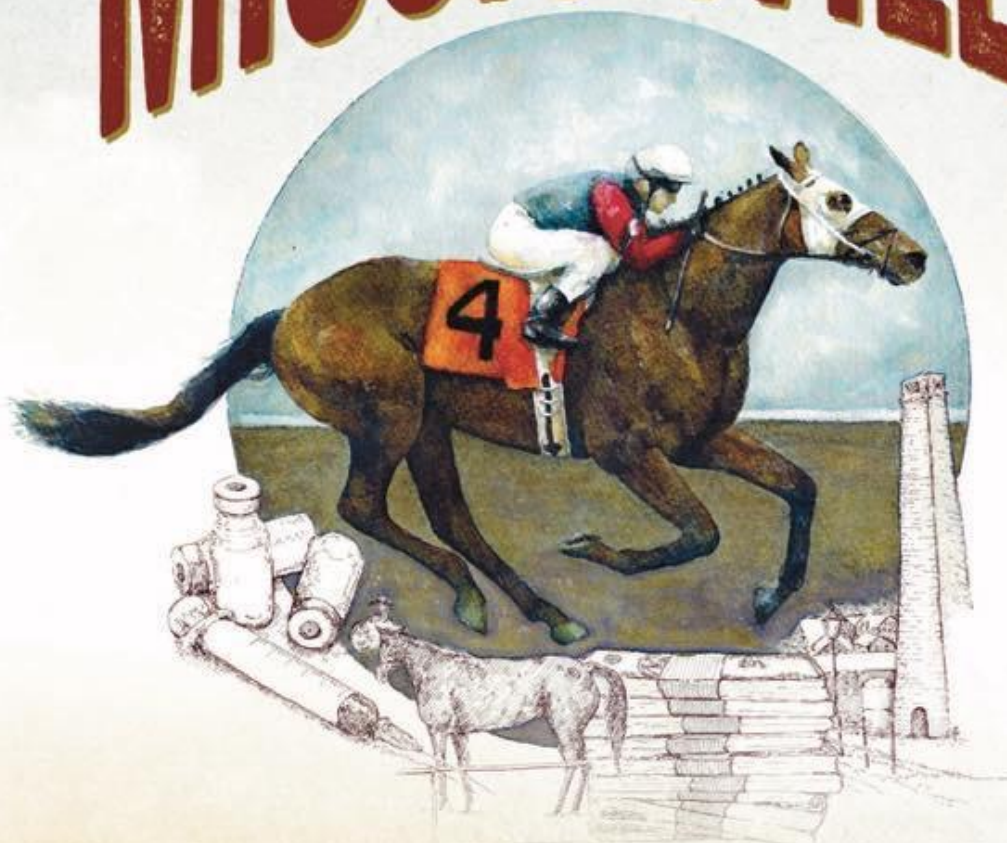


MISSIONVILLE



GREED DESPERATION HUMANITY

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Chapter 4

Pete, Monday

With two horses trained, it's time for a coffee while it's break time on the track.

"Hey, Pete, need anything?" James asks me.

"I'm good today. I haven't trained the new horse yet, but I'll catch up with you, maybe tomorrow, to discuss how he's doing. Hopefully we can make a plan for him?"

"Sounds good. Good luck tonight."

It's bugged me a little, what Amanda said on Saturday about Harry and Mike's operation. James is a little slick for sure, a very good vet, but I wonder if he would do anything beyond the rules. I'm sure he injected that horse last week on race day. I guess that's beyond the rules. While I didn't think anything of it at the time, perhaps I should have. The horse won, he shouldn't really have beaten a couple of horses in that race. Maybe I'll just keep a closer eye on James's comings and goings. Talk to him more, learn a little more about him. I don't think there's much point in sharing anything with Amanda right now. She'd probably go a little crazy with it. I remember her being upset with me on the phone when she found one of my horses at Owenscreek. That was bad all around. Jake had told me he would try to rehab the horse when I sold it to him. I should have pushed him a little more, but I didn't. Three weeks later the horse was at the auction.

Amanda is very cute. She has lovely green eyes and long reddish blonde hair. She is definitely not ordinary looking, and has a wonderful figure. I really didn't think she would come out to watch the race on Saturday, but she did, and seemed to enjoy it. I'll try to get her out again, hopefully sooner rather than later. I finish my coffee.

Hairy is snoring in the corner of my tack room as I get the tack for my final horse to train for the morning, Thunder Clouds.

I groom the old horse and tack him up. He seems very gentle and easy to be around when you're on the ground. He's a pleasure to have in the barn really. Alfie pulls him out of his stall to give him a turn around the shedrow.

"Ready, boss?"

"Thanks, Alfie," I mumble through my facemask, as he gives me a leg up.

At the entrance of the track we just stand and wait. The first time I ride a new horse that I don't really know, I'm always cautious. But I've seen this guy train a few times, so I figure he is going to be fine. He is. We start our jog over to the wire. Like most older horses, he has a little stiffness in his movement; he is definitely a little short on the right front leg. It's hard to notice, but over many years of riding at the track, you learn to feel even the most subtle imperfections. I start jogging on the left diagonal as usual, but when I switch to the right diagonal I can feel the shortness a little more. This is something a lot of exercise riders don't do, unless they went through pony club like me. Anyway, I'm not too worried, a bit of stiffness is to be expected.

