses either didn’t know how to jump yet and threw themselves at jumps with gusto, or they already knew they didn’t like jumping and threw themselves *away* from the jumps with equal gusto. Either way, I learned to get out of the saddle and clutch mane for dear life. I’d never have made it as a pretty girl posing in the hunter show arena, but in the jumper ring, getting over the fence is all that matters. How it looks is of no consequence.

Dynamo took a slight misstep upon landing, the rhythm of his stride in doubt for a split second—which can be a long time when you are perched atop an airborne horse—before he managed to catch himself, rebalance, and carry on. I sat still, poised just above his withers, with my weight deep in my heels, lodged in irons hanging tautly from the stirrup leathers, all one hundred and thirty pounds of me dangling from the two steel bars in the center of the saddle, allowing him the freedom of his back so that he could help himself.

I hoped the judges were getting all this. It wasn’t about the horse, after all, it was about how I got the horse around the course. This audition was all about me. And why I deserved *more* good horses. *Better* horses (sorry, Dynamo!).

We made one more sweeping turn around the top of the jumping arena before I turned him back for another warm-up fence, where I was hopeful that I wouldn’t have to poke him with a steel spur to convince him that he needed to jump. I needed him to regain some of his usual pizazz and enjoy his job. “I know it’s hot, baby,” I told him, and his ears flicked back languidly to listen to my voice. “But we really only have to be out here for another ten minutes or so. Help me out here.”

His strides did not increase in strength, but the tempo remained even. I kept my legs tight against his sides and tried to help him as best I could.

He was the best horse, a great horse—he always tried for me. Even when the air was too wet to breathe and his skin was too soaked to let him cool, even when his nostrils were extended to their red-rimmed utmost, even when his flesh was searing hot to the touch, he gathered his hindquarters beneath his body and shoved himself on, stride after

stride, with the bounce and grace of a puma.

I glanced to my right as we cantered along the rail, and found myself eye to eye with Peter Morrison, who was watching us from about fifty feet away, his wet mare grazing beneath an oak tree. He raised a hand and nodded, giving me a thumbs-up, and as I turned my eyes back to find the path to the next fence, I felt a resurgence of anger wash through me. Spoiled rich white American male, spying on me while his good mare dried out after their audition, their *full* audition, while I would get only a third of the judges' time and attention. What was the *point*, what was the point of any of it? He was going to win, Damon Knox probably hadn't seen anyone else's name after he ran his finger down the list of finalists and saw the word *Peter*.

I shook my head, regardless of how odd it must have looked to the judges. I *wouldn't* let him win. I put down my hands and waited for the fence ahead.

Dynamo took the tall vertical in perfect balance, his breath shuddering from his lungs in a great fluttering snort as his hooves connected with the ground again, and I immediately reined him up in a dancing halt, dropped my right hand to my thigh, and nodded a salute to the judges on the picnic table. They nodded back, and I brought back my right calf, touching Dynamo slightly with the tip of my steel spur, and he bounced forward into a bright, eager canter. The jumping had gotten him keyed up despite the heat.

And me, too. This was a second wind: this suddenly high, heady feeling, drunk with delight and passion and driving will all at once, to feel myself one with my horse, rocking back and forth with his swinging stride, my eyes tingling with the sharpness of salt dripping from my forehead. There was a sudden burst of wind from the recalcitrant rain cloud, the reluctant storm that had hovered so tantalizingly nearby all afternoon, a hot wind like the gust from a convection oven, like the desert of Dynamo's forebears, and as we drove towards the first fence, a confection of saw-sculpted wooden flowers holding up a four-foot-high series of pink and yellow poles, the whole heavy structure seemed to be wobbling before my eyes.

Not just mine; Dynamo's ears pricked and suddenly seemed to be directly under my chin as he leaned back in alarm, raising his head higher to get a good look at the mysteriously moving fence. Despite course designers' continued efforts to make fences look more and more outlandish and alarming, there is one unwritten rule: jumps don't move. Horses have no tolerance for machination.

Dynamo's strides faltered; I sat down in the saddle and pushed, hard, with my seat, forcing him to match my own motion and keep moving forward. Horses' bodies mirror our own; pelvis to pelvis, chin to chin, elbow to elbow, our weaknesses become theirs and our determination dictates their decisions.

And that is what happened.

Dynamo plowed forward despite his misgivings, right up to the very base of the fence, and then gathered himself up and launched upwards. His hind hooves had not yet left the ground when the second gust of wind came bursting out of the cloud, my very

own little black rain cloud which had followed me since birth, waiting for this very moment, and mowed down the pretty wooden flowers and sent scattering the pink and yellow poles. One pole caught Dynamo in his perfectly even knees, aborting his flight, sending him downwards face-first. One standard of wooden flowers crashed into my left leg before sliding down my polished boot and across Dynamo's ribs. A blossoming red rose appeared on the bleached white of the saddle pad, dark and oxygen-starved, as the wooden flowers splintered on his side.

Did Dynamo flip over because his head hit the ground and broke his momentum? Or did he stumble as his hind hooves tried to gain purchase on the rolling poles beneath them, like scrabbling on steel rollers, sending his hindquarters up into the air? Whatever caused it, he was up before I was, tripping and falling and lurching, dripping blood from a dozen abrasions caused by shattered poles and fragments of flowers. I lay where I'd fallen, face in the dirt, clay in my mouth, mane between my fingers, tears in my eyes, until Peter Morrison was on his knees at my side.

Chapter Four

"You didn't really fall off," my mother said. "The fence fell on you. That's completely different."

"There's no do-over, Mom," I said impatiently. I had a crick in my neck from trying to talk on my cell and muck stalls at the same time, my head turned completely to the left to pin down the little phone while my hands were busy with the pitchfork. "I don't complete the audition, I fail. I lose. They're going to give it to Peter fucking Morrison, just watch."

"Stop cussing like that. You sound like a stablehand. You're running your own barn, act professional."

"I am a stablehand right now. What do you think I'm doing? I'm mucking out." I was impatient for the conversation to be over. Phone calls from my mother were just opportunities for us to realize how much we didn't understand each other. She thought I should be building up a big riding lesson business to make money for one nice competition horse of my own. I was concentrating on training horses and selling them on, reasoning that since I hated children, there was no point inviting them to my farm and letting them make me miserable all day. I was in the horse business to ride, not to babysit.

"Laurie would have had a kid in there mucking out," my mother pointed out. "She always had you doing it. She wasn't doing all that work. She was teaching, making money."

"Laurie liked kids. I don't. I like being by myself."

“Well, she’s out riding her horses while you’re in the barn mucking your own stalls. Doesn’t seem like you’ve improved much for yourself since she was out riding her horses while you were in her barn mucking her stalls. Except now you have to pay the bills, too.”

I couldn’t argue with that, as much as I’d love to. I flicked manure into the wheelbarrow with a practiced twist of my wrist. The expert at work. “I’ll ride in the afternoon.”

“When it’s ninety degrees? That seems smart.” Her voice took on its nasal, sarcastic quality, which I associated with pretty much every foolish decision I’d ever made, from the time I’d bought a plastic horse model from a girl at school for my entire life savings (she fleeced me thirty bucks for a model that cost twenty dollars at the toy store; I was in second grade and saving for a real horse, but the temptation of seeing that gleaming model right in front of me was too much to bear) to entering one of Laurie’s sales horses in an event with a non-refundable entry fee (I lost one hundred and fifty dollars when the horse sold for two thousand dollars a week later; the event went on, five weeks later, with me dancing in attendance on Laurie and her students, as usual). I had a history of foolish equine-related decisions, and every one of them could be chronicled in my mother’s special tone which she reserved for my stupidity and my stupidity alone.

I can’t even describe the knife-edge it took on when I announced my plan to buy a farm with my college fund.

She responded to heartbreak with sarcasm, I see that now.

I did, too. We were always alike. I see that now.

At that moment, I couldn’t see how anyone related to me by the sacred bonds of blood could be more different. Teach children to ride? Had we never met?

“Listen to me, Jules—Peggy Barlow is selling a nice lesson pony. I can give you her number. You really need to think about it.”

“How do you know about that?” My mother wasn’t involved in the horse business. How was she still in on the feed store gossip, after I left home and took the horses out of her life?

“One of the girls at work told me. Her daughter rides with Peggy. That lady, she’s another one making a fortune teaching kids. I’m really disappointed that you won’t consider it.”

From sarcasm to disappointment. We were almost to the angry hang-up. Which was such a relief, because my neck, shoulder, back and somehow, inexplicably, my left hip, were all in a state of extreme agony from the effort of holding the phone in place against my shoulder. Also, the phone was getting hot and wet against my cheek, the temperature at eight a.m. was about eighty-five degrees, and stall mucking is physical work.

“Mom, I just can’t deal with kids right now, okay? I’m not a riding instructor. I’m a trainer. They’re not the same thing all the time!”

She clicked her tongue in exasperation and I knew the conversation was over. “Jules, you think you know everything. I don’t know why I even offer to help. Have fun

mucking your stalls.”

There wasn't a bang or anything to mark the end of the call; angry, explosive, cathartic, phone-shattering slams just don't happen in this modern life anymore. We were denied that with cool technological efficiency. She pressed the red button on her phone, and that was that. Back to her air-conditioned, modern life, making deals or whatever it was she did all day. My mother was in property management. It was a new career; she liked to change careers. I didn't ask what property management meant; I didn't care. It didn't affect me, did it?

The only thing that mattered was my farm, my horses. They were my future. I wasn't interested in what other people did with their time. They weren't me, so what difference could it possibly make what they did?

I sighed and slid the phone into the back pocket of my threadbare cut-offs. The silence of the barn echoed around me. The horses were outside, enjoying a little freedom before I brought them back in for shade and the manufactured breeze of their box fans. I loved it when the barn was occupied: twelve little horsies, neat and tidy in their boxes, heads poking out to watch me while I swept up the aisle, nickering their encouragement each time I disappeared into the feed room, ears pricked with their eternal hope for surprise grain or bonus hay. It was like living in a snow-globe, or a magazine advertisement for a stabling architecture firm; it was like the fairy-tale existence I had always known would characterize a life spent with horses.

But right now, the reality of life was very much in my face. A hay-, dirt-, and manure-strewn barn aisle. Eleven dirty stalls (and one half-cleaned one). A hay pallet that was discouragingly empty of hay. A low rumble from the west that signified the Gulf of Mexico was already stirring with plans to flood my riding arena and trump my carefully-plotted training calendar.

Sometimes, I was very much afraid that my mother was right.

I worked in silence for a little while longer, dumping wheelbarrows into the bin situated beneath the old ramp of the loading dock. Once this had been a broodmare barn on a much larger breeding farm, and the loading ramp, covered in grass and fenced on either side with crumbling wooden rails, had been for the huge semi-trailers that were used to transport racehorses and high-end breeding stock around the country, or even, in this case, from one section of the farm to another. I didn't have such fancy transportation for my horses, though. Just the four-horse trailer parked out along the edge of the parking lot, waiting for the next event. Which wouldn't be anytime soon, I thought regretfully, wiping sweat from my face with the front of my tank top. It was too damn hot. I really shouldn't even be training in this weather.

But there was no time to spare.

I just had to be careful and watch the horses.

And myself. I had nearly ended up in the back of an ambulance in all the confusion at Longacres yesterday. I blushed to think of it: the way that Peter Morrison had held my wrist, checking my pulse, calling over his shoulder that my skin was cold and I was going

into heat stroke.

“No I’m not,” I hissed through numb lips. “Give me my horse!”

“Shush, take it easy,” he said, leaning over me, and I wasn’t so far gone into heat stroke or shock or PTSD to not notice what chiseled cheekbones Peter Morrison had, or what shockingly blue eyes, brilliant as the sky at that magic hour just after sunset, shining down at me from sun-browned skin. I stilled for just a moment, arrested by his touch and his gaze, and for a strange moment I wasn’t thinking about horses at all.

Ugh. I was disgusting *myself*. I was mucking out a stall, surrounded by manure and soiled shavings and stinking to high heaven of ammonia and I was the most disgusting thing in it. How could I even *think* things like that? Lying there in the dirt, with my hard hat pushed back and sweat trailing muddy rivulets down my dirty cheeks, gazing up at that entitled shoo-in for the award I wanted, I needed, while God only knew what was going on with my horse... looking at him like some kind of love-struck Juliet...

Well, that *was* my name.

Another reason to be angry at my mother this morning. I mentally added it to the list. Why would you name your daughter after someone who fell in love with the wrong person and died heart-broken? It was like she had been wishing bad luck on me. *I already have quite enough on my own, Mom,* I thought viciously, pulling the dirty water buckets from the stall. I staggered down the barn aisle, wishing that Monty would just *finish* his damn water instead of dunking all his hay in it, and threw the water out in the parking lot.

And then I put down the buckets and looked out at the empty parking lot.

It was big, made for all the employees who had once worked here to park their cars. When the realtor had left me to walk around and imagine my domain here, I had looked at this lot and thought it would be perfect: lots of room for clients to store their horse trailers, lots of room for their SUVs and luxury sedans to park when they came to see how their horses were doing. Room for my working student to park her car when she lived here, working in the barn for room and board and riding lessons.

Nothing in it now but my trailer, off in the corner, and my truck, pulled up close to the barn. The few clients I had with horse trailers took their rigs home, to ferry around their other horses. The SUVs and luxury sedans had never materialized. And my working student, Becky—well, she was part-time and didn’t even live here anymore. Which was why I was doing the stalls instead of riding this morning.

I sat down on one of the railroad ties that lined the parking lot’s edge. It was another hot day, and I was sore from falling off yesterday, and dammit, I deserved a break, didn’t I? Of course, taking even a short break meant I wouldn’t have time to get on all my horses today. But who was I kidding? I had a barn to clean, the skies were already growling, and my elbow felt like I had shut it in a car door. I must have landed on it after Dynamo fell. I was lucky that was the least of my injuries. Poor Dynamo had some heat in the suspensory area of one foreleg last night, with just a little swelling. It was gone this morning, but the creeping fear remained: we both could have gotten seriously injured yesterday, and all for nothing.

Becky had thought so, too, but for different reasons. I chewed at my lip. *Becky.*

The way she had looked at me, when I'd pulled into the lot last night and taken Dynamo off the trailer and put him straight into the wash-rack. The way she had looked at the dirt on my breeches, the scrape on my face. And then she had given Dynamo a long, assessing look. The sweat on his haunches, the hollows above his eyes, the flare of his nostrils, the scrapes on his sides.

She'd unwrapped his legs while I poured Diet Coke down my throat, dry as a bone after the day in the stifling heat. "There's a little filling here," she'd announced. "What happened?"

"We fell at a fence," I'd admitted. "Or—the fence fell, in the wind, right as we got to it. So we kind of all fell together."

"*Dynamo* fell?"

"Yeah. It was ugly."

Becky looked at me as if I was something scraped from the bottom of her shoe. Then she picked up the hose and started to fill a wash bucket.

I went into the tack room to wipe off Dynamo's sweaty bridle.

She'd appeared later, in the doorway. Her nose still wrinkled, as if I smelled bad. Worse than her? I doubted it. We had both spent our day sweating in the sun, surrounded by horses and manure. "I put a sweat on his leg," she'd said. "Wrapped the others. And gave him a liniment brace."

"Thanks." I attempted to smile, to pretend we were still friends, the way it had been when she had first come to work for me. Before she decided I was a nobody.

Becky nodded. She leaned against the doorframe for a moment, an unusual moment of relaxation for her. Her pony-tail was coming down and her straw-colored hair was falling around her tan face. "I love that horse," she admitted suddenly, her voice warm. "He's so grateful for everything you do for him. When I was running the sponge over his withers, he was reaching around to try and groom me back."

"He loves having his withers rubbed, doesn't he?" I smiled, trying to capitalize on the moment, keep it going. "He had a hard life before I got him. I think he really is grateful for every little thing now."

"That's why you shouldn't take advantage of him." Becky's voice turned frosty again. "He gives and he gives and he gives for you. He'll *never* tell you no. He'll kill himself for you."

I took an involuntary step back, surprised by her accusation. "I'm not taking advantage—"

"You keep pushing him. You said yourself he's not an international horse. You said he was really going to be maxing out at prelim, then you start talking about taking him Intermediate. And then you pull stunts like this today, taking him to this audition ride, in this crazy heat, and look, he comes back injured—"

"He has a little heat above his ankle, he's not broken-down or something—"

"Not today." Becky shoved away from the doorframe, obviously finished with me. "I

have to go.”

“They haven’t eaten supper yet.”

“I have a paper to write.” She turned away, and a few moments later, I heard her car rattle and whine to life.

I’d stood there for a few minutes, alone in the tack room. And then I just shook my head and hung Dynamo’s bridle back on its peg. I wasn’t taking advantage of my horse. If Dynamo didn’t want to do something, he’d tell me. We had a closeness, after our years together, that Becky couldn’t even begin to imagine. And if Dynamo and I had to masquerade as Intermediate-quality, even Advanced-quality, I had no doubt that for a little while, anyway, we could pull it off. Not forever, because that would be pushing him too hard. But just long enough to get the horses that I needed, the owners that I needed, to make my own masquerade become the truth.

The implication that I would hurt Dynamo, or purposely push him too hard? I shook my head. She was insane.

“Screw you, Becky,” I’d told the empty tack room, and the horses had nickered their approval (or really just that they wanted supper), and I’d gone out to take over where my working student had left off.

Now Marcus, my fat beagle, came padding out of the barn and shoved his nose in my lap, wagging his whippy tail. He loved it when I took a break, which wasn’t very often. It freed up my hands to rub his ears. I stroked his silky hound-dog ears with both hands, while he licked his nose with pleasure, and looked around my domain.

The parking lot shimmered in the heat. Beyond, the line of scruffy turkey oaks that blocked the highway from the farm swayed gently in a humid sea breeze, their tough little leaves rattling, a sound that promised rain. I heard a whinny from the paddocks behind the barn, and a high-pitched squeal in reply. One of the mares must be in season, and Passion, the brat pony, was all about that.

There was work to be done, to Marcus’s sorrow. But first, I decided, a few affirmations to make the universe understand that I was a force to be reckoned with.

“I want to fill this parking lot up,” I said aloud now, my voice spooking a lizard that had been sunning on the railroad tie. He went scurrying into the nondescript bushes that grew, scraggly and untended, against the barn’s front walls. I looked at them without pleasure. “I want flowers here. I want twenty horses in the barn. I want a working student who gives a shit and shows up every day and doesn’t leave until the work’s done. I want sponsor’s names on my saddle pads and owners with nice horses who pay their bills on time.”

Okay, that last part of the affirmation might just be a pipe dream. “I’ll accept just owners with nice horses,” I assured the universe.

Thunder growled somewhere in the west.

“I’ll take that as a get to work.” I hopped up, giving Marcus a farewell rub around the ears.

Marcus stepped away, disappointed, and then went toddling off in search of shade.

Lucky him. But I made up my mind. I wasn't going to finish the barn right now. I was going to *ride*, right now, while I could. I'd do the damn stalls later, while it was storming. I'd work right around the horses if I had to.

Because now, while no one was showing up, while no one cared, what difference did it make if the barn was spotlessly clean? I had to get attention, and mucking stalls wasn't going to get me any attention. Showing horses, and winning, was going to get me attention. And clients. And sponsors.

Step one: ride.

Step two: win.

Step three: clients.

Step four: fame.

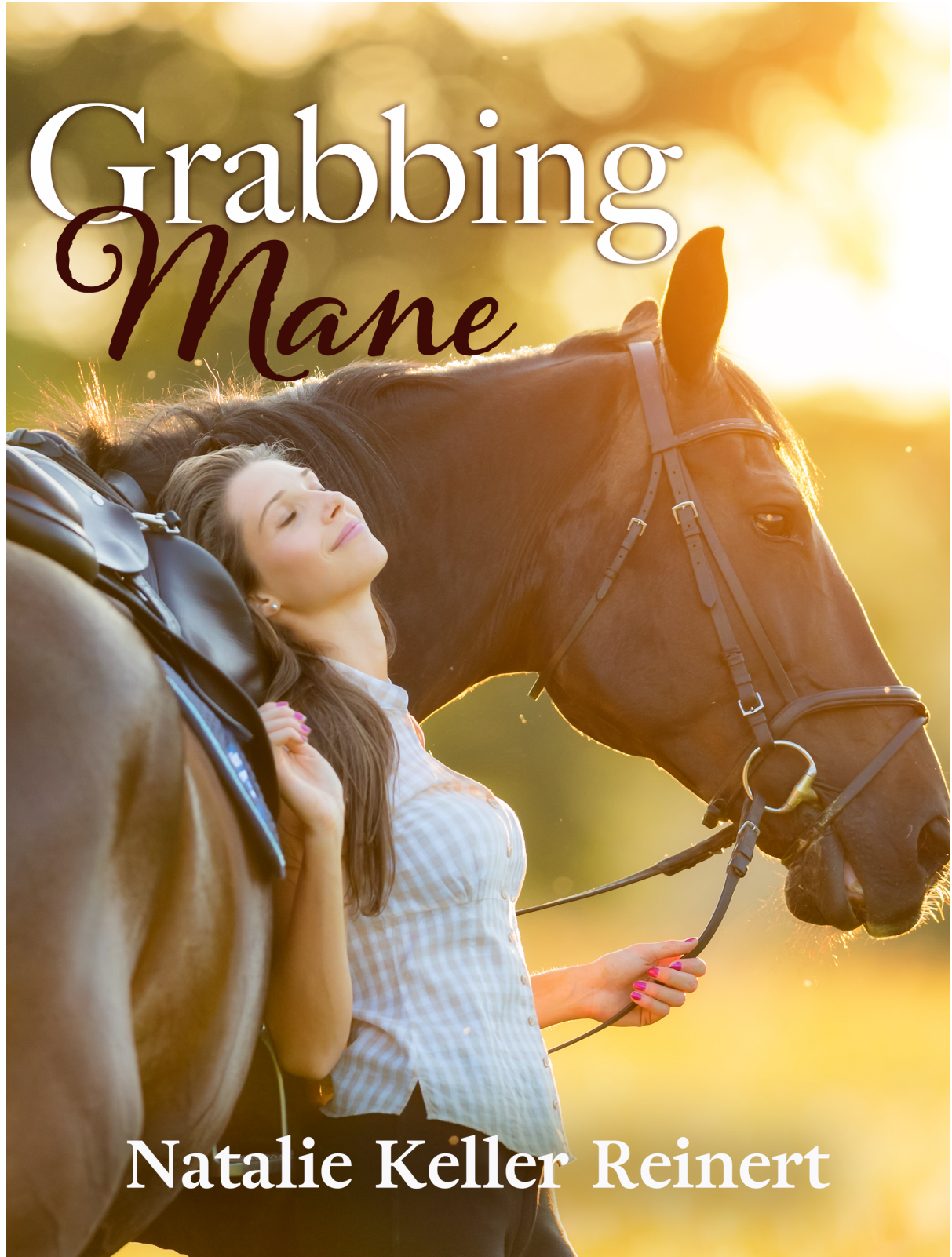
Whatever it took.

I rubbed my elbow one more time and then headed for the house to change into boots and breeches.

Read the rest of the story!

[Ambition is available for Kindle, Kindle Unlimited, Audible, paperback and audiobook here.](#)

Grabbing Mane



Natalie Keller Reinert

Grabbing Mane

Introduction

This is one of my favorite books.

It's also my newest. *Grabbing Mane* was released in June 2020, after some tough rewrites. All in all, I spent about a year on this book, which is a lot when I'd gotten the writing of my series into what felt like a fine science. But it was definitely worth the effort.

Grabbing Mane came about when a conversation on Patreon about what readers wanted to see next suddenly honed in on amateur life. That's when I realized that nearly every horse book is about a professional, or the journey to becoming a professional. So I wrote *Grabbing Mane* to be different. Instead of a story about the chase for Olympic gold, it's a story about the chase for balance, and the questions raised by bringing a horse into a perfectly normal, perfectly adequate life.

Introduction

Whenever Casey Halbach, age thirty-two, thought about horses, she smiled.

She'd done this for as long as anyone could remember. It wasn't just any smile, either. It was a delighted curve of the lips which reached right up to her green eyes and made them sparkle.

Her parents had found Casey's happy horse smile so endearing that they'd taken their little daughter for her first riding lesson when she was only five years old. She was barely able to hang onto the saddle as the chubby lesson pony wandered around the riding arena at a bored walk. She cried when the riding instructor plucked her down at the end of the half-hour. Then she turned and beheld the pony snuffling at her shoulders, and Casey smiled again.

Thus Casey's destiny of becoming a horse girl was made clear at a very young age. She rode horses non-stop for the next decade, with brief pauses to sleep and go to school and scribble out her homework.

After that decade, though, real life won out. Colleges were jostling for her attention, but all their correspondence really meant was that they wanted her to impress them. Stuck at a crossroads which felt more like a cliff, Casey was forced to choose between spending her last junior year horse-showing and hoping for the best once high school ended, or going all-in on school. Her parents made it very clear which side they were on.

If she made it as a professional horse trainer, and that was a very big if, she'd almost certainly struggle her entire life. If she simply worked hard at school and got a good job, she could afford to be as horsey as she wanted without the broke lifestyle. This was the way her parents, teachers, and guidance counselors all broke it down for her, anyway. Her mileage, they stressed, would not vary.

And so, beginning at age seventeen, Casey commenced doing everything she was supposed to do in life: she sold her horse, she concentrated on her schoolwork, she got into a good college, she began a sensible career in marketing, she dated and dumped several unreliable boyfriends before settling on one very good one, and by all measures, she wound up fairly happy.

After four years in Gainesville, Casey settled back down in Cocoa, the coastal Florida town where she had grown up. She live in a rented townhouse with a nice guy who held a good job, and she had her very own desk in her very own cubicle, a square of beige carpet she could roll her chair across in two seconds, located within a frostily air-conditioned office which featured blue-tinted windows to keep the Florida sun at bay.

Casey then proceeded to live her life to the fullest. She never hit reply-all on emails, and she said things like: "let's circle back on that" in meetings. She spent too much money on cheese. She went on cruises to the Bahamas, and had long weekend brunches with friends. She talked about, but ultimately wasn't willing to take the responsibility of, adopting a dog.

Casey's modern life was in nearly every way living up to the ideals her parents had hoped for. Maybe they wondered if she and Brandon were ever going to get engaged, and maybe she wondered if she was ever going to get a promotion, but, all in all, things were good. Things were proceeding at an acceptable pace.

And if a secret smile sometimes played at her lips and creased the skin beside her beguiling green eyes, neither her coworkers, nor her friends, nor even her boyfriend, knew it was because she'd suddenly seen something which made her think of horses.

Chapter One

At about five years into employment at Bluewater Marketing Partners, Casey realized she was bored.

She countered this by escaping the office whenever she could. She didn't look for another job, like some other, more rash person might have done. She had five years of employment there, remember? Things were bound to look up. Sure, all of her moves had been lateral so far, but that would change. Her work spoke for itself. In the meantime, she'd just look for ways to jazz up her days on her own.

Luckily Mary, her accounts manager, liked to extend a little "white-glove service," as

she called it, whenever she thought it might close a deal. This often meant dispatching someone junior to hand-deliver a proposal or a contract, during which time they were expected to show every courtesy possible to illustrate what an exceptional marketing agency Bluewater was. Not just a marketing agency, Mary was wont to lyricize, but a true business partner, every step of the way. You could almost hear the TM at the end of her little slogans.

Casey usually called ahead to the office she was visiting and offered to pick up coffees for the receptionist and the object of her sales-closing desires, and that tended to get the point across.

She'd first put up her hand for a courier job about six months before, on a sparkling-blue November day when she'd suddenly realized that if she wrote one more Thanksgiving-themed marketing email before the holiday weekend, she would simply not be able to tolerate the sight of a turkey and stuffing on Thursday. This would offend her mother, and that would not do. So when Mary stepped out of her glass-walled office holding up an interoffice envelope, Casey stood up and put her hand in the air. It was a job usually given to much more junior employees, but Mary didn't seem to have the least bit of hesitation in handing it off to Casey.

Which was something Casey had tried not to think about as she triumphantly took the envelope from her boss's hand.

She picked up the lattes, she closed the deal, she made it to the end of the day without writing another Pilgrim pun, and after that, Casey volunteered for every single errand which could take her out of the office.

It was becoming kind of a joke around the office. She didn't let that stop her, though. The courier runs became her special thing, and the more she was away from her cubicle, the more she didn't miss it.

The moment she overheard an opportunity to ditch her desk, Casey put her hand up in the air like an overeager student. She didn't stop with courier runs, either. Casey answered emails with requests for client site visits or media event reps so quickly, she often eschewed proper punctuation and the confines of professional sentence structure in favor of getting the first response to their inbox.

Which was really something, considering one of Casey's job requirements as an email marketing strategist was to be a total Grammar Nazi.

Casey couldn't help it; once she'd found something she liked, she became obsessed with it. What's more, she got competitive about it. She'd always been like this, ever since grade school—the first one to jump when the school bell rang, the first one standing in her row when the bus pulled up to her stop, the first one lining up when the airport's gate crew started prepping the queue for aircraft boarding. It had certainly served her well when she'd been an equestrian, too—her desire to be first in all things had made her an incredibly strong rider and a determined competitor at horse shows all over Florida.

Her high school friend Heather, who had dabbled a little in riding lessons herself and would occasionally join Casey for a trail ride on a borrowed horse, used to joke that

Casey was like one of those horses who stood for hours with her nose pressed to the pasture gate, testing it every so often in hopes that the chain would give way and set her free.

Her boyfriend, Brandon, who had come on the scene well after her horse phase had passed, just thought she was fidgety and a bit of perfectionist.

Casey would have heartily agreed that she had a perfectionist's personality and a competitive heart, but there was something else dogging her these days. She felt like there was something better waiting for her, if she could just catch up with it. And so while she wasn't crazy enough to give up her place in line at her job, she still wanted to get out whenever she could, just to see what else was out there.

As the months went by, the changeable Florida autumn turning seamlessly into two chilly jacket-weather weeks of Florida winter before giving way to the blue skies and warm days of Florida spring, Casey found herself looking harder and harder for something better than what she had.

She didn't tell any of her friends or coworkers about this feeling, naturally. It sounded kind of striving, or maybe it sounded kind of pathetic, or she was afraid it would sound that way, anyway. She had quite a lot in her life, actually, and if she told her coworkers she didn't think her life was good enough, wasn't she also implying their lives weren't good enough? They spent all day inside at desks, rushing out at the stroke of five to make it to waterside happy hours or to get back home to deal with dinners and homework, depending on the family situation. They lived for the weekend and its rounds of pancake breakfasts and Little League games and gymnastics tournaments and lawn-care, for the family types, or for brunch and beach time for the singletons and the young couples.

Everyone else seemed fine with this lifestyle, Casey reasoned, so who was she to call it unfulfilling? Anyway, she liked brunch, and hanging out at the beach, and invitations to go jet-skiing on the Indian River. Hell, she even liked writing marketing emails (although she could use some more interesting clients). She wasn't necessarily unhappy.

She just wanted something more, and she didn't know what more might be, and so she just kept looking. In other office buildings with blue-tinted windows, in the dreamcatcher-hung living rooms of beachside rentals, in the antique-heavy home offices of Mediterranean Revival country club homes, she looked at how other people were living their lives and wondered what she could learn from them. She wondered if they had enough, or if they were just as confused as she was.

And at work, standing around the Keurig as it hissed and steamed, she brushed off her colleagues' teasing. Casey joked that her office escapes were actually her coping mechanism to help her deal with her crippling perfectionism. After all, everyone knew her tendency to sit at her desk for hours without getting up for a walk or a coffee, squinting at copy until the last possible moment she could send it out and still make deadline. She was known to frequently work through lunch; hell, she'd even sit through mid-morning snack and afternoon gossip sesh at the coffeemaker. These were the unofficial mileposts of an office workers' day, intended to break up the monotony of

spreadsheets and emails with gentle infusions of caffeine and carbohydrates. Missing them was kind of crazy, in everyone else's view, but Casey generally missed her team's snack and gossip time at least three days per week, utterly absorbed in her work.

But when she left the office midday and went blinking into the intense Florida sunlight, all of her mind's tightly wound cogs and sprockets loosened at once. She felt an intense freedom, a lifting of her heart. She would turn her face to the hot, blazing sun and close her eyes and smile. She would stand there for a moment and just bask, letting the sunshine seep into her pores. She would remember the old joy of spending her days outdoors: the fresh sea breeze playing in her hair, the blue dome of the sky, horses grazing green grass, everything gleaming and sharp in the white, tropical light. She would smile.

"So you can see why I needed to drive that contract down to Melbourne," she'd laughingly explain. "The change in scenery helps me reset my brain."

"I heard you were here an extra hour the other night," a colleague might reply, shaking her head. "Casey, nothing we do is that important!"

Casey didn't find this comforting.

"Plus, it's so hot," someone would always add. "I hate going out there this time of year."

"It's gorgeous out this time of year!" Casey would exclaim. But being the lone Floridian in the room generally resulted in Casey's protests being shouted down. No one liked being outside in Florida, especially in summer, unless there was a pool and a drink involved. Those were the hard facts, according to her colleagues.

"Well, I grew up outside," she had defensively told Marty Barker, who sat two cubicles down from her. He was a brown-haired and pale-skinned Michigander who had questioned her ability to withstand Floridian UV rays for whole minutes at a time, suggesting that perhaps she was just a crazy person. "I used to ride horses and do chores in all that sun and heat. It just feels right to me."

"I can't live without the air conditioning running at all times," Marty had replied, dead serious. "Sometimes I don't even think that's enough. Walking from the office to the car is like torture. I would like an air-conditioned tunnel to my car, actually. Someone invent that, pronto."

"Hey Casey, do you still ride horses?" This was from Amy Hickstead, three cubicles down, with blonde curls and creamy skin which burned if she opened her living room curtains. She was originally from Pennsylvania. "My sister rode horses when we were kids. I didn't, though. They're so big."

"Agreed," Marty exclaimed. "Nothing should have that many muscles!"

"I don't ride anymore," Casey said with a little shrug. "That was all strictly pre-college. Pre-Real Life, you know?"

Although she'd wondered, after saying it, what exactly was so real about her current life of air conditioning, tinted windows, and long drives to peek at other people's lives.

“I make things designed to be deleted,” Casey had told a new face at Sunday brunch a few weeks ago, and all of her friends had laughed as if it was the first time they’d heard the joke. In truth, the nature of her work was a little tough on her perfectionist side. Casey was all too aware that as an email marketer, she spent her days writing words so ephemeral, she might as well be outside trying to blow the best bubbles, or count the most falling leaves. She liked writing emails, but the truth of where all of her hard work eventually went—into the trash, either immediately or after a few days—was too painful to think about very often.

Her work title was email marketing strategist. This was a fancy way of saying that she wrote emails designed to get past a spam filter. Of course, her considerable writing skills were not limited solely to crafting emails convincing consumers to Click to Learn More. She was also known for such hits as the pop-up boxes on websites which encourage users to Sign Up Today For Our Newsletter and Save 10 Percent on Your First Order.

Her profession had come up over the past weekend.

“Really? But I love those emails,” the new guy at brunch, a round-faced IT guy named Lee from Brandon’s coding group, had assured her. “I never unsubscribe from emails because I would feel guilty about all the work that goes into them. And here you are, in the flesh.”

“Well, I don’t write all emails.”

“No, but I’m... I mean, I get a lot of emails. Too many, if I’m being honest. But, I don’t unsubscribe. I’m a supporter of your work.” He smiled broadly.

“But you don’t read them all, either,” Casey pointed out.

“Well, no.”

“So eventually your inbox realizes you’re not opening them and classifies them as spam.”

“Well... yes.”

“You unsubscribe by inaction.” Casey took an elaborate sip of her mimosa and smiled at Lee, who was beginning to look a little unnerved.

Casey’s friend Heather, who didn’t like tension to mar the sanctity of weekend brunch, leaned in to change the subject. “Lee, did you know Casey used to ride horses? We were just talking about that last weekend, weren’t we, Casey? Horses.”

“Oh, no way?” Lee replied, looking relieved at the change of subject. “My sister used to ride horses. I didn’t, though. They’re so big.”

Casey had drained her glass in lieu of answering. Brandon, sensing trouble, had nudged her gently, but she ignored him. She didn’t want to talk about how horses were big and scary. She didn’t want to talk about horses at all. She didn’t mind thinking about them—Casey smiled, thinking of horses, and everyone at the table had assumed she was over her little pique and the conversation turned naturally to jet-skiing—but she didn’t want to talk about them. Casey found that she missed horses too much to talk about

them to anyone... even her friends, even her boyfriend. They were a subject best left buried. She'd jumped into the jet-skiing conversation, inadvertently promising that she and Brandon would come try out Lee's new Sea-Doos.

Now, she looked at the words on her screen and sighed at them. "Patio furniture, why don't you just sell yourself?"

"Still working on patio furniture?" Ah, hello to Brian in the next cubicle, eavesdropping yet again. Not that she could blame him; the office was whisper-quiet, the doldrums of mid-afternoon settling over the squares of cubicles like a winter fog. A neighbor's problems were a welcome distraction from the way letters seemed to gel into one another on the screen as the day wore on.

"It's a patio furniture liquidation store," she explained, pushing back her long brown bangs and tucking them behind her ears. Sometimes, on particularly windy days, she thought long bangs had been a mistake, but she always came back to the gesture of pushing them aside. They were a built-in nervous tic, so convenient! "This company is always in liquidation, that's why they constantly need new subscribers."

"Hello, thank you for calling Going Out of Business Everything Must Go!" Brian chanted in a chirpy customer service voice. "One of those?"

"You got it." Her top client, after five years in the game, was barely removed from a scam. "They have a great deal on glass-topped patio tables this week, if you're in the market."

"I'm all set, thanks."

"You and all of my subscribers." The conversion rate on these emails had been abysmal for the past few weeks. The patio furniture store was brick-and-mortar, and Florida in May was not like the rest of the country, who were just starting to prep for summer fun. Here, folks were generally pretty set for deck chairs and pool loungers all year round. Casey had been revising, and revising, and revising again, trying to please the perfection quadrant of her brain, and trying to figure out a way to get a middle-class mother of three or a retired couple in a deeded manufactured-home community to decide today was the day to redo the pool deck furniture.

She put the email's obligatory call-to-action, a SHOP NOW button, above a photo of plush lounge chairs on a spotless white pool deck, and considered the effect. She moved the button below the image, and then back again, and frowned for a moment. No, it needed something more drastic than that.

She changed the lounge chairs out for an elegant dining set, framed before a green-and-blue summer's day shining on a cerulean swimming pool. She thought about being outside, soaking up the sun of late spring. She hadn't been outside between the hours of eight a.m. and seven p.m. since Sunday. Today was Friday. Today was Friday! A little jolt of excitement fractured her sleepy calm. She wiggled in her seat, and experienced a range of discomforting physical responses as a result.

