We Poured Mud Through Their Veins

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We Poured Mud Through Their Veins
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Summary

Stiles is five-going-on-six years old when his mother buys a pony. He's twenty-two when he takes a job offer as a groom in a racing barn (because anything is better than driving forklifts in a warehouse) and full-on faceplants into a world that he's spent his entire life sneaking glorified glimpses of. It's not clean, and it isn't pretty by any stretch of imagination, but somewhere in there he gets a vague notion of what it is that make this the sport of kings.
Stiles is five-going-on-six years old when his mother buys a pony. He’s a grouchy, tubby little black fellow with a white stripe down his forehead, and a fluffy mass of a mane that refuses to do anything except grow in a fierce imitation of a Mohawk. It takes all of five seconds for Stiles to name him Batman, and only three or four more before he’s begging for a ride. She ruffles his hair and laughs, and reminds him that they need to bring their new family member home, first – then they can get down to business.

The pony’s ex-owner, a Latina woman with crow’s feet already worn into her young face, smiles down at her former charge. “It’s nice to know he’ll be in good hands,” she says. “Not too many decent horse people left, these days.”

They cart Batman away from the sale barn in a trailer borrowed from one of their neighbors, and set him up in the tiny, two-stall stable in the field behind their house. He sniffs everything with interest, paces a few circles, then comes to peer over the door at Stiles, who follows his mother’s instructions, offering the flat of his hand for the pony to sniff. The wiry bristles sprouting from Batman’s muzzle tickle Stiles’ palm, making him giggle. When Batman wuffs out a blast of warm air, Stiles lets out a high-pitched shriek, startling him back, away from the noise.

“First rule of horses,” Stiles’ mother says, kneeling down next to where he is staring in confusion at the now-empty space about the door. “They get scared as easily as we do.”

“I didn’t do anything.” Stiles’ lower lip juts out in a pout, and his mother sighs.

“What if you and I were having a conversation one day, and I started yelling, just for no reason? Wouldn’t you be afraid?” She waits for his nod. “Well, horses don’t speak English, but we’re always having conversations with them, whenever we’re around them. They don’t understand words, but they listen to how we speak, and watch how we move, and that tells them whether or not we’re safe to be around. Do you see?”

Stiles jerks his head in a nod. “Does he hate me now?” he asks, voice quavery.

“I don’t know – he might.” Rising from her crouch, she unlatches the stall door. “C’mon, the only way to find out is to apologize.” She pushes it open, wide enough for Stiles to see Batman standing against the back wall, head turned towards the sound of their voices.

Pausing to swallow and take a deep breath into his almost-six-year-old lungs, Stiles steps onto the cushy sawdust of the stall. “Hey, Batman.” He extends the same hand as earlier. “I didn’t mean to scare you, I promise.” Shooting a glance over his shoulder at his mother, who nods, he takes another step inward. “I’m sorry.”

Batman whickers. When Stiles moves a little closer, he comes off the wall and circles inward until he’s facing the boy head-on. His ears flick back, then forward, then back, and then, as he blows out a careful breath, they face the front again. He butts his muzzle against Stiles’ fingers.

“I think he forgives you,” his mother says.

Stiles grins and wants to squeal, but remembers himself just in time. He pats the velvet softness of Batman’s nose instead, then moves carefully past the pony’s head, rubbing one hand along his crest, like his mother tells him to, and, slowly, warily, stretches up on his toes to wrap both arms around Batman’s neck, hugging him tight. The pony drops his head to accommodate the extra
weight, and watches through his forelock as a warm grin stretches across the face of the woman by the door. He grunts softly, then bends his neck further, twisting around so he can lip at the carrot stashed in Stiles’ back pocket.

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Stiles is six when he rides Batman for the first time, because his mother tells him that you should let a horse adjust to their new environment before dumping strangers on them. He’s never ridden before, except once for five minutes at a fair, but he knows what every piece of tack is called because of the books she bought him, and he names them all while she’s putting them on and adjusting various buckles and straps. She lets him walk Batman outside, then helps him mount properly, shows him how to set the stirrups at the correct length, and which way to hold the reins, and starts them off at a slow walk around the field, towards the corral with the sandy footing that they built just last month.

“If a horse can’t trust their rider, they can’t trust anything,” is the first lesson he learns. “If that truck passing by on the road scares you, it’ll scare him, too. If you are calm, your horse will be calm. If you are angry, your horse will become angry. You and your horse are one and the same when you ride.”

“What if he’s angry, and I’m scared?”

His mother smiles. “Then don’t let yourself be scared. Own your emotions. Own your hands and your legs. Own everything you do. You’ll be fine, then.”

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Stiles is nine when his world cracks and splinters at the edges. His parents are sitting at the dining room table when he gets home from school, so he knows something is off immediately. The dining room is only used for special occasions, or when family visit; the rest of the time, they eat around the island counter in the kitchen, so that the conversation doesn’t have to break when one of them gets up for more food.

They won’t tell him what it is at first, just that she’s very sick, but he presses, and presses, until she breaks and bites out, “He’s going to find out sooner or later” when her husband puts up a fight.

Silence falls with a snap.

She turns back to Stiles, reaches across the table towards him, until he relents and leans forward to grab her hands, a game they used to play when he was younger. He doesn’t have to stretch that far to reach her any more, and the irony rankles, once she tells him, because he knows what leukemia is, because Bobby Sanchez’s dad had it, and he died last summer.

They’re hand-in-hand, hanging on tight, but his mother is suddenly very far away.

He wakes up in the middle of the night, with the light on in his parent’s room, their voices too muffle to eavesdrop. He still hears them when he tiptoes by in the hall, down the stairs, and out the
back door, then bolts across the field to where Batman is slumbering easily on his side in his stall. The pony lifts his head when the stall door swings open, ready to rise and bolt, but relaxes back when he sees who it is.

“Hey, boy.” Stiles sinks to his knees next to Batman’s solid warmth, raising one hand to scrub his fingers in the thick winter coat covering the pony’s neck, all the protection he needs from Beacon Hills’ mild seasons. He sniffs a little, wipes it off on the back of his free hand. “Mom’s sick. And they told me she’s gonna get better, but I… I dunno. She’s got leukemia. It’s this cancer you get in your blood, makes you bruise really easily, and she – I’m scared, Batman.” Slipping in closer, he lays his head against Batman’s barrel, and closes his eyes against the tears. “I don’t want Mom to die, Batman. I looked stuff up. I’m… I don’t want her to die.”

Batman whickers, ears rotated back to listen to Stiles’ voice, but doesn’t move.

“I don’t want my Mom to die, Batman,” Stiles says, repeats it over and over, like the force of his wishing will make all the difference. “I don’t want my Mom to die; I don’t want my Mom to die; I… shit,” spitting out a word he learned just last week. “Please don’t let her die, Batman.”

Batman whickers. He stays still while Stiles settles down against his side, while his breathing evens out from hiccupping sniffles to the drawn-out inhales and exhales of sleep, and only flicks his ears in acknowledgment when a wan, tear-streaked face appears over the door, and a breath of relief sighs from a father’s lungs.

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Independence Day of the year that Stiles turns twelve is when they sit in the local funeral home and listen to a procession of friends and family from all corners of life recite anecdotes and shed tears. “She was too young,” they say. “The best ones always go too young.”

“God save her son, and her husband too,” they say. Stiles doesn’t remind them that God doesn’t exist, because she once told him that would be like telling little kids that Santa isn’t real.

“She was an angel,” they say, and Stiles hides his face, because she wasn’t.

Once, when Batman was in a foul mood, he put his head down and bucked and bucked and bucked until Stiles flew off to land in the dirt. His mother picked him up, dusted him off, and sat him down on the fence of the corral, then cornered the errant pony and stripped off his saddle and pads before climbing aboard bareback. She wasn’t a tall woman, but she still looked too big for Batman, who she nudged into a canter, and then a gallop, with only the barest hint of visible effort, legs wrapped tight around his barrel and back straight as a rod, never letting him drop his chin or veer out of line. She was stone, then, even with the sun gleaming off her shaved, helmetless head. Living stone that flexed with the rhythm of the hooves pounding beneath her; stone that sucked in air; stone that let its shoulders move, free… but stone all the same - permanent. Pink marble, at first, when they could still pretend everything was normal, gradually fading to gritty gray granite, which was so tough, it seemed like it would be around forever, and then into limestone, which withered under leukemia’s white, acidic pulse. And then she was gone.

They place her ashes in a small ceramic urn, which gets presented to Stiles’ father at the end of the ceremony. He takes it with shaking hands, then passes it off to Stiles, who holds it secure against his chest for the entire car ride home. Neither of them says a word.
Stiles doesn’t even wait for the engine to turn off before he’s out of the jeep and over the fence into the field, sprinting towards the dark shape of Batman grazing around the edge of the stable. Tears clog his vision (why is he always crying?), and he loses a shoe, then trips, and the urn bruises his chest when he crashes into the ground, while the ceramic cracks into spiderwebs, lets thin trickles of ash escape to blow away on the gusting breeze.

With hoarse, croaking sobs wrenching from his chest, Stiles curls himself around the urn, mud soaking into his dress jacket and the fancy pants they made him wear for the funeral. He screams, only to lose it in the wind. The same wind that’s stealing Ma, he thinks, and cries harder.

Batman is watching him with beady brown eyes when Stiles picks himself up off the ground and walks over, the urn going to pieces in his hands. “She’s gone,” Stiles tells him.

Batman grunts.

“And she’s never coming back.”

Another grunt.

“She gave up on us.”

Silence from Batman, as the wind picks up to pluck at Stiles’ jacket. He sniffs, just once, and walks past Batman into the stable, to the empty stall that they use as a tack room and storage for hay and grain in the winter. The urn fits easily into the back corner that adjoins Batman’s stall, and Stiles wedges it into the dirt a little, making sure that it won’t tip over of its own accord. A few pinches of ash seep out as he does so, clinging to his hands, and he doesn’t brush them away until he goes back outside. There, the wind does it for him.

It’s early afternoon, but fireworks are already starting to roar into the sky.

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Stiles is thirteen when the bills weigh too heavily upon his father’s shoulders, and the little house with its field and corral and stable is too much to maintain. Three days after Stiles enters eighth grade, a long, lean man, with green eyes that shine against his dark skin, pulls up in front of the house with a horse trailer rolling smoothly along behind his pickup. He has a soft voice, and a careful smile that makes Stiles feel a little better, but not much.

He lets Stiles walk Batman into the trailer, and waits without comment while he combs his fingers for the last time through the pony’s quasi-Mohawk, resting their foreheads together, murmuring nonsense while the tears drip off his chin. And when Stiles climbs out, red-eyed but calm, he offers a hand that is cool, dry, and rough with calluses. “I’ll see him to a good home,” he promises.

Stiles nods. “Please.”

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He spends the day (and night) of the move at Scott’s house, leaving his father to begin the process of unpacking everything into their new, tiny apartment in downtown Beacon Hills. He’s too hollow to feel ashamed. The only food he touches is a bowl of curly fries that Melissa McCall sets down between him and Scott on the couch after dinner, with a severe look at her son. He and Scott sit shoulder-to-shoulder with the bowl balanced on their legs, nibbling fries, watching cartoons, and flicking through channels on the TV during commercial breaks.

Sometime in the mid-afternoon, they land on a news report of a devastating fire not far outside of town, at the breeding and training center of the long-established Hale family. Forty Thoroughbreds and a dozen people were trapped inside: almost the entire Hale family, plus several of the staff who lived on-site. Two Hales were not present: Laura and Derek, a sister-brother pair. (Laura, a junior at the University of Washington, had been taking her seventeen-year old brother on college tours in the Northeast for the entire week.) A blaze so large and so sudden could only be arson, the police are saying. They’re already looking for evidence.

Scott clears his throat. “Didn’t Laura Hale used to babysit you?”

“A couple times, I think, yeah.” A few foggy memories of a pale girl with dark hair float to mind. Onscreen, they are panning across a wasteland of smoking beams and desiccated, leaning structures, flakes of ash still floating down onto reddish-gray lumps that no one wants to examine too closely. Sherriff Stilinski glances at the camera briefly when it passes over him, and Stiles’ guts knot. “But she and her brother made it.”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, boys, I’m headed…” Ms. McCall steps into the living room, catches sight of the disaster on the television, and freezes. Scott jumps for the remote, gets it in his hands, but then wavers uncertainly, eyes flicking between his mother and the screen.

The silence lingers, stiffening and stifling, until the report switches over to a championship bike race.

Ms. McCall swallows. “I was going to tell you that I’m leaving, and have to work late tonight,” she intones. “And now I guess you know why.”