I turn him in at the wire, and we wait for three to four minutes, watching other horses train. While it's another very cold morning, there is also bright sunshine and no wind. Mondays are typically busy days at the track, and we watch three workers come by, as well as a few horses gallop

by. One pair of workers breeze down the lane head-to-head and spook a horse that's galloping in the middle of the track. That horse's exercise rider struggles for an eighth of a mile to get it back under control. Typical goings on for a Monday morning.

Thunder Clouds gallops his mile and a half in a leisurely fashion. When I gallop him tomorrow, I'll drop my irons a little. He sits on the bridle nicely, and is very easy going in his manner. The shortness in his stride that I detected at the jog is not there at the gallop. He switches his leads at the right places, in and out of the turns, but perhaps just falls back onto his left lead a little too easily. These are all signals to a horse's soundness. It's a decent gallop, probably as good as I could have expected. Time to head back to the barn. We stand in at the gap.

"Your new horse, Pete?" Jess asks.

"Yes. Classy old guy."

"How'd he go?"

"Great, thanks."

"Good luck with him. I've followed him for a couple of years now, a real war horse."

"He is. We'll do our best."

"See you tomorrow, Pete."

Marcus Longman is in my shedrow when we return.

"Long time since you've been in my shedrow?" I note with a little sarcasm.

"Yes, too long. How's things?"

"It's Monday, all's well. The old horse trained well."

"He looks good. Just wanted to see if you had a plan for him yet?"

"Not yet. I see you rode him a while back."

"I won on him. I've not ridden him since, and he's not won since."

"I noticed that." It's true. A little over a year ago, Thunder Clouds won his last race with Longman aboard. The comment in the *Daily Racing Form* noted that he spurted away quickly at the quarter pole with an impressive change of pace. He hasn't done that since.

"I'd like to get back on him, if you need me. Just want to work him first."

"Thanks, Marcus, I'll let you know."

Longman heads to Mike's shedrow.

"Boss, he's no good," Alfie whispers to me as he passes me in the shedrow with Thunder Clouds.

"What do you mean 'no good'? Is the horse OK?"

“Sure. He’s good. But Marcus is no good. Not worth it.” Alfie knows the backside as well as anybody. At first appearance he seems to be someone of little consequence, but I have learned that if he tells me something, it is something I need to know. Longman should not ride Thunder Clouds.

I wander over to see Jorge, and how their new claim is settling in for him. Jorge is busying himself with his new horse.

“Hey, Jorge, this your new horse?”

“Si, Spicy Lemon, claimed last week.”

“I figured it was him. Do you like him?”

“Nice old horse, easy to work around.”

“Any problems with him?” There’s a golden rule at the track, you don’t claim horses from trainers in your own barn, nor discuss their horses with other trainers at the track. These are not written rules, but it’s an understanding. Because of this, outfits in the same barn are generally more open about their horses.

“I think he’s a little weak in his hind end, some back issues maybe. I’m working on some stuff. We shall see. Has not been to the track yet.”

“Good luck with him.”

“Gracias. Good luck tonight, I might bet on your filly.”

“Thanks. Yes, me too!”

Jake is hanging out in Mike’s shedrow as I was chatting to Jorge. He is scheduled to pony my filly at the races tonight.

“All good for tonight, Pete?” Jake asks.

“Yes, thanks. I’ll see you at the races.”

“She looks good in the race. I’ll take care of her.”

“Thanks.” For all his faults, Jake is a very good pony guy. You know your horse will be well taken care of before a race.

Ten minutes later I’m grooming one of my horses when Larry, the state vet, swings by my shedrow.

“Pete, can you pull your filly out for me?” Before a horse competes, it has to be approved, soundness-wise, by the state vet. Larry has worked at Missionville for many years, and I’m not sure how many horses he’s scratched due to unsoundness, but it’s only a few. Certainly there are quite a few times he should have scratched a horse, but Larry doesn’t seem to be too bothered.

“Sure,” I respond, I bring the filly into the shedrow. Larry quickly moves his hands down her front legs.

“OK, jog her away, and then jog back.” It is a routine I know well. I trot her away for about five strides, ease her, turn her, and jog her back.

“Looks good. Lasix as usual, four hours out.”

“Thanks, Larry. Alfie will be here when you guys come back.”

“Good luck tonight.”

“Thanks.” With the state vet inspection over, time to head to the track kitchen and then home before tonight’s races.

Alfie leads Pink Slippers into the paddock for the seventh race. She looks good; her bay coat shines under the lights. She has a big white stripe down her face which always makes her stand out from the other fillies.

“All good?” I check in with Alfie.

“No problems.” Alfie waits with all my runners during the afternoon before the races. He needed to be there when the filly received her Lasix shot, he would then wait until it was time to bring her over for the race.

They circle the paddock with the seven other fillies who had been led over from the backside. I wait in the saddling box until the valet comes out with the jockey’s saddle and number cloth. When he does, I nod to Alfie, who brings the filly in.