Her right foot had gone to sleep. There was a crick in her neck. Her left side ached, gently, without definition. Her tongue was poking anxiously at a slightly sore spot behind

her molars. Casey began to suspect there was something wrong with her, something that had gone soft after too many hours motionless in this chair, hunched over this keyboard, glaring at furniture emails.

Her dark bangs fell back over her eyes and she pushed them back impatiently, less amused this time. Her friend Alison had said long bangs would accentuate her small, neat features and her pointed chin, but all they'd really done was block her view of the computer monitor, and get caught in the arms of her blue-light reduction glasses. She should trim them immediately, she thought, eyes flitting to the scissors in her pencil jar.

"Casey?"

She looked up so quickly that her neck cracked. Audibly. The snapping was actually a relief. The tingling of revitalized nerves prickled with a delicious sort of pain that drowned out all the indistinct aches she'd been suffering from a moment before.

Mary was looking down at her, a faint mask of disgust creeping over her usually flat expression. "Was that your spine?"

"I guess I've been hunched over too much."

"You're going to need a chiropractor." Mary lived and died by the chiropractor on the first floor of their building. She went three evenings a week; Casey sometimes saw her through the blinds as she walked down the sidewalk towards her car, Mary greeting the receptionist with a warm smile she never extended to her staff, Mary retreating through a door into a treatment room, already looking more relaxed as she anticipated the bone-cracking session ahead of her. "You should see Dr. Blanding."

"I should," Casey agreed, as she always did. Her eyes shifted to the manila folder in Mary's hands. "Is that... do you need a delivery?"

"If you have time."

"I'm just going to send this revision to the client..." Save. Attach. Send. It was done. They'd better like it.

Sending the email instead of playing with it for another frustrating minute sent an instant feeling of relief over her, as if she'd ducked beneath an incoming ocean wave and let cool saltwater rush over her hot skin.

Newly energized and email-free, Casey shoved her chair back from her desk so quickly the wheels struck the back wall of her cubicle and made the entire cubicle village shudder violently. There were a few gasps from her neighbors, and the sound of calendars and papers slipping free of their push-pins and sliding to the desks and floors below. This was followed by a few gusty sighs of exasperation. But no one actually complained. Everyone knew Casey. This was her thing. The girl liked playing mailman. Better her than them. So her coworkers probably thought as they put their wall decor back up and went on with their afternoons.

Mary was looking at her now with a slightly raised eyebrow. She had always found exuberance distasteful. "You're sure you have time?" she asked, holding the envelope just out of reach.

Casey, who had already switched off her second monitor, closed her laptop, and was

slipping her purse over one shoulder, did her best to smile winningly at her boss. This was an uphill battle. Something about Mary tended to make her expressions freeze up. “I have time,” she assured her. “I forgot to take a lunch. I’ll grab something on the way back and make up for it that way.”

Casey had spent five years at this office, and she’d spent the first two years trying to win over Mary. She’d survived the last three years by trying not to get her feelings hurt. The older woman’s frosty demeanor had made her tough to read and tougher to connect with, and Casey had only been able to assure herself of her own good standing in Mary’s graces by her own continued employment. There was certainly no daily indicator that she was doing a nice job. Her annual reviews were terse affairs which usually revolved around whatever spelling errors Casey might have made in drafts that year, before the minimum salary adjustment was approved.

She had hoped for and been passed over for promotions twice in the past two years, but she hadn’t made any spelling errors recently, either, so she wasn’t sure what else she could do but wait it out.

“It’s perfect timing,” Casey now assured Mary. “I’m all caught up on the patio furniture campaign. I’m good until the new brief arrives Monday.”

“You did a total rewrite? They wanted an all-new email. They didn’t like your last send at all.”

“I did. It looks great. They’re going to love it.”

Mary nodded, but she still didn’t look happy as she handed over the envelope. Her expression made it plain that she didn’t think the clients would like the new rewrite, and that Mary would not be surprised when they sent yet another revision request.

Casey dropped the envelope into her big leather purse with a savage satisfaction, ignoring Mary’s unspoken implication that she wasn’t doing well enough. At this exact moment, she didn’t care if Mary didn’t like her, or if Mary found her work lacking something. She simply wanted to get outside.

These moments were cropping up more and more often. After years of trying and failing to make Mamma Mary proud, Casey found she’d stopped caring so much whether her stone-faced boss liked her. Or even whether anyone in the office liked her. Or even whether clients liked her. Casey still did her job with a vicious level of dedication, but that was just the way she worked—the way she was wired.

Her actual satisfaction in the work? If she was honest with herself, she’d have to admit it was dissipating, quickly, like a brief morning rain shower sliding over the beach and onto the dry mainland.

Casey told herself she was just having a little bit of a slump. She needed an interesting new client, or a really good creative brief, or maybe she just needed that promotion to account manager to come up at last and give her a new challenge, and then things would be fine.

In the meantime, though, she was all for getting out of this stagnant office whenever she possibly could, escaping the work and her constant drive for quality which no one

ever noticed, a perfection which was either deleted or marked as spam.

Mary had already lost interest in her and was turning away. “The address is on the envelope. If you pass a Starbucks on the way back, I’ll take a grande latte with an extra shot and two shots of vanilla.”

“Is someone going to Starbucks?” a voice called. A gentle buzz of interest floated from the cubicles and encircled them with hopeful coffee orders.

“No one is going to Starbucks,” Mary announced. “It’s just wishful thinking on my part.” But she looked over her shoulder and winked at Casey.

Casey was startled into winking back, or she thought she did—she’d never been very good at winking, and Brandon still laughed at her whenever she tried it—but with her fingers gripping that magical envelope and her car keys clenched fast in her other hand, she had everything she needed to make her escape. She’d gladly pay for her boss’s six-dollar latte if it bought her an hour away from her desk, and cheap patio furniture which was never, ever going to sell the way clients thought it should.

Chapter Two

“Well, this can’t be right.”

Casey always talked to herself when she drove. She gave herself pep talks: you can make this light! She gave other people driving lessons she felt they sorely needed: you don’t have a stop sign you MORON OH MY GOD okay thank you, good job. And she narrated the weird feelings which sometimes cropped up when she found herself on a street she remembered from her childhood.

Anyone who has stayed in their hometown past childhood knows these disorienting moments, but they’re super-charged when you live somewhere that has been growing at a lightning pace for years, like coastal Florida, and old memories suddenly burst at you from unfamiliar new surroundings. You’re driving down a road surrounded by the endless plate-glass gleam of strip malls and suddenly a wooded lot where you remember playing with friends appears, somehow untouched by development, like a ghost who got lost in the sprawl.

In this case, the weirdness struck as she made a turn off an everyday residential street, the curb lined with bland beige houses, and found herself driving on hard-packed crushed shell. This road was blindingly white and straight as an arrow, disappearing into the distance in either direction. Both sides were lined with appallingly deep drainage canals. Tall Australian pines dipped their feathery needles into the still black water. Every few hundred feet, the canals were bridged by earthen embankments, where a driveway to some hidden homestead crossed the canals.

Looking around at all of this, Casey had the distinctly unnerving feeling that she

knew exactly where she was. She just couldn't quite pinpoint why.

Then, she saw the leaning mailbox, with its peeling, faded number stickers, and she realized where she was.

"But this road used to be in the middle of nowhere," she muttered to herself. "I remember thinking this drive took forever. My parents used to complain about how far in the middle of nowhere it was."

Casey pulled up to the driveway next to the mailbox, put her car in park, picked up the inter-office envelope from her passenger seat. She looked at the address on the envelope again. In Mary's old-fashioned hand, the note read 12201 Old River Road.

She studied the battered mailbox, clinging by rusting screws to its dangerously leaning post. The impressive fire-ant hill mounded around its base appeared to be the only thing keeping the post upright. Its peeling decals were almost, but not quite, too faded to read. The numbers were correct. 12201. A small wooden sign graced the gate ahead: St. Johns Equestrian Center.

She had to admit that this particular address had seemed familiar from the start. When Casey had first tapped them into her phone and looked at the map, she'd had an inkling, a stirring memory, something buried deep, telling her she'd been to this address before.

"But this can't be the same place," she said aloud, looking ahead to the rusting farm gate, the twelve-foot earthen bridge leading across the drainage canal, the tall barrier of Australian pines which masked whatever lay at the end of the driveway from the peering eyes of passing drivers. "It can't be. But I think... it is."

With that suspension of disbelief, the sense of homecoming rushing over her was so strong that all Casey could do for a few moments was sit very still and take deep breaths.

She was remembering it all now, the memories lifting up hazily from her childhood. She knew what had once waited at the end of this driveway: a long, low horse barn with square windows running down each side; the pricked ears of curious horses as they leaned over their windowsills to see arriving cars; an ancient tractor parked out back which children were warned away from via dire threats of expulsion from the farm; an arena of red clay footing scattered with brown jumps arranged in a simple show-hunter course, outside-inside inside-outside; a sagging single-wide trailer with broken blinds in the windows and a pot of geraniums on the porch; a jungle-green ribbon of lawn out front and fenced paddocks behind, abruptly cut off at the back fence by the fawn-colored savannah which stretched out to the marshy St. Johns River.

Casey could see it all as if she was out there again, still standing under four feet tall, clad in rubber riding boots and cheap polyester breeches, her life feeling like it had just begun that day. In a way, it had.

Because her first riding lesson had happened at the end of this driveway, on a spring morning with blue skies and a sea-breeze ruffling through the long grass. This was where it had all begun for Casey: riding a shuffling school pony in endless circles while learning to post, learning to jump, and, eventually, learning to clamber aboard bareback and how

to hang on with her knees when the barn-sour school pony took off for home.

Oh yes, this was the place. But whatever was at the end of this driveway wouldn't be what she remembered. She had to remind herself of that before she got herself too worked up.

Because that barn had closed a long, long time ago. The ponies she'd ridden and the kids she'd ridden alongside had scattered to new trainers, new barns.

That barn had been long gone before she'd even left elementary school, before she'd even gone to her first horse show. It was like a dream, a place which had vanished from her life before she'd had her own horse, or her own dreams of equestrian stardom... a memory immeasurably distant from her current life, which was so horseless, it sometimes felt like her entire childhood was someone else's memory.

Casey realized she had been sitting in her car staring at someone else's farm gate for some time, and that wasn't considered social behavior in the countryside. In fact, in rural Florida, this could be considered an act of aggression. Without knowing who was on the other side of that gate, she thought, she'd better not piss anyone off with too much lollygagging.

So she climbed out of her car and opened the old gate with a few practiced gestures. Her fingers knew just where the latch was, how to lift it and slide it back without looking or fumbling or pushing the bar the wrong way. Buried under her neat black office suit, somewhere under her soft sun-starved office skin and her tidy office pedicure, there were still the freckled brown hands and dirty fingernails of a barn brat.

She pulled the car through, put it back into park, and closed the gate behind her. Always leave a gate the way you found it: another lesson of her youth she'd never forget.

The driveway was made of crushed shell and long, with a few impressive ruts to shake things up. The tire lanes were dotted with puddles of black water from a recent storm, and palmettos on either side reached out to tap the mirrors of her car and slip long green fingers along the doors. All of this matched the pictures in her head. Her father used to complain so much about driving his car back here that her mother stopped asking him to take Casey to lessons.

Then her car emerged from the tree-lined alley and there it all was, like a doorway into the past—the past, with upgrades. Casey took in the familiar sights with pleasure: the long, low barn with horses looking curiously out of their windows; the red clay arena with its course of jumps, although they were now featuring rainbow colors; the patchwork squares of green paddocks, now surrounded by new black-board fences; a serviceable-looking doublewide trailer where the sagging single-wide used to be. The rusty old tractor was gone.

Behind the barn, the summer-green grass still ran up to the fawn-colored edge of the savannah and stopped abruptly at a wire mesh fence, dotted with wildlife refuge signs. On the other side, the watery grasslands surrounding the St. Johns River spread out for miles under the bright blue sky. A low line of cypress far in the west was the only sign that the swamp had another shore.

The potted geraniums were gone, but there were new signs of life: the barn's front overhang now featured a soda machine and some patio furniture, none of which appeared to have come from Casey's liquidation client. Across the barn's center aisle there was still a set of cross-ties, and there was horse standing there now, looking bored or maybe just napping. Even the horse, bay with a white star, could have been transported to this place from twenty-five years ago. Admittedly, from a distance most bay horses looked alike.

"This is not happening," Casey whispered to herself, putting her car into park alongside a railroad tie which seemed to mark a parking area. "This doesn't even feel possible."

A pair of oddly spotted dogs came running out of the barn, followed by a young woman with a long blonde pony-tail. She was wearing riding clothes: dark breeches and a long-sleeved top, with argyle knee socks and dusty brown paddock boots. The woman whistled as the hounds reached Casey's car and began to bellow a welcome—or was it a warning? She couldn't tell.

Casey decided to sit tight and wait it out.

Luckily, the dogs bounded back to the woman and hopped around her, blissfully reaching up to lick at her fingers, her elbows, even her ears—they were practically kangaroos, Casey thought with astonishment, although they'd be very odd-colored ones, with their red-and-gray roan coats liberally splattered with black dots.

The blonde woman snapped her fingers and pointed at the ground, and eventually the dogs, with a lot of pawing and regretful glances at Casey's car, threw themselves down on the ground and put their noses on their front paws. Casey was impressed.

The blonde woman gestured at Casey, grinning: it was safe to get out.

"Sorry," she called, as Casey climbed out, the big yellow envelope in one hand. "They're idiots. I usually keep them inside when there are people around."

"What kind of dogs are those?" Casey's interest in animals got the better of her professional manners.

"Catahoula hounds," the woman said, and laughed at Casey's immediate confusion. "Never heard of them? Don't feel bad. Most people haven't. They're a really southern hunting dog. I don't hunt... I just like their energy. And their spots. And they bark so much at night it scares off intruders, which is kind of the point."

"I love their spots," Casey ventured. She was a little surprised by the woman's complete lack of any accent; she'd think someone with a penchant for southern hunting dogs would have an accompanying twang in her voice, even if she didn't hunt. "Very handsome," she added, looking the dogs over. Noticing her scrutiny, one of them lifted his head hopefully. The young woman snapped her fingers again, and he put it back down, his tail thumping the grass.

"You just have to train them," she explained. "They've got too much crazy to let them run wild. But I never trained them enough to have them out around people, unfortunately, so they're only out when I'm alone. Hi, by the way. I'm Sky. Skyler

Thomas, I mean, in case you're who I think you are."

Casey looked at the envelope in her hand, the name written in bold black ink. S. Thomas. "Yes, I am," she laughed. "I'm Casey. I was just running this out for the team. I gotta tell ya—this is going to sound weird—but, I think I rode here when I was a little kid."

"Did you?" Sky looked utterly delighted. She had a smile which took over her entire face and made her green eyes dance. "That's amazing! I moved here three years ago... my mother bought it from the bank and then we fixed it up. It was in really rough shape. The last people went bankrupt and then this place just sat to rot. When I first saw it, I thought the property was all jungle. My mom was looking at it as a land investment, nothing more. The barn was a total surprise."

Casey let her eyes run over the tidy stable behind Sky. It was hard to imagine this place had ever been buried in weeds and vines, but that was definitely how Florida operated. "I guess it was at least twenty-five years ago," she said, nearly wincing over the size of that number, "but the barn looks just the same as I remember it."

"Well, you have to come in and see it! I'll bet it's nicer now, not gonna lie... we put a lot of work into the stalls and tack rooms. My mom and I saw a big opportunity up here. I'm from Wellington—yeah, I know," Sky laughed, seeing Casey's eyes widen. "Richie-rich horse country, it's true. But I wanted to get away from that whole Wellington horse show scene, relax a little bit. I grew up with all that, you know? We have fun here, way more fun than I could have down there. When we need to show, we load up and go, but it's nice to have a quiet place to come home to."

Every bit of Casey was yearning to see the barn, but a sizable portion of her mind knew she would be due back at the office—with a latte, since that had been a direct order disguised as a casual request—and Mary would be counting the minutes until she returned. But Sky's enthusiasm was so infectious... and the barn was so alluring...

"I know what you're thinking," Sky teased. "Work beckons. But come on... this is your old barn! It was meant to be!"

The horse in the cross-ties, who had been napping, suddenly woke up and turned to face them, his sleepy eyes slowly widening. Their gazes met, human and equine, and Casey felt a sudden rush of need to get closer to him, to put her hands onto a horse's warm hide, to sniff the stable smells of hay and shavings and leather, to see the wooden rafters and brass nameplates and brightly-colored halters hanging neatly from their hooks on the stalls. She needed to be in a barn again, more than anything else in the world. Fifteen years of missing all of this was swelling up in her chest, and she had no choice but to give in to her heart's urging.

"You're right," she agreed, tossing her boss's approval to the warm wind blowing across the St. Johns. "This was meant to be!"

Chapter Three

“I should be going,” Casey said again.

She’d said it, by her own count, four times already.

Once, after Sky walked her down the center aisle of the barn, prettily redone but still recognizable as the barn where she’d ridden as a little girl. The new touches were decidedly luxurious. There were brass nameplates mounted on every stall door, rows of wide tack lockers along the walls in the boarders’ tack room, and best of all, an air-conditioned lounge, complete with a big picture window overlooking the arena.

Casey lingered inside the lounge, the cool air on her sweaty skin giving her the shivers, and imagined parents clustering here to watch their little darlings riding in their Saturday lessons. Her parents would have loved this! How many hours had they spent sweating it out while she bounced around that very arena? *Too many*, her father would groan.

The bones of the place were unchanged, and felt comfortably like nearly every Floridian horse barn she’d ever been inside: high, open rafters, with a steel roof pinging gently from the clumsy assaults of midday insects swooping in on the breeze; wooden stall fronts with black steel bars, pocked with the teeth-marks of gnawing horses; an overhang at either end sheltering cross-ties, where you could groom your horse while the sea breeze teased your skin.

The second time she’d declared that she really must get going, they’d been exclaiming over the cuteness of Sky’s latest project-horse acquisition, a dark bay Thoroughbred gelding with a small white star and an expression of extraordinary serenity. He looked as if his soul had been bound for a Buddhist monastery but had accidentally been becalmed within the sleek shell of a hot-blooded racehorse.

The horse blinked with quiet interest at the women as they cooed over him through the stall bars, then poked his nose through, allowing Casey to run her fingers over the silky-soft skin between his nostrils. He blew gently on her palms, and she felt like swooning with instant, heart-melting love.

“What a doll,” she sighed.

“He’s only been here two weeks, and I haven’t even ridden him yet,” Sky explained as Casey cuddled with the horse, “but he was such a gentleman in the video his trainer down at the track sent me, I just sent her the money online and said to put him on the next trailer up here. The girls are calling him James, like James Bond, because he’s a total lady-killer. I mean, *look* at him. Look at that nose!” James was wiggling his upper lip on Casey’s fingers, as if he knew his adorableness had no bounds. “That’s his favorite trick. He gets the girls doing it for half the

afternoon sometimes. I have to drag them away.”

The girls! Casey had to bite back a sigh. She’d been one of those barn girls once—that feral pack of adolescent and teenage girls every boarding stable had. Girls who spent every free moment at the barn, constantly fighting small civil wars when they weren’t working relentlessly towards their next horse show.

Casey felt a pang of nostalgia and loss just thinking about her life in those days. They’d been so wild, alternating between fierce friendship and equally fierce enmity, changing teams with artless abandon whenever the mood struck.

The third time that Casey said she should be going, Sky had just finished showing her the framed photos from the lesson program’s very successful winter eventing season. So many bright-faced teenagers, so many determined chins jutting as they jumped their horses over piles of logs and attractive flower boxes!

“No one evented when I was a kid,” Casey said regretfully. “It was all hunters and jumpers back then.”

“A lot of them are still hunter-jumper kids, but I like to give them options. We do both, when we can.” Sky tapped her finger on a framed photo of a grim-faced small girl, who was sending her horse over an alarmingly high jump. “Some of them have what it takes to be professionals. I can’t wait to see where this one goes.”

“Well, she looks insanely talented here.”

“She is. Good old Gwen.” Sky nodded with satisfaction. “Future Olympian, I have no doubt.”

Casey remembered when *she* had planned on being a future Olympian. Hell, they all had. There hadn’t been a girl in her group who hadn’t believed they were going all the way to the top.

The fourth time she’d said she just *had* to be going, it was because her phone was ringing and the caller was Mary, wondering if everything was okay. “Did you get lost?” her boss asked caustically. “Flat tire?”

“I *just* found the place,” Casey lied into her phone, winking her unconscious half-wink at Sky, who was grinning back at her, enjoying the show. “I’m so sorry to have taken so long. It’s in the middle of nowhere and the driveway was hidden. Then there was a gate I had to get open. Took forever. But I got it now. I think I see the owner coming now—I better get off the phone!”

Sky was holding up a can of Diet Coke, wagging it enticingly as Casey put away her phone. By now, they were in the barn office, which in Casey’s childhood had been a dark place where her riding instructor had accepted weekly personal checks from Casey’s mother and placed them into a metal lockbox atop the old wood-laminate desk. Now it was brightly-lit and refreshingly chilly, with a much more twenty-first-century desk of Swedish flat-pack origin.

On top of the desk, a laptop was peeking from a smudged leather case, half-buried by tack catalogs. Cool air slipped through the mouth of a vent in the ceiling. “This room is always freezing,” Sky laughed, slipping on a jacket to cover her bare arms. “We added the air conditioning to the central rooms when we remodeled the barn. My dad runs a construction company, so he always manages to find equipment when he wants it. Try *stopping* him from adding AC to something. I think he’d do the whole barn if I let him.”

Casey accepted the Diet Coke gratefully, telling herself she’d get going in a few minutes. This was just something cold and wet for the road. It was insanely hot under the May sun, and they’d been walking around for... she checked her phone... more than half an hour! “I *really* should be going,” Casey said, the fifth time. “Seriously this time. My boss is going to flip, and now she knows I’m here.”

Sky sighed, clearly disappointed her visit was over. “Well, damn, I hope I didn’t get you in trouble! It was just fun to meet someone who was here when they were a kid. I mean, what are the chances?” She stood up and opened the office door. The humid afternoon air rushed to meet them, along with the scent of hay and shavings. A horse whinnied hopefully. “And it was nice to talk to an adult. All of my clients are children. Boarders, students, leasers: everyone is under eighteen.”

“It’s funny. I was *really* little when I was here, but—” Casey swiveled her head around as they stepped back into the aisle, “—this just brings back so many memories. Stuff I’d totally forgotten about. There was this pony I rode, he was in that stall over *there*, and he had this big white star, and even though he was super-grumpy and pinned his ears every time anyone came near him, I loved him because, I don’t know, he felt like *my pony* in my head. I hadn’t thought about him in years, but now I can picture him perfectly.”

They both looked at the stall she’d pointed out. It was the one where the new Thoroughbred was living now. James gazed back at them with his dark, thoughtful gaze, his silky black forelock nearly obscuring his little white star before falling rakishly over one eye.

Casey again felt that rush of adoration. That horse really was *too* cute. Her palms tickled and she put them behind her back to stop herself from rushing over and rubbing his smooth muzzle again.

Sky was nodding thoughtfully. “I totally get the whole possession thing, every little girl is like that with her school pony! But if you don’t mind me asking, why on *earth* would you stop riding?” She sounded utterly befuddled, as if Casey had given up horses so that she could take up a new life of dog-napping or uprooting flowerbeds.

Casey wasn’t sure how to answer at first.

They started walking up the barn aisle, Casey leading the way, feeling painfully resigned to go

back to her job and her real life. After this little trip down memory lane, she wanted nothing more than to stay. The horses watched them through the stall bars. The bright blaze of the horse she'd seen in the cross-ties flashed from within the end stall as he looked up from his hay. The pull of the place filled her with a hopeless longing.

"I quit riding when I was in high school," she finally admitted. Her voice was low, as if she was sharing a weakness. "Before senior year. It's been... fifteen years." Fifteen years, as if none of her hard work had even mattered. Of course, everyone had told her it *didn't* matter—everyone being her guidance counselor, her teachers, even her parents. Riding had been her hobby, but it couldn't possibly be good enough to be her career. She couldn't throw herself away to be a two-bit trainer when she had so much potential!

Potential for *what*? Casey took a deep gulp from her soda and clenched the can tightly. She was not going to have one of those little anxiety attacks about her job and her life right now. They'd been growing in strength and frequency lately, sure, but now was not the time. She was going to say goodbye to this nice woman and get into her car and drive back to her good-paying job and she was going to *remain calm* and she was *not* going to think about how pointless it all was.

After all, the last time she'd let herself think too much about the general void of meaning in her life, she'd wasted a lot of time and emotion for no return. It had happened like this: she'd had a particularly rough drive home after an uninspiring day of writing emails about patio furniture—yes, much like today!

She'd slammed into the house, already in tears, drank several beers before switching to whiskey, and applied to thirty-seven jobs with customized cover letters and resumés before going to bed at midnight. Several weeks later, sixteen different hiring managers wrote back to her requesting interviews. Naturally, this was well after she'd calmed down and realized she couldn't possibly rearrange her life in such a way that she could become an apprentice at a French bakery or join the National Park Service as a forest ranger in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. So one could argue their delayed timing had been good, and that her entire fit had been a waste of time.

"You should start riding again," Sky was saying eagerly, interrupting Casey's rapid-onset depression. "It's never too late to get back in the saddle! It's like riding a bike! I have some time on the weekends—I could fit you in with a private lesson, get you back in the habit, and then later you could join a group lesson if you want."

Casey felt a rush of excitement, which she promptly tamped down as hard as possible. How could she fit horses into her life? Her parents had always groaned about having to drive her to barn, that extra commute, plus the endless hours she spent there. Horses were a massive time-suck, and it was a solitary hobby, if you were the only one in your household who did the riding.

Even if she just rode on a Saturday morning, Brandon would be left alone half a day, a quarter of their weekend time together. That would be totally unfair.

She shook her head regretfully. “I never have much spare time on the weekends. My boyfriend keeps us hopping—he’s always got something he wants to do. Plus we have brunch with friends, and someone’s always asking us to come ride jet-skis or something. I don’t know how I’d find the time.”

Sky pushed on. “Any weeknights free? You could come after work. I’d find some time for you.”

“I don’t know. It’s almost summer, it’s going to start raining every evening...” The excuses bubbled up without any effort at all. Casey knew picking up riding wasn’t in the cards. If she was meant to start riding again, wouldn’t she have done it sooner than this? It was too late now. She had a real life to contend with: a job and a boyfriend and regular weekend brunch with friends. She was in a middle place right now. Horses were for kids and rich older women, before and after the middle place, assuming she ever got rich. Maybe in ten or twenty years she could be a wealthy amateur. Of course, that would mean her job situation would need to improve twentyfold. “I mean, I’d love to but—”

Casey could tell Sky knew excuses when she heard them, but the other woman pressed on anyway. “Just take some time and think about it. I’m telling you, it’s doable. You can come early on a weekend morning and I’ll have you in and out before your boyfriend notices you’re gone. Start on Saturday morning with a private lesson. I have an opening at nine but it will fill fast, trust me. And just watch how great you’ll do—you’ll pick it all up again in no time! We have great school horses and all of our boarders and students are super-nice—” Sky’s sales pitch went on and on, all cotton candy and buttered popcorn and ice-cold lemonade, and Casey found it easy to believe that nothing bad ever happened here and that if she rode a horse here, clover would spring up in their wake and rainbows would arch over her helmeted head.

Then her phone rang again. *Mary*. Casey held the screen up to show Sky. “I really have to go.”

Sky dug in the back pocket of her riding breeches and drew out a business card, curved and slightly damp with sweat. “Call me.”

Casey took the card in one hand, and answered Mary’s call with the other. “Yes, I’m on my way back, the papers are delivered—”

She looked in the rearview mirror before her car entered the green tunnel of the barn driveway, and she saw the spotted dogs sitting alongside Sky, watching her go.

Chapter Four

Back in the office, Casey tapped her toes under her desk through the remaining two hours of the day, her thoughts so full of horses that she accidentally typed *canter* instead of *counter* in an email for an appliance store. Luckily, she caught the error in a revision before it went out for approvals.

I'm a mess, she thought, but she had to bite back a private smile as she deleted the mistake. Who knew horses would still have this kind of effect on her? She felt like a twelve-year-old girl. She felt light and fresh and free, and—Casey looked at the time and smiled more broadly—in just a few minutes, she would be.

“Happy Friday,” a departing coworker said as she passed Casey’s cubicle, purse over shoulder.

“Almost that time,” a cubicle neighbor agreed.

“Big plans this weekend?” the first woman asked, pausing for chit-chat.

Casey mouthed along with the next line, her head down so she wouldn’t be caught. “The usual. Projects around the house. Kids have soccer.”

“Well, have a good one.” The woman moved on.

The same conversation, the same time, every Friday, Casey thought with a dismissive chuckle. She busied herself on her laptop, clicking windows closed. Then she let the mouse hover over SHUT DOWN while she watched the clock on her monitor. In three... two... *bye!* Casey dropped her laptop into her bag, slung it over her shoulder, and marched out of her cubicle without looking back. Free for another weekend!

Brandon was waiting for her when she got to their usual Friday-night hang, looking admirably relaxed already. Of course, Casey reasoned, since he got to set his own hours, he had probably started his weekend earlier than she had.

He had secured their favorite table by the dockside, with dark water lapping on the opposite side of a fence made of old fishing nets and rope, and a pelican sitting on the closest fishing boat, watching the restaurant diners with beady black eyes.

“Hey, you!” Casey called, smiling as she doled out a light kiss, and sliding into the chair across from Brandon. “Thanks for ordering the fritters!” She dug into the bowl of corn fritters in the center of the table before she’d even settled into her seat properly. “Mmm. Mango’s makes the greatest fritters.”

“Dixie Crossroads makes the greatest fritters,” Brandon corrected her. He grinned, his dark brown eyes twinkling at her. This was a weekly tradition.

Casey chewed elaborately to make her point, then swallowed with as much emphasis as possible. “Mmm. Delicious. I’m so glad you agree that it’s important that we have this conversation every Friday, to keep the moon from crashing into the sea.”

“Oh, I totally agree. But now can we talk about how nicely I trimmed my beard? I did it all by myself.” Brandon ran his fingers under his chin with the feathery touch of a QVC presenter.

She admired the neat edging work he’d given his close-cropped brown beard. “I like how the hair on top of your head is twice as long as the hair on your chin. It really gives you a finished look.”

Brandon ran an appraising hand over his hair. “This extra-hold mousse I found on your side of the bathroom cabinet is doing wonders for me.”

“Well, you look fantastic, that’s all I can say.”

“You should try it sometime.” He smirked at her.

Casey gave him a light kick under the table. “Keep it up and I’ll hide my haircare products, thief!”

Casey might have found her coworkers’ repetitive weekends depressing, but if she was really honest with herself, her weekends were filled with rituals, too. Starting with these three: Casey and Brandon always ate dinner on the dockside patio of Mango’s Island Grille on Friday nights, and Brandon always ate more than his share of the fritters, and Casey always had one more margarita than she had planned.

These were some of the constants of their three-year relationship, along with Brandon’s perplexing out-of-state devotion to the Baltimore Orioles and Casey’s steadfast refusal to agree to a cat and their mutual admiration for kitschy old Florida memorabilia. Their political views meshed. Their favorite t-shirts were the same shade of blue. Their jokes were *all* insider jokes.

After her last anxiety attack, the one in which she’d applied to dozens of jobs, she’d had a striking thought: that a relationship like this was a reassuring place to find yourself after you’d felt like you were drowning and finally came up for air. One half of a perfectly cohesive unit: what a safe and enviable way to go through life! Although she had to admit that when her thoughts did run wild, it was frustrating to realize she couldn’t actually run away to be a forest ranger or a baguette apprentice. Not without ruining this perfect balance she had with Brandon.

A cruise ship was sliding past the patio of Mango’s just now, its soaring metal curves just a few hundred feet away from their table. Loud dance music pumped from the upper decks, and seagoing passengers clowned around and waved to all the unlucky souls remaining on shore. Most of them were drunk already. Some of them would be drunk for the next three days. There

was no hangover like a three-night Bahamas cruise hangover, a fact which Casey could attest to.

“Man, I’d love to go on a cruise,” Brandon sighed, watching the ship sail serenely past them. “If I hadn’t just signed on to this crazy new project, I’d be booking us a weekender so fast. Maybe this fall we can go.”

Casey watched the ship’s prow push through the deep-blue channel water, turning up white foam which cascaded into rippling breakers. “I used to want to work on a cruise ship.” She paused, thinking about far places and tropical islands. “I thought it would be a cool way to see the world. Although, maybe being a flight attendant would have been more fun, I don’t know. Neither of them really fit into my career.”

“More living space for flight attendants,” Brandon remarked, nodding. “Cruise ship quarters are *tight*. They’re packed in those rooms like sardines, from what I hear.”

“Well, too late now,” Casey said, and turned to accept a margarita from their server, who knew her order without asking. “Thank you, Jaycee. This is perfect.”

The ship was halfway past them now, moving at a decent clip. Some of the more tame passengers were watching the shore slip past from their stateroom balconies, enjoying their own private parties while the kegger raged up top. A couple raised their champagne flutes in a toast, and Casey held up her margarita glass in return.

“Yeah, all of that running away to see the world, those are like, college things,” Brandon agreed, nodding to the server as he accepted a beer. “Gotta get them done young, before life takes over. Now we just have to save up for vacations a couple times per year.”

They were old and wise, Casey thought. They were passengers now. They got on, they stayed a few days, they got off again. No commitment, no hard times, no shared rooms.

The ship’s stern was passing them now, the water churning behind it, while seagulls and pelicans dipped and bickered over the fish caught up in the slipstream. Casey took a long sip from her margarita, wishing the tequila would hurry up and quiet her discontented brain.

“So what’s your new project?” she asked finally. “You were being pretty secretive about it all week. Afraid you’d jinx it?” Brandon worked from home, tapping away at something mysterious involving coding and firewalls and security, and all week she’d been coming home to find him holed up in the guest bedroom upstairs, door closed, deeply engaged on conference calls while he tried to work out the scope of work his latest lead would actually need.

“I really was, yeah.” Brandon laughed and ran his hands through his hair. “Things got intense. They weren’t sure I could do it alone... for a while *I* wasn’t sure I could do it alone, honestly. But we worked it out. A huge new site. All the bells and whistles. Integrations out the wazoo. But here’s the best part.”

He took a swig from his beer, mischievously letting a little anticipation build. Casey waited,

smiling. Brandon had a theatrical streak.

“It’s for a new charitable arm of a marine company. The founder is ready to give back to society. So I’ll be saving the ocean! Finally!”

Casey gasped. Then she leaned across the table and took his hands in hers. His dream job, at last! “Brandon, that’s *amazing*. This is what you’ve always wanted!”

“It is!” Brandon’s face was alight with happiness. “After writing websites for endless crap for years, I finally get to do something that *matters*.”

“I’m so, so happy for you,” Casey assured him, and she was, but something in his words made her insides twist into a little jealous ball. She put his hands to her lips and kissed them, closing her eyes so he wouldn’t see any hint of of envy. “You deserve this.”

She meant it. She just wanted it for herself, too.

“Thank you.” Brandon took a deep breath and looked out over the choppy waters. A few pelicans were flapping lazily in the wake of the departed cruise ship, looking for disoriented fish they could scoop up without too much effort. “It’s going to take a lot of time, though. I’ll probably have to do some work on weekends to keep up, definitely at first.”

Her eyes fluttered open and she looked up at him. “Weekends?”

“Not *all* weekend, but I’ll have to do some stuff. Saturday mornings, maybe? That way it doesn’t interfere with the rest of the weekend.”

Casey bit her lip to avoid smiling too much. That would be suspicious, right? To grin like an idiot as her boyfriend announced he’d be keeping office hours on Saturdays?

She hadn’t planned on going back to the horse farm. She *really* hadn’t. But this was surely a sign!

Casey thought of the business card in her bag, of Sky saying *you can start on Saturday mornings*. Of the dark, liquid gaze of that sweet Thoroughbred watching her through the stall bars. What had his name been again? James, that was it. The celebrated ladykiller James. She’d bring him some baby carrots, or maybe some cookies. Which one did he like best? Her old horse, Wilson, had *loved* Thin Mints. Casey used to make her mom buy them by the carton every time Girl Scout Cookie season rolled around. Then she put them in the deep freezer in the garage, taped shut so that her father couldn’t break into them. She wished she had a box of them now, but Thin Mints didn’t last more than an hour in the same house as Brandon.

While her mind wandered, Brandon had plucked the last fritter between his sugary fingers, then paused with his prize halfway to his mouth. “Uh, is this one yours? I wasn’t counting.”

“You *never* count!” Casey protested, laughing. “Lucky for you, I wasn’t counting either. Eat the fritter.”

“Are you sure?”

Casey considered the effect of several years' of Friday night fritters eaten at this very table. "I'm good. Let's order some dinner. It feels like a salad night."

Brandon looked at her. "You usually get a burger."

"Well, it's hot out. And summer is here. Beach body and all."

Brandon didn't look convinced, but he ate the fritter anyway.

Casey picked up her menu and flipped the page to look over the salads. "Yum," she murmured. "Mmm, looks good." She'd shout the praises of arugula and sprouts and lean grilled chicken all night long to stave off questions about the salad if she had to, but what she wasn't going to share was that she was thinking of taking up a sport which required skin-tight pants.

Not yet, anyway.

Read the rest of the story!

[Grabbing Mane is available for Kindle, Kindle Unlimited, and paperback here.](#)

Show Barn Blues



Show Barn Blues

Introduction

This is a story about a beloved place, and a woman who has to rise above the changes happening all around her.

Years ago, I was a manager at a very elegant boarding and lesson stable just outside the borders of Walt Disney World Resort, in Orlando, Florida. This stable had been a pillar of the equestrian community when I was a child, but as Central Florida's population changed and the area around the stable became increasingly built up with apartments, estate homes, and resorts, things began to change. The stable began to empty out. I sensed an ending and found another job. Within nine months, this once-esteemed show barn had closed up for good.

What if that wasn't how the story ended?

I wrote *Show Barn Blues* about a woman who wasn't willing to give up her farm. About someone who learned to bend, not break. And about fighting back against developers, who are the scourge of Florida.

Grace, the lead character, has become a fan favorite amongst my readers. She is also a strong presence in The Eventing Series, featuring heavily in *Pride*, and showing up as a bit role in other titles. Grace isn't twenty-two and ready to take on the world. She's mature, she's tired, and she is fed up. Her strength inspires people. I hope you love her and are inspired by her, too.

Her follow-up novel *Horses in Wonderland*, which takes an even deeper look at the strange world created at the intersection of horses and theme parks.