While Scott stutters out something approximating a decent response, Stiles stares at the winding line of bicyclists on the screen, and wonders if anyone has bought Batman yet.
Four and a half months after his graduation from UC Berkley’s School of Social Welfare, Stiles gets yanked back to consciousness by Scott’s howling phone at the (what the fuck) obscene hour of five in the morning.

“Sorry, sorry.” Scott’s still tangled up in his sheets, leaning half-off the mattress as he fumbles for the right button. “I know – Hi, Deaton, what’s…okay, shit, who… yeah-nope, I’m on my way.” He snaps it shut.

Grumbling to himself, Stiles huddles lower in his bed. “Wz’up?” Across the room, the muzzy shape of Scott resolves itself into a human form when he flicks on the lamp, making Stiles wince and whine.

“The Whittemore’s colt – the one that broke his leg yesterday? He came out of sedation, started trying to run with the cast on. He’s down again, for a bit, and they’re gonna transfer him to a pool sling, but Deaton wants an extra pair of hands there, just in case.” Scott finishes rattling off his explanation as he cinches his belt. “Sorry, again.” A blue shirt that may or may not actually be Stiles’ gets pulled down over his head, and then he’s turning off the light, bounding into the kitchen to pour himself coffee (the machine’s set to start at 4:30), and stampeding out of the apartment.

Stiles listens to him thunder down the stairs as he shuts his eyes and rolls back over. It’s hard to be irritated; Deaton only calls Scott out of bed when he really thinks he’s going to need him. Golden Gate Fields’ track vet didn’t get his unofficial title by being bad at his job, and Scott’s just an intern, still settling into UC-Davis’ graduate veterinary program. He’s been Deaton’s assistant since sophomore year of high school, though, so there wasn’t any question about who would be his mentor, when it came time to look for one. Getting called out at five A.M. on a semi-regular basis is a good sign for Scott, really – a sure indication that he’s trusted, and can probably expect to have a steady source of employment for the foreseeable future.

Too bad Stiles can’t say the same thing about himself.

He yanks the blankets up over his head. “Go back to sleep, Stilinski; that’s an order.”

Insubordinate, his brain ticks further into gear, cogs whirring, trying to lay some sort of scheme. There’s nothing for it. It’s Monday, but he still has hours to go before recommencing the exhilarating work of driving a forklift through the aisles of a warehouse, and there’s nowhere to be, nothing to do this early…

Except check out the track.

Cursing subvocally, Stiles claws his way out of his nest of quilts and sheets, then sits up, curling his legs over the side of the bed. Of course, once his brain’s committed to getting on with life, it has to wrangle the rest of his body into agreeing. When he flips on the shower and gets doused with freezing water, it takes everything he has not to jump out and crawl back under the covers. The water pressure taking its dear time to kick in doesn’t help. It does eventually, though, and he steps out feeling substantially more alive. “I must be crazy,” he tells his reflection.

It doesn’t argue.

The thermometer reads low enough for him to pull on jeans and a sweatshirt as he sniffs at the
crude oil that Scott pretends is coffee. It’s hard to justify going and paying for an actual breakfast, but, he reasons, Scott will want something to eat, too, since he didn’t grab anything before leaving. Yes, Stiles is gonna be an awesome friend and bring him a bagel from the track kitchen, and he’s justified if he picks up something edible (and drinkable) for himself in the process.

At 5:42, he is meandering up to the junction of 4th Street and Gilman, hands jammed into the pockets of his hoodie, picking idly at the red lint that sprouts there. Reaching the corner, he turns down Gilman, putting the purplish smear forcasting sunrise at his back. In front of him, hanging in the sky over the bay, the stars are still bright.

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While most of Berkeley is desolate even as the sun is coming up, Golden Gate Fields breathes and flexes with the drumroll of workouts. In a spirited rejection of traditional Monday-morning gogginess, there is a constant rotation of horses on the track, blowing steam, snorting, stomping hooves, and tossing manes, before and after and while thundering over the dirt or turf.

Stiles leans against the rail, far from any of the trainers, and sucks down some of the coffee he pilfered from the track kitchen. It isn’t much better than Scott’s (who was tight-lipped when Stiles handed him a bagel slathered with peanut butter and queried after the colt, but what he did say sounded optimistic), but the smell alone doesn’t make him gag, so that’s all for the better. Add in the loose-limbed movements of horses and exercise riders as an unwinding synergy that settles down the length of his spine and makes him relax, bit by bit, because these are all horse people here this early – every one of them – and he feels better than he has in days.

As he’s loitering about, a filly ambles up to the gap in the rail, the well-known figure of Chris Argent walking beside her, head tilted back to converse with the solidly-built, dark-skinned man seated atop his charge. The rider nods once, guiding the horse onto the track as Argent clasps his knee and steps back, tugging binoculars from his jacket pockets and slipping over to stand apart from the other trainers at the rail.

The filly, a massive fleabitten gray with hindquarters that look capable of powering a rocket, strides out in long, easy jog that devours ground. By the time she passes Stiles, she’s trying to hop up into a canter. Her rider shakes his head every time she pops back on her hindquarters, nudges her off, holding her on the bit so that she can’t go anywhere. They fade into the kicked-up dust and early-morning shadows as they pass the grandstand, but Stiles picks them out again a few minutes later, rolling smoothly down the backstretch.

When they hit the five-eighths pole, the filly explodes forward as her rider lunges up over her withers, and, yeah, Stiles thinks she really could power a rocket. The line of trainers cease their discussion to track her, thumbing stopwatches, and Chris Argent, with the binoculars in one hand and his stopwatch in the other, smiles.

Stiles gets her for the five-eighths in fifty-eight and change, and feels faint. Twelve seconds a furlong is amazing in a race – running clear of that in a morning breeze, even if the track were fast as lightning, rings wild, especially since Argent doesn’t look bitter, like his horse is getting blown out for no reason. She’s just… crazy fast.

He inches a few feet closer to the trainers, listening hard, until he catches a muttered “fifty-eight” and knows he’s correct.
The wind sighs agreement, plucking at his hood and the filly’s mane as she prances over to the rail, barely blowing, her exercise rider grinning from her back. “Not bad for a hand ride, eh, boss?” he calls, and Argent inclines his head in recognition as he walks over to take hold of the big horse’s bridle.

“Who is that?” Stiles mutters, watching them leave.

“Argent’s newest speed demon? Phoenix Flight. Like she needs to be any more intimidating.” When Stiles whips around, he’s facing a thin figure almost as angular as himself, with cheekbones that jut like they want to slice through the white, white skin binding them, and a mop of curls on top if it all. The groom – that’s what he must be; Stiles has seen him around before, hot-walking horses – cracks his gum and smiles thinly, like a threat. “You’re Stiles, aren’t you? Scott’s friend?”

Stiles blinks at the hand he extends, before the social nicety computes and he remembers to shake it. “You know Scott?”

“Who doesn’t know Scott?” the groom tosses out. “He’s everywhere.” His smile softens into something slightly less ominous. “I’m Isaac.”

A gear clicks in Stiles’ head. “Isaac Lahey? Oh, yeah, Scott, he, uh – he mentioned you, once.” Twenty times, more like, per week, every week, because Scott thinks Isaac is the bestest thing ever, with the possible exception of Allison Argent, who he’s been dating since freshman year of college, and, oh, maybe Stiles, is pretty cool, too. (No, he’s not bitter.) He doesn’t say any of that, though, because Isaac’s eyes brighten and his posture relaxes a bit, just from that casual notice. “Scott’s a cool dude,” Stiles tacks on helpfully.

“Yeah, yeah, I –”

“You probably see him more than I do, since he’s always out with Allison at night.” Okay, maybe Stiles is a little bitter. Maybe he’s also a bit of an asshole this early in the morning.

One corner of Isaac’s mouth twitches up, though, and he hums as he nods. “You can’t put a woman who rides like her in front of a guy and expect him to say no when she calls.”

Stiles is pretty sure he’ll find an innuendo in there if he looks hard enough. He decides not to, and instead gulps down a mouthful of coffee while Isaac glances sideways to watch another horse rip by on the track. His hand comes up to press idly at his cheekbone as he stares after it. When Stiles clears his throat, he startles.

“You alright?”

The hand drops. “Yeah, it’s good. Old habit.” The hooked-corner smile is back, but twisted off-kilter. “Hey, I gotta go, but I’ll see you around sometime, probably, yeah?” he says, backing towards the gap in the rail, where a copper-chestnut colt is coming to a halt past the line of trainers, facing back towards the barns, tossing his head as his rider dismounts in one smooth slide, the filtered beams of sunrise catching on her bright blond braid. “Oh, and Stiles?”

Stiles freezes mid-sip. “Mmmh?”

“You got a job?”

He wrinkles his nose and makes a sort of side-to-side shrugging gesture to indicate that, yes, he has one, but no, he really doesn’t enjoy it.
Isaac’s grin is a flash of teeth. “You ever think of looking for a change, come by the Hale barn. We could use another handler, and Scott says you know horses.” And then he’s turning away, collecting the chestnut’s reins in one hand and high-fiving its rider with the other. The broad-shouldered, solemn-featured woman that Laura Hale turned into steps up beside the rider as she’s pulling off her helmet, and they walk a few feet off from Isaac as he leads the horse back towards the barn, heads bent together in conversation.

Stiles watches them vanish around the corner of a building, brain stuck in the mud over Isaac’s offer. When Scott comes out of nowhere to poke him in the ribs, he startles.

“Yo, dude, it’s 7:15. Don’t you need to get to work soon?”

“Shit,” Stiles says, because he does, because his life sucks. “Crap, I guess – hi, bye, I’ll see you tonight?”

“Sure, whatever,” Scott agrees, shoving him in the direction of the parking lot. “I just saw the bus pulling up – run.”

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Allison’s aggressively sexy knee-highs sitting next to Scott’s well-crusted sneakers are the first thing Stiles sees when he opens the door that night. A solid thirty seconds get wasted while he decides whether or not to be exasperated over their perpetual attachment. But then – still undecided – he wanders into the main living area to see his roommate sacked out on the couch, snoring. On the floor next to his head, combing her fingers through his hair, is Allison, who looks around just long enough to smile. “I brought quesadillas from Casa Coyotepec. Knock yourself out.”

Right then, with an empty belly growling ferociously, Stiles sort of wants to marry her. He also feels slightly horrible for resenting her presence, thanks very much. He sets two quesadillas on an orange plastic plate, and curls up on the couch across from her, knees tucked up into his chest. The TV is airing the vice-presidential debate, because Allison is one of the five people in the country who is actually interested in it. She’s rolling her eyes every couple of minutes, though, with increasing regularity, until, when the candidates deteriorate into talking over each other at the top of their lungs, she grabs the remote and silences them mid-rant.

“Idiocy,” she declares.

Stiles watches Joe Biden rant mutely while he finishes inhaling his first quesadilla. “Can I ask a question that has nothing to do with national politics?”

“Please.”

“What’re the Hales like?”

“The Hales?” Allison frowns, pensive. “Their family was big in Cali racing back before that fire – when people say it wiped out everything they had, it really did. They used to only race their own horses – can’t, now; got none left. Most of the string they had left got sold, and the racers have aged out, so I think they’ve only got a handful of breeding stock. Better than nothing, but, still…” She sighs. “The kids are basically running on reputation right now – but plenty of people will take a chance on that, just because of their surname, so it’s not like they’re starving.” Poking at the crumbs on her plate, licking them off her finger one by one, she hunches one shoulder in a shrug.
“It’s the sister really running the show anyway – Lauren, is it?”

“Laura. I think the brother’s called Derek.”

“Right, right. But Laura – my mom says both kids practically grew up on the backside, but Laura was big into the training even then. Her brother just wanted to ride. I guess that’s probably what saved them: people knowing her as a trainer, as intelligent, as good with horses. That family, though, the ones that they bred… I don’t know what they did, but they had some of the largest Thoroughbreds I’ve ever heard of. They’d get as big as Forego. Bigger, even.” Her eyes dance. “My grandfather paid an arm and a leg for one of their runts a bit before the fire, and he never did well, but we started breeding him a couple years back, and his foals, they’re, they’re…” She trails off, staring past the television screen, lips quirked up into the barest smile.

Stiles waits until she blinks and comes back to earth before opening his mouth again: “Is that fleabitten gray one of them?”

“Phoenix?” And Allison full-on beams. “Yeah – she’s gorgeous, isn’t she? Sixteen-three, almost thirteen hundred pounds… have you seen her run?”

“Five furlongs in fifty-eight and a fifth for a morning breeze,” Stiles rattles off, still reeling the memory of it.