We tack her up and Alfie leads her back out for a few more turns around the paddock. Emma Sparks files out of the jocks’ room with the other seven jockeys and comes over.

“What do you think?” I always like to ask jockeys first for their thoughts. There’s a well-known saying on the backside, good jockeys will know how to ride the race and don’t need instructions, bad jockeys can’t follow instructions.

“There seems to be plenty of speed in the race, so I thought I’d just sit off it a little, and then bring her with a run once we straighten up for home.”

“Sounds good to me.” Alfie brings Pink Slippers back to the saddling stall.

“Riders up!” is the call from the paddock judge. Emma props up her left leg and I lift her up.

“Good luck, Emma. Have a safe trip.”

“Thanks, Pete. She looks great.” Emma gives Slippers a pat as they depart with Alfie.

I will admit it, I’m pretty much a nervous wreck when I run my own horses. There’s plenty at stake. I want to know that I’ve done right by the horse by putting it in a race that it’s ready to win. There’s some vanity there, I want to prove to whomever that I am a good horseman, but I am also concerned for the horse. I want the horse to do well, while I have it in my care. Aside from all that, I kind of need this win. Money is getting very tight.

Alfie comes over to me, after leading Emma and the filly out to the track and handing them off to Jake.

“All good, boss.”

“Thanks. Are you betting?” I ask Alfie.

“No, I just hope she wins for you.”

"Thanks. I'll put ten dollars on for you." Alfie smiles. I walk away. I want to place a bet, and I need a Budweiser to settle my nerves.

"Mary, Budweiser please?"

"Here you go, it's ready for you. Good luck!"

"Thanks."

I head over to the betting windows. My filly, Pink Slippers, is the 3-1 second choice. I place a hundred dollars on her to win. Stupid really, because I need that cash, but I decide to go all in on this filly. If she wins tonight, we are in great shape for the next month or so. She's been training well, so I want to try to take an edge.

I watch the TV screen nervously as the horses are being loaded. My filly walks right into the starting gate with no problem. She looks calm and quiet, Emma appears to be relaxed. Exactly how you want it in the gates.

"They're in the gate," the commentator announces over the p.a. system. "And they're off!"

I watch the race unfold on the screen. She breaks well, may be a little too well. Emma has Pink Slippers head and head on the lead. This could be good, this might not be good. The early fraction is fast, 22 and change. Christ, I hope Emma has plenty of horse underneath her.

They move around the turn. The horse on the inside of Emma begins to retreat, leaving my filly in front on her own. Emma has only one choice, to really go for it. She pulls out her stick and gives the filly a couple of quick cracks and then starts to hand ride. Coming off the turn they shoot three lengths clear.

"Come on, Slippers! Come on!" I start yelling, wrapped up in the moment. At the eighth pole she is still in front, but her lead is shrinking, she's tiring.

"Hold on! Hold on girl!" I yell. Her lead shrinks more and as they cross the wire two other horses flash by heads apart and a neck in front of her.

Damn. She'd run a great race, despite how the race set up, but the result is costly. I finish my Budweiser.

I wander down to where the horses are being unsaddled. Alfie is already with the filly. Emma and her valet are busy taking off her saddle.

"Sorry, Pete. She should have won that race."

"She ran a gutsy race. Tough loss in the end."

"Yes, she broke so well, I really didn't have much choice but to sit on the lead. This was unknown to her, but the other speed in the race never set up like I thought it would."

"No worries. I get it. You've got to make quick decisions, and then go for it. I thought it was going to work out at the eighth pole."

"Thanks, Pete. I know you really wanted this. I'll stop by tomorrow and catch up."

"Cool. Catch you later."

Now the hard part, I had to call Ray. He was probably expecting a win; I have been pretty enthusiastic about her training. When Ray's expecting a win, he bets big, not here at Missionville, but in Vegas, so as not to impact the odds.

I pull out my phone and call up Ray. I get his voicemail, which is a relief. "Ray, the filly ran third, only just got beat. The race didn't set up well, but she ran very game. I'll call you in the morning." Hopefully by tomorrow morning, if Ray's upset, he might have settled down a little. I put my phone back in my pocket. Thirty seconds later it vibrates.

"Hello, Ray."

"Pete, I saw the race."

"She was very game, things just didn't work out."

"Why was she on the lead? What was Emma thinking?"

"She broke so well she didn't have much choice."

"C'mon. This filly needs covering up. She has a late kick. We know that. She's not a speed horse."

"I really think Emma was taken by surprise by how well she broke. She made a decision, perhaps not the best decision, but she tried."

"She screwed up. I know you like Emma, but there's a reason she's not a leading rider at the track." I didn't like the direction of the conversation.

"I get what you're saying. But Emma's loyal, works our horses and for the most part does a decent and honest job. She only got beat less than half a length."

"That less than half a length just cost me thousands of dollars." It cost me a few hundred too, a few hundred I really need right now.

"I understand."

"I want to see Longman, or one of the other leading riders, on one or two of my horses more often."

"OK, Ray."

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US: <https://www.amazon.com/Missionville-Alex-Brown/dp/1999796306/>

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