Chapter One

Of all the types of boarders I could have had, the woman in my office right now was by far the worst sort.

Believe me, by this point in my life, I knew all about boarders. After untold years of running a successful A-circuit show barn with forty stalls, a covered arena, a jumping course, dressage arena, and a dozen paddocks, I knew way more about boarders than I could ever want. I knew the good. I knew the bad... and I knew the bad easily outweighed the good. You try to make forty different horse owners happy sometime. I just dare you to try.

"This is no kind of a way to make a living," I'd tell my working students as they came and went, and some of them would believe me and go back to college, and some of them wouldn't and would go into the business themselves, and then they'd see me at horse shows and commiserate and say things like: "Grace, you were right all along."

I'd just nod along while they unloaded their troubles, secure in the knowledge that I was usually right, and I was used to people not believing me until it was too late. I was like a mother that way, I supposed, although I didn't have any children of my own. Just a barn full of adult children—the aforementioned boarders—and four-legged children, those being the horses. It was hard to tell which were more trouble on any given day, but most days, I'd give the top score to the humans.

Still, they were the ones who paid my ever-mounting bills, and there were fewer and fewer of them to do it these days.

I sighed and ran a hand through my short-cropped hair (once dirty blonde, now dirty grayish-brown, emphasis on the grayish) and fastened on a quick smile so the young woman sitting across from me wouldn't think there was anything wrong with her boarding interview. I was a businesswoman, after all. It wouldn't be very sensible of me to make her feel uncomfortable while I judged her application. For the thousandth time (or maybe the millionth) I thought how much easier life would be if I could just have the horses, without their owners.

The horses had their own quirks, but they were the reason we went into the horse

business in the first place. It was the people that owned the horses, bought the horses, paid you to train and care for the horses: they were the problem. Each living according to their own archetypes, they generally made life as a trainer and barn manager impossible, in their own special ways.

For example, you had your Precious Pony type boarder—the controlling, doting horse mother, who thought nothing of phoning up a barn manager at eleven o'clock at night after a bad thunderstorm so she could make sure her darling love was able to sleep all right after all that nasty noise. Precious Pony's mummy would not hesitate to drag one of the already-overworked grooms off to embark on some private stall-betterment scheme, and was always buying horse-toys that had to be drilled into barn walls (by the grooms, again) or putting up a stall guard so that Precious Pony could stick his head out into the barn aisle, despite the fact that stall guards were strictly forbidden in order to prevent bites and battles with passing horses. Precious Pony was above the rules because Precious Pony's mummy and her four-footed offspring were special.

Precious Pony types had lost me more good grooms and put more holes into my stall walls than I would care to recount.

Then you had your Poor-But-Proud Go-Getter, always trying to work off riding lessons and to convince other boarders that she's their gal for any extra riding or schooling that their horses might need. They mean well, all talent, and no money—and they're not just ambitious teenagers, like you might expect. Some riders hang on to their trainer dreams for surprisingly long, lean years before they realize a professional career just isn't going to happen... or they finally sell all their belongings and move to Germany to take a dressage apprenticeship just like they had always wanted to back when they were eighteen, but had instead chosen to go to college like their mothers wanted. The Go-Getters were a problem that I usually flushed out pretty quickly. I didn't lack respect for these perpetual working students, don't get me wrong—we all had to start somewhere and I'd done my share of begging for rides—but there were simply too many of them, and if they were schooling a fellow boarder's problem horse, then, simply put, I wasn't.

The Go-Getters were welcome to pursue their dreams from the comfort of my excellent facility, and I wasn't above throwing them a lesson now and again in exchange for the occasional pulled mane or mucked stall, but they were not permitted to infringe upon my cash flow. The minute they started riding horses who had previously been on my schedule, they were out on their ears. I had my own working student already, whom I had vetted and interviewed and sunk plenty of time and money into, and one way to lose a good working student was to hand over their jobs to someone else. Working students could be very prickly.

The complete opposite of the Go-Getter and the Precious Pony boarder was the Absent Mother. She drops her horse off, rather like a child at boarding school, and then simply disappears. As long as the checks arrive regularly and the horse is in training, I really don't mind Absent Mothers—most of the time. All is well until suddenly Absent Mother remembers she has a horse, checks the stable show calendar, and arrives on a

show morning decked out in a new jacket with the tags still attached and a pair of never-worn custom boots, wanting to know why I didn't put her name on the entry forms, of course she wanted to go to the show. This exchange of pleasantries was usually followed by a disagreement which would end with the Absent Mother heading off to a new farm, with a new trainer to charm shamelessly, pay handsomely, and then irritate beyond all sense.

Those boarders were just the tip of the iceberg. Believe me, there were plenty more, each with their own brand of insanity.

For all of that, I loved running a boarding stable—really, I did! It was fine if you just accepted that there would be a real cross-section of crazy moving through your barn year after year. You saw people dealing with too much money, not enough money, and the bad effects of both. You saw good horses with bad owners, bad horses with good owners, and everything in between. You tried really hard not to be a therapist. You tried really hard not to admit to yourself that if you could afford the fees, you'd be in therapy yourself. You got through your days on caffeine and the relentless ticking of the clock, as you worked through your endless to-do list: horses to ride, lessons to teach, fires to put out, tempers to soothe.

It was... fun? Maybe that wasn't the right word. It had been exciting once. My own barn! My own students! No one else telling me what to do! I'd worked for years for this right.

I wouldn't give it up for anything—mad boarders or otherwise.

Mounting costs or otherwise.

Empty stalls with cobwebs in the corner or otherwise...

Kennedy Phillips, the young woman who was sitting opposite my desk and making me stifle a sigh of regret, crossed and recrossed her legs. My silence was making her nervous. I glanced up from her application, smiled tentatively, looked back through the papers as if I was checking them most thoroughly. Of course it was all here: the Coggins test showing her horse had a negative blood test for Equine Infectious Anemia, the proof of standard equine vaccinations within the past six months from a veterinarian's office, the application with billing and horse information. All printed out from my website, all done in advance, all very promising if the only things which I were looking for in a new boarder were meticulous record-keeping, responsible horsemanship, and organizational skills. It was the Riding Discipline and Riding Goals entries that disappointed me.

She had written "Pleasure Riding" and "trail riding and fun" under those headings.

Which was very nice for Kennedy, but it put her at the very bottom of my list of Most Wanted Boarders.

"Pleasure riding" and "trail riding and fun" meant no horse shows for Kennedy and her horse, and no lofty training goals, either. It meant no riding lessons, no training sessions, and none of the assorted fees which came with showing: the braiding fee, the shipping fee, the coaching fee, the extra training and lessons afterwards when she didn't

bring home the color ribbons she wanted. Kennedy described herself as an excellent rider, with a history of big jumps and shiny ribbons, and all she wanted to do now was goof around with her horse (which was perplexing in and of itself—the horse was sound, she was in good health, so what on earth was stopping her from showing?)

According to the application, Kennedy didn't need me for anything at all, other than to make sure her horse had a roof over his head, a clean stall to sleep in, and a paddock to relax in. She didn't even mind that the unused horse trails adjacent to the farm were overgrown and needed clearing, or so she had assured me when I explained, uncertainly, that I wasn't sure how my farm was the right fit for her needs.

"I just really love your property, and your standard of care is well-known," Kennedy now told me earnestly, leaning forward in her chair, clearly anxious to break the silence. "I'm used to caring for him myself, but now that I work full-time, I can't do it all anymore. If it can't be me... then it has to be someplace like this. The very best."

We were in the second-floor barn office, a cluttered place wallpapered with rosettes and horse show photos. Above her left ear I could see myself, ten years ago, jumping a picket fence in a Working Hunter class. My face was serious, my horse's face was serious, the faces of the people watching in the background were serious. Showing was serious business. A show barn was a serious place.

"And of course the location matters a lot. But I don't want to show or anything. I just want to have fun."

I nodded. I had six empty stalls, and two boarders making rumblings of moving to another state. Six was too many—one more and I might have to let a groom go—eight was unthinkable.

I couldn't afford to turn this one away, as much as I wanted to. But I felt compelled to explain that she was about to be the odd man out, a lonely position to be in at a bustling boarding stable. "No one else here trail rides," I warned her. "You'd be on your own."

"Not even once in a while? For a treat?" Kennedy's voice was wheedling, and I could imagine her using such a tone on impressionable boarders, worn out with training for the winter season, through what seemed like an unending Florida summer. Just cancel your lesson, just skip that schooling session, come out on the trail and relax with me! Sounded charming, until you considered their actual practical knowledge. More than a few of them hadn't ridden outside of an arena since their childhood, some never at all. There would be problems. There would be accidents. There would be ambulances and vet calls.

I gave Kennedy a sympathetic smile, spreading my hands to show her that things weren't going to end in her favor, and I was sorry, but it just couldn't be helped. "Take a look out here," I invited, standing up and heading over to the observation window behind my desk. Kennedy followed uncertainly, and together we looked out over the scene below.

From way up here on the high-ceilinged second floor, we could look down on the horses in their stalls, the grooms in the wash-stalls and cross-ties, and the boarders leading their tacked and wrapped horses to the covered arena. We could even see into

part of the adjacent covered arena, where a few boarders were walking together, reins loose, after a hard ride. Their horses were dark with sweat, white foam on their necks—it was a hot day in October, another Florida autumn that felt like other people’s summers. Everything about the scene said hard work, dedication, ambition. I needed Kennedy to understand the vibe around the barn before she got any ideas about changing it.

“This is a show barn, Kennedy. Everyone here is concentrating on their show season coming up. They have big goals and I help them get there. We work hard.” I sat back down and waved her back to the guest chair. “I don’t think you’ll find any trail buddies here.”

She nodded ruefully, settling back in the chair, folding her leg over again. Her jeans were threadbare in one knee, and were stained dark around her calves. I knew that pattern. She rode in them, without chaps. Another strike—we weren’t casual around here. My boarders rode in breeches and half-chaps, or field boots. There was an expectation of classiness when people paid what I charged for a box which had the sole purpose of housing a pooping horse. The unspoken dress code was part of that class. If Kennedy had understood what kind of barn this was, she wouldn’t have shown up in ragged jeans at all.

Still, she persisted. “I guess if I want a full-service barn, having a lot of really serious riders around probably comes with the territory. I wouldn’t feel comfortable with anything less than a barn like this, though. I looked at the place down the road. Rodney’s barn...” She trailed off, but her face said it all.

“Rodney’s barn is a little rough,” I agreed. Rough, hell—it didn’t even have full walls to keep the rain out. Rodney’s place was essentially a long lean-to with partitions to separate the horses at feeding time each evening. It wasn’t an atypical Florida barn, though. My fancy show stable had once been the new kid on the block, and Rodney’s had been one of a dozen like it. “But he’s a nice guy. He’s been here his whole life—knew my grandfather when this was just a little breeding farm—”

“Your grandfather bred horses?”

“Right here. His real business was oranges, but he had a couple mares all the time, Thoroughbreds, mostly. A few Standardbreds, back when they still trained in Orlando.”

“I didn’t know there was a Standardbred track there! It’s not still open?”

“Long gone.” I sighed. “Still some horses there, though. A nice therapeutic riding center. But horses aren’t front and center here anymore.” I paused. “How long have you been here?”

“Oh, I’ve been in Orlando a few years,” Kennedy said. “I finished school here. But I’m from Indiana.”

I absorbed this information without interest. Nearly everyone in Florida was from somewhere else.

“And maybe someone will want to come trail-riding sometime,” Kennedy suggested hopefully as she slid the papers back to my side of the desk. “I mean, it’s fun, right? I’m sure I can find a buddy.”

I didn't want her to find a buddy. Still, with the threat of eight empty stalls... I looked at the boarding application again, searching for reasons to tell her to take her business elsewhere, but all the reasons that came to mind didn't exist on paper. I didn't have anything but my own disappointment that she wouldn't bring me any training or showing fees. I looked down at the neatly typed pages and noticed she'd put the horse's breed and age, but not his name. "What's your horse's name?"

"Sailor."

I felt a momentary twinge deep in my gut, a lump in my throat, a bitter taste in my mouth. I bit my lip, forced a smile, and remarked as brightly as I could: "What a nice name."

My first show pony had been named Sailor.

He hadn't been called that at shows, of course. At horse shows, he was Maplewood's Sailing Weather, a title as far from an eight-year-old girl's dream pony name as one could get, but such was the world of show ponies. At least I could call him Sailor at home.

Instead of bursting out with all those childhood memories, I just closed the binder I'd laid out on the desk when Kennedy had first come into the office, its pages listing my various boarding options and training packages. I put it back on the shelf next to my horse show catalogs and training logs and lesson plans, which were usually of great interest to prospective boarders, but which had not been disturbed today.

"And he's a Quarter Horse!" I went on encouragingly, busying my hands with straightening the binders, which always toppled over when you moved one little thing. "We don't have any other Quarter Horses here. I think we did a few years ago, but the owner moved to Chicago." At a barn like mine, Quarter Horses were as old-fashioned as rust-colored breeches in the hunter/jumper ring, but without the trendy vintage respect the breeches could command. "Then again, he might have been a half-Dutch Warmblood," I added upon further reflection.

Maybe she'd take the hint.

"He's not fancy, but he's my pal," Kennedy said, a little defensively. "We aren't here to set trends. Just living life to the fullest. We don't need ribbons to define us. We just want to have fun. Isn't that what life's all about?"

"Of course," I agreed, and took a sip of coffee to hide the twist of my lips. What an optimist. What a hippie. What a pain. I wished she'd just go away. I wished she'd see that this barn was not at all a good fit for her. I needed to fill stalls, but I needed paying clients who wanted my expertise and coaching more than anything.

But of course she didn't go away. There was nowhere for her to go. There weren't any other farms like mine within an hour's drive, and we both knew it. Subdivisions and condos and resort communities were snapping up every inch of land, wet or dry, as fast as their bulldozers could roll over old scrub and pristine pasture, as fast as their diggers could dredge out canals and drain the swamps. I was the last one left. I was the only game in town. Everyone else had sold out, gone to Ocala or Georgia or out west, anywhere land and grass were as plentiful as tourists were rare.

I was the last of the dinosaurs, and Kennedy was an endangered species herself, a dinosaur enthusiast.

While Kennedy signed the boarding contracts, smiling away as she dotted the i's in her last name, I mentally worked out the new language I'd be sending my attorney as soon as possible, maybe as soon as Kennedy left my office, that required all boarders to engage in a training/coaching program. "Seabreeze Equestrian is for serious training and competitive riders only," something to that effect. This casual pleasure stuff was no damn good.

"This is going to be fun," Kennedy said happily, pushing the signed contract my way. "I'm sure I'll find someone to ride with me!"

I nodded and smiled and sent her on her way, waving as she walked down the landing that overlooked the outdoor jumping arena, then I went silently back to the office to look down at her as she strode along the barn aisle, turning her head from side to side, taking in the horses as they gazed out from behind the bars of their stalls. "You better not," I said aloud. "No poaching my students, girl."

I wasn't going to make much having her here. I certainly couldn't start losing income from other clients because she wanted to go play in the woods with her pony.

Which, in my experience, didn't always turn out well anyway. I glanced at the little photo of Sailor, leaning drunkenly in its cracked frame against a row of riding manuals, and sighed.

I added the new Sailor's name to the boarder list and asked Tom to prep a stall for the day after tomorrow. The groom nodded, his white-blond hair falling untidily over his tan forehead, and then asked if he could leave early that day. He mumbled something about a friend's manatee expedition to some canal on the East Coast. Tom was a marine mammal enthusiast; for him, horses seemed to be a land-version of whales, and he found both preferable to humans.

"If Anna can take over for you in the evening feeding, sure," I told him, and went off on a tour of inspection through the barn, leaving him to go find my working student and try to convince her to give up an evening off.

Walking my barn made me happy. It was a grand barn, the stuff of dreams, and I loved it. Two paved aisles, with twenty stalls each, connected by a central bank of wash-stalls that doubled as cross-ties for students, owners, and grooms to tack up horses and have them ready for lessons. A soaring roof and open rafters to eliminate hot, stale air. A small apartment for the working student over the tack room at one end, my office up a narrow flight of stairs at the other. The central aisle led to the crown jewel of my success: the huge, shady covered arena, comfortably situated alongside the barn and always buzzing with riding lessons, schooling sessions, boarders idly chatting while they walked their sweaty horses on long reins after hard rides. The riders who moved to Florida from Up North (a designation that meant everything on the map above Jacksonville) took one look at the covered arena and signed on the dotted line as fast as their fingers could fly. The shade was the only thing that stood between them and giving

up riding for nine months out of the year.

Hell, *I* loved riding in my covered arena, and I had grown up riding under that unrelenting Florida sun.

I leaned on the rail and watched a thin woman on a striking dapple gray warmblood trotting in big, irregular figure-8s. Colleen was better over fences than on the flat, probably because her Trakehner gelding, Bailey, was an auto-pilot jumping machine who could cart anyone around a High Amateur-Owner course without any real direction. But she put in her time on the flatwork anyway, and dutifully attended the fall dressage show I inflicted on all of my advanced students as a preparation for the winter jumping season, so I really couldn't fault her for any lack of trying.

Sometimes it was just hard to get back what had come so easily in girlhood, when you took off twenty years for career and husband and family.

"A bit more leg, Colleen," I called as Bailey jogged by with his nose in the dirt and a bored expression on his big face, and she grimaced and picked up her heels, digging into Bailey's dappled sides with the harmless little nubs of spurs I allowed the riders with less-than-enthusiastic horses. Bailey grunted, lifted his head, and gave me a side-eyed look of disgust, but at least his trot picked up some momentum.

"Very nice," I congratulated Colleen, watching them continue down the rail, and I tried to ignore the way she twisted a little to the right with every rise from the saddle. It really wasn't important, not worth the misery it would take to try to fix. Some things like that, tricks of an aging body, you couldn't fix. Hell, did I post straight anymore? Probably not. Things hurt that didn't used to. Things stopped working. You got on and rode anyway, because that was what mattered.

I walked back through the barn to the other side, and looked out at the paddocks. Sandy and small, they weren't much to look at if you were used to green fields that stretched to the horizon, but for the suburban equestrian, they were certainly good enough. A cloud of dust rose from the nearest paddock, and four legs waved in the air. I sighed. Somewhere in the middle of that mess would be the one and only Ivor.

"Get up, you awful beast!" I shouted at him, and a head which might have been white once, but was now thoroughly coated with black sand, popped up from the dirt to look at me. Ivor nickered, and I smiled despite myself. He was nothing but a lovely clown, my Ivor.

"We have to ride, you know," I told him, putting a foot up on the fence-rail and leaning over the top. He clambered up from the ground with an alarming lack of grace and jogged over, rumbling hello from deep in his chest. Ivor was talkative and desperate for attention, like a few other intact males I have known. On him, it was endearing, and almost made up for the hard labor induced by having a glowing white coat beneath his habitual cloak of dirt. Unlike Bailey's dark, steely dapples, Ivor fancied himself a unicorn, and the only dark hairs left in his maturity were wisps at his knees, fetlocks, and around the boney bits of his head. Otherwise, he was one big stain-magnet, a whitening-shampoo commercial, an argument for the selective breeding of dark bays.

Now he tried to rub his filth onto my face and my spotless blue polo shirt. "Get off, get off," I snapped, jumping back from the fence just as he shoved his head over, fluttering his nostrils with enthusiasm. "I'm going to have to hire a groom just for you this winter, now that you're going to do some Grand Prix classes and need to look extra-fancy." Ivor flung his head up and

down and brought a huge fore-hoof crashing down on the fence's lowest rail. I leapt at him and clapped my hands like a child scaring a pigeon, so he squealed and took off running around the paddock, creating a minor dust storm in the process.

"Jackass," I muttered, but I was smiling when I went back into the barn. Ivor always raised my spirits. We'd been together for a good six years now, and ours was becoming the deepest relationship I'd ever had with a horse. Well, since childhood. Since Sailor.

Still, no matter how much I loved that horse, it was nice to have someone else to clean him up.

"Ah, Anna," I said cheerfully, leaning into the spotless feed room, where Anna was sitting on a bucket, measuring out vitamin supplements into baggies. "How would you like to tack up a horse for me?"

Anna looked at the dirt on my face and grinned. "I'm on it. Give me about half an hour, though. Judging by how dirty you are."

I grimaced, to let her know that Ivor was exactly as filthy as she thought, and watched her put away the supplements and bags before she skipped away down the barn aisle. More of a rider than a groom, Anna would always try to wheedle her way out of the more tedious cleaning and management work which kept the barn ticking over, in favor of anything hands-on with the horses: grooming, warming-up, bathing, schooling a lesson horse who needed a tune-up. She was either going to have to learn to like the nuts-and-bolts work, or marry rich, as I'd told her more than once. Horses were fun, but the care and keeping of them was never-ending work.

The people were no picnic either, I thought, as I heard raised voices in the boarders' tack room. I poked my head in cautiously and saw, amongst the enamel-covered tack trunks and slipcovered saddles, the ever-contentious Stacy Hummel throwing up her hands, a poisonous expression on her ferrety face. "And then the sneaky bitch thinks she can just borrow my padded bridle, like I won't notice, and lets out the throat-latch to the very end and now the leather won't stay down in the keeper because her horse has such a fat face—"

"Ladies?" I cut in, my voice solicitous. "Problem?"

Gayle, round-figured and round-eyed and ready to run from the room, gazed at me in horror, her cheeks pink. Stacy flung back her blonde ponytail and faced me defiantly, looking every inch the cheerleader captain she had doubtlessly once been. "Just Melanie taking Fallon's padded bridle without permission! Nothing special!"

I pointedly looked over at the tidily wrapped bridles hanging along the east wall of the tack room. Each one was labeled with a horse's name in neat black letters on white tape. Every boarder got one bridle hook, and they were encouraged to keep spare or show bridles in their tack trunks. I noticed that Fallon's hook was bursting with three bridles, hanging in a mess one atop the other, and remembered seeing a bridle on the floor the other day. It was a rare enough incident that it stuck in my mind. I ran a tight ship. "Ah, I think I know what happened. I asked Anna to pick up the bridle on the floor and hang it up on an empty peg. She must have put it on Rowan's hook by accident."

"And why would Melanie think Rowan's plain old bridle magically became a self-padded bridle with brass fittings, ordering specially from England?" Stacy crossed her arms under her chest.

"Because Melanie asked for an extra schooling session for Rowan yesterday, and I had Anna ride him, so she wouldn't have realized it wasn't his bridle?" I shrugged. "Just a guess."

Stacy's face fell a little, possibly as much as it could, since I couldn't imagine Stacy ever going so far as to admit she had been wrong.

"Honest mistake, I think," I went on soothingly. "I'll ask Melanie what she did with Rowan's bridle. Maybe she took it for repairs and forgot to tell me. In the meantime," I looked meaningfully at the heap of leather hanging from Fallon's peg, "you may want to put your extra bridles in your trunk, so they don't fall down anymore."

Stacy sighed meaningfully, but Gayle smiled tentatively, always ready for peace. I wondered how she'd ended up cornered by the angry, brittle Stacy in the first place. Bad luck, I guessed. She'd never have voluntarily walked into the tack room if she'd known Stacy was in there. Gayle was afraid of most things, but she was terrified of mean people, and Stacy definitely fell under that heading. "Guess that's alright then!" she burst out. Without another look at either of us, she tucked her saddle firmly against her side and raced out of the tack room.

I smiled beatifically at Stacy, who gave me an unwilling quiver of the lips in return. "Always best to ask about these things, rather than to make accusations," I said. "And show the leather to Tom and he'll make the keeper fit again."

Stacy nodded tightly. "Thank you." There was a pause. "I'm sorry."

I paused and waited, but the sky didn't fall and no pigs went flying by. Maybe I had misjudged Stacy. More likely I hadn't and she was just having an uncharacteristically weak moment since her expensive bridle had been slightly damaged. "It could happen to anyone," I replied brightly, and went back into the barn aisle before I could accidentally say something honest, and tell her what a nasty piece of work I thought she was.

Speaking my mind would be terrible for business.

Chapter Two

Rain moved in late that night, and the next morning I slept through my alarm, lulled into uncertain dreams by the watery gray light drifting through my blinds. I woke at seven thirty when the orange sun finally pierced through the mist and glinted on my face. I sat up, looked at the clock, and sighed. Thank goodness I wasn't feeding the horses this morning. They'd have torn the place down waiting for me.

I picked up my phone, checked for messages from the barn, and, as there was nothing, decided to take it easy for the morning. Boss's prerogative. I padded out to the kitchen, the old wooden floors of the bungalow creaking beneath my bare feet, and made coffee and toast. My avocado-colored refrigerator hummed furiously, and when I leaned against its door so that I could peer up into a high cabinet for a new package of coffee filters, it felt hot against my back.

"Don't die, fridge," I told it, but I figured a trip to Lowe's was in my near future. The appliances were older than I was, and they'd been dying off slowly, one by one. I ran my hand rather adoringly over my new stove; the old one, with burners which refused to

light when the kitchen was too humid for its liking, was not missed.

But a green fridge was to be mourned. They didn't make things that shade of Kermit anymore. My grandfather had loved it.

I had just settled down at the kitchen table with coffee and my tablet, ready to read the morning paper, when there was a mechanical sound outside like the death rattle of a dragon. I put down the tablet with a sigh. Rodney had stopped by.

I liked Rodney just fine—he was the last hold-out, besides me, of the old riding community which had once thrived here. I just wasn't in the mood to chat this morning. Or most mornings, really. But what could you do? He was my only ally at zoning board meetings and community rallies. I got up and opened the door just as his cowboy boots hit the splintering boards of my sagging front porch.

He smiled and touched the brim of his cap, old-fashioned and Southern to the bone. "Miss Grace," he greeted me, weathered face splitting into a grin. He'd missed a few spots shaving, and the bristles on his tanned cheeks were white now. But the unkempt hair curling from beneath the feed-store cap was still a boyish dirty blonde, and there was no hint of age in his bright blue eyes. Which was impressive, because if I stopped and did the numbers, I'd probably find that Rodney Blake had already been receiving his AARP magazine every month when I'd moved back here more than two decades ago. The farm life would either age you young or keep you living forever, I guessed.

I wondered which one it was doing to me.

"Rodney," I replied with real warmth, suddenly pleased to see him. "Come in and have some coffee."

Rodney wiped his boots carefully, leaving behind at least some of the morning's mud on my mat, and stepped into the little bungalow, looking around appreciatively as he always did. "You sure have a fine house here," he said, nodding at the living rooms walls. They were bedecked with framed horse show posters, the best of which was a vintage Aer Lingus print advertising the Dublin Horse Show. The little room was centered around the sagging couch, the worst of which I covered with a throw decorated with racing horses. "I always did like this house. Your grandpa built it real solid."

"He sure did," I agreed, my voice slipping back into a long-abandoned country cadence. "I love it so." I adored my house: a 1920s Florida Cracker's bungalow, with all the termites and raccoons under the porch to prove it. It was dark and cool in summer, and dark and drafty in winter. "Couldn't be more different than those candy-shell pink mansions they're building now, right?"

I fetched coffee from the little kitchen and set full mugs on the table, then considered my company and grabbed milk from the still-growling fridge. Rodney settled down in a creaking thrift-store chair and started right in on his coffee. I sat at the other side of the table and waited for him to get around to his reason for stopping by. We were not social people, given to leaving our farm and our work just to drop by and say hello. He had something on his mind.

"You thinking about selling?" he asked after a few sips.

“I’m sorry?” I nearly choked. Although I got printed letters in the mail every few weeks, announcing that this realty company or that developer was looking for properties in the area and was ready to buy, I always threw them straight into the recycling. There couldn’t possibly be a rumor in the neighborhood that I’d been considering selling up.

“I heard the Roth boys were coming after you pretty hard. Heard you might be giving in.”

“The Roth... I don’t even know who that is.” I tried to picture the most recent of the thin paper envelopes. Nothing came to mind, possibly because I had stopped opening them before I tossed them. “Who told you that?”

“Dean Roth.” Rodney sighed. “I’m selling to him.”

I put down my coffee mug with a clink on the wooden table. The porcelain cow decorating the table’s center wobbled dangerously. “What now? Rodney, you can’t be selling. You’re all I have left.” Rodney and his twenty acres a few miles north on the highway, Rodney and his little lesson barn, ramshackle with age and losing a section of roofing every now and then when a big storm rolled through, Rodney and his collection of mutt ponies and horses, teaching kids how to ride in a big muddy ring for the past forty years, give or take—Rodney was a fixture in this community, much more so than me.

If he left, there wouldn’t even be a community, I realized. Two barns left where there had once been twenty, that was sad. One barn left was a woman in denial.

“I’m sorry,” Rodney said, shaking his head and looking into his coffee mug. The bill of his cap covered his face, but I could see his hands were shaking a little. Worry? Or age? I bit my lip. “I’m sorry, Grace, but it’s time. Taxes are already killing me, and now they want to run sewer and city water out there and it’s going to be a fortune. Something about protected swamps, filtering water. I don’t know.”

I knew: the land behind Rodney’s farm had been rezoned. We’d both been at that meeting, and neither of us had really grasped the technical details, but I’d understood more of it than he had. That’s how I knew that the new golf club going in across the highway from his farm had managed to change their zoning from agricultural to residential, and how I knew the land behind him had in turn been changed from agricultural to protected wetland. It was mitigation, a developer’s way of making up for the loss of habitat where the golf club would be. Now his twenty acres would be next—maybe a shopping center with a new Publix, a Subway, a dentist, and a hair salon, a carbon copy of the one five miles down the road. Or maybe it would be two hundred new houses, painted pastel pink and peach, crammed in one on top of the other, surrounded with St. Augustine lawns and sprinklers that kicked on every morning at six fifteen, rainy season and dry. Or perhaps a resort, its manicured grounds peppered with ostentatious date palms which were more at home in the Arabian Peninsula than in Florida.

It was enough to make a farm girl sick.

What could any of us do, though, against all the millions of dollars being thrown at

these projects? We couldn't pay lobbyists to stand up for us, the last two farmers in a countryside converted into vacation-land. We were expected to go where we were wanted, which was presumably north Florida. Rodney had seen this coming for a long time, and so had I. It just hurt so damn bad now that the time had finally arrived.

"I understand," I managed to croak. I needed to be upbeat, to ease the defeated slump of his shoulders. It wasn't his fault the world had changed. "Of course I do. It's just a shock, is all. Where are you going?"

"Altoona." Rodney looked up and smiled, already looking more cheerful at the prospect. "Up closer to horse country. I bought five acres. There's a doublewide, and a barn for Misty and Patch. I'm going in the spring. Perfect retirement for an old cowboy like me."

"It sounds wonderful." I smiled more brightly, tamping down the slight panic within. "Misty and Patch will be happy to leave behind all those other horses and get a little peace and quiet. What are you going to do with them?" The one big pasture at Rodney's place had twelve other horses in it, lesson and trail horses of uncertain breeding and probably uncertain futures. Misty and Patch were two leftovers from Rodney's old life as a Paint breeder, the last two babies he'd bred out of his favorite mare. They were both in their teens now.

"Well," Rodney tipped his head a little coquettishly. "I was hoping you might want a few."

I took a big gulp of coffee to hide my uncertain expression. Was there a nice way to say his horses weren't exactly what my clientele were looking for?

"And some of my students," he went on. "Some of the local kids. There are some real budding champs in the group. Winning at the 4-H shows. I bet they could do real good at the bigger shows."

"But I don't teach children. I don't even know much about the junior divisions." Or ponies. Or the children themselves. I had built a business around adult amateurs and selling imported horses, and I was happy to be a specialist.

"Oh, they're easier than adults," Rodney said airily. "You just tell them what to do and they do it. No answering back or telling you they can't. And you can always tell them they have to get off the horse if they sass you. Straightens 'em right up. But my kids are good. No one'll give you any trouble." He watched my face, saw that I was still skeptical, and his tone turned wheedling. "Come on now, Grace. The neighborhood kids will have to go all the way to Skip's, and that's nearly an hour away. Some of them will have to stop riding."

I doubted that—when Rodney said "neighborhood kids" he talked like they were poor kids riding their bikes to the barn and working off lessons, when in truth they were all from the new subdivisions and country clubs. Their parents could find the time or get the nanny to drive them out to Skip's or one of the other equestrian centers north of town if they really, really wanted to ride.

Probably.

Maybe.

“I can think about it,” I promised him, but Rodney wasn’t finished.

“I have a few trail horses.”

“Mmhmm.” I busied myself getting more coffee from the kitchen.

“Really quiet, really easy keepers. They wouldn’t be any trouble.”

“And what would I do with them? I don’t think that would be a good fit.”

“You could do trail rides,” Rodney suggested. “You have all that land out back going to waste, and if you’re not going to sell...” He trailed off, thinking. “They really haven’t been pushing you to sell?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. But I can’t do trail rides.” I shook my head briskly. The idea was out of the question. “Where would I find the time?”

“Oh, you could hire someone to take them out. You’d just be providing the spot for them. It’s easy money, trail rides. I’ve been doing it here and there, working with the hotels when they have big groups. You put helmets on them, you have them sign a waiver, you take them out and show them a gator. It’s nothing.”

My phone buzzed on the table and I glanced down. Anna wanted to know if she could have an early riding lesson. As good an excuse to end this as any, I thought. “I’ll think about it,” I promised again, typing a quick yes to Anna. “I have a lesson to get ready for now, though. Sorry I can’t visit with you longer.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Rodney said affably, getting up from the table. “I know it’s early and you have the day ahead of you. No hurry on the horses. I was just driving by and saw the sign and thought I’d check in.”

“The sign? What sign?”

“That’s a big sign, all right.”

Tom nodded sadly. He hunched a little over the Gator’s steering wheel, as if he wanted to hide from the impending doom, the construction crew’s arrival, the downward spiral of the farm, and, finally, the loss of his job. I hopped out of the Gator and walked over to read the fine print more closely. I wasn’t quite so ready to give up on my farm.

Hannity & Roth Realty and Investments. It was smaller than the rest of the letters on the sign, which was a big piece of plywood with a poster plastered over it, set up on two-by-fours in front of the plot of land next to the farm. The big letters said Coming Soon: Tuscan Hills Resort and Country Club. Then the usual suspects, a line-up of meaningless descriptors that vaguely indicated what sort of atrocities would be on offer. Elegant resort-style living. Fine homesites available now. The very best Florida has to offer.

There was an illustration, too: Italian Revival columns and arches, exposed brick and faux-crumbling plaster, twisting non-native pine trees and sparkling blue lakes between green fairways, a cypress dome humping in the distance like some primitive monument kept whole only out of legislative requirement. “The very best Florida has to offer,” if

only Florida was an artistic rendering of Tuscany.

I sniffed derisively and then, struck by some old-fashioned sense of the evil eye, spat on the ground. I picked my way through the sand-spurs and tiny cactus sprouting along the sandy verge and climbed back into the Gator. "Let's go back," I told the despondent Tom, pretending nothing had happened. "Anna probably has her horse warmed up now. I'll get her lesson taught and then I'll have her strip those two stalls for you." Every now and then we gave Anna some of the hard physical work, the Tom-Work, to remind her that the horse business required big muscles and a strong stomach. Stripping the ammonia-soaked underbelly of two recently emptied stalls was just the thing.

Tom nodded and did a quick u-turn, sending us the few hundred feet down the highway's shoulder to the entrance of the farm, and we motored through the gateway and the glade of live oaks that sheltered my house before we started passing the paddocks, already occupied with horses for the morning. Finally, we came around the back of the barn to the parking lot. He cut the motor by the barn aisle and looked at me with melancholy eyes. I just couldn't take it.

"What?"

"Are you going to sell?" Tom asked.

"What, are you crazy? This is my home. This was my grandfather's farm. I'd never give this place up. You know that." We'd had this conversation a hundred times before. Every time someone else sold, every time someone else closed their barn and moved north to the hill country around Ocala, or south to the tiny ranches on the outskirts of the Everglades. Every time another subdivision, or resort, or strip mall went in where horses and cattle had once grazed; every time, I promised once more that I would keep my stable intact. The farm was sacred.

Now, Tom didn't know that Grove Pointe, the subdivision across the highway, had once been my grandfather's orange grove, or he would have had a conniption. That part wasn't important. The stable, I always emphasized, was safe from the developer's touch.

I'd developed this land myself, in the image I had always wanted. From my grandfather's empty pastures had risen an equestrian center. The truth was, I had laid my share of concrete here. I had paved my bit of Florida. I shook my head a little, trying to rid myself of the thought. At least his house and live oaks were preserved, and to museum-quality, if I said so myself. So I'd built up the pastures, so what? The scrubland out back, I'd never touch.

"When that over there is all houses, you won't sell?" Tom pointed at the tangle of pine and scrub to our right: the southern border of the property, and the future Tuscan Hills Resort.

"I'll never sell," I repeated. Firmly, to prove I meant it. Just as I had every other time he had asked.

I hopped out of the Gator, leaving Tom to sit and worry over the future of the farm. I had my own worries on that count.

I walked down the wide south aisle of the barn and stopped in front of the newest

empty stalls, eyeing them glumly. They were part of a growing trend.

Two horses had left over the weekend. Three more might be gone by the end of the month, while their owners waited to finalize home sales and moves. The dreaded eight empty stalls were coming; it was just a matter of time. My once-venerable waiting list was a thing of the past. No one rode here anymore.

For a long time, development around here had been good for the riding lesson and boarding business. Wealthy families moved in, the kids played school sports, Mom rekindled her love of horses, started taking lessons, and eventually bought back into the dream. For years, I'd had a full barn. I'd had a waiting list. I'd had a full eight-horse rig and several private trailers unloading show horses and ponies at every A-circuit show from Venice to Jacksonville. I'd given up my first loves, eventing and dressage, and devoted myself to showing hunters and jumpers, because they were more popular with my clients. From there, I'd shaped my life and my business around teaching and training adult amateurs.

Then, things changed. The way that they do: slowly, and then all at once.

First, it was the hurricanes. People from up north didn't like hurricanes, and they really didn't like four hurricanes in one season. You could tell folks it was a fluke, a hundred-year-season that wouldn't be repeated in their lifetimes, but losing their roofs once was enough for a lot of them. Then it was the local government—failing schools, not enough money to fix them, taxes voted down time and time again. White-collar families, my bread-and-butter, voted with their moving vans. They rented out their houses when the houses wouldn't sell, and suddenly the neighboring subdivisions were playing host to a revolving door of international families renting vacation homes.

After that, things changed very quickly. The developers changed their plans, bought more woodland and farms, and got to work.

They built the water park. They built the luxury mall. Then the resorts began popping up. Vacation homes, villas, towering hotels, grand and classy and seemingly all echoing some collective unconscious memory of Tuscany, of all places—I shook my head, I still couldn't figure out how they had landed on Tuscany as the ideal Florida image. Either way, my little corner of central Florida had somehow become the new epicenter for every sort of accommodation and amusement a tourist could want for a week or two of sun and fun.