Ducking her head, Allison closes her eyes, still grinning. “We’ve got another filly by him – a yearling, black, with a white star. Like Ruffian come again.”

Stiles groans. “On my god, stop, stop; you’re going to jinx them.”

“Can you imagine, though?” Allison leans towards him, speeches on the television completely forgotten, the quesadilla abandoned in her lap. “Imagine that come again, twice over. That speed, that perfection…”

“That horrible tragedy?”

Allison sighs. “Why did Ruffian have to be put down?”

Blinking at her, Stiles lists off the Cliffs Notes of the story: “She broke down during a match race, and then all but tore her leg to nothingness by shattering the cast as she was coming out of sedation because she thought she was still runni-”

“Why did Scott get hauled out of bed at five this morning?”

“I’m not saying…” He’s lost this one, Stiles knows, because Ruffian, and the vets that couldn’t save her, happened forty years ago. “Whatever. You win.”

“Exactly.” She’s smirking, but he sees her rattle her knuckles against the cheap wood of the sofa leg anyway.

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Like the overworked grad student that he is, Scott doesn’t wake up until well after midnight, and then it’s only to roll off the couch and stumble, groaning, into his own bed. Stiles is lying on his
back, wide awake, when he enters.

“Hey.”

Already half-sunk down onto his mattress, Scott freezes. “Shit, did I wake you up?”

“Nah, nah.” Stiles shoves himself up into a sitting position while, across the room, Scott finishes collapsing into a pile of limbs. “I got a job offer today.”

Scott grunts.

“Well, what’s this one?”

“From Isaac – Isaac Lahey. To be, uh, a groom for the Hales.”

Another grunt, with more interest this time. Once Scott figures out that Stiles is waiting for him to say something, he rustles around a bit, and gets his face out of the sheets in the process so he’s not speaking through cloth. “Are you gonna take it?”

Stiles shrugs, even though it’s too dark to see. He can hear Scott maneuvering himself under the blankets across the room. “I don’t know.”

A minute of strained silence, then: “Dude, it’s Laura Hale.” His tone might as well be saying “It’s the Pope” to a devout Catholic.

“The last time I rode, I was on Batman,” Stiles reminds him.

Somewhere between Isaac’s name and Batman’s, Scott has levered himself back to complete consciousness: “Like that makes a difference. Are they asking you to ride the horses, or just handle them?” But then he hesitates. “I don’t know what you want me to say, dude.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t, either.” Forklift-driver isn’t the sort of job you get paid six figures for, but neither is being a groom, and the specter of his mother looms over all the equine-related portions of his childhood (not to mention everything else, but, you know, this is different). He hasn’t even touched a horse since Batman.

“When’s the last time you were within five feet of a horse?”

“I was just thinking about that – ” and Stiles hates how his voice breaks on – “Ten years.” He swallows. “Why the hell’d Isaac even ask me, anyway?”

“’Cause I know you, and Deaton knows you, and anyone who’s talked to Allison in the last year knows about your Kelso vs. Forego debate, and Laura Hale knows you because she used to babysit you, and also you hang out around the track all the time?”

Stiles lets that sink in for a minute. “Why are you only intelligent when it’s least helpful?”

“Shut up,” Scott says back.

Stiles sighs, lying back down again. He hears Scott mutter something incomprehensible and turn over, but doesn’t ask about it, just studies the stick-on, glow-in-the-dark stars that they have jammed on randomly all over the ceiling and walls, while Scott’s breathing winds down as he lulls himself back to sleep.

If he searches hard for it, he can catch the faint, warm smell of horses that permeates everything Scott owns, and wonders how long it will take before his own belongings are the same way.
A Post-it with “Isaac’s #” followed by a scrawled string of digits and “got ride w/ Allison” is stuck to Stiles’ chest when his alarm starts beeping the next morning. He slaps off the racket, and then stares at the tiny bit of paper for a couple of seconds before hauling himself out of bed and plucking it off to set on his bedside table.

He showers in a daze, then dials his boss while waiting for his toast.

Harris answers with a crisp, “Stilinski,” chillier than dry ice. “About to rattle off some half-baked excuse as to why you’re not coming in today?”

“I quit.”

A beat of silence.

“Excuse me?”

“I quit,” Stiles reiterates, hanging up before the sputtering on the other end can build enough to kick off an explosion. His phone rings as the toast pops up, but the caller ID reads ‘Señor Foophycakes’ so he ignores its vaguely-threatening buzz, punching in Isaac’s number instead. He has a miniature panic attack during the four rings it takes Isaac to pick up.

“How soon can you get here?”

He thinks Isaac might be a little shell-shocked by the sheer volume of the words just dumped on him before eight in the morning, because he takes a minute to respond. When he does, though, it’s not with, “Sucks to be you, loser,” but rather, “How soon can you get here?”

Stiles glances at the Post-it. “Ten minutes,” he says, and grabs Scott’s bike lock off the countertop.
“It’s a good thing today’s Tuesday,” is the first thing Isaac says to him. “No races – a bit easier to get you into the swing of things.” They’re walking towards the Hale barn, Stiles on Isaac’s left side, and a blood-bay mare stepping along gracefully on his right. Schizophrenia is Zenyatta’s cousin, Stiles is told, sired by a son of the famous mare’s half-sister. “Jackie rode her in the California Stakes, down in Hollywood; they won by a head – that was back in June, a couple weeks after she was sent to us,” Isaac informs him. “She’s the sweetest stakes winner you’ll ever meet.”

“Jackie?” Stiles says. “As in Jacqueline Vaca?”

“The one and only. She and Laura are buds – they went to school together – and she rides a lot of our horses.” Isaac gives him a careful look. “She’s the best jockey on the West Coast.” Those two sentences bear a lot of extra meaning, because Jacqueline Vaca isn’t just the best jockey on the West Coast; she’s also Berkley’s hometown hero, raised here after being brought to the US from Guatemala when she was two years old, and has been banned from a collection of tracks in the South, for a list of reasons that vary in clarity, coherency, and how thinly they veil the declaration of: “you’re not allowed to ride here because you were born with a penis but identify as a woman”.

Stiles pulls one hand out of his pocket to scrub at his buzz cut. “If I ask for her autograph, will she beat me with her crop?”

When Isaac snorts, it sounds startled out of him. “Probably. Jackie’s fine once she knows you, but she’s… careful, too. People like her have to be.” He slackens his pace, handing Stiles the reins. “Here: you walk Schizo; I’ll talk. I know Scott says –”

“Am I just here on Scott’s recommendation?” interrupts Stiles.

“Allison’s too.” Isaac does his half-smile thing. “Anyway, a stable-full of Thoroughbreds is a bit different from one pony –”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“If you interrupt Laura, she’ll beat you with a stirrup leather,” Isaac says, smooth, like he didn’t just get cut off mid-sentence.

“I, uh.” Stiles winces. “I’ll remember that. Sorry.” He runs his hand back and forth along the reins, following the contours of the thin straps woven through them for grip. Schizo pulls on him, turning her head to eye a line of bushes they’re passing, and he sets his hand on her neck to bring her attention back around. Ten years since he touched a horse, but when he tugs on the reins, she follows his lead, easy as can be. It shoots a thrill through his veins.

“I told you she was sweet,” and wow, Stiles kind of forgot he wasn’t alone. But Isaac doesn’t seem to mind – he resumes talking as he directs them to the left when they reach the next row of compound-barns, each huge building home to a cluster of stables lined up side-by-side.

“We’re a little in the middle of things,” he explains. “But where we are, it’s harder for the reporters to find us, and we don’t get so much noise from the freeway or the bay at night. Wash stall and hotwalkers are over there,” he nods at the wide alley between barns. “We’ll drop her tack, get her hooked up, and you’ll get a little tour, yeah?”

Stiles throat clogs up as he follows Isaac towards where the entryway doors of the Hale stable are
standing wide open, Schizophrenia perking up her ears and quickening her pace as they near her home. His “yeah” comes seconds late, after his feet have already hit the well-worn cement floor, and the barn engulfs him.

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Even if Isaac did drop out of high school at the first opportunity, and skipped away from his father’s house without pausing to consider a GED, that doesn’t make him dumb; that makes him practical. There are a eleven horses under his charge before he brings in Stiles (and that’s not counting Derek’s little project, who is hell and a half all on his own), and the Hales have enough on their hands by way of training that there is a limit to how much assistance he can expect. He knows it. They know it. The damn exercise riders know it, and the shame he feels when he’s walking Schizo back from the track one morning and finds Boyd hosing down McGatsby (registered as Scotch Fitzgerald) makes his face burn and his speech clip.

He goes to Laura within the hour. “Let me find someone else to help,” he pleads. “Don’t make the damn riders do more than they’re being paid for.”

She looks at him for a long moment, because they both know how he feels about pity, and takes her time nodding. “If you can find someone,” she tells him.

People in the racing business are superstitious; it’s a fact of life. Losing most of your family and stable in a fire is about the ugliest sort of omen you can slap a trainer with. Isaac is here because you can’t live off of flat nothing in the greater San Francisco area, and because working with horses is the only thing he could ever really say he enjoyed. Nobody – especially not the riders, who all work for a dozen other trainers besides the Hales and can say any damn thing they want – pretends that the Hales aren’t surviving off their surname right now. Anyone else? That fire would have spelled the end. Hell, even Jackie’s only here because she and Laura made each other friendship bracelets in high school or something crazy like that. They’re running on memories.

It’s been a year and a half, though, and this summer was a good one. Cold Slough – their newest addition, a bullet-sleek, two-year old filly with a dark gray coat and more personality than a horse has any right to – took home the Sorrento Stakes in August; Schizo had her glory down in Hollywood in June; and Sticky Stones pulled an upset at the same meet, beating out the Argents’ stalwart mare, Silveritis, by a nose on a track so muddy it was practically a swamp. (Isaac wasn’t there to see it in person – Laura made the trip as her own groom and exercise rider – but he watched with Scott on the television in the track kitchen, and hugged him, whooping, when the photo-finish results appeared onscreen). Maybe they’re finally getting somewhere.

He watches Stiles clip Schizo into the hotwalker with a flicker of optimism taking root in his brain. *If* Stiles sticks around, *if* they keep getting horses, *if* they keep winning… the world may gradually put itself back together again – for the Hales, anyway. The planet as a whole is a tad much to ask for.

Stiles looked daunted before setting foot in the barn the first time, even if they spent less than ninety seconds in there, and only a hint of color has returned to his face thus far. If this were anywhere else, he’d be rolling his eyes, but The Yogimeister is currently flipping shit over something inside, and it’s hard to judge someone who’s never had to wrangle the bastard into line before. There’s a reason Isaac leaves that task to Derek.
The racket abates with a snap of an order issued by a female voice. As the soft clopping of Schizo’s hooves becomes audible, the line of Stiles’ shoulders relaxes. His stride lengthens as he walks back to Isaac’s side. “Time for that tour, now?”

“Follow me,” Isaac says, leading him back past the wash stall, around to the front entrance. As they step under the eaves, he nods to the wooden double-doors to their left, which are standing open. “That’s the main tack room, but Laura’s got an office in there, too. If you can’t find her? Ninety-five percent chance that she’s in there, or at the track.” He doesn’t look back to check if Stiles is following. “As you can see, there’s another tack room down there – ” he points halfway down the row, across the aisle, to another set of doors “ – that’s got a bathroom in the back corner, and there’s a fold-down cot in there, should you ever need to stay overnight.” A deep-throated neigh sounds from near the entryway; a thin, mud-brown stallion with a stripe down the full length of his face has his head hanging over his stall door, nostrils blown wide, sucking in Stiles’ scent. Stiles stays still, watching Stoner right back, which Isaac approves of. “That’s Shifting Wind – we call him Stoner. He’s ungelded and will take your hand off.”

“Why Stoner, then?” Stiles asks, then pauses. “Good on turf?”


The dun filly in the next stall pins her ears and yanks her head back from where she was inching out, eyeing Stoner’s neck.

Stiles snorts, then blinks. “Is that Sticky Stones? Who pulled that upset in the Vanity Handicap? Scott was all excited when that happened – he always cheers for you guys against the Argents.” He stops abruptly, like he’s just said something he wasn’t supposed to.

Isaac is aware that his own face is flushed, but he clears his throat and turns away so it doesn’t show. He sets his hand on the door of the first stall after the tack room. “We’re using this as our feed room; I’ll walk you through all the specifics later, but let’s get down to the other end first; that’s where all your horses are gonna be. You’ll have five – that monster making all the noise earlier, The Yogimeister, is Derek Hale’s personal project. Don’t worry about him.”

“Personal project?”