The new economy wasn't exactly a source of long-term clients, the sort of students who bought horses and boarded them here and showed with me, the ones who had been the backbone of my business for so long. Hell, all of my business.

I shoved my bangs from my eyes, pushing them behind my ears, and determined that I would think positive. I would figure this out. I would fill my empty stalls. I would adapt, I would evolve, I would prosper. I might be closer to fifty than forty, but I wasn't a dinosaur yet.

A horse next to the newest empty stall nickered to me, pushing his nose through the stall bars and wiggling his upper lip along the steel. "Hey, Poppy," I told the horse, and

gave him my fingers to play with. A big bay warmblood with a white spot on his nose, Rebel was one of my favorites—one of the first horses I'd imported from Europe to sell to a student ready for her own jumper. He was the beginning of an era. The Golden Age of Grace Carter's Seabreeze Equestrian Center.

Rebel wiggled his long upper lip against my fingers, trying to pull them into his mouth. I tickled the damp flesh under his lip and he jumped back, eyes widening with surprise, then he came back for more almost immediately. Rebel would play grab-the-fingers all day long. He'd never bite anyone, either. All he wanted to do was catch things in his lips. Anything: reins, pony-tails, shirt collars. Rebel wasn't picky about what went into his mouth.

"You're the cutest," I told him, retrieving my fingers. He pricked his ears as I walked away, disappointed I wasn't going to stay and play. As I turned the corner into the center aisle, I heard him nicker encouragingly, hoping to convince me to come back. But work always beckoned. I made a quick morning inspection on my way to the arena, savoring every shadow and angle of my barn.

I peeked into the wash-stalls in the center of the barn and saw Margaret, my grim senior groom, solemnly brushing the tangles from a school horse's tail. She looked over the horse's shining chestnut hindquarters and gave me a stiff nod. I nodded gravely in return and Margaret bent her gray curls over the horse's tail again, applying a generous measure of detangling spray to the witch-locks. Skeeter, a stout little Dutch Warmblood, liked to rub his tail against the tree in his paddock, and if the brambles weren't kept down, he brought a shrub's worth of sticks and thorns back inside with him every morning.

"He only has two lessons today, Margaret," I called, and she nodded again without looking up from her task.

"Lotta work for two rides," Margaret grumbled. "Oughta put it up in a bag."

"You know we can't do that," I reminded her. "The clients won't like that look. Or the noise." Tail-bags were pretty loud when a horse swished their tail at a fly and ended up thumping their side with a big nylon bag. And it wasn't a look I thought my clients, who were mainly well-heeled career women, would relish in their beautiful steeds. They wanted the fantasy—there was a reason so many of the sales horses I brought in were dapple gray or flashy chestnuts with plenty of chrome. A tail-bag was too practical for a unicorn.

"Any rides on Splash today?"

I thought, picturing my calendar, sitting open on my desk in the office. "No," I replied after a moment. "He can go back outside later."

"Slow day," Margaret observed. She lifted her eyebrows and regarded me over her plastic-rimmed glasses.

"Guess so," I said lightly, but I was thinking: slow week, slow month, slow year.

Why weren't the locals riding anymore? Not every permanent resident had moved away, but still, my lesson books weren't full anymore. Either riding was going out of

fashion, or the heat was finally keeping the northern transplants confined to air-conditioned pursuits.

Or maybe they just plain couldn't afford me any longer. My monthly board for one horse ran higher than some downtown studio apartments. My riding lessons were just as expensive as lessons in tennis, or golf, or a host of other sports more manageable and less dangerous than riding. I wasn't even price gouging—it was just so expensive to keep horses this close to a metropolitan area, with taxes shooting up year after year, with supplies growing so scarce that I had to pay to have everything from feed to shavings to horse shampoo delivered from a farm supply store way up the turnpike. I couldn't cut my rates, either—if anything, I was going to have to raise prices in the next year just to make ends meet.

Things were getting tight. Cleared land and construction next door were going to make it tighter.

But I wasn't ready to give up on this yet.

I turned into the northern barn aisle, past a few more empty stalls, past a few more nickering horses, to the end of the barn. Though I knew Anna was patiently waiting for me, I took another moment to gaze out across the parking lot. On the other side was a decent chunk of the last undisturbed land in the area: hundreds of acres of scrub and savannah and swamp. I lifted my eyes above the dense thicket of palmettos, their fronds rattling in a gentle sea breeze from the distant ocean. Sixty feet up, the stark, sparse branches of the longleaf pines swayed gently against a clean blue sky, scattered with tiny white cotton balls of clouds. It looked like an impenetrable wilderness, but it wasn't. I had spent my childhood wandering this land on horseback. Now the woods and scrub sat silently, its trails overgrown, or even lost, for all I knew.

There had been one little trail here, which had led riders through the scrub and deposited them onto a wide white road. It was a sandy path through the palmettos, which led to rich treasures of old Florida. First, an ancient shell-mound, crowned with oak trees and carpeted with leaves, which made for a shady oasis on a hot day. A little farther along, a cypress swamp humped up in a dome, its centurion trees protecting a tiny blue spring. When I was a kid, locals called that white path the Indian Road. My grandfather had said that back in his father's day, it was called the Timucuan Trail.

I wondered if the road still went all the way to the cypress swamp, or if the scrub had taken back its sandy ruts. Somehow, I doubted that the wilderness would ever really take it back. That old road had been clear for decades, maybe centuries, despite hardly ever being touched by anything more destructive than horses' hooves. It was like a natural element of the scrub, not a scar on the landscape but a shining jewel, bright white in the sunlight, ghostly gray beneath a full moon. I remembered certain nights spent out there, my gray pony glowing in the moonlight, Grandpa sitting up above me on his big chestnut mare, smiling down from beneath a wide-brimmed Stetson.

"Are you ready for a little midnight ride?" I heard his voice as clearly as if he was truly beside me, and for a moment the bright world dimmed and it was full dark, a whip-poor-

will singing somewhere in the oak trees behind us, the horses' bits jingling as they yearned to be turned loose on that wild white road—

“I'm all warmed up!”

I spun around, heart pounding, the vision splintering around me. He'd been so close to me, I'd almost reached up to touch his calloused hand.

Anna was watching me from the covered arena, sitting on her big bay warmblood, Mason. She had on her hard hat and breeches, her half-chaps and boots, and her usual big smile plastered across her tan face. Her blonde hair was scooped up under her hat, nearly invisible. Just the way I liked her turned out: show-ring ready. Mason wore black polo wraps, gleaming brown tack, and his usual sleepy expression. “Is now a good time?” she asked, grinning.

I turned my back on the Florida scrub, on my grandfather's trails, on a past I didn't have time to rehash. It was time for the barn, time for business as usual. “Let's do it!”

I ducked under the arena's PVC railing and immediately felt more comfortable with groomed clay beneath my feet. After all, in this business, what relevance did the woods and wilderness still have? Under cover from the blazing sun, on safe footing, and with a comforting white rail delineating our work space, we'd get down to the business of training show horses.

I'd figure out the future later.

Good feelings only last so long. Late that evening, as I was flipping out the barn lights, the construction company's sign invaded my thoughts again.

I walked down the paved driveway towards my house, wishing I had a dog to keep me company. It was seven thirty and dark out, the long summer evenings already a thing of the past despite the lingering heat. It would be hot until mid-October, I knew, and then we might get a cold front or two, a cool night or two. Any chilly air would be a rare thing, brought by wind and storm, and everyone would be just as bad-tempered about the cold as they were about the heat.

I took it all in stride. This was my home. Florida's weather was unpredictable to some, but for me, the next day's weather was always written in the clouds the night before. You just had to know what to look for.

Tonight the night sky was clear as spring water, but the stars were more dim than they had been in years past. Light pollution had invaded my farm. When I was a kid, begging to go ride at Grandpa's farm, the nearest street lights had been on the interstate, nearly fifteen miles away. That was before the interstate was joined by a toll road. That had been the enabler—the houses, and then the tourists, had come in a flood once the roads were improved.

It had happened so fast, but life went in a blur, didn't it? Look at me: one day I'd been riding with my grandfather, the next day I was installed at a show barn and perfecting my

hunter rounds, and then suddenly I had been showing professionally for my entire adult life and students were asking me to start my own barn and settle down in one place.

By the time I'd come back from the show circuit, lean and tanned and twenty years older, the farms had already started to disappear. But back then the tack shop was still downtown in its dilapidated brick storefront, right next to the Wagon Wheel Restaurant (Family Cooking with a Smile!), and the feed store was still a collection of rotting wood outbuildings sprawled alongside the railroad tracks. Now the feed store had made way for a home design store and nursery, and the tack shop had been renovated into a clothing boutique, part of a pretty, antique-laden downtown beloved by day-trippers. I didn't bother going into town much anymore. The village had been reborn, but I had kind of liked it the way it was. The cost for a revitalized downtown was very high, for the farmers who had frequented the old one.

Grandpa hadn't had to see it change. He was gone by then.

I crossed the grass under the live oaks and went up the sagging wooden steps of my little house. A new roof, a half-rotted front porch, and flaking paint—it was my favorite place in the world. My grandfather's house, left for me, the black sheep of the Carter family. The only one who loved horses as he had, the only one who would never give this place up.

I flicked at the green paint curling from the door-frame. Paint would be the fall project, now that the dry season had come. The porch... I hopped experimentally, listening to the creaking wood, feeling the sponginess in the boards beneath my boots. The porch could probably wait until spring, if no one too heavy did any jumping jacks on it. Since the roof had been redone, I had been working from the inside out, one project at a time, to restore the bungalow. It would outlast me now, if a big hurricane didn't blow through and knock one of my gorgeous oaks on top of it.

Selling to the developers would have meant more than giving up the business. It would mean giving up this house, and I couldn't imagine living anywhere else, now that it was mine and mine alone. Too many sweet memories here, of staying with my Grandpa on the weekends, playing with his couple of Thoroughbred broodmares and any foals which might happen to be hanging around the place, and crossing the two-lane county highway, which had been less-frequented then, to the orange grove stand he ran in the picking season. Stealing oranges from the big bins he set out for the tourists, sharing them with Sailor when I was allowed to keep him here, when we weren't off at shows, before I made the mistake, before the accident.

The orange grove was now two dozen luxury homes and a clubhouse with an Olympic-sized pool, all hidden behind a brick wall and a row of Queen Anne palms. The old fruit stand had burned down long before my return, the victim of a midnight lightning strike. I'd been in Virginia, at a horse show. My parents told me after I won finals and had come home flushed with triumph and exhausted from nerves. That fire was the beginning of the end for the orange grove; by the time I came back to take over the farm, the trees had died in a freeze and the homesites were being sold. The pastures

and the scrubland where Grandpa rode with his buddies, and with me, was all that was left.

That, and this lovely little house. Thank God it had been built on this side of the street.

The front door whined open and old boards creaked beneath my feet, the planks sloping in weak spots as if the floor were a series of rolling hills. The wood had warped as the house slowly sank into the soft Florida ground. But wood was flexible, and adapted more readily than concrete to the shifting sands. Things were built better in my grandfather's day, and houses made more sense. My low-slung bungalow was dark and cool in summer, with a broad front porch made for capturing breezes, unlike those sunny pastel stucco houses in their sea of chemical-green grass. Admittedly, the shade from the overhanging oaks came with a price, since those lovely trees housed entirely too many spiders for my comfort. Other pests I could handle: I fed a few feral cats outside to keep the mouse population down, and reluctantly sprayed for the rest of the bugs. Someone had suggested chickens, to keep down the palmetto bugs (that's what Floridians call massive flying cockroaches) but I hadn't been willing to commit to the birds yet, in case they required more maintenance work than folks were letting on.

On the other hand, I really liked eggs, and I had an idea that if I had a couple of chickens there would be eggs all over the place, so that was a temptation.

My stomach grumbled.

"Speaking of food..." I said aloud, slipping off my boots and setting them neatly next to the door. In breeches and boot socks I went down the hall to the little kitchen, hoping I still had some food in the freezer from my last expedition into town.

I peered into the tiny freezer of my ancient fridge and was rewarded with a bag of frozen pasta and shrimp. "I am Italian tonight," I announced, pulling the bag out with a triumphant smile. "I dine on sea-bugs and noodles."

I ripped the bag open, dumping the contents into a pan. "A little olive oil..." About the talking to myself: I wasn't crazy. It was just that I usually had a dog, but I'd been alone for a few months now, and in the quiet of my house, I hadn't gotten out of the habit of narrating my life to the dog, who would be watching me right now, sitting on the linoleum floor maybe, wagging a bristly tail, or a wavy one, or maybe just a little stump, hoping for a bit of shrimp as a treat. It was a break from the silence of the house, even if it was only my own voice. Eventually, I'd get another dog. I felt there had to be a break between dogs, for decency's sake.

"And don't forget to turn the gas on," I finished, because it wouldn't be the first time I had waltzed out of the kitchen, thinking with pleasure of the gourmet stove-top dinner awaiting me, and realized twenty minutes later that I had never flipped on the burner. The flame burst into life under the pan. I looked at the floor next to me, where the dog should have been, watching me hopefully. "Lord, I need a dog," I told the empty spot, and took my wine into the living room.

I sank into the sagging couch, sighing as its upholstery took me in. It was a tired old

couch, like me, I thought. But it was charming in its own way, faded plush covered with a brocade throw decorated with prancing racehorses, their nineteenth-century tack and long willowy legs the relics of another age and another way of looking at the horse. I sipped at my wine. There was a thump somewhere beneath my feet—just a cat under the house, stalking mice, doing its cat job. I liked animals to have jobs. I considered chickens once more. I didn't love the roaches, after all, but they were part of life in Florida. Roaches had no job, but I could employ chickens. "I think I'll get chickens," I told the living room, and no one answered. "And a dog," I added. A big dog, maybe, that barked all night. Tourists loved that.

Chapter Three

A good barn manager smooths over silly fights, and, as promised, I made sure that Stacy's bridle was fixed. She accepted it with a lack of grace which didn't surprise me, but at least the fight was over and everyone was happy again. Briefly, I supposed. The week ticked by quietly. I rode, I taught lessons, I tried not to worry about the impending development next door. Rodney didn't call back about the trail horses, which I hoped meant that he'd found a better solution for them—some nice farm a bit more appropriate for them than my equestrian center. Kennedy's horse, Sailor, arrived without fanfare, walking quietly into his stall and eating his hay as if he had always lived there.

Then, turmoil!

Stacy canceled her riding lesson.

It probably doesn't sound that dramatic, even if I explain that this lesson was a prime Saturday afternoon spot which Stacy had been hanging onto with grim determination for the past four years, refusing all comers when they sought to barter time-slots, approaching the heartless Stacy armed with sob stories about soccer games, band trips, and lunches with in-laws. Stacy Hummel knew what she had and wasn't letting anyone else get a sniff. Still, anyone might have to cancel a lesson from time to time. Kids got sick, cars had to go to the shop, mothers-in-law dropped by and the house had to be cleaned. If it had been any of those reasons, the world might have kept on turning.

But Stacy's reason made me see everything beginning to tilt dangerously out of kilter.

I was standing in the barn aisle, observing the grooms as they threw lunch hay to the thirty-odd hungry equines of impeccable European lineage, and also to Sailor. The barn was echoing with horses and their shouting—big bold whinnies, throaty nickers, high-pitched neighs. Everyone went gaga for lunch hay—it broke up the monotony of the day. Breakfast hay had been so long ago. Dinner hay was so far in the future, it was barely worth contemplating. A grooming and a ride? Didn't have the same ring as a big old pile of dried grass. Stall doors were rattled, teeth were run up steel stall bars with eye-watering results. Feeding time at the zoo.

My phone rang and I walked outside to get out of the cacophony, relieved for an excuse.

“Hello, this is Grace,” I said, holding the phone to my ear. The sun was hot on the parking lot asphalt and I tilted my face up into its rays, closing my eyes. The light was red through my eyelids. “Stacy? Hello, what’s up?”

“I just need to cancel today’s lesson,” Stacy said. She sounded out of breath. I wondered if she was running away from something—a fire, a burglar, an alligator.

“Is everything alright?”

“Oh, yeah. Can we just reschedule for midweek?”

“I can check the calendar and call you back.” I bit the inside of my cheek to stop a gusty sigh from letting her know how annoying I found a late cancellation. An empty hour in my Saturday afternoon was a chunk of money lost. I paced along the barn wall, kicking at stones that had escaped the edging. A toad hopped under the hedge and peered out at me resentfully. I grasped at another billable hour. “Want me to ride Fallon for you this afternoon, then? You have shows coming up. I’d hate for him to get an unauthorized day off!” I forced a laugh.

“Oh, no thanks,” Stacy said lightly. And then she added, with an air of nonchalance: “I’m going to go trail riding with Kennedy instead of taking my lesson.”

There it was: the ground tilting beneath my feet. I stopped pacing and stood still, too surprised to reply. The toad blinked at me and hopped away to safety.

The grooms went driving by on the Gator, and I let the roar of the motor serve as a convenient excuse for my radio silence, but in reality I was reeling from those few simple words. No one on the farm went trail riding. Their beautiful show horses were just that—beautiful show horses. They were not accustomed to the rigors of the natural world, and they would surely get themselves into trouble out there.

I certainly did not trail ride, and I had impressed upon my students that the arena way was the proper way to ride. We were all much safer in the arena, with rails and groomed footing, and lovely shade, than we could ever be out there in those swamps and scrublands, places where anything might happen.

The grooms parked the Gator in the hay and equipment shed on the other side of the parking lot, switched off the roaring motor, and quiet returned to the farm. My window of acceptable silence had closed. I gathered my wits about me and tried to remind Stacy that she had goals. “Are you sure you want to skip a lesson for a trail ride, right before a show? Surely there’s a better time down the road. You don’t want to give up any training time, do you?”

“There’s always a show coming up, though,” Stacy said, aggrieved, and since it was October and the beginning of the winter season, she was right. “And I know I’ve never taken Fallon trail-riding, but I’m sure he’ll like it. Kennedy says he’s very stiff in the top-line and a nice trail ride will relax him and help him move forward more naturally. And she says Sailor is the perfect babysitter for a green trail horse—Fallon can just scoot up against him and feel perfectly safe —”

She prattled on a little bit longer in a similar vein, her sentences peppered with “Kennedy said...” By the end of the call, I was ready to call the sheriff to have Kennedy Phillips and her perfect Quarter Horse removed from the property. If her “live life to the fullest/just have fun/YOLO” spirit infected my performance-minded students, I’d go under for sure.

And, more immediately, despite her bad temper, Stacy was a pretty rider with a talented horse. They could always be depended upon to bring home a few blues. We were going on our annual dressage show outing next weekend, to make sure our show jumpers were paying attention and ready for the upcoming season, and I was looking forward to seeing some excellent scores from Fallon. And from Stacy, of course. She sat very prettily, always in the perfect pose, and Fallon did his thing. They were a good team, and I was always proud of them, happy to show them off in front of rival trainers.

Despite all that, it didn’t seem there was much I could say on the phone to convince her that she was making a mistake. Someone had gotten her all jazzed up over this trail riding business. I could probably get her back in the show-ring state of mind, but my power over my students’ decisions was best conveyed in person, standing before them with the convincing uniform of custom riding boots and German riding breeches, with a tapping riding crop in one hand, and the reins of a seventeen-two hand Oldenburg stallion with a rebellious streak in the other. I was pretty hard to argue with, then. I was a queen.

Stacy finished carrying on about seeing the natural side of Florida from the back of her darling horse and hung up, and I pocketed the cell phone and looked across the heat waves shimmering up from the parking lot. Beyond the asphalt, wilderness reigned, and the thirsty pine trees cast their thin shade on the sharp-edged palmettos. The natural side of Florida looked about as appealing as the Sahara right now.

The grooms came out of the hay-shed and headed across the parking lot for the barn, their normally quick gait slowing to a languid stroll in the blazing sunshine, ready for their lunch and a break from endless chores. They saw me watching them, and the older two wisely affected careful nonchalance.

Anna, being the working student, was the one to foolishly make eye contact with me, and so she was the first to reluctantly veer from her intended trajectory, the shady oasis of the picnic area behind the barn, and head my way instead to see what the boss wanted. Margaret and Tom, older and wiser and more irritable, brought up the rear, casting disgusted glares at their youthful colleague. They could have made it all the way to their break area without ever acknowledging my presence, as they had proven on more than one occasion. Trust Anna to get them into extra work, they were thinking. I knew. I’d been a working student, and then a groom. I’d done my share of avoiding the boss.

“Hey guys,” I called as they drew near, and Anna smiled, genuinely, the way very young working students still do, and Margaret and Tom nodded, warily, the way older and wiser grooms do for the rest of their careers. “Has anyone used the trails recently, that you know of?”

“The new boarder has,” Anna volunteered brightly. “She went out there the first—no, the second day her horse was here. Then she went out the next day with a machete.”

“A machete?” This was unwelcome news. We didn’t have a farm where swords were encouraged, of course, but it had never occurred to me to specifically ban machetes from my property. Cigarettes, yes. Dogs, obviously. Weaponry? The subject had never even come up.

“For chopping overgrown palmetto, branches, crap like that,” Margaret drawled. She ran a hand through gray-streaked hair, sweaty from a morning of hard work, and pulled it back up in an untidy bun without much thought. “My old boss always cut trails with ’em. They’ll hack right through brush.”

“I should think so.” Margaret’s old boss had been a competitive trail rider of some repute. Of course, that had been twenty years ago, and I would have thought trail-blazing might have progressed beyond swinging swords from the saddle, but this was the horse biz, after all. Change came slowly out here. “So the trail out to the sandy road is open again?”

“Guess so,” Margaret shrugged. She didn’t care.

“Everyone’s been taking about trail riding,” Tom said. He still cared a little. “The new girl has been talking it up. Says horses need the down-time.”

“She talks it up while I’m out in the ring and can’t hear,” I guessed, and Tom nodded, brushing back his white-blond locks.

“She’s going to get someone hurt,” I said testily. “These ladies aren’t used to trail-riding, to say nothing of these horses. Let me know when some of them are planning on sneaking out there, will ya? And try to discourage it. Discreetly. Mention the shows coming up, that sort of thing. They won’t want to throw away all their hard work if you remind them of how important their training is to a successful season.” After all, that’s why they were here, every single one of them, paying top dollar: to win on the A-circuit. Not to goof around in the woods with a priceless show horse.

There was a trio of nods, from weary and uncaring (Margaret) to brisk and can-do (Anna), with Tom landing somewhere in-between. I released them for lunch with a nod of my own, and walked back to my office, climbing the stairs slowly, aware of every step as my kneecaps protested the hard labor, reminding me of all the years I’d been training, all the successful and not-so-successful seasons I’d had.

These ladies with their Mercedes and their BMWs and their imported horses had it easy, but they still rode hard and aimed high. I wasn’t about to let them fritter it all away.

Chapter Four

The new worries about trail riding cheerfully joined the older worries about the development next door, plus some old favorites which came up when the electric bill

arrived in the mail, and together they were all eating away at me with impressive diligence. I tried to put in a training session on Gayle's silly mare, Maxine, but I couldn't concentrate on walk-canter transitions any better than she could. I gave it up, handed the sweaty mare over to Anna, and tacked up Ivor.

Riding my big gray stallion often seemed like the answer to all life's problems. I could forget about everything—bickering boarders, mystery lamenesses, overdue bills, unpleasant bank statements—and just sink into his spirit, moving with him as easily as an osprey soaring on the thermals. We had been together long enough to know each other on the sort of deep level that made self-help/equestrian mash-up books such a success. Everyone wanted what Ivor and I had. I happened to know that it was rare. I'd ridden a lot of horses in my time, and only had this kind of connection twice.

Whatever we had—and it was hard to explain, as one person's psychic-bond scenario was another person's practical admission that we had just been riding together for a very long time, and I tended towards the practical side of things at all times—it was enough to knock my old boarder's defection and my new boarder's dismal lack of ambition and the presence of that damn sign next door quite out of my head. I was granted forty-five minutes of happiness and peace, worrying only over finding the right stride and cadence in Ivor's big, ebullient canter.

Once we had bounced through a jumping school, me relishing the way he bunny-hopped through gymnastics, he swapping his leads for fun as we circled after each course of fences, I handed him off to Anna to cool out and got down to the business of teaching. I was thankful for the further distraction, especially as it would last right through the evening. Friday evening was a busy time for riding lessons, especially with the clients who worked all week in air-conditioned offices, and sweated through their evening rides every night they could manage, before hurrying home to heat up dinner for their families. They showed up in breeches and boots despite the late-afternoon heat and grew red-faced as they labored through figure-eights, lead changes, and triple combinations. Huffing and puffing, one by one, my students toddled out of the arena leading their sweating, blowing horses, and I felt I could pat myself on the back for another job well done. Miserable work in summer would be a delight in winter, and they'd ride like champions in the show ring.

Most days, we had just a little small talk before lessons: how were the kids, how was work, of course I'd be delighted to ride your horse on Tuesday, so sorry you can't make it—but today, everyone I hadn't seen all week only wanted to talk about The Sign, and what it would mean for the barn.

“Do you think the construction will be noisy?”

“It's going to be so weird to lose those trees. It's going to change the whole character of the farm.”

“Sad to see another piece of woodland get mowed down.”

“I guess this place will be next.”

I heard this last one from every single student, and I marveled that they could all

think I'd just up and sell.

"Why would you think that?" I asked my last student of the night, mystified. Did they have so little faith in my commitment to Seabreeze, and to them? Did they not understand this was my life's work, and I was doing everything I could to preserve it? Sometimes I wondered why I bothered, if this was all the respect my struggles had gained me.

"No one would blame you," Melanie replied matter-of-factly, rubbing Rowan's forehead. She had him in his flat bridle, the one Anna apparently hadn't seen the day she used Fallon's new bridle on him, and stretched out the throat-latch. Rowan did have a huge head, I noticed. Stacy had been right about that, anyway. The flat hunting bridle really complemented his massive noggin. "Everyone else has sold. Even two years ago there were at least four more barns on this road. Now there's just you."

"Well, don't forget—this is my home. I couldn't possibly sell it." My tone was emphatic; I needed everyone to believe this one simple truth. If anyone thought for a second I'd sell the property, they'd all be barn-shopping and I'd have an empty barn and a bankrupt business in no time.

"Even when you're the last one here?"

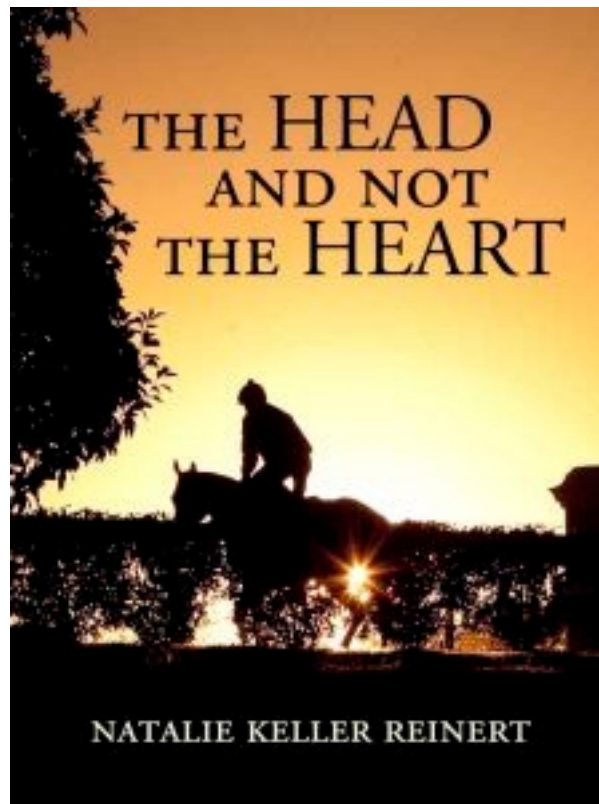
"Especially then. I'll have a lock on the market!" I grinned. "Now let's get rolling. We have a dressage show coming up, you know."

Melanie groaned and led Rowan up to the mounting block. I smiled. You wanted to show during the Winter Equestrian Festival, you did your little dressage show, that was the deal. And you brought home a good score, if not a ribbon. "Walk him on a loose rein for a few minutes, then pick him up, put him together, and give us a few nice walk-trot transitions!" I bellowed, in full teacher-mode, and managed to forget about the construction company next door for another half an hour.

Read the rest of the story!

[Show Barn Blues is available for Kindle, Kindle Unlimited, and paperback here.](#)

The Head and Not The Heart



The Head and Not The Heart

Introduction

The Head and Not The Heart was my first novel, and to be fair, it's a novella. Clocking in at about 37,500 words, every single one of them heartfelt, this is the story I had to tell to get started in equestrian fiction. When I wrote Alex's story, I was trying so hard to understand what kept me around horses, day in and day out. I started writing it while I was living on a small farm in Florida, and I finished it while I was living in an apartment in Brooklyn, galloping racehorses at Aqueduct.

I'm always touched and humbled by the number of readers who start reading my work with *The Head and Not The Heart*, understand the depth of emotion in this novella, and go on to read my entire collection of stories.

I also understand why some people don't fully enjoy a little book this heavy with feels, and that's why I've included the first follow-up, *Other People's Horses*, in this collection. If

you're looking for a good racing story with plenty of action and fun, *Other People's Horses* shouldn't be missed — even if, especially if, you weren't totally sold on Alex's debut. This book was a semi-finalist for the Dr. Tony Ryan Book Award, an annual prize for horse racing literature, and its full-length follow-up *Turning For Home* was a top three finalist for the same award.

I'm writing a prequel to *The Head and Not The Heart* as well, all about how Alex came to Ocala and met Alexander in the first place. So be on the lookout for that in 2020!

Chapter One

Last Horse of the Day

I relaxed in the saddle, loosening my joints, in a bid to keep Saltpeter quiet, and tried to enjoy the morning. It was a show-stopper, as usual, all fog winding through the branches of live oaks, an orange disc of sun visible faintly through the opaque gray, just lifting above the rolling horizon, the damp air carrying the sounds of whinnies and neighs from a thousand horses in the fields around of a hundred farms. Oh, winter mornings in Ocala are spectacular. They stretch on and on, the sun coming up late, past seven thirty, when exercise riders and gallop girls like myself have already put in half a day's work.

We'd galloped a mile and when I turned back to see the horses behind me, I could see the steam was rising off their hot, sweaty backs and necks. My grandmother, never a romantic, once said steaming racehorses looked as if they had the devil in them. I'd been five when I found a book of slick black and white racing photos at the library, and brought it eagerly to show her while she sat studying her Bible. My grandmother had been overly interested in the devil.

We must have looked like that picture now, and I couldn't have denied Nanna at that moment if she'd risen from the grave and proclaimed every horse there to be possessed by a demon. There were five other horses in this set of advanced youngsters, five other leggy two-year-olds, blowing out their nostrils and snorting at the shadows and the imagined tigers in the bushes, lurking on either side of the gravel pathway back to the barns, lusting noisily for hot young racehorse flesh. Sitting upon them, bodies moving easily with their curvettes and feints, five other riders, identical in our polo shirts and safety vests and hard hats, identical in the whips in the small of our backs, shoved unused through a belt loop, identical in our hard-set jaws and wary eyes.

Luckily our expressions and posture were as far as the resemblances went, and I meant to keep it that way. They were hard men, older than me, and had spent their lives in this outdoor life, with faces like cracked, forgotten leather parching in the afternoon sun. I moisturized and sunblocked frantically, but there was no keeping at bay the Florida sun, and no disguising those little squinting wrinkles next to my eyes.

Salt peter was the last ride of the morning for me, and his gray hair was all over my black polo shirt. I tried to brush it off and found that the shirt was damp with the fog. The droplets of cloud were slowly sinking through, and I suddenly felt chilled in the cool morning. There's a moment when all the heat of exertion from galloping the horse gives way to the cold air outside your skin. It feels like sudden-onset hypothermia. But here we were back at the barn, and it was time for a hoodie for me and a knit sheet for the horse. We rode into the open shedrow and I ducked under the doorway as Salt peter turned of his own accord into his stall. I gave the big gray horse a pat on the neck, nodded to the waiting groom who stood with a leather halter and shank over his arm, and started to dismount. From behind me I heard a noise in the shedrow which gave me another chill, raising goosebumps on my bare arms, unrelated to the weather.

"Horse!" someone shouted frantically, and I saw a blur rushing past the open stall front, big and dark and fast. Salt peter flung up his head and I caught desperately at the reins, the thick rubber slipping through my grasp. The colt darted forward through his open door, chasing the runaway, and, half-off already, feet clear of the stirrup irons, I went off backwards and hit the ground hard, grunting as I lost the air in my lungs. My head snapped back and my hard hat thudded against the concrete wall.

Just another morning.

The grooms were shouting, chasing the horses, which was nonsensical, because nothing will make a terrified horse run away faster and farther than a shouting person running after them—they find it hard to differentiate between mountain lions and humans sometimes, and I imagine that I would too if I had evolved with my sole chance of survival in the world being a keen sense of hearing and scent, and four very swift hooves to gallop away on. Through half-closed eyes I watched them, and when the tall Englishman who had been watching the horses work turned back to look at me, I waved an arm at him to go on after the horse. I was pleased that he'd thought of me, but I was fine, just winded. And the horse would always have to come first.

That's just how we live.

I closed my eyes and listened to the melee as if detached from it all. What a life, I thought. What a life I lead. Another morning up at four thirty, another morning spent in boots and kevlar vest and hard hat, whip in hand, wrestling and shouting with barely-two-year-old Thoroughbreds, practically wild frontier mustangs in their feral flight reaction to every object or surprise that came their way—stray candy wrappers, stray leaves, stray cows, other horses, probably even their own mothers. Another morning getting dumped—and how typical that it would be the last horse, the last ride, the last dismount, when you think you've gotten through the day unscathed. Another bruised rear end to favor. Another dented hard hat to discard.

What a life, I thought. What a life I lead.

The fog was finally lifting when they came back, leading the two shame-faced horses, who both looked completely winded and sore after their excursion. I could see them through the stall door; I still hadn't moved. I was too busy grouching, too busy feeling

sorry for myself, too busy questioning all my life's decisions. This is the sort of thing that happens when you get up too early, get dumped off a horse, and haven't had coffee yet: you start remembering that you had a 3.8 GPA in high school, and that office jobs, complete with padded desk chairs and climate-control, don't start until nine a.m.

"Up the driveway, on the pavement, right up to the gate, and a huge bloody dent in the iron gate where someone slid into it. There are scrape marks for fifteen feet across the bricks," Alexander reported in haughty disgust, his British accent particularly pronounced and betraying his bad temper. He came into the stall where I sat, arms over knees, still in the straw where I'd landed. "And what the hell are you still doing down? Do you need an ambulance?" He didn't look alarmed. Either he knew that I was in a foul mood, or he really didn't care that I could've been hurt by such a silly fall.

"I'm fine," I grumbled, and put my hand up for a lift. He reached out and pulled me roughly to my feet, then pulled me up against him for a brief kiss.

"Silly girl," he murmured. "Who falls off the last horse in the last set in the stable? Only you."

"You may laugh," I said stiffly. I couldn't laugh about my riding with him; he was the only person on earth with whom I was insecure about my horsemanship. "But my ass is not laughing. My ass is ready for a feather pillow for once instead of this hard ground." I toddled away from him, tossing my whip to the nearest groom, who snatched it out of the air and grinned laughingly at me. Speaking no English, his toothy smile was thrown to me like a bone to a dog; it was the closest he'd come to supporting me against Alexander, who would cheerfully work me as hard as he did the barn crew, and wonder if I didn't thank him for the privilege. Hell, sometimes I did. Protégé to a great conditioner, with a born and bred eye for a good horse—a dream come true, of course. Depending on your dream. I was starting to question mine. I brushed my hand thoughtfully across the seat of my jeans, dislodging the pebbles and mud, and thought of a bath and a book. The sort of things normal people, who didn't run 200-horse farms, got to do when they hurt themselves.

"You fell in the *straw*," my lover and boss said from behind me, completely unsympathetic. He steered me away from the golf cart and back into the barn. "We better watch those horses walk out."

The shedrow had been raked smooth already. Some silly groom had stayed behind and groomed it into a perfect tranquility garden, as if we were done for the morning, while the two miscreants were out being chased down by the rest of the barn crew. The hot two-year-olds, Saltpeter and his delinquent buddy, a bay simply called Max, were being led through the grooved lines of sand while the over-eager groom leaned against his rake and shook his head in despair at his own foolishness.

Alexander stood still in the center entrance, watching them walk away from him down the row, kneeling down in the dirt to get a close look at the way their ankles and hocks and knees flowed and clicked, and shading his eyes against the emerging sun's rays to see if the hindquarters moved evenly, or if one slouched lower than the other. I

watched him, and then the horse, trying to see what he saw, and when Saltpeter went on a second pass, I closed my eyes against what I suspected.

Just then, Alexander turned to me. Bad timing; he didn't tolerate sentimentality, or hiding from the facts. The heart has no place in the horse business; he had schooled me on my first day. In this business, you think with the head and not the heart. "Open your eyes, girl," he fumed. "Did you see it?"

I nodded. "I saw it."

And I had: an ever-so-slight catch in the motion of the left hind ankle, an arrest of motion before the true depth of the ligaments was reached, a tiny shortening of stride. An injury.

He stood up and watched the horse amble away from us before turning to disappear around the corner on yet another circuit of the barn. "The left ankle," he murmured. "There'll be an almighty swelling in it this afternoon. If that's all." He turned around and shouted down the shedrow. "Hey, Manuel!"

A small man appeared in the doorway of a stall, past a bright-eyed horse pulling hay from its net. He climbed under the rubber stall guard and set his pitchfork against the wall before regarding us silently. He's thinking that his lunch has just been cancelled, I thought. And he's right. Poor guy. Horses pay no attention to anyone's schedules but their own.

Alexander barked out instructions for cold-hosing and bute in the horse's lunchtime grain, which Manuel presumably understood, because he nodded and said, "Si," which is about the most reaction I have ever gotten from him. One of the morning riders had been a groom once, but he was a nice guy and I found it hard to imagine him being as taciturn and silent as our training barn crew was. One certainly never got the impression that they loved horses. And this was very hard work to do if you weren't doing it for love. Very hard. I rubbed at my backside again, feeling the bruise and wincing. I must have hit the concrete berm which ran around the inside of the stall, to support the clay foundation of the floor. Naturally, to fall in a stall filled with straw, I'd hit the concrete. I didn't usually think too much about tumbles, but this fall offended me more than most. I had started wondering what these mornings were all about, honestly.

Alexander asked Manuel again if he understood. The groom, who had lived in America for seven years, understood perfectly. He nodded sullenly and went on. A good lunch break and nap, spoiled. Because Alexander had hung around the barn and his stupid girlfriend couldn't sit a horse. Oh, I knew what he was thinking. It was what all grooms thought, and I had once been one. But you cannot deny good horsemanship. Give the man his due—Alexander put his horses first.

We made our way back out to the golf cart. I slid into the driver's seat cock-eyed, favoring my bruise. Alexander settled down in the passenger seat, sliding aside a sales catalog with a cover photo of a foal peering through its mother's tail, meant to entice even the most hard-hearted horseplayers that the time was ripe to purchase an in-foal mare so that its get could eat its way through your savings and break your heart, and he

sat contentedly, waiting, as always, for me to drive him. “Shall we go up to look at the yearlings now?” The morning routine, first the training barn, then check in with the yearlings, and with the broodmares and their foals. I just wanted to go back to bed.

I took off on the gravel drive, and the cart whined and rattled its way past the training barns, and up the hillside.

There is nearly always a fog in these winter mornings, and if you live in the right sections of Marion County, the expensive, limestone-rich swaths of countryside where the live oaks have been growing for hundreds of years, their Spanish moss dripping down over the stable roofs, then the mist twining through the trees, the five-board wooden fences, and the shadowy figures of horses, at grass, or jogging on the track, or being led, hot and steamy, in bored circles after a workout, is simply too beautiful to believe. Saratoga has her summer-green elm trees, but our ancient live oaks are pretty spectacular in their own right, and they have leaves all winter, unlike some northern trees I could mention.

Cotswold Farms was scooped out of a valley in one of these sections, in the rolling hills of a village called Reddick, just north of Ocala proper. Village is a misnomer; it was really a collection of horse farms with a gas station at one of the rural intersections. Our training track was the centerpiece, located deep in a valley, adjacent to the long shedrows of the training barn, with the green hills above it peppered with barns and horses of all ages. The broodmare barn. The weanling barn. The yearling barn. The breeding shed. The stallion barn. And close behind it, riding a high slope and nestled within a grove of oak trees, the house.

Down here in the valley—and please note that I’m talking about hills, here, not mountains like northerners or people from out west might be thinking—down here in the valley is where I have spent my mornings for the past five years, galloping on the track, schooling babies at the starting gate, teaching galloping youngsters to skip to their other lead on the turns, and then riding them back into the training barn, under the overhang of the shedrow, where horses poke out their noses over their stall screens to greet their friends, and hand off my steaming wet horse to a groom so that I can go get on another one.

The middays, and the afternoons, I spent at the top of the hill, running the breeding operation. I spent spring and summer in the broodmare barn, more often than not, gossiping and learning all that I could from the vets that came in their dually pick-ups, rattling with stainless steel surgical equipment, cabinets chock full of hormones and antibiotics, and bearing strange scandalous soap opera stories from the weirdest place a person could ever live: a racehorse town. I spent fall and early winter in the yearling barn, where the weaned foals, who had spent their summers by their mother’s sides in the fields, were brought in to learn to live as adult horses, with stalls and schedules and

halters and humans, and along with the grooms I was pummeled and bitten and dragged by the adolescent miscreants that we would name yearlings on New Year's Day. In the blinding-white barns, with their wide, airy shedrows like the porches of a plantation house, I was the authority, the queen of the property.

In the house, I would always be less so. I might talk to the vet myself and bring the information back to Alexander for him to digest, but my personal opinion wasn't really in play. My veterinary opinion, in fact, wasn't very often solicited or appreciated at all. I was a young female person, raised in America on show horses, and therefore a corrupt presence in his insular world of men—British, one would hope—who cut their teeth on National Hunt horses and marathon-galloping hurdlers, the likes of which we Americans could never hope to ride or breed. Their soundness legendary, their miraculous winning streaks in the face of years of strenuous racing legion, they compared in no way to the toothpick-legged sprinters that we Americans so prized. I'd heard it all before. I could quote it all verbatim.

I let it go because I loved him, without reason, loved the way he looked at me and the way he reached out a hand to brush against me when I walked past him, loved the way he let me run the place (most of the time), loved the knowledge that he gave me so freely, loved his eyes and his face and his smile and his voice, and that lovely accent wasn't bad either. How could you not love someone who put all of your dreams in your grasp, so graciously and freely? I had run away for this, I had come here for to be with racehorses, and Alexander put it all in the palm of my hand. If he was somewhat old-fashioned, it was a small price to pay.

Most of all I loved our middays, the early eleven o'clock lunch hour, where we hid from the sun and the work waiting for us outdoors. In the kitchen, we sat drinking coffee, and Alexander slumped over the high counter top of the bar between kitchen and breakfast room, poring over the print-out of the *Thoroughbred Daily News* that the secretary placed there, between the fruit bowl (early oranges from the trees in the yard) and the candy dish (today she had filled it with wrapped dark chocolate squares—which I would cheerfully eat until I couldn't sit a horse but would just wobble like a Weeble. I believed our secretary was jealous of me and wanted to ruin my figure). I loved our bright kitchen: a high-ceilinged white room, touches of gray granite. The room was lit spectacularly from the ten-foot windows in the breakfast room that looked down the hill to the training barn and the racetrack. Opulent in its simplicity, the kitchen was where we lived.

He looked restless there, unsettled, an outdoorsman in the cool gray room. He was a tow-headed Englishman yet, despite the years; decades in the sun had lightened the blond almost to white, but he insisted that there was no gray in the family, and it looked like he'd prove himself right. Tall, too tall and heavy in the shoulders to gallop the babies himself anymore, but you could see in the strong arms and hands the rider he'd once been, growing up riding to the hounds, a fearless young boy, a ruthless young man, out to win at anyone's cost, as long as it wasn't his horse's. *Nothing* would ever be as important as his horse. The same sun that had kissed his hair and eyebrows had darkened and

damned his pale skin, and he was growing wrinkled—no, leathered—in that classic, long-jawed, aristocratic way of his ancestors. In the pressed khaki pants, polished brown boots, and button-down shirts that he favored, he looked the part of enterprising pinhooker or prosperous veterinarian, in the neighborhood of fifty and wheeling down towards a gin-soaked retirement on a spacious yacht somewhere in the West Indies. In reality, Alexander was simply an accomplished horseman, gambling each day on the things he knew best: Thoroughbreds, in their breeding, their raising, their breaking, and their training. He might have turned down the yacht, in fact; there were no horses at sea.

I think I would have taken it; at this moment I would have liked nothing more than to walk away from all these horses and their demands and their antics. Alexander had insisted that I go out and look at a yearling in the field, which had set the entire herd of little demons off into ecstasies of kicking and biting and carrying-on. I'd avoided the flying hooves but some little chestnut with a white face and a naughty eye had managed to bite me on the forearm, and I could tell already that the formidable bruise was going to be a work of art that would last a week. Add that to the sore spot on my rear and the necessity of driving down to Winning Edge later to buy a new hard hat to replace the one I'd hit on the concrete wall this morning, add to that Saltpeter's lameness. . . oh, just keep adding! I was exhausted with it all. I wanted to climb into my bed with a romance novel and forget all these crazy beasts. Of course, I couldn't. Alexander would remind me that after lunch, the vet was coming to check the pregnant mares. Oh, Alexander. I gazed at him guardedly, hiding my eyes beneath my lids. I still loved to watch him, no matter what his horrible beasts might have done to my life.

Of course, it wasn't entirely my fault. If you looked at me, you'd see the truth: I am the the typical American horse-crazy girl, just not quite in my teens anymore. My hair still in a blond ponytail, but the bright gold mixing with darker streaks, like a bale of orchard grass instead of clean straw. Still tall, still slim, still wearing worn jeans and untucked polo shirt with the collar half turned-up and dirty paddock boots, my uniform since I was at least twelve. It all gave me away; I was never really going to go to college, I was never going to get a job in an office, or own a pair of heels. I was a horse girl, the sort of girl that looked too light and weak to ride racehorses—but if you try to muscle a horse around, you're in for a surprise, anyway. Even my name was fancy and horsey: Alexis, shortened to Alex, which made us, yes, Alex and Alexander. Or, in Ocala parlance, Alexander and His Alex.

Yes, second, and his, always.

I suppose being twenty-five years younger and the former groom doesn't help. Maybe I was his toy, and maybe I only thought of myself as something much more, as a partner, as a friend, as a reasonably imaginative lover. I'd heard Earl Whiting say "Now, now, Betty, she makes him happy," over the cocktail shrimp at a Florida Breeders Care About Kids charity night at the Ocala Hilton, and I hadn't imagined her eyes rolling at me from down the buffet line. I was too young for the Ocala society, such as it was, and so it was just me and Alexander, which was fine until we were thrust into terribly

awkward social situations like that. Which we tried to avoid. Again, there was a reason why I didn't own a pair of heels—I didn't *need* a pair of heels for this life.

It had been good for these five years, though; who was I kidding? We rattled around the big house, dirty and disheveled and content, for there was a maid every other day to tidy up our messes and sweep up our mud, and a strange entrepreneurial housewife from Gainesville who cooked things and put them in our freezer every Monday: exotic curried meatloaf concoctions, or neo-Creole lasagna, or whatever else was fashionable and featured on the Food Network, which I imagined to be her pornography. I'd eat anything she made, as long as I didn't have to touch the gleaming stainless steel appliances, especially that terrifying natural gas stovetop. Sometimes I felt overfaced by the sparkling expense of everything that surrounded me. I was a solid middle-class girl, raised in subdivisions, begging and mucking stalls for the privilege of riding other people's horses, coming home to macaroni and cheese with a side of hot dogs. This lifestyle, in this big house, on this outstanding spread of two hundred acres, was far more than I could have asked for. I mean, a horse farm! A mansion! I would have been thrilled with an aging single-wide mobile home, if there had just been room for a horse outside.

Okay, well, maybe it wasn't a mansion, but it wasn't far off. Like a lot of Florida farms, it had a history based in the very random time known as the 80s. Ocala had more Follies built in the rush of strange business and cocaine money than all the Romantic ages in England. This sprawling farmhouse looked like it had been dropped carelessly from a helicopter which had been en route to a more suitable location, like Vermont. It had been the farm manager's house when the absentee landowner was a so-called "Wealthy Industrialist," the manufacturer of random and unrelated items like breakfast cereals and tires and hair accessories. He had built this beautiful farm and yet lived, inexplicably, in Omaha, and had flown down to watch works on the professional-grade training track before sending his horses to unsuccessful careers at Belmont, at Fair Grounds, at Finger Lakes, dropping progressively in prestige, in ambition, and in cash flow. He had been living proof that you can't buy horse sense, that all the wealth in the world can't make up for a lack of breeding, human or otherwise. His horses populated rescue ranches and retired racehorse adoption programs across the country. One of them had competed at Rolex Kentucky last year, a robust fifteen-year-old, leaping unmovable logs and splashing into the infamous Duck Pond. He had come in fourth, the highest placed American team member.

Alexander slapped down the papers and sighed. "Truly Given had another stakes winner yesterday."

This was interesting news. Truly Given's first three-year-olds were just starting to win races. We had a nice chestnut colt of his in the shedrow now. His owners wanted us to send him with the next group to New York. Didn't all the owners? No one wanted to pay training rates on a horse at the training center, loafing in the shedrow, lounging under an oak tree during an afternoon's turn-out. They wanted them at the racetrack, bouncing off the walls, earning their keep. So to speak. Anyway, now they'd really be turning the

heat on to Alexander to get the horse to New York. They had too much money and clout to want to run him at nearby Tampa, where the ground was easy on the legs and the races were fun but rather second-class.

“He could go,” I said cautiously. I didn’t want him to, and neither did Alexander, so there was no harm in sharing that position. I watched the back of Alexander’s head as he went and looked out the window, down to the training barn. If we weren’t in the shedrow, we were watching it. “He was early—wasn’t he a February? And it’s February already. He’s really and truly two now, but no one will think of racing him until summer. He’ll need to get used to life at the track, get a gate card. . .”

“Rates paid to a New York trainer instead of to us,” he muttered. “You want another empty stall?”

“We only have three empty stalls,” I said defensively. “And we always get new trainees after the two-year-old sales. The Hastings’ alone are planning on buying at least six this year,”—naming our newest, wealthiest clients, ready to play the game in a big way, already the proud owners of a new black Lexus SUV specifically for driving to the farm—“And Rick Owen always sends us his partnership’s buys. He’ll buy a dozen. Those are the certain ones. There will be a few stragglers. Why not make the owners happy?”

Because it went against Alexander’s grain to make training decisions solely to keep owners happy, I knew. He was of a school of thought that owners were senseless louts, good only for paying the bills put before them, signing the checks their accountants wrote out, or however it was done these electronic days. I tried to ignore it.

“Horses are better off at the farm,” he grumbled, and I recognized one of his pet arguments on the way. “We need a better track to ship to. I’d rather ship them in and then bring them home for turn-out than send all the good ones to Kentucky and New York to get locked up in stalls. Good horses go lame from lack of exercise. Ten minutes a morning on the training track is no way to keep a horse sound and fit, to say nothing of their brains.” He shook his head and went back in for another assault on the coffee pot. “You can’t explain that to these owners, a bunch of accountants who think of nothing but money and ignore the sport. When I was a boy this was the sport of kings, and now it’s the sport of bankers. You can’t pinch pennies and keep horses—it can’t be done.”

“I know, you’re right,” I said, trying to be soothing, before he sank into a muttering, bitter sort of mood for the rest of the workday. “We just have to do the best that we can. But Alexander, we have to have clients. We can’t own them all. If it was our horse, we’d do it differently—but we don’t own the horse.”

“If I could change one thing about this business,” he growled, “I’d get rid of all the people.”

I never had much love for people, either—that was why I surrounded myself with horses—but I had enough sense to know that clients pay the bills, and if a horse was sound and going to a good trainer, at a good track like Belmont, there was no reason to worry about breaking him down. Sure, he’d miss the paddocks and a roll under the oak tree, rubbing the sand into his back, but he was going to give all that up sooner or later

anyway, and it was only for a few years. The faster he ran, the shorter he'd be there. The clever horse would run like the devil was at his tail and secure himself a good stud farm position before he turned four. I tried to explain that to all my colts. But you know colts. They're *boys*. They never listen.

Alexander started a headcount of all the horses in the training barn, emptying the candy dish and lining up the foil squares in long rows on the countertop. "We'll send up six then—the Truly Given, the Smarty Jackson, those three colts of Owen's, and. . ." he paused, finger on a chocolate, trying to determine a horse's fate. "If that Holiday colt goes. . ." he faltered, trying to think of the flashy bay colt's name.

"Beachside," I supplied. It was one of my unwritten job requirements to know all the horse's names and spout them off at the correct times. Sometimes, when the barns were full to bursting before a sale, I actually had to sit and study lists of names, breeding, markings, and birthdays.

"Beachside," he agreed, nodding. He looked at the diagram he had made for himself, shook his head with displeasure, and walked back to the breakfast table, which was set prettily with white china dishes and coffee cups, as if I were going to don a gingham apron and serve biscuits and homemade sausage and scrambled eggs, instead of shoving the dishes out of the way to make room for an oversized mug of black coffee and a copy of *The Daily Racing Form*.

"And Saltpeter," he muttered, as an afterthought.

"We'll do fine with what we've got," I said, pouring more coffee. "The barn doesn't have to be full to pay for itself." One hundred and fifty dollars a day plus veterinary expenses tended to pay our training barn bills. The fee was more for Alexander's expertise than for the overhead, alarming as equine expenses always are. I topped off Alexander's cup and sat down across from him. His last sentence made its way into my brain and sat there, worrisome. "Wait—where's Saltpeter going?" That poor colt, and poor Manuel, too, icing the ankle down in the barn while we idled in the kitchen.

He just looked at me and shook his head, and I knew: he'd written the colt off for the season. My confidence that it had been just a little set-back suddenly wavered. Alexander knew more than me, after all. He'd been conditioning horses when I'd been sitting up until midnight to catch the bettor's program "Calder Report" on my parent's television, up too late on a school night, trying to sort out long-shots from favorites and the mysterious phrases like "drop in class" and "percentage off a lay-off." He'd been winning purses and end-of-year awards when I'd been learning to jump cross-rails on a school pony. Wearing me down with an excess of knowledge was never really a problem for him.

"I'll turn Saltpeter out," he said finally. "He's not mature enough. This little injury—he needs more time. That shouldn't have happened."

His face grew long, the wrinkles in it deeper than I'd seen in a while, and he looked his age. And I thought for a desperate moment that I was in love with a man too old for me.

“Don’t—” I said falteringly, but there was nothing I could say. He loved Saltpeter. He had bred him for the two-year-old classics. Saltpeter was supposed to go Saratoga this summer, make us proud. I thought fleetingly of purse money and future stud fees, mercenary, because the Thoroughbred business only pays in green linen paper, never blue or red satin rosettes. A little rest, he’d be good as new. We could catch up on lost time.

But no, it didn’t matter about the money, because Alexander didn’t do this work for the money. The money was a lucky happenstance of getting good horses, getting good owners, and the unlikely concurrence of doing the right thing by a horse *and* getting stakes winners. Turning out Saltpeter was certainly an overreaction to the little shortening in his stride this morning, but it was more than a trainee suffering a set-back. It was about falling in love with a horse, and that was something Alexander had rarely allowed himself to do. But Saltpeter was special. Every year, there was a horse that wriggled its way into our affections, despite all our best efforts. Last year, it had been Red Erin. Oh, Red Erin! I still couldn’t let myself think of him, and I *never* mentioned him to Alexander.

This year, the beloved son was Saltpeter, due to circumstances beyond anyone’s control. Saltpeter was Alexander’s pet—Alexander had loved his dam, a gray mare he had imported from England, and ridden himself in the mornings. She was flawless—sweet-tempered, sound as a dollar, and fast as the wind—winning races until she was six years old. That had been fifteen years ago. She died last year, a terrible colic during her pregnancy, losing the foal that would have been Saltpeter’s little brother. A chestnut with four white socks and lungs which were not ready for air. We had been up all night with her. The vet had advised euthanasia. Alexander had wiped tears from his eyes and held her wet head while the vet depressed the plunger on the syringe, while she closed her eyes and breathed her last. Great horsemen may not be sentimental, but they still love the special ones.

Saltpeter was all that was left of her. Of course Alexander wouldn’t risk the gray colt, a facsimile of his perfect mother. He’d give up all the dreaming of Saratoga and wait it out until the horse was a three-year-old. Kentucky Derby, I thought idly. We always thought of Kentucky Derby when we looked at Saltpeter. It was an affliction, this desire to win this one silly race every May. All horsemen had it, though, the Derby disease. And what prep race? He’d like the tight little turns at Gulfstream—maybe the Florida Derby. I daydreamed in workouts, in breezes, in nomination fees and purse money, of smiling for the photographer in the winner’s circle. A pay-off now or a pay-off later. It was worth waiting, I supposed, though painful to sit out a season for nothing more than a twisted ankle. One dainty ankle, expected to bear a thousand pounds at forty miles an hour for a mile and more.

I shrugged it off as if it didn’t affect me, as if I wasn’t a partner in the farm, who was entitled to some sort of input on financial matters. And sending a horse back out to pasture when he ought to be prepping for a race was certainly a financial matter. No matter how much you tried to sugar-coat it, if your business model contains the word

“horse” in it somewhere, then those horses are going to have to earn you money. They can’t always gambol in shady paddocks when there is work to be done. Like people.

Anyway, my opinion would not be solicited in this, or any other matter, once he’d made his decision. Being a partner was solely on paper. It always had been, and I was feeling it more than ever. Alexander had given me a partnership two years ago, because he thought he was being kind and generous, as a reward for my hard work and slavish devotion, not because he thought that I’d make some kind of meaningful contribution to the business of breeding and training racehorses—although he did have to admit that my eye for conformation was natural and precise, and that I ran the place to perfection—perhaps not his celestial level, but pretty damn good anyway. If I didn’t always feel appreciated, or respected, I didn’t care—that much. I was in love with him.

I’d always been in love with him, since that first moment. Since that day I’d driven into Ocala, desperate for a job with Thoroughbreds, and seen him getting into his truck at a barbecue joint, and lost all sense or inhibition and just ran over to him to announce my undying devotion to his training skill and to beg for a job—ever since that day, I knew even as I agreed to be at the training barn at four thirty in the bloody morning, that I wasn’t going to work for him just because he could teach me everything that I ever wanted to know, but because I was hopelessly in love with him, with his legend, with his face, with everything about him. Maybe it was just that I was in love with that posh English accent. At the moment, so tired of my life, so tired of these horses and this heartbreak, this exhaustion and these bruises, this monotony of sun-up to sun-down labor, it was good to blame my choices on something foolish and superficial, because it felt like a foolish and superficial decision. Falling in love with your boss, with your much older, worldlier boss, when you are a girl in your early twenties, is always a mistake. It has to be. Doesn’t it?

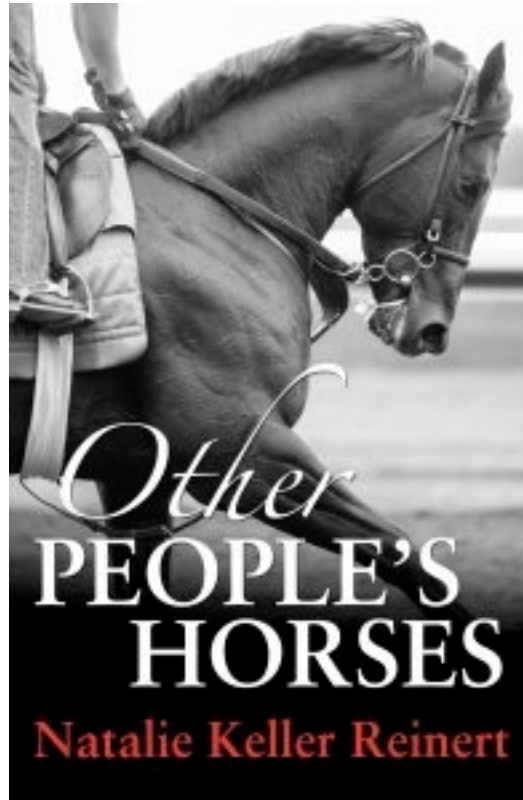
I still loved him, though, for whatever reason. It kept me here. I looked out at the barns, felt a shudder of revulsion at the afternoon of holding up mare’s tails for the vet so that he could check a dozen sets of reproductive systems, and thought that nothing else could keep me here anymore.

I leaned over and stroked the back of his neck, gently, and he reached out and pulled me to his lap. I lolled across him, arms behind his neck, hands clasped, and smiled up at him. He looked down with those crinkled eyes, as if he was looking always at the sun, and smiled back. “Lovely girl,” he said softly. “Lovely little groom.”

Read the rest of the story!

[The Head and Not The Heart is available for Kindle, Kindle Unlimited, and paperback here.](#)

Other People's Horses



Other People's Horses

Introduction

I mapped out the plot of *Other People's Horses* in the back of a Fasig-Tipton catalog, sitting with my husband at a brew-pub in Saratoga Springs, New York. I am sure it was our first trip there for the summer race meeting. It was not our last. Saratoga is magic.

For that reason, *Other People's Horses* is primarily a racetrack novel. It's about summer in Saratoga, about finding one's inner strength, about feminism and how guys can be jerks sometimes even when you love them, about falling in love with a horse even when you know better.

As the second Alex & Alexander novel, it's a dramatic departure from *The Head and Not The Heart*. It's even funny sometimes. Sometimes I wish I had made this the first novel in the series, but ah well. What is done is done.

This novel was a semi-finalist for the Dr. Tony Ryan Book Award, a literary prize awarded annually for literature about the Thoroughbred racing industry. I can't tell you

what that meant to me. It would spur me on to continue writing about Alex, with the novella *Claiming Christmas*, and the novel *Turning For Home*, which made it to the top three finalists and earned me a trip to Kentucky.

Chapter One

Red-Headed Fillies

“Oh-ho-ho, look at that shit!”

“Hang on, Juan! Break that bronco baby!”

“Give that filly a smack! Now... *Now!* Aw, man. You missed your shot!”

It was going to take more than a smack, I thought. It would take a freaking lobotomy to fix that filly.

I'd only been watching her for a few minutes, but that damn Five Star Won filly, pretty as a picture and dumb as a post, was giving me a really nice reminder of why I'd quit climbing on babies. Well, quit climbing on all but the most sensible, talented, worthwhile youngsters. I'd gotten choosy in my old age; now that I didn't have to ride in every set, I didn't. I let the full-time exercise riders put up with all that bullshit. Me, I was the assistant trainer. I had bullshit of my own to deal with.

But my bullshit wasn't down here at the training track yet. He was idling in the training barn, I guessed. Pouring coffee. Peering at ankles. Puttering around. Alexander wasn't in a hurry much anymore.

That stupid filly! She'd been twisting and corkscrewing the whole way from the training barn to the track, leaving divots in the gravel horse-path that would have to be filled in by the landscapers later, before another delicate baby twisted a slender ankle in one. Her hooves were sending pebbles flying like tiny missiles at the other babies in the set, and they went skipping ahead onto the track to get away from her. Even her own kind didn't want to be seen with her!

I sighed impatiently. Now she was outright refusing to step hoof onto the harrowed dirt of the training track, as if the line of demarcation where the ground abruptly changed from gravel to sand was a sign of imminent danger which only red-headed fillies could decipher. What did it say to her? Panthers ahead! Rattlesnake den! Hot lava! Whatever it was, the message of doom was meant for her and only her. The other kids went trotting away, leaving her in the dust. She didn't care. She went on bucking.

But for all the Five Star Won filly's considerably athletic and carefully-plotted theatrics and acrobatics, she would lose the war in the end. I had told Alexander more than once that Juan Silva had a seat constructed from Velcro and super glue, and, as usual, his denim-clad ass was sticking tight to that little flat exercise saddle, his legs shoved out in front of him and his booted heels somewhere near the narrow little filly's

chest, his center of gravity as close to her plunging tail as he could get it. He knew, and I knew, and anyone who had been a few hundred or thousand young racehorses knew, that letting his weight fall forward was the kiss of death, the last decision you regretted before you were spitting dirt from between your teeth.

That's the thing about these slender Thoroughbreds, and these delicately-built fillies in particular: there's nothing in front of you when they finally get their head, drop their shoulder and throw that buck. Just the road rising to meet you, and not in a drunken friendly proverbial kind of way.

Juan managed to wrangle her onto the track at last, but his battle wasn't over. I chewed at my lip, anxious. She was anti-social, our little Miss Five Star Won Filly. She chose to ignore her work partners, something distinctly un-equine. They were heading off down the lane towards the turn, making fairly tidy straight lines in the sand, jogging in pairs like model citizens. The chestnut filly, however, elected to stay behind. She preferred the thought of heading back to the barn, alone, to the prospect of making her way around the track with her group. I thought that was odd for a horse, who should have been herd-bound, but then again, was anything really too strange for this particular little witch?

I kept Parker next to the gap, where I could snatch at her bridle in the unlikely event that she actually managed to dislodge Juan and head back to the barn. My pony gently offered, with a toss of his fine head, to stand in the gap itself, blocking her way, but I declined with a little tug of rein, keeping him off the path. I wouldn't put it past her to just plow right into him if he blocked the path, and I wasn't about to endanger my sweet Parker the Pony because this goofy filly didn't want to work. He was worth ten of her, anyway. A good pony was worth their weight in gold, and Parker the Pony was the best. The Five Star Won filly wasn't even mine. She was a client's, and if I got sick enough of her, which was a prospect not that far off, I was going to tell Alexander to send her idiot self home to her mother.

"She's nothing but a banana-head. Five Star Banana-head," I murmured to Parker. That was a fun name, I decided, and so I calculated the number of characters in the name. Twenty letters. Too many for the Jockey Club to accept, and the banana-head's owners would probably not be amused by my suggestion anyway. It wasn't exactly a blue-blooded Thoroughbred name, and they were not the sort of people to stick vanity plate monikers on their blood-horses. I did like that about them, even if I disliked their filly. Every now and then I liked the owners instead of the horses. It was pretty rare, but it happened.

The blue-blooded filly showed off her appreciation for her aristocratic ancestry by grunting like a pig in muck, then ducked her head hard, snatching the reins through Juan's hands and gaining enough space to throw a spine-twisting buck. Juan, his head somewhere near her haunches at this point, riding the acrobatics with laudable composure, glanced back at me with a strangely bland expression, as if he was asking me if I was getting all this. Maybe he was thinking of taking out his whip, and was wondering

if I would approve. Well, he was welcome to it. Good riders, like good ponies, were not common enough to be allowed to go to waste. If it was him or the filly, I'd have to choose the filly. Take out the stick and teach her a lesson, Juan!

Anyway, it was my fault he was in this situation, so what right would I have to question his methods for getting out of it? I was the one who made the horse and rider assignments every morning, moving the little magnets on the white board. I put him on that horse and once there he had every right to do what he thought best to stay safe on her back. But there was a silent consensus in the barn that since I was a woman, I didn't approve of hitting horses. It hadn't done any harm to the babies, so I'd let the rumor stand. People thought women were softies, even at the racetrack. But people were fools. I myself had a very nice racing whip and I knew how to swing it. Safety first! Sometimes you had to remind the thousand-pound babies who was in charge.

The war with the filly was reaching a critical juncture: she was reaching her breaking point, where she would either lose her head completely and flip over or fling herself to the ground (nothing would surprise me from this filly. Nothing) or give in to Juan and follow his instructions. She squealed and crow-hopped, bouncing stiff-legged down the track like a bronc with a bucking strap, and Juan was fed up at last; he took his stick over his head and brought it down with a resounding crack on her right hindquarter.

Birds flew from the tree over my head. Crickets were momentarily shocked into silence. Even steady little Parker pricked his ears at the sharp sound. The filly herself took off like a bolt of lightning, but Juan was ready for her; he'd already shifted his weight to prepare for her leap forward and now he was urging her on, sending her chasing after her stablemates who jogged sedately around the far turn, portraits of racehorses at work. Parker sighed and dropped his head until his chin was resting on the railing, certain at last that his services as pony would not be needed. Mile gallop now out of the question, he could relax and take a nap while the youngsters toiled.

I kicked my feet out of the stirrups, watched the flying filly and Juan's swinging stick, and thought much the same thing.

Alexander brought coffee down from the barn in the usual style: a stainless steel mug in each hand, reins wrapped around the horn of his saddle and knotted securely. Betsy was a steady pony; she knew her way to the track without any help from the boss. Morning routines were her bread and butter, and she put her feet in the exact same places every single day.

"Like a cow," I'd smirked, just the once.

"Like a trainer's pony," Alexander had insisted, expression smug, and after that he wouldn't let me ride her. "Train your own pony," he'd told me, and I'd had to turn Parker, a former lesson horse from a livery in New York City, into something approaching Betsy's own sedate reliability. Once he got used to dirt beneath his hooves

instead of asphalt and stopped shying at rabbits and lizards and the neighbors' lowing herd of Black Angus, he was really very good at his job. As good as Betsy, I'd wager, but Alexander would have snorted if I'd said so aloud, so I didn't mention it. Alexander already snorted at me quite enough on a daily basis. If it had been tough just being his farm manager, adding assistant trainer duties was downright exhausting. Ever meet a man who was impossible to please? Meet my charming husband.

"Ready for round two?" Alexander smiled, leaning over to hand me the mug, a twin to the empty one I'd discarded in my saddle bag already. I looped my own reins around the saddle horn. Parker had looked up to watch Betsy pick her careful way to his side, but now he dropped his head again, snoozing through coffee break as usual. He left a puddle of drool to slowly drip from the white railing where he pressed his chin.

I drank deep and settled the mug against the horn of the saddle, keeping a hand on it to stop it from tipping. A minor, but important, improvement to the thousand-year history of equestrian tack occurred to me. "I wonder if the guys at Quarter Pole have ever gotten a request to install a cup holder on a saddle. There's plenty of room next to the horn."

A cup holder would play a huge role in cementing my relationship with Western saddles. I'd grown up with jumping horses and their light little English saddles. I hoisted myself into this bulky big boy every morning because if I had to catch a runaway it was a lot tougher to haul me out of all these blocks and horns and panels and what-have-you. The lack of a cup holder was a real missed opportunity. I should patent it. I'd make a mint.

"I shouldn't wonder," Alexander said carelessly. "Everyone in this town is a fiend for some beverage or another. You could just as easily put a can of Bud Light in there. Now *that* would please quite a lot of horsemen." He squinted to see the horses on the backstretch. Juan had caught up with the rest of the set and reined the galloping filly back to their pace. Even across the misty infield, her temper was clearly visible: the way that she shook her head head furiously against the pressure on her mouth, the way she swished her tail violently against her hocks. "That one is a witch, all right. She go out with the others today, at least?"

"In the back, fighting all the way. But she kept up with them all the way to the gap. Then she stopped and put on a show."

"With Juan starring as Buffalo Bill."

"Yup."

Alexander sighed. "Chestnut fillies..."

"Don't say it." Every chestnut filly that was born here or sent to us, he said it. Every chestnut filly I wanted, he said it. And then when I asked for her anyway, he said no.

Naturally, I now wanted a nice chestnut filly to win races for us more than anything else. But nothing had turned up yet. Still, I kept looking for the red-head that would be my champion. It was illogical, of course. You couldn't ride color, or run it, either, but it had become a minor obsession with me. If I'd let myself think about it, I'd have had to

admit that at least part of it was a desire to prove Alexander wrong.

Just once, to be right.

“She's the one perpetuating the stereotype, not me.”

“It's completely unscientific to equate coat color with temperament,” I snapped.

Alexander laughed, a little coldly. “Since when has horsemanship been a science? We all believe in black magic and lucky charms.”

I took a deep gulp of inky coffee to avoid answering him. He was right.

As usual.

I drank more coffee.

In addition to being right all the time, Alexander made damned good coffee. I'd always thought the English only drank tea. Alexander said tea was all good and well for people with nice, normal lives, but for horsemen who got up at four o'clock in the morning, year-round, something stronger was required. And the brew he had come up with, after some tinkering with different blends and grinds, was that something stronger. It looked like a lake had sprung up from a coal mine. Or the LaBrea tar pits. But it tasted of dark chocolate and espresso and red wine and concealed more caffeine than could possibly be good for my heart. Or his. It was delicious and probably dangerous.

Ah, but we lived healthily enough, out of doors and always exercising. A little extra caffeine wouldn't kill us. I drank deep.

An orange glow was starting to pierce the heavy shroud of fog that lay over Ocala. Sunrise was the prettiest time of day here, no matter the season. I waited for the horses to reappear from the cloud-bank and spent the time reflecting on the difficulties of having married a man who was always right and knew he was always right, unquestionably and implicitly, and who did not mind telling his wife she was wrong. I sipped at my coffee, imagining my morning-slow heart beginning to pick up the pace, and watched the sky above the thinning fog. There were high clouds rolling in from the west. Well, that wasn't right. I pondered them for a few moments. A June morning should have a clear sky. Something was brewing out there.

The youngsters emerged from the fog, came jogging around the turn and made their way back towards us. Parker, awaking from his power nap, pricked his ears and watched them. Did he see them the way that I did, the way that Alexander had taught me, the way that a true horseman saw a horse? Their peculiarities of gait isolated and memorized, their expressions read and their moods analyzed, their every movement conveying essential knowledge of their health and potential and ability and faults? I barely saw a whole horse anymore; I saw them in bits and pieces, in angles and joints and lengths, and only when all those subsets had been studied and connected did I step back to see an entire animal that was functioning in perfect harmony.

That was on a good day, anyway.

There was always something though. The bay filly in front with the jagged splash of a star: she held her left ear cocked, all the time. She moved nicely enough, she seemed agreeable and cleaned up her oats, but that ear bothered me. Was there some infection

deep down we hadn't been able to pinpoint? Or could she have some wildly unusual problem with her inner ear that could cause her to lose her equilibrium someday? That could be dangerous. That could spell disaster if it happened in the wrong place, say, somewhere on any given racetrack, on any given afternoon.

And the gray filly next to her, with that damn paddle to her stride, like she was going to reach out and swipe the horse next to her with each step. It worried me every day. Horses could paddle, true enough, and display all sorts of similar deformities of gait and stay sound, but that knowledge didn't make me any more comfortable. Perfection was a help, not a hindrance. There was no harm in striving for it.

And there, behind her, tossing her head up and down, the plain bay. The one with the occasional heat in her left ankle. It was a phantom inflammation: there one morning, gone by dinner, only to reappear two weeks later on a Tuesday morning and disappear the next day. Did she bump it herself, moving carelessly while galloping? Did she twist the ankle playing in her paddock? Or was this a harbinger that she was a horse who just wasn't going to hold up?

I washed down all my fears with more of Alexander's rich coffee. I would have drunk it if it were awful, of course. Coffee was a necessity for a girl who got as little sleep as I did. And was my lack of sleep any wonder? Who could sleep, with twenty-one two-year-olds this spring, and every single one a puzzle to be worried at day and night? Not to mention the yearlings, the foals, the handful of three-year-olds we had bred ourselves. The two stallions aging gracefully in the stallion barn. The fields of broodmares lazing under oak trees. The older ones were ours, but the younger set were only half Cotswold Farms horses.

Other people's horses, but our worries. How had we ended up with so many horses? Once we had vowed not to work so hard. To only work for ourselves. And yet here we were, at six thirty on a Wednesday morning, watching six horses that didn't belong to us, and fretting over every one of them.

I would bet even money that every single one of their owners was still sound asleep, arms wrapped around lovers, heads deep in the feathery embrace of pillows, bare feet kicked free of cool linen sheets, contentedly dreaming horseless dreams.

The two year olds trotted decorously past us, like little Grand Prix dressage horses prepping for their Olympic rounds, and started a second loop of the track. The Five Star Won brat threw her head and kicked out a little as she went past the gap, and Juan shouted and smacked her with the stick to straighten her out. Self-preservation had won out over pleasing the boss. That was good. I'd hate to see Juan hurt, and he was too good a rider to waste on some nasty filly who wouldn't jog.

I'd just as soon send her back to the owner with a note that read "Don't bother."

I should do that with all of them. And get some damn sleep. And maybe go to the beach. Apparently it was only an hour away.

"The light bay is a little uneven in the back, don't you think?"

I felt my face flush hot. I'd been too busy in my head, grousing about my racehorses,

to notice anything actually wrong with said racehorses. It was my job to see problems; I was the assistant trainer. “I didn’t see... Um... We can jog her in the shed if you saw something. Or on hard ground. The driveway—” Being caught out meant I was just *full* of helpful suggestions.

He shrugged. “Might not have been anything. I’m sure you would have noticed too.”