“My brother, contrary to popular belief, is in possession of a beating heart.” Boot-heels thudding as she steps from the tack room down into the main aisle, Laura Hale runs a studious eye over Stiles. “You’ve grown.”

Stiles’ mouth twitches. “Funny how that happens.”

“Indeed,” she muses, sounding preoccupied. “I know Isaac all but dug you up out of the mud, but I’m not in the habit of hiding behind pretenses – another difference between the supposedly-interchangeable Hales,” and her smile is sharp as the blade of a butcher knife with all its implications. “We are clawing through the mud to climb this ladder. Isaac’s lost every ounce of baby fat that he had when he started here eighteen months ago.”

Because he really doesn’t need to listen to half-pitying stories about himself, Isaac glances at the stall to his left, and makes use of the distraction that is Thirteen Shots poking his head out, ears perked, ready to bolt even in the confines of his stall. He eases over to the colt, laying a steadying hand on the curve of his neck. “Chill, Booze. It’s just the new guy.” He rubs the blaze that flashes bright white against rest of the copper-chestnut’s face. “You’re gonna have to get used to him.”

Booze is high-strung like no other Thoroughbred that Isaac has ever dealt with. A long-shot closer
owned by the same soft-hearted woman who sent them Scotch Fitzgerald, he’s won three of his
twelve starts, all of those under Jackie, all since arriving at the Hales’ in January. The wins were
allowance races, but Jackie and another Hale-friendly jockey, Lydia Martin, have taken him to
place and show in a few low-grade stakes races. It’s standard format for him to be soaked in sweat
by the end of the post parade, he gets so worked up by the crowd. He has to trail the field for most
of the race to keep from losing it, but if his jockey slams on the gas at the right moment as they
come into the stretch, that nervous energy gets converted into velocity, and he has the capacity to
go bounding past the competition.

Reflecting on all of this, Isaac leans his head into The Booze’s, tuning out Laura’s spiel of early
mornings, less-than-stellar pay, getting trampled and bitten and shoved around by horses, bitched
out by humans, and being hauled back and forth across the state every couple weeks for meets or
intermittent races. He’s heard it before, and has the untold luxury of living it.

Booze smells like hay, salt, and horse. Isaac breathes it in, closing his eyes while his mind wriggles
its way back to Scott and Allison and races. He wonders if it’s a sort of bet – if Scott won
something, when Sass snuck into the winner’s circle. His gut twists.

Laura nudges his shoulder. “Don’t fall asleep yet, Lahey; you’ve got a tour to give.”

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recognizes a few of their names from watching them race, and can’t help but feel a little proud.
(Cold Slough, owned by the famously-picky Whittemores, is a fast-rising star despite being only
two and a half, and watching Isaac tug on her ears and call her ‘Slaw’ makes his head spin.)

“You’ll learn all their quirks within days,” Isaac reassures him. “For now, just know that we
nicknamed Sovereign King ‘Bush’ because he is exactly that dumb, and Ernest – For Lack Of An
E – will do anything if he thinks he’ll get food or treats out of it.”

“Where do you guys come up with these names?” Stiles asks, letting Nine-Yard Run – AKA Pig,
apparently – wuff warm breaths across his palm.

Isaac does his hooked-corner smile. “People who hang around the Hales too much tend to pick up
Laura’s sense of humor. You ever heard of that book that doesn’t use the letter E?”

“Yeah – Gadsby?”

“Written by a dude named Ernest Vincent Wright.” Shrugging one shoulder, Isaac shoves his
hands into his pockets. “Pig’s similar to Stoner. That scrawny little lady loves mud. And Boyd, one
of the riders, just started with Slaw for this one here - like coleslaw, I guess. ”

He nods at Cold Slough, who is neighbor to Pig, and pokes her head over her door like she knows they’re talking
about her, butting it into Isaac’s shoulder. She shoves at it until he lifts a hand to ruffle her mane,
tangling the long strands around his fingers while he studies the muddy brown of her coat. “It all
makes sense once you’ve been here a while,” he finishes lamely.

Stiles watches them a moment, then looks back at Pig, tickling at the snip on the end of her muzzle
with one finger while admiring how it and her two back stockings set off the rest of her body,
which is a pale, somewhat-muddy bay. He licks his dry lips. “So what’s the deal with The – with
Yogi? How’d he end up here?”

Quick as a death, Isaac’s mouth flattens into a thin line. “Derek picked him up at some auction they passed through at the beginning of the summer. They weren’t even… They were there to meet with an owner from New York who was checking out some of the higher-class stock. Derek walked out halfway through the conversation, came back with a psychopath, and then offended the guy so badly with his bluntness that he left immediately. Laura was calling it the dumbest thing he’d ever done even before they got back here, and she laid it out right away: his fuck-up equals his nightmare. And because stubborn pride runs in the family… here he is. Slaw’s the only one with enough spine and dignity to bite back and shut him up instead of turning it into a fight, and he’d just tear himself to pieces in isolation, so they get to be neighbors.”

“Sounds fun.” Craning his neck for a better view of the gelding, Stiles can’t help but be surprised that something so ugly found its way into a fairly-well-respected stable. The Yogimeister is roughly a mile and a half of neck, plus two miles of spine, and his high withers mean that he’s always running downhill. There’s an oval-shaped white star in the center of his forehead and socks on his back feet, but apart from that he’s a textbook dark bay, with fetlocks that are actually black, and even the high points of his hindquarters are a soft brown in the dull light of the barn. “Is he a bolter or… or what?”

Isaac sighs. “He’ll take the arm off anyone he can reach when he’s on a lead rope, and the one time Boyd rode him, he said it was like holding up a twelve-hundred-pound dead weight that can turn on a dime and keeps trying to use its momentum to slingshot you off its back. The horse is crazy.” He glances back over his shoulder at the gelding, who pins his ears and turns away. “I can’t imagine what he must have been like before they chapped his balls off. Even Jackie won’t ride him, and she races McGatsby, who is savage on the track.”

Pig is nosing her way up Stiles’ arm while he scratches under her mane. “So what do they do with him, then?”

“Derek grooms him and rides him for workouts – just guns him and sits back as far as he can to hold his head up, try to make the bastard build some neck muscles, so some day he’ll do it on his own.” Isaac runs a hand through his curls, then drops it back to Slaw’s neck when she shoves her forehead into his chest. “Dina rode him in the one start he’s had with us, took third in an allowance; she just got off being a bug this spring, so she’ll ride anything – ” Standard for a newly-minted jockey, Stiles thinks. “She races Stoner, too, and, uh, Howard. Howard’s Call. We also call him Prostate Cancer; you get to do that math on your own. Laura’s joke. And Dina’s. She’s almost as bitchy as Derek, but she doesn’t even pretend to have a heart, so she and Yogi work out together.” He stumbles to a halt, awkward, like he’s unused to speaking for so long.

Stiles keeps probing. “Where is the infamous Derek Hale, anyway?”

“Dentist’s – getting a filling? I think? I don’t know. He’s probably gonna be a real joy to deal with when he gets back, though, no matter what it is.” Isaac cracks his gum and loosens, gaze flicking beyond Stiles’ shoulder. “Turn around.”

Stiles does.

An odd couple is making their way down the aisle. The dark-skinned fellow who he watched ride Phoenix Flight yesterday walks with easy, rolling movements, pausing to brush his knuckles across the noses poking out at him. Beside him swaggers a blonde woman whose face also rings familiar. She grins like a sadist, first at him, then at Isaac, clicking her tongue. “Fresh meat?”

“Still bloody.” Isaac inclines his head to them. “Erica, Boyd – this is Stiles. Stiles: Erica and
Boyd."

“Pretty sure we’ve seen him around,” Boyd muses from where he’s standing at BurymewherewhereIfall’s stall, scratching the big black gelding’s chin. His gaze settles on Stiles like a lodestone. “Welcome to the crew.”

“Thanks.”

Erica clears her throat. “Laura wants Pig and Sass on the track in ten minutes; wants to run ‘em off each other a bit, since it’s emptying out.”

At Stiles’ back, Pig whickers, lifting her head to blow hay-scented breath through his hair. Neither of the riders bothers to pretend that the sight doesn’t make them smile.

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The sun is setting before they close up the barn. Stiles chews on the string of his hoodie as he watches Isaac flick off the huge overhead lights. A faint glow still spills from Laura’s tack room, where she’s hunched over her desk, filling out paperwork. (Derek never turned up after going to the dentist, which somehow manages to present Stiles with twin feelings of relief and foreboding, because they’re going to have to come face-to-face eventually, and all the evidence points to Derek Hale being a perfect storm of poor judgment and monumental stubbornness.)

“There’s a night watchman for every barn, right?”

“Yeah; Finstock’s ours. Laura’ll stick around until he turns up. The horses love him.”

Isaac’s sneakers look like they were red, once upon a time, but now they’re a shade of grayish-brown: the color of the track when it’s raining hard, and the dirt is all churned up and waterlogged, and a sea of gray-brown is all that can be seen from the stands. Stiles watches them walk back towards him without processing the movement.

“Still willing to be here by five-thirty tomorrow?” He jumps a little at the query.

“Yeah – yeah. I’m gonna have to buy my own bike, but, uh, yeah.” He spares a moment to mourn his beloved Jeep, which gave up the ghost during his final semester at Berkeley, while they haul their bikes out of the empty stall between Sass’ and McGatsby’s. They pedal out to the parking lot, whirring of their chains the only sound as shadows swallow up the rows of stables behind them, the miles of dirt paths between them, and the grandstand casts clean, solemn darkness over the concentric oval tracks. At the entrance to the parking lot, they pause.

A horse’s bellow rings over the grounds, all but lost under the distant roar of traffic.

Isaac’s mouth twitches up at one corner. “The Yogimeister,” he says, meeting Stiles’ eyes. “Five-thirty tomorrow.”

“Five-thirty tomorrow,” Stiles agrees, hiking his weight up onto the pedals, steering with one hand so he can salute with the other. “See you then.” He catches the first bob of Isaac’s nod as he pedals off, the sun sinking into the earth on his left side, the city rising from it on his right.
For All These Times, Son

Because Scott is the bestest friend ever and doesn’t have to wake up at five A.M., Stiles is able to wheedle permission to use his bike until the one Stiles dug up online (welcome to the 21st century) turns up on Sunday. And maybe he got that permission by waking Scott up at five A.M. with his alarm and turning on the light and issuing veiled threats about sabotaging Scott’s mattress, but he still got it. Plus, Scott has a girlfriend who also works at the track and can drive him, and Stiles doesn’t. So there.

He walks into the Hale barn at five-twenty-nine to find Isaac elbow-deep in feed tubs, The Yogimeister kicking at the walls, and everyone else hanging their heads over their doors, eyes locked on the feed room.

Isaac doesn’t waste breath on a greeting. “I’ll measure; you get everyone their bucket. Watch Howard and McGatsby, just shove Ernest out of the way if he gets greedy, and have a hand on Stoner’s halter the entire time you’re in his stall – same for Yogi.” Grain rattles off the scoop into the feed bucket that has Bush scrawled on a piece of scotch tape on its front. “Do Bury first; he needs to be on the track by six. Booze and Ernest next. Derek’ll be here soon.”

Head spinning, Stiles grabs the buckets for Bury and Ernest, and goes.

By the time the clock on Laura’s desk reads 5:42, the horses are all crunching away, Isaac is rubbing at his lower back as he straightens out of his hunched-over position, and Stiles is piling Bury’s tack on the wooden stand beside his door while the gelding finishes licking up his breakfast.

“Hey, Stiles?”

“Yeah?”

Isaac sets his hands on the back of his pelvis and arches his spine, vertebrae cracking. “After you walk Bury out to the track, if you swing by the kitchen and grab me a coffee – six sugars, no milk – I’ll haul Ernest out of his stall and start wrapping his legs for you.”

“Six?” Stiles says.

“Well?”

Bury’s head comes up, ears perked forward, so Stiles unlatches the door, taking hold of his halter and leading him into the aisle. “I’m not paying for it,” he says as he’s snapping on the cross-ties.

Isaac makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat at that, but shoves a crumpled bill down the back of Stiles’ shirt when he walks past, headed for the tack room.

Squawking in discomfort, Stiles shakes it out, catches it in his palm, and holds up the fiver in disbelief. “How expensive —”

“Get yourself something, too.” Isaac remerges with a girth thrown over one shoulder, a saddle propped against his hip. “Believe me: you’ll need it.”

“I have borderline ADD,” Stiles tells him.

“And you got up at five, and Derek is the grumpiest bitch alive before sunrise, so…” Isaac hefts the
saddle up to set it on Booze’s door. “Decide for yourself. You can pay tomorrow.”

Stiles rolls his eyes, settling the baby pad just behind the highest point of Bury’s withers. He has to stretch onto his toes to place the saddle properly, because, while he is a complete mushball, Bury is still a monstrous seventeen hands at the shoulder. As he’s pulling the gelding’s bridle off its hook, Allison’s Forego comment springs to mind. “Random question: did all the Hale horses die in the fire?”

“A handful made it out – uh, hey, look at me.” Stiles does. Isaac is leaning against Booze’s door, waiting for the coppery colt to inhale the last of his oats. He jerks a thumb over his shoulder at where an unfamiliar figure is pacing down the row of barns beside the easy, loping shape of Boyd. “The bastard of the castle approaches.”

“Oh.” Stiles’ throat clicks as he swallows.

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The interesting thing about Derek Hale is that, physically, he is not the world’s most imposing figure – which is not to say that he isn’t menacing, but Stiles was sort of expecting… more. Granted: while in college, Stiles pituitary gland dumped out one last huge load of hormones, so he has Derek beat by a full inch, height-wise, as do Boyd and Isaac, and while Derek’s got all the lean, solid muscle of a lifelong equestrian, he’s nothing spectacular when compared to Boyd’s bulk. It’s the hard eyes in the white face, and the self-declared authority that boils off his skin which combine to give Derek the presence of Goliath. Stiles dislikes him on sight.

Which is fine, apparently, since Derek doesn’t say a word to anyone, just stalks past where Stiles is slipping the bit into Bury’s mouth, coming to a halt at The Yogimeister’s door, matching him glower for glower.

Boyd knocks Stiles’ shoulder with his own as he’s buckling the noseband. “He’s extra-sour before the first workouts. Ignore him until he loosens up.”

Stiles decides that Boyd is his favorite exercise rider. They walk out to the track side-by-side, and after giving him a leg up by the gap in the rail, Stiles tells him, “I’m being sent to get Isaac coffee – do you want anything?”

Boyd purses his wide lips for a moment. “One sugar, one milk, and you’ll want to get Erica a cup, too: double of both.”

Stiles curses under his breath. “I’m not –”

But Boyd has already collected Bury’s reins and is wheeling away. “Laura’s three sugars and two milks; Derek’s black.” His laugh rings through the morning fog as Bury’s trot extends across the dirt.

String of expletives lengthening, Stiles digs into his pocket for his wallet as he turns away from the track. Derek’s walking towards him, shoulders hunched up inside his leather jacket, face blank. Their eyes meet for a fraction of a second that swells past the laws of time. Then Derek nods once and moves past him to stand by the rail, and Stiles is headed for the kitchen. He waits until he’s out of earshot before releasing the breath that he’d been holding.
Erica sprouts from the shadows as he’s walking back from the kitchen, snags her cup from the carton/tray combo in his hands, and pecks him on the cheek with a knowing smirk. “Boyd?”

Stiles grunts, irritated.

She laughs, but not at him – or, at least, he doesn’t think so. She does keep one eye on him for the entirety of the short walk, that smirk tugging further at her mouth whenever her gaze drifts to land on the quartet of drinks still in the carrier.

Laura’s in the aisle when they get back, crouched beside Booze’s front feet, while Isaac stands off to the side, rubbing Sass’ poll as he watches Laura run her palm up and down the colt’s left fore cannon bone. “Morning, Erica,” she says, distracted, then looks up, smile taking her face by surprise. “You really know the way to a girl’s heart, don’t you, Stiles?”

“Yeah, well, someone kicked off an avalanche,” he says, glaring at Isaac when he ambles over to study the cups a moment, before picking out the one with his name on it. “You knew I was going to ask Boyd if he wanted something, and then get roped into doing everyone, didn’t you?”

Isaac takes a sip, then shrugs when he catches Stiles’ gaze. “Live and learn.” He turns his head to address Laura: “He got one for Derek and everything.”

“Cute.” Her attention slips away from them, over to Erica. “I don’t feel any heat, but splints are a bitch, so warm him up slow. I don’t want him breezing five furlongs in less than one-ten – one-fifteen, if you can help it. I’ll be out in a few minutes. And slap Derek on the head for me and tell him he’s got coffee waiting.”

“Done and done.” Erica sets her own cup atop a tack box, right beside Isaac’s, and takes up position at Booze’s right shoulder while Isaac draws the reins over the colt’s head, the two of them filling most of his view around the blinders and shadow roll attached to his bridle. He blows nervously. “Let’s go, spaz.”

Stiles steps to the side to let them exit, then ducks into the front tack room to place the drink carrier on an unoccupied corner of Laura’s desk, before heading towards the back of the barn, where Ernest is on cross-ties, legs wrapped, as promised.

The colt, dark bay save for a blaze so wide that he’s actually wall-eyed, knuckles encouragement as Stiles approaches, ears perking up expectantly. Stiles pats a shoulder that bulges with stocky muscle as he passes. “Tack first, boy. Then treats.” Ernest sighs, but only tosses his head in protest when Stiles settles the pads and saddle across his back, instead of pinning his ears or whipping around to savage him. “See? You get the deal.” He cinches the girth at the first hole on both sides, then digs into his sweatshirt pocket for a peppermint, letting Ernest gobble it off his palm before he starts pulling the straps tight. “Atta boy – there you go.”

Ernest’s ears flicker to the sides to follow his voice before facing the front again, alert and happy.
The day’s first race begins at 12:45: a $20,000-purse allowance for fillies and mares three years and up. When the starting gate opens, Stiles is holding a loop of Slaw’s lead rope while she tears at the scrubby grass growing between rows of barns. The sun is high and warm in the sky. Slaw’s coat is still heavy with water from her bath, gradually drying itself out as she grazes. On the rubberized mats of the wash stall, McGatsby is shoving his head into the hose whenever it comes within range, distorting the large star that stands out high on his dark chestnut forehead every time he does. Isaac is laughing at him, cursing affectionately, droplets clinging to the planes of his face and gray t-shirt stick to his chest. He threw a sweat-scraper at Stiles’ head earlier, when he made a comment about giving the horse a bath, not taking a shower. (Let’s be realistic: Stiles is wet, yeah, but he’s not dripping.)

Stiles catches Scott’s approach out of the corner of his eye, turns in surprise to wave a greeting. “What’re you doing back here?” They’d barely spoken last night, both too wiped to do more than order pizza and watch Mythbuster reruns while slumped together on the couch.

“Lunch break.” Scott steps up beside him. “Hi, Isaac.”

Isaac clears his throat. “Hey.” He’s a bit too sodden to appear stiff, but he’s keeping his attention centered on McGatsby, sidestepping around the gelding in an attempt to hose him down properly, like he’s trying to ignore Scott’s presence.

Stiles can feel his eyebrows hiking up his forehead in confusion, and he’s opening his mouth to nudge the conversation along when he realizes that Scott is just sort of standing there like a piece of zucchini, brow wrinkled ever so slightly. Clicking his tongue, he pokes Scott with his foot. “Hey.”

“Huh?” Oh, and now he looks like a lost puppy. Great.

Stiles jerks his head at Slaw. “This is Cold Slough – one of the Whittemores’ gems.”

“Ah. Cool.” Scott sounds like he’s chewing gravel. His attention skitters to the wash stall, then back to Stiles, then to the filly, who has raised her head and is investigating the pocket of his jeans. “You don’t want my keys, girl,” he mutters. “Speaking of which: my bike.” He narrows his eyes at Stiles. It’s worrying for all of five seconds; the threat factor plummets when Isaac shuts off the hose and McGatsby’s immediate response is to shake himself like a 1200-pound dog, spraying water far enough to sting Stiles’ cheek, and completely distracting Scott.

“Isaac told me to be here by five-thirty,” he offers, while Scott is busy calculating the curvature of where Isaac’s t-shirt has plastered itself against the lines of his ribcage. “I was here at five-thirty.”

“You stole my bike,” Scott grouses, eyes on Isaac’s profile while he sluices away what little water is left in McGatsby’s coat. “Did you really?”

Isaac keeps his focus on McGatsby, running the sweat scraper down the long contours of the gelding’s wiry limbs, so intent that he’s forgetting to blink. “We start workouts early.” His Adam’s apple bobs. “Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Scott stares blankly at Stiles for roughly half a second, before he’s back to Isaac. “Do you guys need extra help in the mornings, ever?”

“We’re fine,” Isaac grits out, at the exact moment that Stiles says, “Sometimes.”

They dead-eye one another for a couple seconds.
“Maybe Scott would be willing to go get everyone coffee in the morning without having to be tricked into it,” Stiles points out.

“It’s not tricking you if you’re too dumb to figure out that people who are given an inch will take a mile.” Isaac unclips McGatsby from the ties in the wash stall, leading him a few paces off to the side, until he drops his head to being grazing. “And besides: you stole a bike.” When Scott beams at him, his chin drops, that half-hooked smile curling up one corner of his mouth.

“It’s not stealing if the owner gives you permission,” Stiles declares to an ignorant audience. Isaac is watching McGatsby like he’s expecting to find a riddle written along his crest, and Scott is looking at Isaac like Ernest does when he’s hoping for a treat. Stiles might as well be chatting with Slaw. He sort of wants to stab Scott and remind him of Allison, but he also sort of thinks that he really shouldn’t, because Scott forgetting about Allison is about as likely as Stiles forgetting about his mother. So he shuffles his feet instead, maneuvering Slaw around until her hoof stomps down almost on top of Scott’s sneaker, and he jumps.

Isaac’s head snaps up. “She get you?”

“Uh, what?” Scott’s attention flies first to Stiles, then to Isaac, then to Slaw, back to Isaac, lingering there for a smattering of heartbeats before finally migrating down to his own foot. “Oh, uh, no – it’s fine. All good. Missed.” He grins. “All good,” he says again, looking to Stiles, hopeful for fuck-knows-what.

Isaac’s smile is all sorts of soft around the edges.

***

Between feeding, wrapping, tacking up, grooming, hosing down, and grazing five horses; doing laundry; grabbing something to eat so that he doesn’t starve; caving in around two in the afternoon and buying himself coffee; searching for things to throw at Isaac whenever he sees the cup and smirks; and getting sent off by Laura on random tasks – like digging Lydia Martin out of the jockey’s room so they can confer about whether or not she’ll be coming down to Hollywood with them at the end of the month (she is), or finding Danny the farrier to tell him that Booze needs new shoes, could he please come by tomorrow? – Stiles never actually interacts with Derek until the end of the day. That doesn’t bother him, because Derek is a grump of epic proportions, and watching Scott and Isaac’s weird quasi-flirting is easier to deal with, so he does that instead.

He’s busy buckling on Bush’s blankets when Derek takes The Yogimeister out to the track in the morning, and is rolling up Bury’s wraps when they return, Derek slick with sweat and The Yogimeister quiet, for once in his damn life. Derek nods at him, again, eyes not quite so hard as they were when he first turned up, and leads Yogi down to his stall to untack him. That’s the extent of their communication for Stiles’ first full day.

Except.

They’re closing up at sunset, again, when Laura pokes her head out of her office and informs them that it’s going to start raining around three the next morning and last well into the night, then vanishes back inside.

“Allright.” Isaac cracks his gum as he slides home the bolt on Sass’ door. “You’ll pick me up?” he
asks Derek, who is standing in front of Schizo’s stall, feeding her a peppermint, the gigantic poser.

“Five-fifteen.” With Schizo crunching merrily away, Derek turns to face Stiles. “What’s your address?”

“Corner of 4th and U. But, uh.” He blinks. “You don’t have to—”

“He’s going to anyway. Closest thing that you get to a job perk around here.” Isaac grins when Derek glowers at him, then pokes Stiles in the arm. “Move. I want to get home to my takeout and bad TV.”

Stiles shifts sideways so Isaac can open the stall door. When he glances at Derek, he’s studying his phone, eyes hooded.

“I’m picking you up at five, Isaac. Stiles: five-fifteen.”

Isaac curses. “Is it because he brought you coffee? I paid for that, you know.”

“Shut up.” Tucking the phone into his pocket, Derek rolls his shoulders inside his leather jacket and steps over to the tack room door. “Pizza?”

“Get me clams, Der, or else,” Laura says, still hunched over her desk.

Derek grunts an affirmative, glances back at where Stiles and Isaac are wheeling their bikes out of the empty stall, meets Stiles’ eyes for the barest fraction of a second, then turns on his heel and walks out.

***

Stiles’ phone clicks over to read 5:15 as he’s stepping out of his building’s lobby. He’d sort of wondered what kind of car Derek would have, and how he was supposed to recognize it, since neither Derek nor Isaac bothered to describe it. He realizes, now, why they didn’t. There aren’t very many cars on the streets of Berkeley at 5:15 on a rainy Thursday morning. There has got to be only one obnoxiously, aggressively sexy black Camaro with “I am driven by someone who is seriously compensating for something” practically written on the windshield. And it’s idling in front of where Stiles has his jaw on the sidewalk, all that tinted glass as menacing as anything else, for the death-ray glare it’s probably hiding.