I nodded thankfully, but I was suspicious of his quick forgiveness. That was awfully gracious of him. Entirely out of character, in fact. Where was the usual lecture on lameness, watchfulness, and the necessity of constant vigilance that I received whenever I missed the slightest hitch in a stride? I glanced at Alexander to see if he was looking disapprovingly at me, but he was not looking at me at all, disapprovingly or not. He was just sitting his pony with that natural, effortlessly graceful seat he had, looking like the captain of a cavalry regiment as he gazed across the citrus mist to the trotting Thoroughbreds. His classic English profile, strong jaw and straight nose and tilted brow, was dark against the rising sun behind him. But what I could see of his face looked closed, as if he had something on his mind he wasn’t going to share with me.

I’d been with him long enough to know he didn’t think it necessary to share every little thing, but not long enough to be used to it. I wasn’t sure there was a time long enough for that. “What’s going on?” I asked, although I knew he wouldn’t tell me. I had to try, every time. “Something’s on your mind.”

“Nothing important,” he said lightly, predictably. He toyed with Betsy’s black mane, growing shaggy. I had forgotten to have a groom pull it.

“Something’s going on,” I insisted. I had a persistent hope that someday he’d treat me as an equal, or at least as an adult. Alexander seemed to think that his Deep Thoughts and Large Problems would simply overwhelm my sweet li’l brain. It was just one more maddening thing about a maddening man I adored. He was damned lucky he had good qualities: generosity, wit, a way with horses, and an inexplicable love for me amongst them.

“Only thinking of the New York trip,” he admitted, turning his head slowly to watch the joggers rounding the turn again. The chestnut filly threw a defiant buck and several others followed suit; there was a general chorus of shouting and the reports of sticks slapping hide, the sound carrying impressively through the damp morning air, and the unruly class subsided back into good behavior.

The New York trip! Distracting enough to keep us both up at night. It was a big decision, taking a string of our own horses to Saratoga to run this summer. But we’d agreed, back in the springtime, in the height of breeding season with foals coming out of our ears and mare’s backsides haunting us in our dreams, that it would be a badly needed change. We needed some time off the farm, and the Gulfstream trip we had taken in January had been a rousing success. It had only been a month, but we both felt better afterwards; for having gone to the beach on the days we didn’t run horses, for going home to the pastel blandness of the wicker-furnished condo, the walls absently decorated with bland sailboat scenes someone else had hung up and promptly forgotten about.

We'd both felt better in every way from simply not being at home, and we'd gotten some wins, too, and you always feel better with a few good wins. And then we'd come back to Ocala for the February opening of the breeding sheds and everything had gone back to the way it was, the pair of us sleepless and silent, a couple of zombies wading through breeding season.

I'd suggested the upcoming summer in Saratoga. Alexander had agreed, after a fashion, and then I just kept at him until the plans became reality, with a house rented and a list of six horses that we would take to run in our colors. They were all homebreds, including a couple of two-year-olds who hadn't started yet, with one in particular that we thought might just be a champion someday. Every one of them could reasonably be expected to hold their own against the top-level competition at the Spa.

I had been thinking of the upcoming trip nearly constantly. It would be hard work, but it would be a nice change of pace, especially after last summer, which had seen us sales-prepping yearlings, tending foals and broodmares, training the youngsters who hadn't shipped to the races yet, and keeping up with our runners in Miami, all to the backdrop of no less than four hurricanes and six different days of record high temperatures. By October both of us were ready to move to Kentucky; then the freak Halloween blizzard that dumped three feet of snow on Lexington changed our minds quickly. Now we were just happy to get out for the summer.

And so the van was booked, the stalls secured, and the tack was being checked and sent out for repairs before it was time to pack it up in the monogrammed tack trunks. I'd ordered new saddle towels and bridles and polo shirts with our farm name monogrammed on the chest. Next week we were getting out of the Sunshine State and we weren't coming back until the temperature dropped below 85 degrees. I had declared it; I would make it so. We were *excited* about the trip, dammit.

So what could have Alexander looking so pensive and keeping so close-lipped?

Chapter Two

Favorite Children

I didn't have much time to chew on the worrisome swings of my husband's moods. Personal Best was already tacked when we moseyed back to the training barn, behind the unruly herd of two-year-olds. I knew it was their job, but I couldn't help but feel a little disappointed in the ruthless efficiency of my grooms this morning. I preferred to tack him myself, although (or because) it could be something of an adventure. Personal Best "knew who he was," as one older horseman had put it when he'd met the colt as a rambunctious yearling, galloping headlong along his paddock and flying along the curving rails of the fence with the graceful balance of a bird in flight. Knowing who he was, it

seemed, translated into a bigger-than-usual personality, and a series of clearly stated preferences and outright demands. It meant making sure he had enough slack in his stall chain that he could get it into his mouth to chew on while he was being groomed. It meant picking up his right-side hooves before his left-side, in opposition to the normal routine. It meant holding the bit exactly two inches from his sharp young incisors and letting him choose to open his mouth and reach out for it. Some people might have called him a pain in the ass. I called him my sweet baby boy.

I saw his hindquarters to his stall webbing, a sure sign that he was tied up to the back wall of his box, when I was riding Parker along the railing of the training barn's shedrow. I sighed, perhaps too gustily, and Alexander glanced at me. I shut up and straightened any lines of discontent out of my face. Behind the baby racehorses, we rode our ponies right into the barn, the fluorescent lights overhead suddenly feeble in the strengthening light of the rising sun. One by one, the two-year-olds were turned into their stalls, their riders ducking their heads to avoid the top of the door-frame. When everyone had made it inside safely and there was no banging or shrieking to suggest that someone had been flung into a wall, when a hotwalker had followed each horse into their stalls with halter and lead-shank in hand, I kicked my feet out of my own stirrups and hopped off Parker, landing lightly in the soft red clay of the shedrow. I then performed a routine trick that Alexander was deeply disapproving of: I let go of the Thoroughbred's reins and he ambled down the aisle, ignoring the pinned ears and bared teeth of stalled horses along the way, and turned into his own open stall door at the far end of the barn. A moment later his head reappeared, to snatch at his full hay-net. It was his best party trick. I liked to tell friends that Parker was a homing pony: give him his head and he'd always find his way back to his stall.

But Alexander didn't complain about my homing pony today. After a moment while he took Betsy to her stall, Alexander was on his feet beside me, looking guardedly excited; he loved to watch Personal Best work as much as I loved to ride the colt.

And who wouldn't? Even if he had been slow as molasses in June, he would attract attention with that brilliant red coat, those four white legs, that splash of white running the whole width of his nasal bone down to a narrow strip between his nostrils. He was a chromed-out red chestnut, a guaranteed crowd pleaser, and funny and personable to boot. Personal Best was everything I could have hoped for in a home-bred, and I had hitched any number of stars to his wagon. Stars! Wagons! He was *born to be* a star! He was our Big Horse. He was going to take Saratoga by storm, I just knew it. I could *feel* it, every time I got on his back.

Alexander walked ahead of me into the stall; he unclipped the stall chain and carefully snapped the loose end of it back up to its mate. Tidy, tidy, as always. The colt, fastened by the halter to the back wall with a short length of chain, whickered a greeting, a flutter of nostrils and lips. He was ready to get out and run. Alexander put a hand on his halter and the horse nearly hopped straight up. Oh, excited today! Alexander gave him a quelling look, pale eyebrows drawing together in disapproval, and the colt quivered with

anxiousness. "Let me give him a turn."

I nodded and stood aside. The concrete-block walls were very, very hard. Some lessons you only wanted to learn once.

Alexander led the cavorting baby down the shedrow, impassively ignoring Personal Best's trademark hopping and dancing and general glee at the marvel of walking out of his stall, and I leaned back on the wall to wait. Nicki, who had been riding the filly with the sideways ear, wandered over, soiled bridle over her shoulder. We had an odd number of colts right now, so she didn't have a horse in this next set. It was a built-in coffee break.

Nicki rubbed at her sweaty crop of white-blond hair under her hard hat and grinned, showing off a smile that had more gaps and grays than pearly whites. She was a rough and ready redneck, voice twangy with the local accent that was more Appalachian than Southern, and born and raised in Micanopy, a place most people never hear of with good reason. "That's yer baby," she said knowingly. "I seen it in the way ya look at him."

"*Tiger's* my baby, too." I replied, smiling. "And Parker. And what's her Jockey Club name... Bitey McBiterson, I always call her..." I thought. We had a lot of horses, and it wasn't always easy to remember their registered names. "Rippled Valley. Up in the broodmare barn. Love that nasty bitch! She runs the mare herd. No one gets past her."

"You got Rippled Valley up there?" Nicki lifted her white eyebrows. Her eyelashes and brows were so pale they might as well not have existed, until she moved the skin around them. "No *shit!* I watched her win the Hillsborough Mile, must've been ten year ago, by fifteen lengths. It was like two different races for them other horses. *Was* that ten year ago?"

"Something like that." I wasn't surprised that she knew the old broodmare's name. Nicki was one of those career race trackers who knocked around from farm to track to farm again her whole life. Someday she'd be a wrinkled and lame seventy year old, bent over the steering wheel of a golf cart, feeding yearlings on some big farm seven days a week in exchange for a rusty single-wide. Ocala was full of women like her. There weren't a lot of retirement plans in the horse business, and even less in racing. "I bet you'd recognize half our broodmare herd. Walk up there sometime and look at the names on the chalkboard."

"Might do that," she said non-committedly, and shoved away from the wall. "Have a nice ride on Baby there. I'm gonna grab a smoke and take a piss." She sloped away in her trademark hobble. I never had asked what she broke or how she did it; her gait was too peculiar to even *want* to know. It must have been awful.

Around the corner came Alexander with an apologetic-looking Personal Best. The colt's head was practically dragging in the dirt. He looked like a whipped dog. "What did Sonny Boy do now?"

"Little bastard shied at a bandage unrolled on the ground and reared up. A *bandage!* I gave him a piece of my mind." Alexander held the opinion that lecturing an intelligent horse was just as effective as smacking them. He said they realized that they couldn't

shout back and it took them down a peg or two. Judging by the colt's general air of depression, he'd been right. Anyway, Alexander just enjoyed lecturing, in general. If he hadn't come from a family of world-class horsemen, he would have *had* to have been a professor.

Personal Best pricked his ears at me, sensing forgiveness from Mother, and impulsively chewed at his bit, dribbling white foam to the ground. I rubbed the white blaze hidden beneath his lush, girlish forelock and he closed his eyes and sighed, a ripple of wide nostrils. "Alexander, I think you broke my horse." I shook my head mournfully, grinning all the while. "Just look. He doesn't want to run. He wants to sit in his dark room and listen to goth records and think about how his parents don't love him anymore."

Alexander was unrepentant — had Alexander ever been repentant? He must have been an awful child, always right and impossible to perturb — and gave the colt a resounding slap on the neck. "He's *fine*. He'll cheer up plenty once *you're* in the saddle. I'm not sure which he adores more, running in circles or turning your heart to mush." And Alexander handed the reins to a hovering groom so that he could give me a leg-up. I put my knee in his proffered hands, my hands on the pommel and cantle of the little exercise saddle, bounced three times and sprang up on the colt's back, stretching my right leg over as I went.

The colt's hang-dog demeanor underwent an immediate transformation. The white-blazed head came up, the fine fuzzy-tipped ears pricked, the cream-colored hooves beneath their white stockings went to prancing and dancing. I sat back, legs long and swinging, and let him dance down the shedrow, enjoying himself as he pleased, crab-stepping and ducking his head to snatch at the bit and generally behaving in ways that I would find completely unacceptable in any other baby racehorse. Personal Best and I... we had an understanding. I hadn't fooled Nicki with my fobbing about Parker and Tiger and Rippled Valley; yeah I loved them, but let's face it: the red colt, bred by my hand and born by my watch, *was* my sweet baby boy.

"Sweet baby *boyyy*," I crooned, just so there would be no mistake, and one of the grooms cracked up laughing. Alexander, who really was in the worst sort of mood this morning, scowled as he swung into Betsy's worn saddle. He reached for Personal Best's rein and ponied us to the track wordlessly. Daunted by his mood, my singing subsided, though my colt's dancing did not. We led the set of spooking and shying two-year-old colts like the grand marshals of a particularly unruly and ill-practiced parade. I sat deep in the saddle, my seat hugging his back, and he arched his neck and carried the bit like a dressage horse. I looked down at the mane falling upon his crest, the curve like a swan's neck, and sighed with love.

There always seemed to be one, in nearly every crop. One I couldn't help falling in love with. It was a scary, foolish thing, falling in love with a racehorse. But the heart can't be helped. It does what it wants.

I looked at Alexander, sitting taciturn on Betsy's back, the rein still gripped tightly in

his right fist. Poor man, he was so upset; I shouldn't goad him, but I couldn't help myself. I was overflowing with excitement and anticipation for the summer ahead. "Alexander, this colt is going to be the biggest thing Saratoga has ever seen."

Alexander didn't reply.

Alexander was distant all the rest of the morning. After Personal Best's gallop, one more set of fillies went out, and then I rode my other pet, Tiger. The little bay racehorse I had brought back from New York was still athletic and excited to run at the dignified old age of six years. He jigged and pranced like a colt next to Alexander's staid old Betsy. Once he reached out with bared teeth and made to nip at Betsy's neck, and in response to this playful gesture, the beleaguered mare flattened her ears and lunged at him like a rattlesnake, her teeth snapping empty air a bare half inch from his face; Tiger, well-chastened, went back to amusing himself by spooking at butterflies and practicing his piaffe, and she didn't have to give him any more deportment lessons that morning. Such is the power of old mares.

"He's feeling cheeky," Alexander observed gloomily, his tone implying that the horse was probably going to run through a fence and break his neck, and break the fence as well, an added expense.

He was starting to get on my nerves, my husband.

I galloped Tiger alone, letting him stretch out on the empty track, listening to the snort he made with each stride. I'd read that it was the sound of their breath being forced from their bodies as their forelegs struck the ground, which seemed a rather harsh reality. But the snort was a part of galloping, whatever caused it, as much as the squeak of stirrup leathers and the drumming of hooves, and I loved the symphony of rhythms which were the background music for each and every run, as all the pieces that were being taxed came together to work in harmony. It was the sound of things going right.

He switched leads joyously, that precarious moment of skipping, flying airborne, without so much as being asked when we rounded the top of the stretch, and we went hammering down the lane into the orange morning light, the sun gleaming above the dark tree-studded ridge that humped down the middle of all these Florida horse farms, as hundreds and thousands of other riders on hundreds and thousands of other Thoroughbreds were doing right this moment right here in Ocala's horse country, and I thought that you never enjoyed your home so much as right before you left it. Then we were swapping leads again and winging into the turn, and with a rush we were upon Alexander and Betsy, waiting for us in the center of the track.

I galloped past them and pulled Tiger up near the turn, standing in my stirrups and leaning back on the reins. He pulled on me for a few strides and then acquiesced gracefully; older horses who know their job can be easier to ride than babies, but they're also strong and smart and try to shove you around sometimes. But my Tiger was never

malicious. Like his dam, Erin's Princess, and his half-brother, Red Erin, Tiger was brimming with good temper, just clever and utterly obsessed with running.

I was a little breathless as I trotted him up to Alexander; I wasn't as fit as when I'd been the head rider a couple of years ago, riding ten a day. "I know we planned on giving him the summer off," I panted. "But he's really peaking right now. It seems a shame not to send him to Calder and give him a chance."

I didn't really want to send Tiger to Calder; we generally shipped horses down to race and brought them home again afterwards, but since we were supposed to be in New York all summer, we had given a few of our other horses to a nice trainer who slept in the barn when she heard so much as a cough from one of her charges. I just wanted to hear Alexander say that might not be a bad idea, wanted him to admit that we wouldn't be able to run him ourselves as we had in the past. I wanted him to confirm that we'd be in New York, and be reassured that he wasn't thinking of scrapping the whole deal.

But Alexander just looked the horse over and nodded once, a stiff little nod. It was not a shrugging nod, not a "maybe you're right" nod, not a "that's nice dear," nod. I knew, because he used all of those with me, and frequently. This was a nod that said he wasn't ready to discuss anything with me. *Still?* "Bossy son of a bitch," I murmured, to make myself feel better, and instead just felt like I was behaving like a child.

I frowned and turned Tiger away from his pricked-ear study of the incurious Betsy, walking him over to the inner rail and halting him with his head facing the grass of the infield. I looked fixedly at the infield while Tiger, a mouthy horse, fiddled with the PVC rail with his upper lip. The grass needed mown, I thought. Alexander is going to have to tell me what he is so upset about, I thought. I am not staying here this summer, I thought. I stroked his hot neck and picked up the reins; he tensed and arched his neck in preparation for a whirl and a bolt, his signature move after he'd been backed off after a work-out, and so when I had sufficiently convinced him that we were going to turn to the left, I hauled the reins hard to the right and made him turn in that direction, too off-balance to put on the squeal-and-rear-and-spin show he had been prepping for. He dragged his feet, disappointed, and I couldn't help but laugh. "Still smarter than you," I told him.

Alexander fell in alongside us, and we walked quietly back to the training barn. The sun was well up now and the day was heating up; the mockingbirds were watching us from the live oaks that lined the gravel horse-path. To our right, the land sloped down to a round sinkhole pond, its mirror shimmer reflecting the unheralded high clouds in the sky. A great white egret, nearly four feet tall and dragging long black legs, flapped down from above, unfolding his sinuous neck as he reached the water. I gestured in the direction of the wading bird, a little motion of my hand that was still gripping the reins, and Alexander nodded without interest, not turning his eyes more than a moment from Tiger's steady walk. He watched Tiger for signs of unsoundness; I watched Alexander for much the same. At breakfast, I decided, he was going to give me the whole story.

Chapter Three

Family Calling

The Taco Lady turned up just as the riders were turning their horses into the barn from the last set. A few unlucky hotwalkers got busy leading wet horses, casting longing glances at the paper bags set along the railing; everyone else gathered upturned buckets or snatched at one of the few coveted folding chairs in the center aisle of the barn, chowing down on the foil-wrapped concoctions that came out of the Taco Lady's big old Cooler of Health Violations. What she lacked in Department of Health permits, she certainly made up for in business acumen: the Taco Lady's old Dodge Caravan went rattling around the farms in the neighborhood every single morning, doling out home-made Mexican food and bottles of water and Jarritos soda to the mostly-migrant farm workers. Her arrival was the unofficial ending of the training for the day: occasionally she arrived too early, when there were still horses to ride, but the quality of a gallop around the track was generally negatively impacted by the presence of a half-pound burrito in the rider's stomach.

Today her timing was outstanding, however. We took our leave, climbing into the golf cart and waving our good-byes to the riders for the day. I'd been an ardent fan of the Taco Lady from my first morning on the farm, but I'd quickly realized that there are people who can eat jalapeño-laced steak tortas at ten a.m., and there are those who can't, and I was in the latter camp. So breakfast was with Alexander, sitting up like the gentry at our breakfast table overlooking the paddocks and barns, with coffee and toast and eggs and bacon. It had become a tradition for us, and so had the conversations about the farm and the future that we had over second and third cups of coffee. This was the time to get a clear answer out of him: what exactly was his goddamned deal this morning?

I went to wash my hands and face, tingling with sweat from the oppressive humidity. He didn't look up as I came into the kitchen. I bit at the inside of my cheek, pulling at an old scar. Once I'd come off under a horse and a hoof had come down, pressing my cheek into my molars and tearing the skin. The ragged flesh had healed over but never smoothed out again.

So there Alexander sat, so content with his *Thoroughbred Daily News* fax freshly printed by the secretary down in her little den next to the garage, his back to the great bay window that opened to the broodmare pasture, where the dark mares mingled with their foals beneath a sky that seemed to be growing increasingly obscured by high clouds. The wrong sort of weather for June, I thought again. How disconcerting. It was like looking at a clock at sunrise and seeing the hands point to twelve. It was an error in the natural order of things.

"The weather is funny," I said, pulling out my chair and sitting across from him.

“Tropics, I shouldn’t wonder,” he replied absently. His eyes flicked over the maiden reports, looking to see which stallions were producing early winners.

“It’s early for that.”

“Climate change.” He flipped a page, reading the international reports.

“If the tropics are starting already, it’s just as well we won’t be here all summer.”

He sighed, setting down the paper as if it had disappointed him, and went to sawing at his eggs, spilling yolk across his toast. The lurid yellow bled into the dark wheat bread and its brightness was leached away, soaked into the brown and consumed utterly. Alexander, who liked his toast crisp and his yolks cooked through, ignored it all, as he was ignoring everything, and went on cutting the sloppy eggs into bites, smaller and smaller triangles, meticulous and absorbed in his handiwork. I wondered if he would even eat it, or if ritual mutilation was the only mission on his mind.

Outside, a foal galloped up the fence line, brush tail high and eyes wide, and swerved away from the corner at the last moment. His mother whinnied after him from further down the pasture, her high-pitched neigh carrying through the glass windows. I watched him turn his head around frantically, looking for the sight of his nervous mother. He wheeled and went full tilt down the gentle slope, where the mares had already gone back to grazing. There was a noisy reunion and then the foal dove for the comfort of his dam’s udder, his brush tail slamming up and down like a pump handle while he nursed.

Alexander set down his knife and fork and picked up the paper again.

“What’s new in the world?” I asked.

Nothing.

“Tell me what’s going on,” I insisted. I reached across the table and snatched the paper from his hand. Rudeness tended to get Alexander’s attention, I had learned, and this morning’s dark mood did not change things. It was crude, but effective. He sighed and laid his hands flat on the table.

“That was rude,” he stated with great gravity and self-righteousness, like a headmaster with an unruly pupil.

“*You’re* being rude,” I snapped in reply. “You’ve been completely ignoring me.”

He pursed his lips, and then, unexpectedly, he nodded. I could have fainted dead away.

“Tell me,” I said.

“I’ve gotten a few worrisome emails from Tom,” Alexander admitted, and I felt a sinking feeling.

Tom was lovely. A sweet and handsome horseman of about forty, he was Alexander’s *much* easier-going little brother. He had a massive breeding operation, much bigger than Cotswold Farms, somewhere in Australia, with something like thousands of acres of pasture and hundreds of mares and, during the breeding season, as many as twelve different stallions. Most of the stallions were only temporary residents, American and European top sires and champion runners shuttled to the southern hemisphere for their September-December breeding season, which brought along their own challenges

of transportation and quarantining. The farm was also a major quarantine site for horses leaving and entering Australia.

Alexander flung the international section of the *TDN* to me. He tapped at an article with one calloused finger. **Australian breeding in jeopardy: Wessex operation may be closed due to owner's illness.**

I put a hand to my mouth. "Oh *Alexander*."

He just nodded, mouth a thin line.

I'd never been to Tom's farm; we'd talked about going last year, but soon after the conversation, Marcy Wallis, some big-time football player, bought ten two-year-olds and sent them to us, and the Candlewick fortune sent us thirty broodmares they'd snapped up from a Kentucky dispersal as a lot, and we suddenly found ourselves back in the boarding and training business, with no free time to speak of.

We also had a nice collection of Candlewick merchandise. The house had never smelled so good, it was so littered with scented candles. There was one on the table between us right now. Sugar cookie scented. It made you long and long for sugar cookies. I flicked it with one finger and then reached for Alexander's hand. "How long have you known?"

"Only a week, that's the thing. I hoped at first it was nothing, didn't want to worry you, but..." He shook his head. "It's moved so quickly, I'm afraid it's quite serious."

"And what is *it*?"

His voice was low, as if he was afraid of the word. "Cancer."

"Somewhere nasty?"

"All over," Alexander choked. "My baby brother." He looked into his coffee cup as if he wished it were something stronger.

"And Polly," I remembered. It wasn't just Tom down there on the other side of the world. I'd met them just once, but I always had the same picture of them in my mind: Tom, with his shining blonde hair and deep Down-under tan, laughing uproariously, the very life of our wedding reception, holding hands with his wife, a dark-haired little beauty named Polly. A horse girl like me, Polly, but vivacious and outgoing where I had always felt mousey and retiring. She had charmed every man at the wedding, and laughed at them when they fell over themselves to keep her drink filled at the reception. She wouldn't be laughing now. What must she be going through, with her athletic, still-young husband suddenly gravely ill? And all that responsibility falling onto her shoulders...

What would *I* do, if something like that were to happen to Alexander? Certainly I had managed the farm, but always with his input and guidance. What would Polly do if she was alone on that massive spread? "Alexander, what will Polly do? What do they have, four hundred horses?"

"Not so many as that." Alexander shrugged. "About two hundred. Just more acreage than us; you need more land down there. And all those other extras they have. Tom has always been more ambitious than me. They have the quarantine center, the rehab facility." He took a deep gulp of coffee, and turned, looking out the window at our own

spread. The pastures were a rich forest green under changing skies as the gray clouds rolled in from the northwest; Alexander must be right and the tropics were riled up early this year, dark and wet skies spilling over from the Gulf of Mexico. Grazing broodmares were studiously ignoring their foals, who, growing big and burly with their four and five months birthdays, were flinging themselves around like broncos as they felt the change in the weather. While we watched, a solid looking bay colt tried a spin-and-kick maneuver he'd no doubt show off next year for some poor exercise rider, but he failed to get all four legs underneath of him on the landing and skidded to the ground. A moment later he was up and running for mother; she looked over at him with mild interest, swished her tail, and went back to grazing while he shoved his muzzle under her flank for a reassuring suckle of milk.

The foals were lovely, but the work that went into them was crippling. "It's almost breeding season there," I said thoughtfully.

Alexander looked at me and nodded. "That's what this article is about. The timing couldn't be worse. Tom going into hospital just when they're ramping up for the season."

"How many stallions will they have this year?"

"Six. Plus four shipping in from Kentucky, England. Shuttle stallions. They fly out soon; they're done working here."

I went for more coffee, and to make more toast. Away from the table, with my back to him, I could speak more easily. "Is it really serious, Alexander?" As if cancer, "all over," could be anything else.

"He's going to be sick for a while."

He didn't say what sort of cancer it was; I didn't suppose that it mattered. The c-word was the c-word. I found myself overly frustrated by the toast. The Irish butter was too cold to spread nicely; I flung chunks of it on the hot bread and waited for it to melt, glaring at it all the while as if the butter was the source of all my troubles. "Who will help Polly run it? She can't do it all."

"I'm sure she thinks that she can," he said approvingly, and I remembered that he was very fond of Polly. "But she has to take care of Tom as well. He's going to need quite a lot of her time. When he's home from hospital." He paused. "Whenever that is."

The butter was dissolving into golden oil, soaking into the wheat bread. I shoved it around with the knife, trying to speed its demise. I thought about running the farm alone and taking care of a sick Alexander at the same time. I thought about the sleeplessness of breeding season: client mares shipping in and out all day, vet visits at all hours, mares foaling at two and three o'clock in the morning, twelve hours of labor and three hours of waiting for the healthiest of foals to get up and nurse and have a nice poo before anyone could even think of going back to bed. I couldn't do it alone. Polly couldn't do it alone. No one could. "Who is going to run the farm, Alexander?"

There was quiet.

Bread on plate, bread on plate, plates in hand, one foot after another, back to the table. "Who is going to run the farm, Alexander?"

Chapter Four

Decisions

I wouldn't have called it a fight. No one raised their voices and no one stormed out and there weren't any tears or broken dishes or anything like that. It was merely a difference of opinion, followed by a stony silence. We both went on with our day as if nothing had happened. It's not as if we had a choice in the matter, anyway. There was no time for whining or grudges or hurt feelings, at least not outwardly. The horses came first, the horses demanded every second of our time, the horses could not be neglected. We did what we always did: we finished our coffee, we put our boots back on, we went down the front steps to where the golf cart was parked neatly in its little car-port, I climbed behind the wheel, Alexander settled into the passenger seat and went to flipping through his metal clipboard of notes and forms and checklists, and off we went rattling around the gravel roads of the farm, stopping at the various barns and paddocks and pastures, peeping in on the lives that we had created, and the lives that we were responsible for.

When you're irritated with someone, though, you notice things that wouldn't bother you ordinarily. And sometimes you see things that you had been blind to before, and they rankle and curdle in your belly long after the initial disagreement has been forgiven and forgotten.

Those strange tropical clouds were thickening over, filtering a blazing hot noon-day sun into air so steamy it was hard to breathe, and we were standing out in the broodmare pasture, surrounded by the sunburned, sweaty matrons of the turf, their long manes tumbled and tangled around their lean necks, their eyes dark and patient in their sand-freckled faces, the hair on their faces thinned by the constant heat and damp. There were foals here and there, big bold babies of three or four or five months old, with coats growing slick with impending maturity, manes already starting to fall over from that baby-mohawk they were all born with. A chestnut colt blinked at us through black spectacles: he would shed out the red coat and reveal himself as a gray before the summer was over.

It was his dam, a big flea-bitten mare white with age, that we were frowning over. Chatterly's Lover (whoever named her had clearly forgotten her noble rank) was seventeen years old and had borne ten gorgeous foals for us here at Cotswold. Before that she'd run like a demon and won twelve races in twenty starts. She was a lovely mare who had "done enough," so to speak, but she was also healthy and loved being a mother, so we'd decided to breed her back this year.

Except now *we* hadn't decided to breed her back; *I* had.

The mare had dropped weight very suddenly, there was no denying that. Her back had sagged and her belly had sprung from carrying so many foals, and, because of that, some of her ribs would always show slightly, just from the way that gravity had treated her as she dragged around the weight of hundreds of pounds of fetus and fluid. But there were now *many* ribs showing, and her hip bones were sharp points under her thin skin. The hollows above her eyes were deep, as befitted her advancing age, but these were more like pits. The mare was, over the course of the past three weeks, turning into a walking skeleton.

“She should never have been bred back,” Alexander fumed, arms crossed across his chest as he surveyed the mare. The groom who held her lead-rope was a young girl who went to Equine Management classes part time at Central Florida Community College; she looked at me nervously and then down, brushing at some straw clinging to the threads of her cut-off denim shorts, at some streaks of dirt on her bare calves. She was a nice girl, quiet and fairly knowledgeable; she’d flat-out asked me for a job as I leaned over the rail at an OBS sale last summer, and I couldn’t tell her no — it was too close to how I’d come to Cotswold. I chewed at my lip, walking around the broodmare in a slow circle. The mare herself stood quietly, head down, nostrils blowing harder than they should have, even in the dense jungle-like humidity that was only growing thicker with the advancing clouds. A mosquito whined in my ear and I shook my head, knocking it away with my pony-tail as if I were one of the mares gathered around us, shaking their heads and stamping their hooves.

“Everyone agreed she was healthy enough to breed back with no problems,” I said carefully.

“I was against it. I thought she should have the year off.” He said this with utter conviction.

The groom, Kerri, locked eyes with me. I remembered; she’d been there. Kerri, and the vet, and me, and Alexander. I shook my head slightly. *Just keep quiet.* She nodded. She knew.

“We thought if we gave her a gap year she wouldn’t conceive next year. It would be tough for her body to get ticking again, is what we decided.”

“What nonsense,” Alexander declared. “And now look what we have. A sick mare, you see? And what happens when we lose her? What happens to her colt?” He looked at the owlish little colt, who was even now nosing underneath of her, bending his knees a little and twisting his neck in an uncomfortable-looking maneuver in order to get to the inconveniently-placed udder.

“We’ll have the vet out and get an answer.” I turned away from the mare and foal and scanned the rest of the herd. No one else had dropped any noticeable weight, and coats...well, *all* of their coats were dull, from the constant burning of sweat and sun. “She’s still producing milk, and she’s still eating... right, Kerri?” Kerri nodded. “So we’ll get some tests run and see what’s going on. It might not be the pregnancy. It probably isn’t. It’s too soon for it to be that much of a draw on her.”

Alexander just shook his head. He went back to the golf cart and sat down, making a great show of going through the paperwork on his clipboard. "Come on, Alex," he called impatiently. "We need to look at the yearling's feed charts. I'm not sure I like the way a few of them look. I want to know just what you've got them all on."

I waved a hand to the nervous Kerri, who smiled wanly in return and started to slip the halter off of Chatterly's Lover, and climbed into the golf cart. I could see what was going to happen now. It was Discredit Alex Day.

I could see exactly what he was doing, of course. I'd said, over that last cup of coffee, that perhaps I should just go to Saratoga, as trainer, and free up Alexander to help Tom and Polly if they should need it. I'd been trying to give him an option. I'd been trying to ease his mind. But it was becoming increasingly clear that all I'd done was upset him. He didn't think I was ready to train alone, and he was reminding me that I needed his help. That things would utterly fall apart without his help.

Who was I kidding? I paused and leaned out to pick up a rock from the path, and flung it into the bushes next to the broodmare barn where no delicate hooves might tread upon it. Alexander was *never* going to trust me to run the horses on my own. He'd given me three years as his assistant trainer, taking on the fitness and placement of the racehorses; before that, I'd been the farm manager, handling the daily operations and breeding management (admittedly, under his constant surveillance), and before even that I'd been head rider in the training barn. Assistant, yes, but he wasn't prepared to let me take that next step, and do what I'd been gunning for all along: take out a full-fledged trainer's license and run horses on my own. And maybe he was right. Supposing he did go to Tom's farm this summer? Supposing I needed help with a horse? I'd never done any of this on my own.

I pulled the golf cart up in front of the yearling barn, threw it into park. How far from Florida to New York, how far from Australia to New York? Too far for comfort.

"Maybe I should come to Australia with you, then," I suggested. "If you *do* go." It had been hinted at; it was a possibility; I thought it must be a certainty. Alexander was leaning over a fence, watching the yearlings arguing over a new block of alfalfa, but he'd get no pleasure from their rambunctiousness. He was imagining kick marks, long scars across hindquarters that were only bad in a cosmetic way, just enough to scare away ignorant buyers with deep pockets at the sales. He was running an inventory of all the things that could go wrong, and ignoring the reality that these things would happen whether we were here or not.

"You'll be running things here," he said. "Who else would I leave in charge?"

That was flattering, although I *had* been the farm manager before, and could do it again. "Heidi can run things. We just have to ask her."

Heidi was a neighbor, tall and German and implacable and more knowledgeable about

horses than anyone else on earth, so far as I could tell. She lived down the road on five acres, just enough room for a single-wide trailer, a dressage arena, and a paddock and barn for her two horses. The single-wide trailer was luxuriously appointed with a Jacuzzi tub and high-end stainless steel appliances; the dressage arena was cushioned in rubber and shredded fabric; the barn was built from restored cypress planks and the doors and bars of the stalls shone with polished brass. Heidi was a singular woman. She always watched over the farm, living in our guest room, while we took horses to Miami or went to the sales in Kentucky, and somehow it was always cleaner and tidier when we returned. The horses were fatter and brighter-eyed. It was uncanny. "She always said we can use her for long-term absences." I liked the clinical way in which Heidi spoke.

But Alexander was determined to be difficult about even the most palatable of solutions. "I just don't like the idea of both of us being so far from home. It's not that I don't want you going up there, love, it's just all this..." He looked around and I knew he was being truthful. We were standing in the bowl of the farm, with the pastures reaching all around us, from horizon to horizon the horses of Cotswold Farms were moving around us, and they were all our children, all our creations, all our responsibility. He saw it all and thought we couldn't both go gallivanting off to another hemisphere, another day of the week, even with Remarkable Heidi to man the helm. It was just too far.

"You could do it if you wanted to, though, Alex. You're plenty good enough."

I looked at Kerri, holding the lead of Chatterly's Lover. The vet had just come and drawn blood, and given vitamins by injection, and clucked over her vital signs for a few minutes. Chatterly's foal, more shaken by the vet's truck than the mare herself, was in for another suckle, tail thumping his hindquarters in rhythm with the slurping, sucking noises coming from beneath her flank.

"I don't know, Kerri. That's nice of you, but... that's a big step. Training horses away from Alexander? All the way in Saratoga? Maybe I should start smaller. Take a few down to Calder now and then, while he's away."

She shrugged. "Have it your way, I guess. But that's not what you wanted at all, is it? You wanted the big races. For Personal Best, especially."

I toyed with Chatterly's yellowish mane, yanking free some of the witch's locks. I should stop confiding in the staff. But Kerri was a nice girl, close to my age... I didn't know many people like that in this town of retirees and aging horsemen. "I did want the big races for Personal Best," I admitted. "And not just him. Idle Hour, Virtue and Vice... they could be big horses, not just Florida horses. They could be national horses."

"A stallion the whole country wants babies from, not just Florida breeders."

"Yeah." Kerri knew how it worked. "I think we could have a big stallion. Look at Alexander's brother... he has one of the biggest breeding farms in the Southern Hemisphere. I don't need all that but... we breed good horses. We just don't showcase

them well enough.”

“You have to run them in the right spots,” Kerri said wisely. “You know how to run horses, Alex. And if you have a question for Alexander... well, that’s why God made cell phones.”

“And Skype.”

“Does an old guy like Alexander know how to use Skype? Wow.”

“Shut up! Come on, Kerri... he’s not *so* old.” I laughed.

Kerri shook her head, smiling. “He’s pretty old.”

“You should be so lucky as to marry a guy like Alexander.”

“I know it,” she said, and she sounded serious this time. “So go show him what you’ve got and let him know *he’s* lucky to have *you*.”

That would be nice.

“Saratoga,” I agreed. “Ready or not?”

“Here you come.”

“I guess it comes down to whether or not you think I’m capable. And you taught me everything I know about racing horses. So if you don’t think I’m able to do it on my own now, Jesus Christ, Alexander, isn’t that kind of an insult to yourself?”

I studied myself in the mirror. The last line was either the icing on the cake or laying things on much too thick. It was hard to know, really.

Did I have the words right, though? Could I march down to Alexander and recite them without stumbling on my own tongue? They seemed straight-forward enough. I took a deep breath.

“An insult to myself?”

His face was laughing at me in the mirror; he was standing in the doorway. *Shit!* I turned around and saw him grinning at me, leaning against the doorframe with his hands in his pockets. He looked more relaxed than I’d seen him in weeks. I leaned back against my desk and blew out my cheeks.

“I wasn’t sure about that part.”

“It’s true enough, though.” He straightened, and his face grew more serious. “I spoke with Polly a little while ago.”

I stiffened. Rain thrummed against the dark window, thrown against the glass by the stiff tropical wind. I thought of wet horses in muddy fields, I thought of soft feet and skin infections.

“Tom will be going into hospital in the city... and staying there for some time, she says. It’s too far for him to commute back and forth while he’s in treatment. And even once he comes back... it will be a long time before he has the energy and strength to tackle the farm management. They need help preparing for the season, if nothing else. The quarantine center, the stallions and mares arriving, staffing.”

He wasn't looking at me anymore; his eyes were blank, off in the direction of the window, the streaming water flowing down the glass. "I'll go in a month's time."

It stopped being about me, then. He was going to go to Australia. Alone. And whether I stayed in Florida or went to Saratoga, I'd be alone, too.

"I opened that bottle my uncle sent from Scotland last year. Come help me drink it and we'll discuss your training stable."