Isaac rolls the shotgun window down, teeth catching the light from the streetlamps. “Get in, loser; we’ve got Thoroughbreds to feed.”

Sputtering and blushing, Stiles ducks his head and clambers into the backseat, buckling himself in with shaking hands while he tries not to stare too obviously at all the cushioned leather and glossy surfaces.

It helps when Isaac kicks his feet up on the dashboard and curls an arm back around his headrest, like he’s lounging on a sofa. “Enjoy it,” he says without turning around. “It’s a three-minute drive in a five-star vehicle with a no-star driver.”

Derek doesn’t take his eyes off the road or his hands off the steering wheel, but the growl that grates from his throat is plenty of threat all on its own.
So, because nobody ever said that he didn’t run head-first at a challenge when it was offered, Stiles leans forward to poke him in the ribs. “I’m not bringing you coffee if you’re gonna be a sourwolf.”

“Sour-what?”

“Sourwolf. I’d say sourpuss, but you strike me as more of a wolfish person, what with the hair and the muscles and all.”

Isaac’s mouth is gaping open, silent cackles sending tremors through his frame as he slumps lower in his seat. In the rearview mirror, Derek’s eyes are frigid.

Stiles meets the glare head-on, until they make a left turn and Derek has to watch the road again. His gaze flickers back to meet Stiles once more, though, as the car straightens out again, less enraged and more studious this time around. But then they’re pulling into the parking lot, and the engine is cutting out as Derek throws his door open, twisting his head away, and they are wrapped in fog and rain as they climb out of the car, pulling up their hoods and half-jogging along with chins tucked against their chests until they reach the warm shelter of the barn.
The formation of a routine in an environment where every day presents different situations is all but impossible, yet Stiles ever-so-gradually finds himself sinking into the rhythm of life at a racetrack.

He continues to steal Scott’s bike until his own arrives, in pieces, smothered in bubble wrap (he ruins a shirt getting the chain on, even with Allison’s help), but even then rainy days still find Derek rolling the Camaro up to the corner at 5:15 on the dot. Once they’re actually at the track, it’s a blur of deciphering Laura’s spidery handwriting to figure out who needs to get fed and tacked up first, actually feeding and tacking everyone, mucking out stalls, cleaning feed tubs, collecting horses from their riders once the workouts are done, hooking them up to hot walkers (or hand-walking them, if they’re Yogi, Stoner, or Booze, with the former two viewing the machines as enemies to be vanquished, and Booze just being flat-out terrified of them), giving them baths, and then grazing them until they’re dry.

And that’s just the day-to-day tasks. Tack gets cleaned, aisles are swept, hay is unbale, dozens of errands are run, laundry is done, and reporters are fended off in varying cycles. Danny the farrier sticks his head in on Saturdays to see if anyone needs their shoes changed, and Stiles gets sent to root him out whenever there’s an issue during the week. Scott comes around fairly regularly, ostensibly to do checkups or give shots or just say hi, but he somehow always manages to kill an hour distracting Stiles or shadowing Isaac like the hapless puppy that he is.

It takes a week before Stiles resigns himself to being the one who brings the humans their coffee every morning, but he does manage to badger them into a rotating cycle of payment, so he feels a little less like he’s being used. Even Derek coughs up when it’s his turn. Stiles pretends that doesn’t surprise him.

Race days are terrifying.

The Yogimeister starts in a maiden allowance for three-year-olds and up, and comes home in third under Dina Fasano, who is exactly five feet tall, weighs 108 pounds when carrying a saddle, and is the most unrepentantly vicious rider Stiles has ever encountered. She has to be.

She’s got near-black skin and bright green eyes, and he first meets her when she strolls into the barn, arm-in-arm and gossiping away with Jackie Vaca. And all that computes just fine, except for the part where ‘Fasano’ brings to mind wine and pasta and cheerfully rotund people, not slender whips of menace who have to count calories and kill hours in the hotbox so they can make weight. As a freshly-unbugged jockey, she has to be even more stringent that Jackie or Lydia, who have been in the game a while and built up enough reputation to race the tougher, faster horses with the bigger handicaps. If you’re a trainer, and your horse has to be carrying 120 pounds when they run, 115 pounds of live weight urging the animal forward is a lot better than 105, which would put fifteen pounds of ‘dead’ lead weights on the horse’s back, considerably restricting its movement. (And that’s not to say that Jackie and Lydia have it easy, mind, because Stiles knows that Jackie basically lives in the hotbox between races, and Lydia has black coffee instead of breakfast and lunch some days.) The number of jockeys with eating disorders is roughly an order of magnitude larger than that which doesn’t – Stiles knows that much.

He learns that Isaac sleeps in the tack room for a night or two before any of the horses races, and does so himself when Pig starts in the Miss America Stakes. It makes him feel better to be on hand, even if nothing out of the ordinary happens. He wakes up at 4:30 and wanders into the aisle, managing a bleary-eyed nod at Finstock, who is shamelessly feeding Schizo baby carrots while the
mare wuffles contentedly into his palm. Then he goes to start filling feed tubs.

The track is damp from a heavy morning fog that doesn’t burn off until midafternoon, but Pig blazes the soggy mile and a sixteenth over the turf in one minute and forty-three seconds, rolling home under Lydia with three lengths between her and second-place finisher Sevas Tra, the gap widening with every stride.

Pig prances up to where Stiles is standing by the winner’s circle, tossing her head, ready to go again and he and Lydia trade beaming grins as he settles the cooler over the filly’s hindquarters. He catches Matt Daehler, Sevas Tra’s trainer, trading angry words with her jockey, who throws down the reins and vaults off, unclipping his helmet as he stalks away to the jockey’s room. Stiles turns his head to watch him go, wondering.

Pig starts stomping her feet and blowing before he can get anywhere with the thought, and he loses track of it amidst the snapping of cameras, cracks about her being ready to run another race, and her owner – a portly Italian named Paul Gray – bubbling over with enthusiasm as he shakes Lydia’s hand and Stiles’, praising them incessantly for taking such good care of his horse.

It’s later that same day that Laura grabs Stiles while he’s sorting through a laundry basket full of pads and wraps. She plunges right in: “You’re not blind, deaf, and dumb, so I can safely assume that you’re aware we’re taking the whole string down to Hollywood for five weeks for the meet, yes? Alright. Now,” she spreads her hands, palms up. “Are you coming with us?”

“Oh,” he blinks. “Yeah?”

“Good. You’ll be driving down with the horses and Isaac. And then rooming with him – there’s a building right across from the track where everyone stays. We’ll pick up the tab. We leave on Tuesday.” And then she’s gone.

He sits there blinking until Stoner barges into the barn, swinging his hindquarters around like a pendulum and pinning his ears at Isaac, who is on the other end of the lead rope, just waiting for his handler’s attention to slip so he can tear a chunk out of the shoulder that he keeps lunging at.

Stiles waits until Isaac’s wrangled the stallion into his stall before opening his mouth: “So we’re gonna have some awesome bonding time in Hollywood, huh?”

“You, me, and Derek.” Isaac shoves the deadbolt home and throws up his arm to fend off Stoner when he lunges over the door. “Laura’s gonna be living by the rail or in the owners’ boxes or in any of a dozen different offices for the entire time we’re down there. Derek gets to take charge of the barn, in the meantime.”

“Is that… is that a good thing?”

The face that Isaac pulls isn’t reassuring. “He needs the experience.” He shrugs as he starts coiling up the lead line. “It’s good for him. You and I will have to be extra on-top of everything, though – realize it’s gonna be different, and adjust fast. He’s not as efficient; wasn’t born to manage people quite like she was. It’ll be a looser ship trying to get to the same place, and farther.” He grins: a wolf clamoring for bloodshed. “You should have seen us before you signed on.”

Stiles snorts. “Yeah, I’m not sorry I missed that.”

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The meet starts on Thursday, November 8th. They’re heading down on Tuesday because Laura wants a few days to settle the horses into their new environment. Best-case scenario, it’ll be an eight-hour trip with the two gargantuan six-horse trailers, since they’ll have to stop halfway through to let the animals get a bit of fresh air and exercise. And, while Laura might be heartless, she’s not suicidal and has no interest in sitting in rush-hour traffic, so she lets it be known that, so long as the trailer is set, with everything packed and ready to go the night before, they don’t have to be in until eight in the morning to load up.

As soon as Scott and Allison catch wind of that detail (which takes about nine seconds) they materialize in front of the Hale barn to help, in the name of dragging Stiles and Isaac out for farewell drinks and dancing as soon as they’re done.

“My family’s going down on the first weekend, so I’ll see you,” Allison tells them. “But Scott’s going to be stuck here with only school and his work for the next five weeks. He’s gonna be miserable.”

“I can hear you,” Scott calls, poking his head out of the tackroom with an assortment of martingales, breastplates, bridles, and girths hanging from his limbs. Allison blows him a kiss. Several dozen pieces of metal jangle against one another as he catches it, pressing the closed fist to his heart.

Stiles rolls his eyes. Isaac turns away, shaking his head.

That night, they wind up at some out-of-the-way club that looks more like a tavern, but plays music that iTunes would probably classify as ‘alternative’. They go from Mumford & Sons to Placebo in the time it takes their group to get from the door to the bar, collect a quartet of beers, and make their way to a small table off to the side of the dance floor.

Stiles takes the chair that puts his back to the wall, while Scott grabs the spot across from him. They both side-eye Allison, who sticks out her tongue when Kiss With A Fist comes on.

Isaac ducks his head to hide a grin. “I like your taste,” he says.

Allison frowns as she tries to decide if he’s being sarcastic, then smiles, soft, and reaches across the table to wrap loose fingers around his wrist. “When’s the last time you danced to a song on the radio?”

From Isaac’s face, you’d think she’d just let loose with a spiel of grammatically-correct Gaelic.

“Alright, I’m taking that as a no.” She studies the crowd a moment, sipping at her beer, then sets it down as she rises from her seat. “C’mon.”

“I…” Isaac glances from her to Scott and back again.

She tugs. “You’re not getting out of this.”

Dumbstruck, Isaac blinks, swallows, and goes.

They wend their way onto the dancefloor as Kiss With A Fist skids towards its close, Allison radiating confidence, Isaac nervous and fumbling. Marilyn Manson’s rendition of Sweet Dreams crackles over the speakers as they come to a halt, Allison making an about-face to lace her fingers together around the back of Isaac’s neck. He’s watching her, mouth quirked, completely at a loss.
The crowd shifts to hide them from view.

Stiles spins his beer in a circle, studying the play of light across the brown glass. “You don’t seem worried that your girlfriend just hauled another guy out to dance.”

Scott’s eyes are on the mix when he shrugs. “She’s her own person. And Isaac is… Isaac.”

“Oh okay then.” Stiles slugs down half his beer, almost dropping it when they get a clear line of sight across the floor. Isaac’s hands have settled on Allison’s waist, their grip loose, hesitant. She’s grinning up at him, mouthing the lyrics. The angle is all wrong, but Stiles is pretty sure the corners of Isaac’s mouth have begun to twitch upwards.

A sigh wrenches from Scott’s throat. “They look good together.”

Stiles glances at him, then back at the pair on the floor. Allison’s still singing along, lips pulling back further with every degree that Isaac’s shoulders loosen. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah they do.”

***

It’s a strange night.

Allison and Isaac retreat from the dancefloor after only one more song, reclaiming their seats and drinks with only a hint of awkwardness due to the fact that Isaac won’t meet Scott’s eyes. He does seem to find the label on his beer incredibly fascinating, though.

Stiles ceases to fear for the health of the Scott/Allison relationship as soon as Rise Against’s The Good Left Undone comes on and they bound onto the floor hand-in-hand, happy as Ernest with a pile of carrots (and, wow, Stiles has officially spent too much time around the stable), caught up in each other within moments.

He looks at Isaac. “You mind if I abandon you?”

Isaac is rolling his second beer between his palms, face solemn. He shakes his head. “Knock yourself out.”

“Awesome. See ya.” And then he’s up amongst the press of bodies, pretending punk rock is something he can dance to, while Tim McIlrath’s voice blares clear over everything else.

A squat woman with night-black skin materializes out of the shifting tides of humanity and pulls him into the circle of her arms. He follows her lead, feels a flare of pride when she beams like a spotlight, and subsequently loses all track of time. A handful of songs seem to pass in as many heartbeats, but when Imagine Dragons’ It’s Time kicks on, it hangs in the air for hours. The black woman leaves at some point, is replaced by her foil: an androgyny with ghost-pale skin collects him, and later drops a peck onto his cheek when they, too, slip off. The faces get really blurry after that, because people are buying him drinks – fruity things, sour things; so many that he’s glad they took a taxi here – and then he’s up amongst the press of bodies, pretending punk rock is something he can dance to, while Tim McIlrath’s voice blares clear over everything else.

‘Damn’ is his favorite word, he’s just decided, when Scott loops an arm around his chest to pry
him from the crush of people. He gets to use it plenty then: “Damn you; **damn** you; I was having a **good damn time**.”

Scott hauls him outside anyway, to where Allison and Isaac are leaning their weight on each other as they stand at the curb. Allison’s shoulders are hunched up inside her coat in a manner that reminds him of Derek. He doesn’t know why.

She lifts a hand to cover her yawn. “I’ve gotta go home; I gotta be up at five.”

Stiles goes to protest, before she shoves her watch into his face, glowering at him until the fluffy bubbles resolve themselves into 1:08. “Oh,” he says.

“Yeah, ‘oh’.” The watch goes back into her pocket, and her head lolls on Isaac’s shoulder. “Someone grab a cab.”

They hail one and pile in, Stiles in shotgun, the other three in the back. He falls asleep with his forehead leaning against the cold glass, gets jerked awake when Scott opens the door from the outside, then proceeds to fall out, flailing so hard he almost gets run over as the taxi peels away from the curb. Isaac’s still with them, for some unidentifiable reason. He grabs one of Stiles’ arms before he falls, loops it over his own neck, supporting him until Scott is there to share the burden.

Time slips and twists as they haul him upstairs, into the apartment. There’s a deliberative pause before they decide to deposit him on the couch. A clunk: Scott setting a trashcan by his head. “– not letting him puke all over the bed –” he’s grumbling. “Fuckin’ drunk. Urg.” He runs a hand through his hair, straightens up. “I’m fuckin’ drunk.”

Stiles follows the movement with his eyes, while the words shoot in one ear and out the other. He watches as Scott steps over to the armchair that faces the television and plucks his ass down right in front of it, legs just long lines kinked out in front of him. Isaac lingers by Stiles’ couch, his face drawn, hands in his pockets.


Isaac snorts, carefully easing himself around to sit on the edge of the other sofa, facing Scott. “Try five weeks of hell.”


“Me? Yeah, right.”

“Yeah, you. Fuck. You’ll be so happy – never come back.”

“I’ll come back,” Isaac mumbles. He’s got his head bowed, elbows propped on his knees, both hands tangled in his hair. He looks like he should be the one with a trash can in front of his face, what with his breath coming in ragged streams and sweat gleaming across every inch of exposed skin. “I drank too much,” he mutters.

The laugh that Scott spits out is so raw it’s bleeding. “Fuck – you, man? You? Man, you n’ Allison, before I’d even had any, out there together.” He rubs his palm over his face. “You wouldn’t believe what you looked like.”

When Isaac laughs, it’s a forced bark. “Don’t play that fuckin’ game. I’m not a virgin. You think I spent those three years before Derek found me, what, working as a cashier at 7-11?”
Stiles’ brain scrabbles at that sentence, trying to catch hold, but it slips away. He closes his eyes, then opens them again. Neither of them is watching him. Scott has gone ominously quiet, while Isaac’s inhalations are shaky, almost hiccupping. They’re staring at each other: gladiators, or something similar. Unwilling opponents.

Scott’s the one who turns his head away, and clenches his jaw until Stiles imagines he can hear the teeth creak. “You should go,” he rasps. “Before I do something stupid.”

“You’re always stupid.” It isn’t an insult. Isaac stands, wiping his hands on his jeans. His smile is broken and hooks up in one corner. He studies the door. “Gonna be a long five weeks.”

Scott groans. “Isaac.”

And maybe he actually meant to leave, but Isaac’s knees go out from under him as he moves, until he’s straddling Scott’s lap, hands cradling his head, thumb pressing in behind the bolt of his jaw, digging in as Isaac tilts Scott’s head back to kiss him. Scott snarls, arches up, sinks his fingers into Isaac’s hips to haul him in. They’re – they’re – shit; they’re really kissing. There’s a growl curling out from somebody’s chest, and Scott’s got one hand tangled in Isaac’s curls, and there are open mouths, and, oh, oh... holy fucking shit.

They break so Isaac can duck his chin down to bite at Scott’s throat, and that growl cuts off in a grunt as Scott bucks up, and, shit, he’s kissing Isaac again, clenching at his skull and his hip like he might vanish into thin air, while Isaac shoves him back against the frame of the chair, fucking licking into Scott’s mouth holy shit. And Scott just takes it, just hangs on tight, gives everything back like his damn life depends on it.

When Isaac pulls back a second time, turning his eyes up towards the ceiling, Scott goes to follow, stopped only by the hands still curled around his face. They’re both gasping.

“Isaac.” Scott’s voice is torn all to shreds.

“I can’t – ” Isaac looks like a gun’s being pointed at his head. “I gotta go, I-”

“Isaac.”

“You’ve got Allison.” Isaac’s hands flex, before he drags Scott up one last time, just for a moment, for a parting souvenir, and then he’s scrambling back and up and away, all long limbs and incoordination, bracing himself on the armchair when he spares a final glance over the scene: Scott wrecked and pleading on the floor, and Stiles watching blearily from the couch. He looks sick again. “You’ve got Allison,” he repeats. And then his hand is on the doorknob and he’s turning it, opening it, bolting.

“Isaac,” Scott calls, seconds late.

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There’s a damp fog curling through the streets as he trudges along the sidewalk. It’s only a few blocks. He’s sucking in the mist, letting the shivers and shudders crawl down his spine, juddering out along his limbs until his hands shake and his feet stumble over themselves. He can’t believe he was so stupid, that he ever thought that would turn out well. He feels like he’s committed a crime - a rape or a murder, something they’ll lock you up for decades over.
When he thinks of Scott pinned beneath him, of the warm skin under his fingers, of the reciprocating grip, it makes him light-headed – half just because it all clashes so harshly with Allison, earlier, with all her confidence and her kindness and her conviction that all of it was okay. Angst is fucking bile in his throat.

He spits. It gleams against the sidewalk.

*You wouldn’t believe what you looked like.*

He would, actually. He would. He knows – knows too damn fucking well.

He makes a turn without processing the decision, and doesn’t bother to analyze it afterwards. San Francisco’s lights are twinkling across the bay; the wall around the track carves a gap in them, and the grandstand reaches high, high into the sky.

The night watchmen on patrol give him curious glances, but most of them know his face and he’s got his pass in his wallet.

The Hale barn is as dark as any of them. It’s just after two.

Finstock is pacing the aisle when he walks in. “Lahey?” He sounds startled.

Isaac just nods back at him.

Stoner is quiet for once: head hanging, asleep. Sass is too. McGatsby, Howard, Bush, Slaw – even Yogi. They’re all drowsing, if not unconscious. Schizo is off her feet entirely, lying down in the deep straw. Booze twitches awake when Isaac steps over to his door; he tosses his head up, blowing once before he calms.

“Sorry, boy.” Reaching in, Isaac rubs under his chin. “Go back to sleep.” He brings his hand around to knuckle the colt’s muzzle until his eyes sink shut, then withdraws.

Finstock clears his throat. “Lahey.” When Isaac looks at him, he holds out a plain gray sweatshirt. “Bilinski left this behind.”

“Okay,” Isaac says, and doesn’t tell him that Stiles has exactly two sweatshirts, and that he was wearing the gray one out tonight, and that the other is red. He takes the hoodie, balling it up. “I’ll make sure he gets it back.” The walls are closing in. As soon as Finstock nods, he turns on his heel and leaves.

There’s still alcohol fizzing along through his veins, for all that every breath of chilled air makes his vision sharpen another degree. He should feel much colder than he does. He’s got goosebumps, sure enough, but… but…

He plucks agitatedly at the sweatshirt, then unwinds it, slings it over one shoulder, and holds his breath. His heart’s running too fast; a dozen strides, and his skull is tightening, his vision crinkling at the edges. Too fucking much. Four steps farther on, he lets go to suck in more fog.

His apartment is on the fourth floor of the building. The stairs are a mile high and a thousand flights in length. He stumbles up then with the ground spinning out to the side at every turn. It takes a year, and then his key keeps skidding away from the lock, again, again, again, again, until he snarls a portmanteau of half a dozen insults and slams a fist into the wood.

A splinter bites back.
He spits more fury, drives the key home, and lurches inside, where nothing but a jungle of shapes is waiting for him. He fumbles through shades of gray to the bathroom, jams on the light, winces at the brightness, then drags out the splinter with a pair of nail clippers. It’s as big around as a toothpick, and blood spills free in its wake, just a trickle, but one that dribbles down the line of his wrist. A muttered curse. He slaps a band-aid over it, pretends that’s good enough, and retreats to the mess of his bed. Everything’s packed; all he has to do tomorrow is haul his backpack and duffel bag to the track.

He peels off his sneakers and socks, kicks out of his jeans, but pauses at his shirt, at the sweatshirt, and makes the mistake of taking a deep breath in a vain attempt at staying calm. Scott smells like horses, like the clean health of a vet’s office, and like a safe, warm place to hide, and Isaac wants. It’s sick.

But he strips off his shirt anyway, buries his face in the hoodie like a freak, and breathes in Scott, trying to clear out some of the shattered glass in his lungs, his head. The whole line of his sternum aches. He can feel the ghosts of hands on him: in his hair, on his hip, looped around his neck – fuck, Allison.

The sheets are cold when he collapses on top of them. Angst, angst, angst, goddamn, why is he so fucking broken? He’s sweating and shivering, probably reeks of booze, and he’d really like nothing more than to claw open his ribcage right now and die in a pool of his own filthy fucking blood. He clutches the sweatshirt to his chest with one hand, reaches the other up and back, sinking his nails into the soft wood of the headboard. It helps, but not enough. He lets go to roll onto his side, reaches off the bed to dig his phone from his pants’ pocket, and hits #1 on the speed dial.

It rings twice.

“Isaac.”

“I’m gonna fuckin’ die.”

“No, you’re not,” Derek says on reflex. “What’s going on?”

*I’m a fucking idiot, that’s what.* He ignores the question. “Someday, yeah, I’m gonna die.”

Derek’s voice is croaky with sleep, and his irritated rumble is weak. “Not today,” he argues. “Not while there are horses to race.”

Isaac chokes on air, on a laugh that threatens to tear his lungs out. He fights it down so he can track Derek’s breathing over the line. It’s better than a metronome, slow and steady, and it drags him back into control, bit by bit. He’d been asleep, of course. It’s almost three. Isaac curls in on himself, tucking his knees up to his chest, free hand fisted in Scott’s sweatshirt.

“It’s gonna be five weeks,” Derek reminds him, after Isaac doesn’t say anything for a while. “Whatever it is, you’ve got five weeks to sort it out.” Like this is something he can just sort out. “Breathe, Isaac.”

“I’m breathing.”

“Don’t stop.”

He has to grin at that, though it seems like it should hurt. “Whatever you say, boss.”

Derek sighs. “Go to sleep, Isaac.”
He hangs up without replying, tosses his phone into the pile of clothes on the floor, and rolls back over. It’s dark, but he doesn’t feel secure, as he should; he feels like he’s standing on a street corner in the black wifebeater and the jeans with holes chewed into the knees. He feels fucking filthy. There’s nothing profound about it.

Bowing his head, he flexes his spine until the vertebrae pop, and hangs on to that bitty piece of Scott like the pathetic creature that he is. He’s too used to it, though. It takes him mere minutes to fall asleep.

***

Scott wakes up tired, with a headache worth killing over. He’s slumped on the floor in front of the armchair, with Stiles passed out on the couch to his right. It’s just after seven, so Scott prods him awake, and they fumble through the morning routine together, fighting for the shower, downing aspirin with their toast, and mumbling insults at nothing.

Stiles even drinks some of Scott’s coffee. He makes a face afterwards, and mimes gagging, but still, he drinks it. He also gives him a hug, slaps him on the back, and says “I’ll call you when we get down there; tell Allison I said bye, and sorry if I threw up on her shoes or something,” before scooting out the door.

Scott watches him go, feeling a little mournful, but gets distracted from it when he’s pulling everything together for work. After ten minutes of searching, he finds himself sitting in the armchair, dialing Allison. “Hey,” he says when she picks up. “Have you seen my sweatshirt?”
The track is throbbing with activity when Stiles pedals in on his bike: the last few sets are running their workouts, while the earlier ones are being hotwalked and hosed down, and a handful of stables are – like the Hales – already packing up to venture off to different meets. Racing season in San Francisco is thundering to a close.