That rare scotch! That was exactly what we both needed. One shot of that stuff would sedate Secretariat. "I'll find some crackers and a piece of cheese," I said, pushing off the desk. "We'll need something to soak all that moonshine up."

As I was on my way past him, thinking hostess-y thoughts in order to ignore our impending separation, Alexander swung an arm around my waist and pulled me close. I buried my face in his neck, feeling his lips in my shower-damp hair, and tried not to think of a summer without him near. Australia was unimaginably far away, and this was really happening: he would be gone for at least three months, on the other side of the world. My personal drama, my cloying ego, my burn to prove myself, those things fell away with the reality of being *alone*.

I sniffled.

"None of that now," he murmured. "We'll both manage just fine."

But his voice didn't sound all that steady, either.

Horse time can seem glacial most of the time: the eleven months between breeding and foaling, the year and a half between foaling and backing, the three years between deciding to breed a mare and seeing a two-year-old that might be ready to run a race.

But the summer was advancing at a full gallop: plans executed almost as soon as they were made; the van already booked and the trunks being sorted, the grooms keeping busy in the barn with twitch and clippers and a judicious meting out of acepromazine from its little clear bottle to settle nervous minds and kicking legs, trimming whiskers and fetlocks and bridle paths, plucking delicately at the bushy growth on the tail bone to even out the hairline and create a refined silhouette, pulling manes with little silver combs to the four-finger-length I preferred. The English turned out their racehorses like show horses, a tradition I was only too happy to continue. I couldn't stand a raggedy horse. Or, rather, since it wasn't the horse's fault: I couldn't stand the *groom* of a raggedy horse. The grooms watched me from the corners of their eyes, and plucked, plucked, plucked.

One of the conditions that we had hammered out over scotch and Irish cheddar was that I would hire an assistant trainer here in Florida, and Alexander would assist in her hiring. "Her" hiring: I made it clear from the first that my assistant would be female, and Alexander had no objections. I didn't want to spend every day in the company of some old-fashioned chauvinist racetracker who thought he knew better than any woman, and Alexander just plain didn't want me in the company of some racetracker. Let's just say

they don't have a good reputation, and leave it at that for now.

There wasn't time for anything like an ad in *The Blood-Horse* or Ocala's little daily racing paper, so Alexander just made a few calls to see if anyone knew any trainers who wanted to get out of Florida for the summer. Not surprisingly, there were quite a few. Finding ways to get out of Florida for the summer is a constant preoccupation of people who train horses in Florida. But none of them were thrilled by the prospect of being *my* assistant.

But they came to Cotswold anyway, saying they were interested in the job. The secretary made the interview appointments one after another, typing them into the calendar, in the same disinterested and efficient manner that she dealt with everything on the farm. Eileen spent her thirty hours a week sitting behind a relentlessly tidy desk in a good-sized office on the ground floor of the house, with an outside door and its own bathroom and kitchenette, and I usually forgot she was actually there, interacting with her almost solely through terse text messages and the *dings* of appointments added to my calendar, vet visits and farrier schedulings popping up on my phone screen. Although she had been a farm secretary for her entire thirty-year career, Eileen was not necessarily a horsewoman; when I did have need to go into her sanctum, I usually got a glare for wearing my mucky, muddy boots onto her clean floor. The phone system was much easier, but Alexander and I still exchanged nervous glances when we saw the six interviews lined up for a single afternoon.

It was a very long afternoon. While thunder growled outside, I sat on the couch next to Alexander and listened, attempting to keep my face dispassionate, as one by one, the trainers enumerated to my husband all the excellent reasons they would not take the job. That I was too young. That I was too inexperienced. That they'd have no problem at all taking me under their wing, that they'd have no problem at all watching over me and showing me the ropes at Saratoga, but that they would most certainly not answer to me as boss.

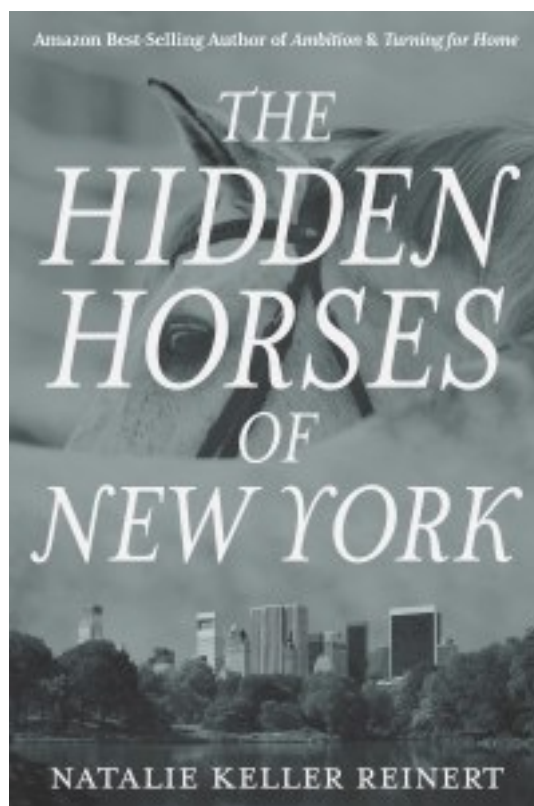
Painful to hear? Yes. Eye-opening? Yes. Humbling? No. I wasn't at all chastised by their gentle reminders that I was just Alexander's little gallop girl, all up-jumped and married to him, as they certainly must have hoped: I was fucking *infuriated*. Who *were* these people? Nothing but old washed-up trainers who had retired to breeding farms and training centers years ago because their win percentages crashed, their owners fled, their checks bounced. They came sniffing around Cotswold the moment they heard Alexander might have horses to train, looking for a boost back into the game with horses higher quality than any they'd ever trained before, and they weren't shy about throwing me under the bus, undermining me in front of him, so that they could have my gig, steal my big chance with my very own horses. I was brimming over with outrage. I was ready to hit someone, horsewhip someone. The next person to call me "*sweetheart*," I decided by the fifth interview. That son-of-a-bitch was going to get it.

But then the last appointment canceled, and I went out to supervise the evening feeding without having my outrage appeased by physical violence.

Read the rest of the story!

Other People's Horses is available for Kindle, Kindle Unlimited, and paperback here.

The Hidden Horses of New York



The Hidden Horses of New York

Introduction

My first departure from my series novels in many years, *The Hidden Horses of New York* still treads familiar ground. Ocala, and New York City. I love these places the way I love sweet and salt, and writing about them feels like coming home every time.

I knew for a while I wanted to write a new story about a young woman and her friends finding their purpose as they navigated New York City. I just didn't have a handle on what exactly that story would be, and it nagged at me. When I realized it had to be a group of social media-savvy grads who were intent on pushing the boundaries of horse racing coverage out of betting sheets and into pop culture, I was thrilled. This book was a pleasure to write, a pleasure to edit, and is still a pleasure to read. I love Jenny and all of her friends so, so much.

In 2020, *The Hidden Horses of New York* won the 2019 American Horse Publications' Equine Media Award for Equine-Related Fiction.

Side note: Jenny's family farm of Sugar Creek, in Ocala, was named as a tribute to Sugar Hill Farm, which was an old Thoroughbred training center near the first farm I ever worked in Ocala. I don't know its history, but it had to have been old — the unimaginatively named NE 36th Avenue where it was located had once been called Old Sugar Hill Farm Road.

Chapter One

Jenny jiggled the lead-shank to distract the three-year-old colt tugging at the other end, and tried to ignore the phone buzzing in her back pocket. Her mother's gaze, sharp and unforgiving, caught hers from across the saddling ring, and Jenny felt the force of her warning: *don't touch that phone while you've got hold of a horse*. It was one of Andrea Wolfe's most ferociously-enforced rules. Once, she had taken a rider's phone right out of his hands and thrown it with the power and grace of a pitcher. The phone had landed in the cattail-choked drainage ditch running along the inside of Sugar Creek Farm's training track and was never seen again.

"Settle," Jenny hissed at the colt, who rolled one wild eyeball at her and flared his nostrils, tossing his head towards her face. For an instant her vision was a blur of black skin, ringed inside with red. The colt's sleek coat was graying out slowly, his neck and body spangled with white-ringed dapples and his mane a cloud of black. Jenny remembered when he'd been born, a fox-colored colt blinking owlishly through spectacles of pale hair, a dead giveaway that this pretty little chestnut would grow up to be a gray.

Jenny jerked back to the present and gave the lead-shank in her hands a tug to remind him not to get so personal. The colt straightened out and they kept on walking in their tight circles, using every inch of the space they'd been allotted. The walking ring of Tampa Bay Downs was tight; the little crowd of spectators pressing in so closely that Jenny was sometimes afraid even the rail keeping them back from the horses was still not far enough away to protect them from a kick. As a rule, hot-blooded young Thoroughbreds were not malicious. But they were in a hurry to get moving, and indiscriminate with where their flying hooves ended up.

Jenny's phone was buzzing again, furiously rattling against the thin chest pocket on the flowing blue blouse she'd paired with her race-day khakis. She desperately wanted to answer it, wanted to see her friends' silly faces and hear their stupid voices so much, and she was crazy to find out what had happened with their final presentation, if Professor Mulvaney thought their idea was any good or if they were just a bunch of idealistic kids (which Jenny did not think was a bad thing, not yet). They needed his buy-in if they were going to get anywhere. Lana's father had been determined on that point. He wasn't giving them a dime otherwise.

The loudspeakers crackled as if they were clearing their metallic throats, and then the feed from the track's resident commentator took over the sound of jingling metal and thudding hooves. He was standing near the paddock with his back to the horses, a small burly man in a three-piece suit that strained at the arms, wraparound sunglasses and gel-stiffened blonde hair competing with his swirling tribal neck tattoos for attention. Jenny always thought he looked like a cross between a professional skateboarder and Guy Fieri. He spoke, with a thick Long Island accent, about past performances and speed figures and jockey win percentages. When he got to Mr. November, he just said: "this one is the favorite for a reason, but if you want to beat him, try the three and the six," and then continued on with the next horse.

Jenny ran a hand along Mister's hot neck. They weren't going to beat him—not the three, not the six, not any of the other horses circling the paddock. His dark eye met hers, and suddenly Jenny forgot about her phone, and the conversation she was missing in New York right now. This happened before every race. Jenny would live entirely in the moment for the next fifteen minutes: the moment she handed Mister off to the outrider, the moment she caught him after his race, the moment she led him into the winner's circle.

Today was Mister's day.

She smiled at him, the sounds of the horseplayers dissipating around her.

Then he ducked his chin backwards and tried to bite her, his eyes bright with mischief, and she was wrenched back to reality. "No," she huffed. "You're *bad*. Don't do it again!"

Mister pushed hard against the bit in his mouth, grinding his teeth. The movement tugged at her joints, made her wince as she pulled back. He was so ready, so painfully ready. Why wasn't it time to mount up yet? She looked to the center of the ring. Her mother was there, talking to the jockey, a slim-hipped young man who was having a very good year. It had been easy to convince him to ride Mister in the colt's first big stakes challenge. Everyone knew the colt was peaking. No one knew it better than Jenny. Because while the line for *owner* was always filled in with "Sugar Creek Farm," Mr. November's real owner had always been Jenny Wolfe. He was the last good thing she'd done before she'd gone away to school, and the one good thing she'd returned for, over and over again. Bred by Jenny, foaled by Jenny, halter-broke by Jenny, started under saddle by Jenny. She'd done it all over winter holidays, spring breaks, summer vacations, and long weekends. She'd hurried home from a cold, snowy New York to a warm March evening when his birth seemed imminent, despite her mother's tired reminders that there was no telling when the mare might actually foal. And early that morning, as a storm blew through the open rafters overhead, her colt had been born.

The new foal had blinked at her from his damp bed of straw and then promptly bit her, all gums and tiny milk teeth closed tight on her hand, and Jenny had laughed and told him, "you're the one, you're my Mister November," and he'd been Mister every day since then.

Jenny's mother had disapproved of naming a wobbling newborn colt for a race three and a half years (and a solid mountain of luck) away. "There are thirty-six foals due on this farm alone, thousands all around Ocala, and you're pinning all of your Breeders' Cup hopes on this one?"

But Mister was *Jenny's* hope, not the farm's hope or her mother's hope. And she thought Mr. November was a fine name for a colt she planned to point at the world racing championships, held in November each year. "Plus he looks like a Mister," Jenny added. "With those little spectacles of his."

"Those will be gone in two months," her mother snorted, but she left it alone after that.

Three years ago, Jenny thought, her hand still on the taut muscles running along Mister's arching neck. Three years ago, he'd stood no higher than her waist. And now he was this big beast, this monstrous colt with muscles toned into the airstream lines of an Art Deco locomotive, coat spangled with white stars like the iron-gray sky the morning before a hurricane, taut skin and flowing raven mane and dark, intelligent eyes that landed on Jenny the moment she entered his field of vision and never left her until she was gone again, back to wherever Jenny went when she left Mister behind.

"Riders up!" the ring steward called, raising his clipboard in the air like a ceremonial flag. As if released from taut strings, the jockeys and trainers dispersed in every direction, flowing toward their mounts in a wave of bright pageantry.

In her pocket, Jenny's phone buzzed three times—then stopped again. They were learning, she thought, tugging Mister in a circle for the jockey.

Mister was not the sort of horse who stood still for mounting, despite Jenny's best efforts to teach him good manners. She'd come home last summer and ridden him each morning, teaching him to be a racehorse on the white-fenced oval back home in Ocala. It hadn't been enough. Jenny's mother had snorted that a body could hardly expect some rude *New Yorker* to teach manners to a two-year-old colt, and Jenny had protested even while inside she felt a glow of pride at being called a New Yorker. There was something about belonging in the city that was beginning to call to her by then, a realization that the alien streets and endless traffic and soaring towers were somehow as richly intoxicating as the green hills and ancient oaks and molasses-scented feed rooms of Ocala, and she had already begun to wonder if she was going to stay on after school was over.

Now, she was just waiting for the chance.

Her phone was still and silent, but she felt it rumbling against her hip, a phantom vibration with every step. Her whole life was waiting to begin, and she'd find out what came next in minutes... if she could just get Mister out to the race course without bloodshed.

She kept walking the colt, slowing his stride infinitesimally (infinitesimally was all Mister would tolerate) as her mother held out her palms alongside the colt, waiting to help Manny spring into the saddle. Mister, watching him with a sideways ear, tensed his muscles, his steps shifting into a hopping-skipping jig, his hindquarters weaving sideways

as he hit Jenny's unforgiving hands on the leather and chain binding them together and he ran out of room for all of the energy flowing through him. He held back for a moment, and Manny put his hands on the saddle, his knee into Andrea's hands, and jumped onto the colt's back.

"Watch him in the gate," Jenny's mother spat out, falling back from Mister's swinging haunches before he let a hind hoof fly, heedless of what might be in his way. "Don't let him twist and carry on or he'll miss the break." It had been Mister's undoing in all but his last start this year. It was the reason he was still in Florida in May, when everyone had expected him to go to Kentucky. He just hadn't had the brain to go with his speed yet.

Jenny thought his brain had finally caught up.

"I got this, Miss Andrea," Manny said, his voice confident. Jenny glanced up at him and he grinned back at her.

"I'm glad you're riding him," Jenny told him.

"Yeah, me too." Manny laughed and adjusted his stirrups. Mister was still trotting in slow motion, but the jockey wasn't bothered. The only thing that would have gotten his attention was if the horse reared or bucked. Spine flat? All systems go. "I like this boy. He got a lot of spirit, but he not stupid."

They gave up their circle, and started toward the gap in the track fencing. The outriders were waiting on their track ponies, the retired racehorses and bored quarter horses watching the younger horses' antics without interest. Track ponies had seen everything before, twice over. Jenny slid the chain free of Mister's halter, and began to unbuckle the strap behind his ears, preparing to turn the colt over to the outriders. Manny wouldn't be asked to control Mister alone until the bell rang and the gates sprang open.

A darkly tanned woman with a long bleached ponytail flowing from the back of her helmet leaned down from her rangy horse's back, and, just as Jenny slipped his halter free, the outrider slid a slim leather strap through the ring of Mister's bit.

She timed it perfectly; Mister was never free for a moment.

"Let's go, old man," the outrider told her mount, and the horse broke into a shuffling jog while Mister hopped alongside like a big gray bunny, shaking his head furiously against the outrider's taut hold on his bridle. As he sprang away, a gob of white foam slopped from his bit and onto Jenny's shoulder. She brushed the saliva away without looking at the damage done to her blouse, wiping her hands on her race-day khakis, which had seen much worse. For one long, frozen moment she just watched Mister cavorting at the end of the leather thong. He flipped his head, propped his shoulders, blew loudly through his nostrils. No one paid him any mind. The outrider was ignoring him, the pony horse was ignoring him, even Manny, perched above his withers, was ignoring him. Refusing to acknowledge his foolishness was the only way to deal with Mister's mischief-loving heart; the moment you got on his case about something, the colt escalated things to a scale that quickly got dangerous for everyone.

Jenny thought about how much she loved him, and how much she had missed him

while she'd been in New York, and how much more she would miss him if she went back for good.

Then her phone buzzed again, breaking the spell, and she pulled it out of her pocket just as her mother came hustling up. "Let's go, girl. You're standing in the track like a crazy person," Andrea commanded. "They're trying to put a race on, if you haven't noticed."

She hit the green button on her phone's screen, her heart between her boots, suddenly afraid of whatever news was waiting. Yay or nay, go or no go, it was all going to be a disaster for half of her.

"*JENNY!*" the people in her phone shrieked in a chorus, and her heart rebounded like a balloon freed of its string, soaring up into the endless blue of the Florida sky.

"*GUYS!*" she yelled back. "*HOW DID IT GO?*"

Jenny's mother shook her head and hustled away, pushing through the crowd. She was heading for the spot near the winner's circle where she always watched races. Jenny hung back in the walking ring as the remaining horses danced past her, bound for their own outriders, and held up her phone to get a good view of her friends.

Aidan crowded Lana for optimal screen time, his broad smile taking over Jenny's entire display. She couldn't help but let her grin slip into something deeper, a more all-encompassing smile that probably put her heart on her sleeve for a few revealing seconds. She wondered how her hair looked, if her dark waves were hanging lifelessly thanks to the humid May evening. She imagined just how red her cheeks were, how sweaty her upper lip must be. Aidan looked cool and collected, his walnut-brown hair falling in its habitual wave across his forehead. Lana, pushing her way into the frame, was as flawlessly made-up as ever, and Jenny shrank from the comparison Aidan must be making between the two of them.

Then she caught herself, pushed the thoughts away, and produced a toothy, friendly grin. "Stop shoving Lana, Aidan! Haven't you ever heard of chivalry?"

"It's called being a gentleman, *learn* about it," Lana screeched, pushing him back, and as Aidan tumbled off his bar stool she could see they were at Fargo, a dive bar on the Lower East Side where they'd been celebrating good grades and good days for the past few years. Jenny waved at the bartender, an aging hipster boasting a glorious lumberjack beard, but he couldn't see her. "JENNY," Lana roared, swiping back white-blond hair from her face, where it was always falling with orchestrated abandon, "*HE LOVED IT. HE LOVED IT!*"

The bartender spoke up without lifting his gaze from his lemon slicing. "Yo, stop yelling, Lana, there's no one here but you guys. Let me enjoy some peace and quiet before the evening hits."

"Sorry, Mike," Lana whispered, and she crossed her eyes at Jenny, making a gag-me face. Lana thought Mike was secretly in love with her. Lana thought every man was secretly in love with her, and most women, too. "Professor Mulvaney said the entire plan was a fantastic idea. He said it made him think differently about horse racing! And he

never even thinks about horses period!”

Aidan pushed his face back into view. “If we can get through to people who aren’t even interested, think about the actual equestrian community. This is really it. We’re going to build bridges. We’re going to connect people like never before. This is going to change everything.”

Jenny took a deep breath, feeling a rush of excitement tingle from her nose to her toes. This was it, then. One step closer to going back to New York. They were going to get to work, just as they’d planned. Now all they needed was Lana’s father to finance them.

Then she felt someone tap her on the back. She turned to find a hectored-looking member of staff, holding a manure fork in one hand. “Miss, can you clear the paddock?”

Jenny looked around and instantly felt guilty. No one else was left. She looked around at the screen in the infield—the horses were cantering up the backstretch, heading for the chute at the far corner of the track. All of the spectators were either finding spots to watch the race or inside, getting their bets in.

“I’m getting chased out, guys,” she said. “I have to call you back.”

“NO!” Lana shrieked. “We have to see the race! Keep us on.”

“Live-stream everything,” Aidan suggested. He turned his head slightly. “Mike, come watch this. Get a taste of what we’re going to offer with our new website.”

Jenny could practically hear Mike rolling his eyes, but the bartender finally put down his paring knife and came around the bar. Her heart melted a little, just to know he was pretending to care. So he really *did* like them! She knew he had always thought she and her friends were just a bunch of spoiled college kids, and to a certain extent, he wasn’t wrong. Even though she and Aidan didn’t have a spare penny, being friends with Lana, who was generous with her father’s money, meant living like a trust fund kid... well, part-time, anyway. For Jenny, at least, the experience was still dizzying—even after three years of Lana’s luxurious hand-outs, spendthrift shopping sprees, and expensive meals out. Maybe Aidan and Jenny’s inability to accept nice things as their lot in life, and Lana’s open-pocketed approach to friendship, was why Mike still treated them with a sliver of respect, instead of eyeballing them with the same distaste he reserved for the other college students who came swaggering into the dark little bar. She decided to put on a good show for him.

“Okay, guys!” Jenny flipped the camera view, held out the phone, and began touring her little audience through the paddock as she headed for the gate out to the apron. She gave it a slow swing for a panoramic view, trying not to bounce the phone too much with each step. If live-streaming from around different racetracks was a key aspect of their audience engagement plan, the art of not making viewers seasick was going to be the most important skill in her toolbox. And commentary, she reminded herself, realizing she’d been silent for the first ten seconds. “So, this is the paddock. Over here is the barn where we saddle up. If I’m quick we can get a look at the shoe board, that’s pretty cool, it shows bettors the shoes that are allowed on the horses—”

Jenny's patter was momentarily interrupted as she tripped over a grooming tote someone had abandoned on the walking path, and Lana and Aidan shrieked with laughter. Their howls rang from her phone and she wondered how two people currently located in Manhattan could be so loud all the way down in Tampa. Technology was a mystery she accepted as her master without understanding it at all, sort of like a medieval peasant at mass.

"Oh, sorry, Jenny!"

She turned at the sound of an actual, non-digitized voice and saw Luis, a groom from the Lawson barn. She liked Luis; had known the guy since she was just a kid. The Lawsons were neighbors back in Ocala, and rivals here at Tampa, and aggressive, unpleasant humans in both towns. But Luis had always been nice: a middle-aged, soft-faced man with a shy smile and a sweet way around horses. He stooped down to retrieve the grooming tote, his horse's halter flung over one shoulder.

"No problem," she told him, letting the phone dangle from her hand, forgetting temporarily about the live-stream. "You've got a good horse in today. Good luck!"

"Good luck to you," Luis said, grinning. "Your Mister, he's a crazy one, huh?" He was ready to settle in for a chat.

The phone protested Mister's innocence. Luis looked at the screen with interest. "Your friends are upside-down," he observed.

"Whoops!" Jenny righted the phone. "So that was Luis, he's a groom of another horse here—"

"Well, *this* is totally inappropriate," a familiar voice growled, interrupting her commentary. Jenny looked up from her phone, alarmed. Luis had already scampered for the fence, ducked between the two lowest bars, and disappeared into the crowd gathering along the rail.

Jenny swallowed, trying to push away a wave of anxiety that would surely show on her face. She didn't want to give Brice Lawson any hint that he frightened her. The middle-aged trainer was a big, forbidding man, with broad shoulders strong enough to snatch a runaway racehorse out of stride and a frowning face that always found fault with Jenny's horsemanship. If she was breezing a horse on the main track, he'd find a reason to complain about her to the stewards. If she was walking a horse before a race, he'd protest she was taking up more than her allotted room on the path. He and his wife, Laura, behaved in the same roughshod way with her parents, always pushing their jockeys to claim fouls on Wolfe horses and blowing up over petty nuisances on the backside. It was all the stuff of racetrack legend now. The time Laura Lawson had run over Andrea's tomato garden next to the barn. The time Brice Lawson had called animal control to remove the Sugar Creek grooms' hens. The time the both of them had moved a Sugar Creek horse, in the dead of night, to another barn so that they could steal the stall for one of their own shippers. The Lawson-Wolfe feud had been going on for as long as Jenny could remember.

She made to chase after Benny, but Brice moved between her and the fence.

“Three minutes,” the track announcer intoned, his terse voice echoing from the loudspeakers. He was talking to the bettors, but it felt like a countdown for Jenny, as well.

“I have to go,” Jenny said desperately. “My mother is waiting.”

“You better keep away from my staff,” Brice demanded. “And stop videoing the paddock. This is for horsemen only. You have no business sharing it with your little social media following.”

This—*this* was the problem. Jenny felt an unusual courage rise up in her chest, the same feeling that got her around tracks on top of young horses she ought to be afraid of, the way she was afraid of everything else in the world. It was the courage that got her through four years of school in the city, and helped her talk to Aidan and Lana back in freshman English, and gave passion to the thesis statement which would become their website. If these old school horsemen and their fear of cameras didn’t sink everything before it started! Their suspicion of everything tech, their shortsighted denial of everything good about transparency and branding and carefully curated insights into the worlds of their horses that the public was so anxious to see for themselves. They wanted to keep everyone on the other side of the rail; they thought of race-day visitors as bettors and could not conceive that anyone would drag themselves out to a racetrack to see beautiful, powerful horses for the sole purpose of just that, without any financial gain or sporting itch to be scratched. They refused to let any light in, and as a result their sport was dying in the dark. She saw it so damn often, and she was enraged by it.

“There’s nothing to *hide*, Brice,” Jenny insisted, waving her phone around the empty paddock, ignoring the shrieks from the speaker as she gave her viewers back in Manhattan a wild ride of their own. “Why do you need so much privacy? Why can’t people look inside? We act like our shed-rows need security details to keep out the fans, so the fans get discouraged and do something else with their time. They’re just horses, Brice. They’re just horses running in circles. We don’t have anything to hide.” She paused, took in the fullness of his anger as he stood before her, clenching his fists at his sides, and wondered if Brice Lawson was really so cruel and stupid that he’d hit an assistant trainer in the paddock before a stakes race. She didn’t care—not yet. That was the glory of Jenny when her blood was up. She was a different person until the moment was gone. “What do *you* have to hide?” she asked softly.

There was an *ooooooooob* of approval and shock from the New York audience, and then Brice moved suddenly, like he was going to grab at her, and Jenny sprang away, turning on her heel and running for the paddock fence. She slid through the bars and went pelting through the thinning crowds at the back of the concrete apron in front of the grandstand doors, her waves of dark brown hair bouncing through the haze of cigarette smoke hanging over the crowd. The people around her spoke with accents almost entirely Long Island and New Jersey-bred, making her feel like she was back in New York, maybe out at Aqueduct or Belmont for a stolen day of photography with Aidan, but the concrete ran out too soon. Tampa Bay was a comically small track compared to the New York racing machines, but it had a big heart for its racing family. She knew

almost every groom leaning on the wall behind the winner's circle, and most of the trainers as well. She had known them since she was a child.

Her mother gave her an annoyed look. "What took you so long? They're in the gate."

"Bathroom," Jenny lied. She glanced over her shoulder; no Brice had appeared through the crowd of blue-haired bettors.

"Uh, Jenny?" A voice at her side, oddly low to the ground, asked. "Could you like, pick us up?"

"Oh, sorry!" Jenny lifted her phone; she'd completely forgotten about her little screen crew. "Hey guys, did I give you motion sickness?"

"I put the phone down on the bar when you started running," Aidan laughed. "That was quite a speech you gave that dick in the paddock. Was he that guy Brice you told us about?"

Jenny laughed and put her finger to her lips. "Shhh, you'll get me in trouble! But yes, that was him."

As the horses broke from the gate and the announcer began to call their positions, Jenny went on gazing at her phone, listening to Aidan congratulate her. She hadn't realized it was possible to miss a person this much. She'd been in Florida for four days, and now she was drinking Aidan in like a lost lover she hadn't seen in decades. His lean face and sand-streaked brown hair falling over his forehead and his dancing green eyes and his big-toothed grin, so carelessly thrown her way for the slightest agreeable thing she did—bumping him gently on a rocking subway car, catching his shirt in one hand when he pushed too far ahead of her on a crowded sidewalk, bringing him an iced coffee when she came up to the studio to work on a project or quietly study beside him. He always looked delighted with her, as if he didn't know that she did these things for herself, as naturally as breathing: she could not have stopped herself from brushing against him every time the F train screamed its way through the labyrinthine tunnels of lower Manhattan, or let him get away from her in a crowd, or not buy two coffees as habitually as she had once bought herself one, knowing when he'd be nearby and that he'd always be happy for a fresh jolt of caffeine. These gestures were part of her very being.

He was looking delighted with her now, but she couldn't even hear what he was saying anymore. The air around her ears was roaring, there was noise all around. She looked up, and blinked, and gasped. She spun the phone around, held it above her head. "*Look!*"

Mister flew past, his gray dapples flashing as he thundered down the center of the track, Manny's face pressed close to his fluttering mane with his whip hand high. Only a flashing second of her horse was visible, then the rest of the field came pelting after, one flicker-frame of horse and then another, disappearing into the distant clubhouse turn.

"I have to go," Jenny gabbled into the phone, but Aidan protested.

"Just take us with you," he said. "Give us a view of the winner's circle when you can. We'll wait."

Jenny nodded, heart too full to speak, and dropped her phone into the pocket of her

khakis. She had a fleeting thought, as she followed her mother to the gate onto the track, of Aidan's face pressed against her ass. But she shook it off. It was time to catch her horse, and lead him into the winner's circle.

Her new stakes-winning colt, Mr. November.

Chapter Two

Racehorses are always moving in circles and so, by extension, are the people who move them.

Jenny had been walking Mister in a loop around the shed-row for twenty minutes, her boots trodding the well-worn path in front of the stalls, while the horses within pushed against their stall webbings and pulled at their hay-nets. Nodding along at her right, Mister's hooves slid through the softer sand at the center of the aisle. His steps would wear a deep rut in the churned dirt there, and after Mister had been put away in his own stall for the night and most of the humans had retired to the barn's little office, they would be raked away by a whistling groom, while Jenny and her mother blinked at the small television propped atop the filing cabinet until one of them mustered the energy to get up and drive back to the motel room for the night. They always spent the night in Tampa after a late-card race. Jenny's mother hated making the long drive back to Ocala in the dark.

When Jenny had been younger, they'd had their own shed-row here. A string of horses would come down from the farm to spend the entire racing season living at the track. Jenny's father stayed in Tampa to oversee the operation, while Jenny and her mother just came down when a race-day fell on a weekend. Otherwise, the two of them were responsible for holding down the fort back in Ocala. With a hundred and thirty-five acres of pasture which always needed mown, miles of fences which always needed repaired, a three-quarter-mile training track which always needed groomed and watered, and dozens of horses of all ages who needed the same, Sugar Creek Farm was an insatiable monster, never satisfied, always needing more, more, more—more work, more money, more time. For a few good seasons in Jenny's elementary and middle-school days, the horses at Tampa had paid for it all, and the months Jenny's father spent away from home were considered worth the sacrifice.

In those days, every morning saw Jenny walking down the long barn lane beneath a rustling canopy of live oaks, damp hair brushed back, freshly showered after helping the grooms feed the horses in the training barn. She took the yellow bus to a rural school where drying mud flaked away from farm boots between first and second periods, and camouflage was practically the school uniform. In the afternoons she walked back in the shade of those same oaks, or sometimes, if Florida's ferocious thunderstorms were threatening, ran as fast as she could, heart pounding, backpack thumping, thunder

echoing in her ears. She dropped her backpack and clean school sneakers in the kitchen, swapping them out for paddock boots so that she could race back outside—to help with the endless work that came with raising and training Thoroughbreds: mucking stalls, throwing down hay bales, filling up buckets with sweet feed and stacking them on the seat of a golf cart, then rattling down rutted paths between pastures to feed broodmares who lived their days and nights outdoors.

When the racing moved to south Florida for the steamy summer season, her father would send the peaking horses south with his assistant, and bring home the horses who needed a rest. Then, with school closed for vacation, Jenny's days would get even longer. Her parents started sending her out with the exercise riders when she was fifteen, and by the summer of that year, she was getting on six horses before nine each morning. At sixteen her riding season extended: she began starting the long yearlings in the cool October mornings, trotting them out in the pastures with the other exercise riders while the sun slowly slid over the horizon, then racing for her little pickup without even changing her jeans, the only way she could make it to first period before the tardy bell rang. She'd kept clean shirts and baby wipes in a tote bag on the passenger seat, just in case she was running too late to stop at the house to rinse off and put on a presentable top. On warm days in the city, she still used this trick, rolling up a blouse which wouldn't wrinkle in the bottom of her tote bag in case one of the long walks between classes, lunch, and the odd jobs she picked up from personal assistant apps turned sticky and grimy.

She wondered now if her days of using an app to find some pocket money by picking up someone's groceries or sweeping a loft before a messy artist brought a date home were finally over. Surely she wouldn't have time for that sort of thing when she was getting the website up and running. Her heart beat a little faster at the thought. She and Aidan and Lana, working together as a team. It was going to be incredible. It was going to be everything they'd dreamed. Working that close with Aidan wasn't going to be a problem for her *at all*. She'd make sure of it. They were friends, after all.

Just friends.

Mister tried to pause outside of the tack room, as he always did when he was being walked around this particular shed-row. Once, a visiting trainer had given him a candy cane as he'd walked past this very tack room, and there was every possibility such a miracle could happen again. Hope springs eternal in the heart of a Thoroughbred. But the only person standing in the tack room doorway tonight was Andrea Wolfe, and she did not believe in giving young horses treats. "They do too much biting as it is," she would say grimly, and if the inquisitor was lucky, she'd show off some of the scars on her index fingers and thumbs, where she'd been caught over the years by overly eager—or overly savage—youngsters.

Jenny felt Mister slow his strides and let him, because she wanted to know just what was going on inside the tack room. She knew her mother was holding court with several owners and trainers, men with lined faces who had come by to congratulate her on the

colt's stakes win, and perhaps try to get into her good graces. On an earlier circuit, Jenny had managed to sneak a glance inside, and smiled to herself when she saw the little cluster of men gathered around the dusty desk where Andrea Wolfe was holding court, the queen of her tiny domain—for one night, at least. The Wolfes hadn't had a big horse in years. Racing was like that, when you were tough and talented but no millionaire. The lean years would always far outnumber the fat ones.

The fat ones could be very, very good, though.

And if people were hustling to get on Mister's bandwagon, Andrea was not going to shove them back into the road—not when they came bearing promises of further riches. After today's win, everyone knew Mr. November was ready to be a top-level contender. Sure, he'd missed the Triple Crown trail with his shenanigans. But now that he had his head on straight, he was ready to be a summer star, and an autumn champion. The public might not know there was more to racing than the television-ready Triple Crown races, but the horsemen did. They were looking for the horses who would keep galloping right through November, and the Breeders' Cup championships.

Mister would be one of those rising stars. He'd matched the track record today, and he hadn't even been in a drive. He'd cantered home, a cocky two lengths in front of the straining second-place horse, Manny sitting chilly with his whip flipping carelessly in his right hand, the stick nothing but a fashion accessory to bring out the shine in his patent-leather boots. Andrea had scolded him for showing off, but Manny swore Mister liked to look the other horse in the eye as he was beating him home. "You let him pull away, he just stop," the jockey told the turf writers after the race. "He's a heartbreaker."

Mister peered hopefully into the tack room. The chatter tapered off as Andrea waved her hand at her horse and daughter, urging them to keep moving, then turned back to the men in the room. Jenny knew when she was being dismissed. There was something important going on in there, something Andrea wasn't willing to allow to get sidetracked for a single moment by a silly colt posing for cell phone pictures.

"Come on," Jenny told the colt, tugging at his lead-shank. Mister tossed his head against the pressure, and the clink of the chain against the halter fittings seemed loud in the quiet shed-row.

Not as loud, though, as the voices in the tack room. "You know he'll be a great fit if he stays right here in Florida," a man with a sharp New Jersey accent said, his tone wheedling. "Just think about sending him to us. We'll support him with our own mares, plus market him all over the state. With Florida-bred incentives, you'll clean up—"

"Come on, Andrea, you don't want to do business with Charlie!" A new voice interrupted, a slow Southern drawl dripping vowels all over the place. "Send him to Kentucky and I swear if he wins the Breeders' Cup I'll give you—" and the man named a sum that made Jenny's jaw drop.

It must have been enough to astonish everyone in the little room, and beyond, because there was a sudden hush that extended out of the tack room, across the shed-row, through the stalls of still and silent horses, into the hedges where mockingbirds

crouched quietly, their stolen songs quenched as if by cold rain. Mister alone was unaffected by the promise of paid-off loans and silenced creditors, new black-board fences and a resurfaced training track. The colt tossed his head, the brass chain sliding musically through the halter's rings, and then abruptly set off down the shed-row again, as if this disruption had been his plan all along.

Jenny went with him, because that was what you did with three-year-old racehorses—you kept them moving, if movement was what they craved. It was the surest way to avoid a fight. But her steps were automatic, her hands on the lead-shank were instinctive. Her mind was busily rolling over the implications of what she'd just heard.

That Southern drawl—that had been Foster Donahue, the owner of a vast Thoroughbred breeding farm in Lexington, Kentucky. Foster sent horses to Tampa every spring, usually the second-tier string along with any who just didn't seem to be galloping right, subscribing to the oft-repeated proverb that the forgiving track of Tampa Bay Downs made sore horses run sound. His top horses, of course, went to Kentucky's prime tracks: Keeneland, and then Churchill Downs.

"Would you like it in Kentucky?" Jenny whispered to Mister as they rounded the corner. "It snows up there, would you like that? I kind of like the snow, but don't tell anyone here."

The short end of the shed-row was stacked with bales of straw and hay. Jenny couldn't see around the corner; in the day, with other horses around, she would have called out to warn anyone standing there. This late in the evening, with darkness deep around the eaves and no one left on the backside but night watchmen and the few horsemen who'd had horses in the last couple of races, she didn't see the need to say anything.

And so she nearly ran Mister right over Brice Lawson.

He jumped out of the walking path, his back pressing against the wooden board that ran along the end of the shed-row. But this put him on the wrong side of Mister, and so Jenny pulled the colt up. She could feel Mister's impatience rise as he planted his forehooves in the dirt and considered his next move. Brice Lawson was no amateur; he knew Jenny couldn't walk a horse past him while he was on the right-hand side of the shed-row. It was against the most basic rules of the racetrack with good reason: when spirited, racing-fit horses decide to leap and kick, they swing their hindquarters *away* from the person leading them. That makes people on the right of the path prime targets for a hoof to the jaw. Some horses *only* kicked when they saw a person on the right. Jenny didn't know why. She just accepted it as racetrack law: nobody stands to the right.

"You have to move," Jenny said impatiently, tugging back at Mister as the colt yanked on her.

Brice ducked under the railing and backed away a few paces. "There," he spat. "Are you happy?"

"Why are you acting like I made the rules?" Jenny snapped, letting Mister step forward again. She wasn't usually rude to Brice, since he was her parents' age. It felt like

snapping at one of her high school teachers—wrong, but also richly deserved, as if she'd been sitting on the desire for a long, long time. "What were you even doing in our barn?"

Technically, it wasn't their barn, just a receiving barn for horses who trailered in, but Brice had his own shed-row and he had no business in this one. Jenny could call security to run him out if she wanted to, and he knew it.

"I was coming to congratulate your mother," Brice growled. "But she already had plenty of company."

Jenny knew then that Brice had been down here listening to the breeders making their cases to her mother. But she was already rounding the corner with Mister; she couldn't stay and make any accusations against him. "Fine," she called, trusting her voice to carry back to him as Mister dragged her down the next long side. "I'll let her know you stopped by."

Mister's steps slowed for a moment as he spotted a horse outside the barn, walking in their direction. The sunset was fading fast, but in the last luminous glow of blue twilight, Jenny could see Laura, Brice's wife, walking a rather thin bay horse. She looked over the horse curiously as they grew closer. He had a cute blaze, beginning with a big star between his eyes and spilling into jagged zig-zag of a stripe below, before it pooled over one nostril in a big splash of white. The horse pricked his ears at Jenny and Mister, turning a pretty head to watch them as they passed. She admired the way the horse's black forelock fell over the eye closest to her, turning his expression flirtatious.

"So cute! Who is that?" Jenny called. Laura had always been kind in her own rough way, despite the long feud between their families, and Jenny felt secure talking to her without Brice around to make things uncomfortable.

But Laura shook her head in disgust, as if the horse wasn't worth complimenting. "Just another slow-poke," she snorted. "He'd still be running in the second race if they hadn't needed the track for all the other horses. I'm taking him home. I could stick a Shetland pony in his stall here and get more bang for my buck."

Jenny remembered the horse then; she'd actually looked him over in the paddock and thought he'd look good with some groceries and some proper conditioning. That had been early afternoon—amazing to think she'd forgotten the horse's sweet expression already, but those hours in the sun felt like a hundred years ago now, with dusk settling over the backside and a stakes winner at the end of her lead-shank.

"Well, better luck next time," she told Laura as the distance between them began to grow. The words were automatic, one of a thousand similar backside exchanges. *Better luck. You'll get them next time. It wasn't the right spot. His race is coming.* The things they said to their rivals, and heard themselves, in a sport with more disappointing days than thrilling ones. She walked on, but kept turning her head to watch the bay gelding walk away. He had a nice swing to his hindquarters, and that stride, along with the friendly expression on his face, made her think he'd make a very cute hunter. She wondered if the Lawsons were thinking of retiring him. She'd have to get in touch with Laura later. Maybe Lana's trainer up in Connecticut would like to have him for a project horse.

When she'd looped around the shed-row again, Foster and her mother had stepped out into the wide drive between the stable blocks, conversing in low voices, and the tack room was deserted. Perhaps they'd known they were being listened to, and had gone out into the open where no one could lurk close enough to hear them. Whatever their reasons, Brice Lawson was nowhere to be seen. Andrea was swinging her arms back and forth, clapping her hands lightly as she spoke, more at ease than Jenny had seen her in a long time.

The backside was dark at last, a Florida half-light sounding of frog song and colored by orange street-lights burning against the azure blue evening, moths of unbelievable size throwing themselves against the plastic shades. Mister was cooled out now, his breathing back to normal, and he'd had a bucket of water. Jenny put him into his stall and tossed him a scoop of grain, then tugged down his blue leg wraps from the clothes-line. She'd have to do his legs up in cooling clay for the night, and make sure his hay-net and water buckets were full, before heading out to the motel.

While she was rolling up the long lengths of standing wraps, she glanced through the day's racing program, left open across the tack room desk. That cute bay horse had been in the second race, Laura had said. She had just turned to that page when her phone buzzed.

It was a FaceTime from Aidan; the sight of his smiling face pushed the bay gelding far down her priority list. As she accepted the call, tilting the phone to rest against a bucket so she could keep working, she tore the pages with the second race out of the program and folded them up, sliding them into her khaki's pockets for later.

"Hey you," she told Aidan happily. "What's up?"

"I wanted to tell you congrats," Aidan replied, his eyes dancing as he watched her wind the leg wraps in her hands. She figured she must be showing up at an odd angle on his phone, but he didn't complain. Aidan knew that when she was at the barn, work came first, always.

"Congrats? You mean on the race? You already did!" She'd put them on in the winner's circle just in time for the awards presentation, and even Mike had cheered at that.

"On your new job," Aidan corrected her, grinning devilishly. "Lana's father is going to be the publisher and produce our website. After graduation, we're all staying in New York."

Chapter Three

Driving back up the barn lane of Sugar Creek Farm always gave Jenny the same feeling: an anxious, butterfly flutter in her stomach. Not the sort of feeling one wanted when heading up the driveway of one's childhood home, of course, but there was so

much to worry about at a big farm like Sugar Creek. Horses could be loose, or injured, or sick. There could have been a barn fire. One of the dogs might have eaten something poisonous. There might be a gas leak in the kitchen. Jenny worried about all of these things with a fierce devotion, turning each potential disaster over in her mind until she was out of the truck and could look around her, see that every horse was in its place and every barn was whole and good, and only then would she feel the peace of the farm sink into her bones.

Because despite all of its possibilities for disaster, Sugar Creek *was* a peaceful place. At first glance, the farm's physical charm more than made up for the emotional drain that came of simply living there. Drama happened on farms, certainly, and her mother left a trail of thoughtless criticisms behind her every time she left a room, but all in all, it was bound to be peaceful. What else could you say about a farm with more than a hundred acres of gently rolling pastures, plantations of massive granddaddy oaks murmuring in warm breezes, breathlessly still ponds where tall white egrets crept through the cattails, and horses of all ages scattered everywhere? It was quiet here, a deep, contented silence which seemed to emanate up from the land, a country quiet of bird chirps and frog song and snorting horses. The farm's innate tranquility suffused every man and woman and horse and dog with a sense of home. People came to Sugar Creek on temporary jobs and wanted to stay forever. Jenny, Andrea often said with a sigh, was the only one who had ever wanted to leave.

And Andrea thought she was insane to want to leave, to go to the clatter and clamor of the city, to abandon the quiet chatter of nature. This was a place where house guests came for a few days and promptly forgot the real world even existed. There was no buzz of traffic floating over the hills of Sugar Creek, and airplanes only rarely flew over. The sounds here were seasonal. Spring winds rustled the live oaks and sent their browning winter leaves rattling down the barn aisles and across the white-sand driveways. Summer storms rumbled all afternoon and late into the nights, drifting across the Florida peninsula in flickering towers of blinding white cloud. In fall, the hills spent a few melancholy weeks absorbing the plaintive whinnies of mares and foals, as the new weanlings grew accustomed to life without their dams. And in winter, while the north fell into a deep, bloodless slumber, Sugar Creek's hedges and trees and barn eaves were a constant riot of wings and song as flocks of tiny birds arrived, warblers and flycatchers and songbirds who chose the hills of north-central Florida to wait out the snowy months back home.

Of course, Sugar Creek's barns were filled with the typical sounds of a working farm: a radio playing raggaeton in the distance, buckets rattling on the back of a golf cart driven over a rutted dirt road, surprised neighs from horses who woke up from dreams of the herd to find themselves all alone on a sunny hillside, the idling rumble of a tractor left running somewhere, because everyone knew it was more expensive to turn a diesel tractor off and on than to leave it idling between jobs, though no one seemed to know precisely why this would be.

Jenny hopped down from the farm's big white truck the moment the cab had stopped rocking, her boots hitting the hard-packed white sand of the training barn's parking lot with two tiny puffs of silica dust. She looked around, taking in the little compound of barns, and the house a short distance away, shielded from view by a grove of oak trees. It was all there. Everything was fine. Everything was just as she'd left it two days before. The old feeling of panic drifted away, as it nearly always did—the only exceptions being the times she had come home to find broken fence-boards, loose horses, unlatched stall doors, a stray dog in amongst the yearlings. But no such calamities were present today... just the peace of the farm. She took a deep breath, soaking in the safety of home, and then reached back into the truck for the leather lead-shank she'd carried with her in the cab.

Her mother was already walking into the training barn, welcomed by a symphony of whinnies from curious horses, looking for a groom to help unload Mister. Jenny was instantly annoyed; she was sure she could manage him on her own, and why bother the grooms for something as trivial as bringing a colt home? After all, Mister was a seasoned racehorse now, and no stranger to shipping; he knew how to step down the ramp without killing anybody, and after that it was just a question of leading him to his stall while he looked around with the same eager, questioning attitude that Jenny had given the property when *she'd* gotten out of the truck: was everyone still here, was the barn still the same, were the fences up, had anything changed, should he panic or just relax?

She rubbed his nose through the bars of his open window, and he wiggled his lip on her fingers in response. Then he snorted, hard. Evidently there had been a lot of road dirt to clear from his nasal passages.

Jenny winced, wiped her dirty face on the sleeve of her t-shirt. "Thank you for that," she told Mister. "Thank you very much, no, *really*."

She'd already dropped the ramp of the trailer when her mother came hustling out of the barn, her wiry frame moving jerkily as she speed-walked down the little slope from the shed-row. "Wait for Marco!" she yelled. "Just wait for Marco, he won't take a second."

And just like that, Jenny's peace deserted her. She suddenly felt a little ill, her nervousness flaring up like a fever. *Marco*. She'd started to think maybe she could get through this trip without running into him at all—she'd certainly *hoped* so. He hadn't been at the farm on Thursday night when she'd first arrived from New York, and they'd gone straight to Tampa on Friday morning, skipping morning training. Flying out the next day, she'd really believed she could escape without facing Marco... or telling him that she was leaving the farm for good. She scrunched up her toes in her boots.

Her parents were going to be bad enough when she told them, but Marco was going to be... what *was* he going to be? Angry? Reserved? Dismissive? All of these years, and she still didn't know his depths. She figured she'd come as close as anyone else, though. Marco kept his life away from the horses hidden away, if he had such a life at all.

Marco was technically just the head exercise rider, but he had become wrapped up in the running of Sugar Creek during the years Jenny had spent in New York. The last she'd

heard, he'd been working with Joseph and Andrea towards becoming an assistant trainer. When that happened, Jenny hoped, he'd get sent down to Palm Meadows to help manage the south Florida string, getting him out of her hair forever. She'd be able to come home for visits without his presence lurking around the barns, without him waiting for her in a tack room or an empty stall. If she'd known, when she was a teenager, that Marco hadn't just been playing a game, she never would have let things go so far.

Or maybe she'd never had a choice in the matter.

Well, there was no way to avoid seeing him now. Jenny folded her arms and leaned against the sun-warmed aluminum skin of the horse trailer. Mister, detecting a delay in his immediate removal to his stall and the fresh shavings he wanted to pee in, kicked the trailer wall. "Knock it off," Jenny said lazily.

"He wouldn't *be* kicking if you hadn't taken down the ramp already," her mother hissed as she passed, clambering up the ramp to take down the steel bar that acted as a second barrier between the horse inside and the waiting world. Mister, standing in the front stall of the slant-load trailer, lifted his head to look over the divider. His eyes rolled back in his head as he tried to get a good glare in at Andrea. "You just stand still and wait," she scolded, and looked around for Marco.

He came out of the barn next, and Jenny had to admit he was looking extremely well. Marco wasn't tall, but he was graceful, with dramatic good looks. His thick black hair fell over his face, and his shirt's sleeves had been cut off, revealing a pair of arms bulging with muscle. He walked towards her the same dancer-like stride she remembered, the same dark eyes flashing under sharp brows. Marco's family were all actors and dancers and choreographers; he had run away from their showbiz expectations to ride horses when he was a teenager, and eventually ended up at Sugar Creek, riding their toughest horses with a surreal grace. When Jenny had started galloping with the exercise crew, Marco had been her primary teacher. They'd gotten close.

Too close, Jenny knew now. Every time she came home, she had to work to keep him at arm's length. Once she'd moved to New York and met Aidan, she'd known Marco would never be more than a friend, but Marco had never been willing to accept that. Avoiding him had become the hardest part of coming home.

Mister, with no such qualms, whinnied through the window bars when he saw Marco.

Marco held up his empty hands in the universal gesture for *nothing to see here*. "No grain right now, buddy!"

Jenny handed over the lead, taking care to slide her hands away before Marco's fingers could touch hers. "I'm sure he likes you for more than just being the guy with the food," she said jokingly, hoping to keep things light.

Marco gave her a knowing grin. His gaze was piercing, as if he wanted to know how much *she* liked him. "If only!" He reached up to the window and ran a narrow finger over Mister's dark muzzle. The horse clicked his teeth together with a snap. "Love me and leave me, these racers are all the same." He laughed and walked away from her, climbing up the ramp into the trailer.

Jenny took a deep breath to steady her nerves and walked ahead of them into the barn. That hadn't been so bad, she told herself. And once she was really gone, once everyone finally believed Jenny Wolfe had moved to New York City and wasn't coming home, Marco would stop looking at her like that. That would make visits home *so* much easier.

Jenny stayed in the training barn after her mother had walked back to the house, leaving the truck keys with Marco. He'd pull the trailer around to its parking space in the machine shed, unhitch the truck, and send a groom over to clean the trailer out. Andrea had a strict daily routine she was anxious to return to after the disruption of a race weekend. Right now, it was eleven-thirty; past her appointed time to make a ham sandwich and catch up with her training charts at the kitchen table, a glass of sweet tea close at hand. Andrea's ability to will a normal day out of an abnormal one was catching, Jenny knew. The stakes-winning weekend, last night's late session in the tack room being chatted up by Kentucky millionaires, the old episode of *Friends* they'd watched while they finished off the last of the champagne from the double beds of the motel room: all of that would recede into the past so quickly, it would begin to feel like a dream before the end of the day.

Jenny had lived by her mother's routine for years; now she felt excluded from its tidy checklists and reminders. She wondered if there was a stranger sensation than wandering around a busy farm without a list of chores. What was she doing here, if she wasn't working?

She knew she wasn't going to find anything to do in the training barn—the twin shed-rows were a hive of activity between five and ten a.m., but the afternoons were quiet, even deserted at times, with the stalls filled with snoring, napping horses and the training barn grooms free to roam until their evening feeding shift brought them back for a few hours. But it was her favorite place, and the part of Sugar Creek she missed the most when she was back in the city. The high ceiling with its web of rafters, the open shed-rows with wide, clay aisles and horses gazing out over airy stall grills, looking towards the rolling fields surrounding them: it was a place of broad views, earthy scents and cool breezes, and it somehow felt like an encapsulation of everything she loved about life in Ocala—everything she couldn't have in New York, everything she had to wrench herself away from anew, each time she went back.

After walking down one shed-row, leaving boot prints in the carefully-raked clay, visiting with each horse as they put their heads over their grills and nickered suggestively to her, she stopped in the center aisle and put her hands in her pockets, considering the view in either direction. Pastures, hills, fences, barns; mares, foals, yearlings, long-legged egrets. The training track, its fading rails mostly hidden by a scrubby hedge. Heat rippling over the crushed white shells of the driveway. *Home*, she told herself, just to test the ache

she'd find in her heart at the word, and found it wasn't as bad as she'd expected. The sounds of horses pulling at hay-nets was blissful, but somehow she was still missing the rattle of traffic, the bass beats shaking out from tinny bodega speakers onto the crowded sidewalk, the rumbling of trains beneath her feet. The barns and fields and huge, ancient oak trees were as close to her heart as family, but she missed the narrow stairs of Aidan's apartment building, the noble lines of apartment houses lining the oasis of Central Park, the glowing green globes of subway entrances.

Jenny shook her head at herself. She wanted it all; she'd known that since the first time she'd visited New York City. She'd been thirteen, and they'd had a big horse running at Belmont that summer—the last big horse Sugar Creek had seen, until Mr. November. Her father had taken her into Manhattan—Andrea had stayed behind at the track, not interested in anything beyond its fences—and they'd ridden the subway, eaten a hot dog in Battery Park City while gazing at the Statue of Liberty, and jostled their way through Times Square. They'd wandered through a residential street on the Upper West Side, past graceful brownstones, shaded by green London plane trees, and watched a dog-walker wrangle a pack of seven or eight happy canines of all sizes. Jenny had fallen in love that day. Maybe it had started as just a crush, but she'd never gotten over it. Something about the city had touched her, and from that day on, there'd been two sides to her: the country Jenny, the city Jenny.

Jenny stretched her arms over her head, smiled at the green fields, the white cotton clouds drifting through the endless blue sky. “Maybe I can have both?”

“Who's out there?”

The voice drifted out from the feed room behind her, and Jenny jumped. Then she walked across the center aisle and poked her head through the open doorway.

It was a dark, cool space. Two massive chest freezers, their plugs cut off and their shelving removed after they'd been liberated from a closing country store, dominated the rectangular room. Against one wall, Marco was sitting on a stack of sweet feed bags, his back against the cinder-blocks, thumbing through his phone. Or rather, he had been. Now he was looking at her with a kind of intensity she'd rather not see.

“Marco?” Jenny hung back in the doorway, unwilling to share the room with his dominating personality. “Aren't you going back to your apartment for the afternoon?”

He shrugged. “I wasn't in the mood today. Thought I'd stick around. You don't have to wait around for evening feeding with me. I know you're very busy.” His gaze turned furtive. As if he could still hide his feelings around her.

“I'm not doing anything,” Jenny admitted, leaning a hip against one of the freezers. “Just trying to stay out of the house. I don't want my mom to get me started on a project I can't finish.”

“Good idea.” Marco stood up, stretching, and managed to finish up just a hairs-breadth too close to her. Jenny wouldn't have expected him to behave any other way. Ever since she'd joined the exercise crew, Marco had been standing too close to her. But—and this was the reason she couldn't quite push him out of her life—he'd also looked

out for her out there. When she'd get assigned fractious young fillies for pasture rides or strong older horses for gallops, Marco kept his horse, and occasionally a helping hand, close by. Joseph Wolfe had thought his daughter needed toughening up and gave her difficult horses, but Marco was the one who stood between her and the hard ground when the going got tough. She remembered that now, instead of the years in between, the things they'd done behind barns and in empty stalls; all the flings she'd tried to brush off as teenage experiments, and which Marco had hung onto as evidence of her everlasting love.

She took a step back into the aisle, not bothering to disguise her retreat. Marco knew he was always in her personal space, and he would make no apologies. He had always had a brashness about him, which he had ramped up since she'd first started coming home from the city. She suspected he wanted to show her what a worthy alpha-male he was when compared to those pretty boys back in Manhattan, the ones who showed up in her Instagram pictures. Marco didn't post much to social media, but he sure as hell stalked it. It was how he knew to tease her about Aidan, but what he didn't know was that Aidan always seemed to have a new girlfriend, and her name was never Jenny.

Jenny squared her shoulders to help push the thought out of her mind. It was always easier to be tough with good posture, Lana liked to say. Something her fancy Connecticut girl's school had taught her—a place which, from her stories, seemed to be half Jane Austen novel, and half *Fight Club*. “So, you got any busy work going on down here?” she asked. “Something to pass the time and make me feel less like a lazy brat?”

“We can groom yearlings if you want.” Marco shrugged. “Or go up in the hay barn and catch up a little.” He smiled suggestively.

Jenny went back to her favorite response to his come-ons: taking out her phone and pretending she was getting a call. “Hello? Aidan? Yes I was just talking about you!” She stuck her tongue out at Marco, acting as if she was listening intently. “What's that? Oh, I miss you too!”

“Haha,” Marco said. His smile did not match his tone. “I get it, I get it.”

“Do you get it, Marco?” Jenny changed her tack; she pushed into the feed room and hoisted herself up on the freezer. She swung her legs idly, as if she hadn't a care in the world. As if he didn't make her nervous with his dark looks and moods. “Because it would make our lives easier. We could stay friends.”

“Yes, I get it. You got your New York boyfriend, you don't want to go cuddle with me no more.” Marco shook his head at her, but he was still smiling. “Maybe when you graduate, you come back to me. I can wait.”

“Well, I graduate in a few weeks,” Jenny pointed out. “And then...” She hesitated. She wasn't ready to tell him. She hadn't told her parents yet. She hadn't told *anyone*.

“And then what?” Just like that, Marco was too close to her again.

Jenny slipped off the freezer and ducked past him, heading back into the barn aisle. The blue sky sat over Ocala's green hills like a dome, sealing their farms away from the noise of the real world. She had to push through it; she had to push past Marco. She had

to be out there beyond the hills and the horses, making things happen. The training track winked at her, the faded white railing crinkling in waves of heat. Words she'd written for their project mission statement came back to her. There was more to horse racing than just racing horses. There was more to a country lifestyle than just living it. Every sport, every passion, needed a really good ambassador team, to take the message to the rest of the world.

"And then I'm going to live in the city," Jenny said, her eyes still on the track. "I'm starting a racing website with Aidan and Lana."

From behind her, Marco sighed heavily. Jenny felt bad despite herself. She really didn't think she'd led Marco on. They hadn't done more than work together since she'd gone away to school, four years ago. Even before that, they'd never done more than fool around in dark corners of the farm. And yet, Marco had always seen himself as The Man in Jenny's life—even after she'd begun pretending to him that she was dating Aidan. He'd always believed that she'd come back to Sugar Creek for good, and that they'd be together. Now was he finally going to see it, was he finally going to believe her?

"You shouldn't do this," Marco said roughly. "You belong here. This is your family's farm! What I would give to have a farm like this—" He broke off, too angry or too sad to continue. Jenny didn't know. She didn't turn around to find out.

"I have to go," she said simply. "My life isn't here."

The words were the truest things she could say. They fell out of her so simply, she wondered why she'd been afraid to say them before.

If only it would be that easy to say them to her parents.

Chapter Four

At Sugar Creek, there were only so many ways to hide from her parents, and Jenny had exhausted all of them by five o'clock. She'd tried to while away some time helping Lanie and Maria drive around in a golf cart to feed the outside horses, scooping from a cart filled with sweet feed, but Thoroughbred farms close up shop early, and there was still a yawning gap of empty time before sunset and the human dinner hour to fill once they had finished making the rounds, dumping grain in dozens of feed buckets to all the pastured broodmares and weanlings. Maria dropped her off at the training barn, which was already finished for the night. The horses were pulling at their evening hay-nets. The evening was hot, the sunlight slanting and golden, shimmers of dust lazily floating through the center aisle. May in Ocala was always stiflingly warm.

"You staying here long?" Maria asked, checking the lock on the feed room door.

"No, I have another two weeks before graduation."

Maria glanced at her. "Then what?"

She couldn't tell everyone on the farm before her parents knew. She shouldn't have

told Marco. “Not sure,” she said.

“That’s OK.” Maria winked at her. “You don’t have to know yet.”

Jenny watched her drive the golf cart back to the machine shed. When Maria finally left, she’d be all alone, standing in the middle of one hundred acres, without a damn thing to do. Maybe she didn’t have to know what she was going to do next, but the feeling of *not* knowing was unbearable, even for a few minutes. She had been raised to check all of the boxes in a never-ending list of chores.

She remembered bringing home a friend for a rare slumber party, back in fifth or sixth grade. Samantha Bedincourt, a grand-sounding name for a small girl, but Samantha wore it well. She rode hunters at a high-end show barn; back then she’d still been mounted on a white Welsh pony, her pigtails bound with blue ribbons. An outsider would have thought Jenny and Samantha would have had a lot in common; they were both horse-girls, after all. But in reality, they might have come from alien planets. Jenny remembered Samantha looking around the quiet training barn with confusion. “But it’s only six o’clock,” she’d said. “Where *is* everyone?”

“We’re done,” Jenny explained. “The horses work in the morning. The rest of the day is for the horses to just chill out. There’s just regular farm work in the afternoon, mowing and chores and things. Then everyone goes home.”

Jenny remembered Samantha Bedincourt looking at her in horror. “So you have, like, no friends to hang out with at the barn?” Samantha gasped in dire tones. “Aren’t you *bored?*”

And for the first time in her life, Jenny had wondered if she was. Bored, lonely, and looking for something more... all while surrounded by a hundred acres of land and half a hundred horses, with her family’s name on all of it? Even as a ten-year-old, Jenny had seen the absurdity of the premise. And yet, there was something there.

After that day, she’d realized how different her life was from the other equestrian girls. And she’d sometimes wished she’d had a normal equestrian childhood: a show horse boarded at a barn half an hour from home, a tribe of half-feral horse-girls to play and ride and fight with, evening rides and late gossip sessions in the barn aisle afterwards. As Ocala changed, shifted from a racehorse-only community to more of a sport-horse center, more and more of her schoolmates lived that lifestyle. Over the years, plenty of horsey school friends had come home with Jenny to take the farm tour and see how the Thoroughbred half lived. They all looked around the shed-rows and the training track as if they’d landed on an alien planet.

Jenny had begun to understand then that even though they were all horse-people, the show-horse girls didn’t see her as a peer. Horse racing was simply another world to them. A few of the bolder girls would get galloping jobs when they turned eighteen, earning their college and horse show money by getting on racehorses before school each morning. But most of them stuck to their center-aisle barns, their after-school riding lessons, their oval arenas and their long weekends at monstrously expensive horse shows. All of them riding in big gossiping groups of friends, or what passed for friends in their

cutthroat society of ribbon-chasing, while Jenny rode with the exercise riders and threw grain with the grooms.

Her version of equestrian life was so different from theirs. That knowledge sat beneath all of her other noble words about bridging the gap between horse racing and the rest of the world. She wanted them to know that she was a horsewoman, too. That they were no more, and no less, for training fast horses instead of jumping horses, or dressage horses, or even cow-horses.

Jenny sighed, looking out over the sunny meadows. This was too heavy a topic for a sultry Sunday evening. She was relieved when her phone chimed with a text from Aidan: *Up for a call?*

Yes please! she texted back. A second passed, then Aidan's face was grinning at her from her phone screen. Her heart lifted at the sight. "Oh my god," she sighed. "I am so freaking glad to see you."

"Bored already?" Aidan smirked. "Can't wait to get back to the city?"

"You have no idea." Jenny tilted the phone so he could see the expanse of empty barn aisle behind her. Even the horses had retreated inside their stalls. "All the grooms went home and it's just me. I've been waxing philosophical. I think I need to find a bar before I have a breakdown. Why am I not at Fargo with you?"

"You're all alone? Where are your parents?"

"At the house, I think. Probably waiting for me. So they can berate me about my post-grad plans. I'm so scared to tell them."

"Well, they love you," Aidan said, believing it with all his heart, because his own mother was a lovely, sweet woman who treated her son and all of his friends like they were still darling, helpless little toddlers who must be constantly adored and given homemade cookies, and Aidan had never experienced life as the only daughter of two exhausted farmers who never had enough help around the place.

"Fine—they berate out of love, then," Jenny snorted.

"When are you coming home?"

"Tomorrow," Jenny said, thinking of how odd it was to call a flight back to New York *coming home*, when she was standing in her own barn, on the farm where she'd lived since the day she came home from the hospital. "One-fifteen at LaGuardia. Think Lana will pick me up?"

"*LaGuardia?* In the middle of a Monday afternoon? Not even Lana is that good a friend. Take a town car if you're going to fly into that dump."

Jenny shook her head at him. "Shut up! It was thirty bucks cheaper than JFK. Taking a car would defeat the purpose. I'm still asking Lana."

Aidan gave her a knowing smile. "Just remember you won't be a poor student forever, Jenny. Our ship has come in! It's all happening!"

"You're so right! Soon, I'll be a poor journalist. I have so much to look forward to."

"Speaking of which," Aidan said, "can you update the Instagram account with some stuff from Tampa yesterday? Maybe post a couple of stories? And do some of the

horses on the farm, too. Let's go ahead and get the Full Stride account really busy."

"Of course," Jenny agreed. "And we should make sure we get out to Belmont quickly, and get as much of the summer meet as we can. We can start our coverage there."

Behind him, his apartment door opened and closed. A petite girl, with black hair in tight pigtails, wearing a frilly blouse trimmed with dozens of pink bows, had come in. She waved tentatively at the phone screen. "Hello, Jenny!" she called. Her childish voice grated at every nerve in Jenny's body. Lily's Lolita aesthetic was, frankly, disturbing.

"Hi, Lily," Jenny called back, forcing a smile. To Aidan, she said, "I should let you go."

"Yeah, we're going to grab dinner over by the High Line and take a walk. It's too nice an evening to stay inside." He paused, and his expression grew serious for a moment. Jenny waited expectantly, hoping he'd have something private and thoughtful to say to her. But after a moment, he just let the corners of his mouth trail up again, that habitual smile she'd seen in the baby photos his mother kept on every wall of their New Jersey apartment. "Stay strong, Jenny-girl!" he said brightly. "Just a couple more hours on the native soil, and then you're back in New York where you belong."

"Right," Jenny replied, her false smile still stretched across her face. "See you soon."

Aidan clicked off.

Jenny looked at her own reflection in the dark phone screen for a minute longer. Her long, narrow nose. Her pointed chin. Her round face. Her full lips. Her brown eyes, and her darker brown hair, curly in the evening humidity. She was twenty-two, and she felt younger, though she looked older than many of the other girls her age at school. The childish roundness which still clung to their chins and cheeks had melted away from her face in the past year or two, and she could see cheekbones, only just, defining the curves of her face. Her mother had groaned at Christmas, and said: "you always looked like an adult to me, but now you look like a *woman!*" And to Jenny, who knew Aidan's current penchant for pink bows and baby-doll lips, the words had come like a punch to the gut.

A young horse pushed his head and neck over the V of his stall screen and leaned over to take a good look at the girl in his aisle. He whinnied to her; probably reasoning that a nice girl like that might be carrying carrots. Jenny walked down to him and held up her hand like a salutation. The colt, chestnut with a fat white blaze and a scruffy forelock, flared his nostrils at her palm, then gave her fingers a long, wet lick with his pink tongue.

"I don't even know your name," Jenny told him. "That's how rarely I'm here anymore. You're in my own training barn and you're a stranger." She cocked her head to see the halter hanging on a hook next to his door, but it was missing the brass nameplate; a ghostly rectangle of clean leather showing where it had been torn off by some random act of equine foolishness. "I guess you'll stay a mystery," she said, taking her hand away and wiping it on her jeans.

The next horse down was Mister; he had come to the door as soon as he heard the chestnut colt's whinny, and was shoving at his stall screen with impatience, his knee making the metal shake with a metallic rattle.

“You need to stop,” Jenny commanded, but there was no commanding Mister. You asked him, and he ignored you: that was how it usually went down when he was in a mood, and the big colt was nearly always in a mood. He shoved his head down as far as he could reach over the stall screen, trying to get his nose at her jean pockets, while a few other horses poked their own heads over and began to nicker their encouragement. Within a few moments, the training barn was erupting with kicks and neighs, as word spread that Jenny was in the house and might be bearing treats.

“I have nothing, you idiots!” Jenny insisted, but once a barn full of young racehorses has started talking, almost nothing will shut them up for a solid ten minutes. When Jenny looked over her shoulder, it was to confirm what she already knew: her parents were coming up the driveway on their golf cart, alerted to her presence by the song of so many greedy Thoroughbreds.

“Jenny,” her mother said when they’d pulled up in the training barn aisle, not bothering to get out of the golf cart, “you’re not coming down to the house tonight?”

Her father coughed and said nothing. He was getting over a cold. He was always getting over a cold; at least, he had been since Mister had started running well and her mother wanted Jenny to come home to help run him.

“I was just seeing the horses a little bit while I have the chance,” Jenny lied, holding her hand up to let Mister lap at her fingers with his tongue. “Since I have to leave for the airport pretty early. My flight’s around ten, you know, and it will be rush hour around Orlando when I get there...”

“You’ll be back in a few weeks,” Andrea said comfortably. “So it’s okay. Come back to the house. There’s too much pollen out here for your father.”

Joseph Wolfe coughed again, but added a smile on as an afterthought.

Jenny knew she had to say something about that whole “back in a few weeks” thing. This wasn’t summer vacation coming up; this was life after graduation. She had to get to work.

But she couldn’t say anything while her mother was staring her down like that.

So she climbed onto the back seat of the golf cart and let her father start driving back down the driveway. Instead of turning towards the house, he took a right down another lane and they rattled over to the broodmare barn.

“Why aren’t we going in, Joe?” Andrea asked irritably. She was the only one who called Jenny’s father anything other than Joseph, and she did so with an air of ownership, as if the name was hers by right and no one else could claim it. “I want to get dinner started.”

Joseph held up one finger. “Visit one mare,” he said hoarsely, and then he coughed.

Jenny immediately knew who they were going to see, and the knowledge filled her heart, pushing all of her own problems to the side. She chewed at her lip as she climbed out of the golf cart, and followed her father over to the gate behind the barn. He opened up the pasture gate and they walked out onto the sunburned May grass, where broodmares grazed while their foals slept nearby, exhausted from a day of play. One by

one, the wary old women lifted their heads and watched the humans cross through their territory.

Only Saint Jenny kept on chewing as Joseph stopped before her and reached out, placing a gnarled hand against her broad neck. The faded chestnut mare was nineteen years old this spring, and looked every year of it, with a sagging back and round barrel from the nine foals she had borne. Deep hollows had sunk into the skin above her wise eyes. Joseph looked down at her head as she grazed, silent for a long moment, until Jenny finally said the words he couldn't get out.

"You're a good girl, Saint Jenny," she told the mare, running a hand along the tangles of her red mane. "Your boy won his race yesterday. Thank you for Mr. November."

It was a ritual of Joseph's, with all of their home-breds: he went out and thanked the mare for her hard work. With Saint Jenny, though, there was an extra layer of emotion. Everyone was attached to the old mare.

Even Andrea walked over at last, her cracked leather boots crunching over the blanched grass. "Remember when we brought her home? Two years old and mean as a snake until she met Jenny. We thought she was going to kill you when you opened her stall door," she went on, favoring Jenny with a nostalgic smile. "We couldn't get down the aisle fast enough to stop you. But we didn't know you had an apple in your hand. It took her so long to eat that damned apple, we had time to get you out of her stall before she remembered she hated humans."

"Fired the babysitter," Joseph said dreamily, his voice husky with coughing and memories. "Had to hire a girl from Ireland who understood horses." He smiled at Jenny as well. "And horse-girls."

Jenny had heard the story a thousand times, forced to relive it at family gatherings and when racing friends came to visit: the legend of Jenny and her filly, how she had become the namesake of a fiery chestnut racehorse who apparently softened into sainthood whenever her favorite little girl toddled into the shed-row, apple in hand. It had made her squirm since she was seven. Still, she smiled back at her parents, suddenly grateful they'd brought it up again.

Because somehow, she'd just realized, this legend of Saint Jenny and the little girl with the apple was at the heart of what she was setting out to do in New York. Their website was going to be about more than Pick Six pay-outs and racetrack gossip. They were going to show the world the true faces of horse racing: the good people and the happy horses. They were going to tell the stories of horses like Saint Jenny and horse-crazy girls like Jenny herself. And with those stories, they'd reveal the behind-the-scenes reality that just because they kept different hours, horse show people and horse racing people weren't so different, after all.

Jenny, Aidan and Lana were going to change the world—the horse racing world, anyway.

And it had all started right here, with this sunburned chestnut mare... and these two proud parents.

The time was now.

“Mom, Dad,” Jenny began, her fingers still tangled in Saint Jenny’s mane, “I’m staying in New York after school. We’re going to start a horse racing website, and it’s going to be amazing.”

Her race-day khakis and blouse were thrown across her bed when she came in that evening, cleaned but not folded—Andrea was a little inconsistent about laundry, and her general willingness to perform household tasks changed from day to day. Jenny smiled when she saw the trousers sprawling lazily across the floral pattern of her bedspread. Those boot-cut khakis were definitely not going back to New York with her; they were strictly for fitting over her paddock boots when walking a horse to the paddock. Even if the cut had been stylish, the fabric was dotted with spots from muddy days at the races. The blouse’s condition wasn’t much better: its contrasting stripes helped cover up a multitude of stains from slobbering horses, dirty wash-rags and accidents involving Diet Cokes and pushy crowds, but the mess was starting to overpower the pattern. Well, she wouldn’t be running a lot of horses in the near future; these could sit around and wait for an emergency. She opened her closet door to put them both away, and heard a rustling in the pocket of the pants as she tossed them onto a shelf.

Jenny slowly tugged the paper, softened by wash-water but not ruined, out of the pocket. She unfolded it gently: it was the past performances page for yesterday’s second race. Why had she kept it? She skimmed the names of horses and trainers, and it came back to her.

“That Lawson horse,” she remembered out loud. “I better hang onto this.” There had really been something about that horse she’d liked. And he could be the next hunter prospect she funneled to Lana’s trainer, a talented horseman who was languishing at Lana’s family farm in Connecticut while she gaddered around Manhattan. Ryan was always desperate for some fresh horses to shake up his routine. If she kept an eye on this horse’s career, she might be able to help Lana take him off the Lawsons’ hands once they were ready to give up on him.

“A good day at the races,” Jenny said to herself, putting the wrinkled sheet of paper on her dresser and tucking the khakis onto a closet shelf. “And now, to pack all this up, and go home.”

Outside, the sun was sinking over the Ocala hills. Down the hall, her parents were rattling pans, opening and closing the refrigerator doors, making a general racket as they fixed dinner together. It could have been any year, Jenny could have been any age—that was how long it had been since anything had really changed at Sugar Creek. But without even meaning to, Jenny had called New York *home*. And that, she thought, had to be a sign.

Read the rest of the story!

[The Hidden Horses of New York is available for Kindle, Kindle Unlimited, and paperback here.](#)

About Natalie Keller Reinert

I currently live in Central Florida, where I write fiction and freelance for a variety of publications. I mostly write about theme parks, travel, and horses! I've been writing professionally for more than a decade, and yes... I prefer writing fiction to anything else.

In my spare time I ride Ben, a grade pony who I aspire to take around a beginner novice event someday, and hang out at theme parks with my husband and teenage son. My family also includes a foxhound named Sally, but she sleeps most of the time.

Visit my website at nataliekreinert.com to keep up with the latest news and read occasional blog posts and book reviews. For installments of upcoming fiction and exclusive stories, visit my [Patreon page and learn how you can become a subscriber!](#)



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