Boyd’s wave catches his eye, and Stiles turns off the path towards where the bulky exercise rider is stepping out of a barn, helmet tucked under his arm. He taps his crop against his boot as he saunters over to Stiles. “You guys heading down?”

“This morning, yeah. You?”

“Got a horse to ride today, but we’ll be down tonight, yeah.”

Leaning in on his handlebars, Stiles braces one foot in the dirt. “What horse?”

“One of Pim Byrn’s freaks: Leocardian. Ugly little chestnut, three years old, runs like a machine. Dirt or turf don’t make a difference. He’ll be giving you hell once Pim heads down – him and every other horse in the damn barn.”

Stiles nods, processing this. Liam “Pim” Byrns is a new face in West Coast racing, but he’s got a reputation over in Europe for turning underdogs into champions. He dropped out of sight years ago, but reappeared a few months before the Hales and started picking up every bent, broken, or crooked horse in sight. He’s doing well for himself. “Are people still calling that white he got an albino?”

Boyd’s snigger is ugly. “Ghostchant? Yeah. Horse’s a raucous bastard, even for a two-year-old.” He shakes his head. “Monster like that, people want to label him different. Human nature. You tell Laura to watch out for any horse Pim’s touched, y’hear?”

“I hear.” Stiles hikes himself up on his pedals, pointing the front wheel back on course. “I gotta run. See you in Hollywood, man.”

***

The loading goes better than expected, which is to say that nobody gets pieces torn out of them by Stoner or McGatsby, Booze doesn’t bolt off to Neverneverland, Howard and Bush restrain themselves to nipping at each other, and Stiles’thumbnail will probably fade to a color other than black within a couple of months – providing that Yogi doesn’t bite it again before then. The girls all load like pros, so Laura takes a private moment to be smug about that.

The drivers are identical twins who did a great deal of work for the pre-fire Hales. Sam and James Grey are former jockeys who raced on the Japanese circuit in their twenties, before coming to the US in the mid-nineties and shedding every possible trace of their homeland, right down to their names. They’re good friends.

She’s returning from a final check-over of the barn when Derek falls into step beside her.
“I need a favor,” he says, hands in his pockets, eyes straight ahead.

“Mhmm?”

“Let Isaac ride with you and the fillies. He’s barely functioning right now. I’ll help Stiles with the others.”

Laura clicks her tongue. The females (plus Bury and McGatsby, who are gelded, and therefore unlikely to cause chaos with an attempted mating) will be easier to keep calm and happy for eight hours than the six colts, stallions, and geldings in the other van. They’ll need constant attention, as men often do, and there are probably drunk zombie ghosts who look better than Isaac does right now: his head is bowed and he’s leaning against the trailer, all but asleep on his feet. It’s a matter of putting the best people up for the job where they’re most needed.

“Fine,” she says. “But do try to keep your lunatic in line. Ernest has a race Saturday. I won’t have him scratched because The Yogimeister tore open his neck.”

Derek blows air through his nose, but doesn’t reply.

Laura beckons to Isaac once they step back into the sunlight. “With me, boy. Stiles, you’ll get some quality bonding time with my brother. Smack him if his growling starts to spook the horses.”

“Jesus,” Stiles says, followed by, “Yes, ma’am.”

She slaps his ass. “Isaac? Ya hear me? Let’s go.”

***

Even though Stiles has been working for the dude’s sister for three weeks now, there is still a great deal that he has simply been presuming about Derek Hale. For example, yesterday morning, if asked, he would have told you that Derek hates everything with a pulse besides Laura, and maybe even her a little bit, sometimes. (The idea is totally plausible. Only not. In those three weeks, he’s seen Derek sneak certain horses treats without a hint of shame – he’s just sort of disregarded the incidents, because Derek is grouchy and scary and it’s easy to assume the worst about him.)

Right now, Stiles doesn’t know what he thinks about Derek and his relations to the rest of the planet. Booze, being Booze, is not a fan of the rumbling and the moving and the turning and everything that comes with being in a trailer, even though he was heavily sedated by Deaton before they left… but Derek is literally planted two inches in front of his nose, one hand running through the copper strands of his mane, and Booze is calm. Five minutes ago he’d had white rings around his irises and was ready to put a foot through the wall.

Stiles adds “horse whisperer” to the column of Derek’s positive attributes. It’s a small column; there’s only one other item: “pays for coffee when it’s his turn”.

Stiles needs new hobbies. Before he was watching Derek, he was trying to describe the relationship between Bush and Howard, and gave up somewhere around “quasi-homoromantic, quasi-incestuous, reciprocating domestic abuse”. And before that he was wondering if homosexuality is something horses partake of. And before that, he was piecing out the origin of Howard’s alternative nickname, Prostate Cancer, which still makes negative sense. It’s something to think about between keeping the animals calm and nursing his thumb.
“Why did you guys start calling him Prostate Cancer?” Sue him – he’s curious.

Derek grunts. “Howard? Laura thought Howard sounded like an old man’s name, and he’s Howard’s Call, so…” He clears his throat and stalls out on elaborating. “Dina thinks it’s very funny.”

“Cute.”

Derek makes a noise like he can’t decide if Stiles is sarcastic or serious. Before he can decide, Booze snorts, ears flicking back, and he shuts up.

It occurs to Stiles that that explanation was the most words Derek has ever directed at him. He’s not sure how to feel about that, so he starts examining his thumbnail instead, which is almost completely black. How Yogi even bit him is astounding – one second he was clipping a lead shank onto the bastard’s halter, the next, his thumb was on fire and Yogi was dancing away, eyes alight.

Yogi tosses his head, blowing through his nose and prancing in place. Even tied up in a trailer, he looks evil. Stiles sticks his tongue out at him. While the gelding doesn’t even seem to register the insult, it makes Stiles feel better. Asshole.

A touch on his arm distracts him: Ernest is sniffing at his sweatshirt pocket. Stiles nudges the probing nose aside with his elbow, restraining a laugh when those crazy blue eyes fixate on him and Ernest whickers what probably equates to a childish plea in horse-speak.

“Greedy,” Stiles says back. “Greedy, greedy, greedy.” He sneaks a glance at Derek, who is still busy with Booze, then slips a hand into the pocket to produce a baby carrot.

Ernest wuffles his approval.

“Pushover.” Derek’s tone is wry.

“Hypocrite. I’ve seen you with Bury.”

“He works for his treats. Ernest oogles you for five minutes and you cave.” This time, when Stiles looks, the corners of Derek’s mouth are twitching up ever so slightly.

“That doesn’t mean he doesn’t work for them. He’s a stakes winner, after all, and he’s racing Saturday. He has to build up his strength.”

Down the line, Stoner pins his ears at Howard, who bares his teeth, then thinks better of it and leans to his other side to nip at Bush. Derek raps out a sharp “Hey,” and Stoner bays back, but the half-brothers settle down and he doesn’t go after Howard again.

Stiles tugs on Ernest’s forelock when he tries to shove his muzzle into Stiles’ pocket again, then steps past him, out into the aisle, running a hand down the colt’s side as he moves so that he doesn’t spook. He wants to ask permission before bringing up awkward, probing questions, but It’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission and all that, so… “How many horses survived the fire?”

A strangled rasp crawls from Derek’s throat at the non-sequitur: surprise and irritation caught up in one another. “A few,” he concedes. “Very few.”

“What is that: three, five, ten…?”

“Four. Four out of sixty. A yearling, a stallion, and two brood mares.” Derek looks directly at
Stiles, then away. “We sold the adults. The colt… he was caught under a burning beam, too broken and scarred to ever race, and the family that bought him was also based in California – not friends, but… friendly competitors. Laura talked them into a deal: every year, we pick one of their mares for him to breed, and if there’s a foal, it’s our after its second birthday.”

“That sounds like a great way for them to completely screw you over by giving you a wild horse.”

Derek’s smile is bitter. “I’m not fond of Chris Argent, but he’s a better man than that.”

Stiles’ gut twists. “Wait, wait, wait,” he says. “You sold your horses to the Argents?”

“The colt.” Derek glares like he thought Stiles was insulting his intelligence, which – okay, he was. “The rest went overseas.”

“Ah.” Howard is stomping and blowing at the curve of the highway beneath their feet, so Stiles goes to take hold of him. “Where are all his foals, then?”

And, wow, Derek’s scowl is intense. He looks like he might hurt himself if he gets any grumpier. Even Booze ducks his head away. “Chris Argent’s honest. His family isn’t. Seven years since they started breeding him, and they’ve only given us one foal so far.”

“Bury?”

“Bury,” Derek affirms. He grits his teeth a minute, knuckles along Booze’s withers, then continues: “Laura regrets gelding him, since he settled down so much once he started racing, but we’re getting two fillies in January. Twins. We’ll see how they run.”

“Do you think they will?”

Derek shrugs, eyes on Booze. Stiles asks a few more questions, but that’s it for Derek and talking. Even after they pull off the road near Coalinga to let the horses get some fresh air and stretch their legs, he is silent in the ominous way that only the truly miserable can manage. Stiles lets him be. He’s done enough prying for one afternoon, he figures, and has received more than enough information to ponder for the second three-and-a-half-hour leg of the trip.

***

The sun is just touching the rim of the horizon when the ramp of the trailer is unhooked and eased down to the ground. Stiles leads Stoner off first, while Derek follows with Booze. Schizo is already pacing down the shedrow behind Isaac. As soon as his hooves are all on the dirt, Stoner halts and raises his head, scenting the air. He trumpets a single note. Booze whuffs nervously, and Sass, stepping out behind Laura, whinnies back.

“Enough flirting,” Laura says, and tugs on the shank.

Stoner rumbles, pinning his ears, but goes willingly enough after them, settling into the stall next to the filly with only a minimum of savagery.

The barn is the same size as the one at Golden Gate Fields, with a near identical configuration. They arrange the horses in the same order as at home, making as few changes to the routine as possible to keep them comfortable. Like Stoner and Sass, Bush and Howard are paired, as are Yogi
and Slaw, and Booze has the feed room on one side and an empty stall on the other. They get everyone settled, then start dishing out dinner.

For a moment after she slides the bolt home on McGatsby’s door, Laura stands there in the aisle, expression thoughtful. She flinches when, a few stalls over, Bury rattles his feed bucket loud enough to startle, then rubs her palms across her jeans and licks her lips. “I’ll have the full list of who’s racing when up by tomorrow morning,” she says like someone asked. She turns to Derek, who has just stepped out of Yogi’s stall. “You’re gonna be running the show, you know, Der.”

He nods exactly once.

“Don’t fuck it up.” She flexes her hands into fists, then opens them. “Stiles, Isaac: be here at five.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Stiles doesn’t dare to meet her gaze as he follows Isaac outside. The tension breaks as soon as they step out from under the eaves.

Isaac looks at him as they’re pulling their bags from the trailers. “What the hell was that about?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugs. “Sometimes I think I just talk too much.”

***

As far as lodgings go, the bunk house – because that’s what it is; let’s be realistic – is a couple notches up from a college dorm, but Stiles is still going to be glad when he gets back to Berkley and doesn’t have to stand in line for toast. But the place is clean and neat, and there’s that sense of community that comes when horse people congregate. For five weeks? Sure, he can make himself at home here.

He calls Scott while they’re unpacking, gets a weird look from Isaac while informing Scott that, no, he doesn’t know where the hell his sweatshirt went, maybe he left it at the track kitchen and someone took it, and tell Allison hi from both of them. No sooner has he hung up than his phone rings again, ‘Dad’ flashing across the screen. (Shit; he hasn’t called home in almost a week.)

“Yo, Dad.”

“Hey Stiles.” His dad sounds tired. “How was the drive?”

“Eh.” He wrinkles his nose. “Long. Boring. The company wasn’t what you’d call stellar, since it was six horses and a Sourwo- grumpy human. But it was, you know. Alright. How’re the crime rates in Beacon Hills?”

“Same as ever.” His dad sighs, and Stiles can all but hear him rubbing at his neck. “I had a question: are you coming home for Thanksgiving?”


“November 22nd,” his dad says, while Isaac shoves a little notebook calendar at him, open to that week. Cold Slough, Hollywood Prevue Stakes is written on the 22nd and circled in red pen.
“One of my horses is running that day, Dad, I –”

His dad doesn’t waste time: “New Year’s?”

That will be during another meet entirely – he doesn’t remember the schedule well enough to say where. “I don’t know, Dad. I’ll try, okay? No promises, but I’ll try. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay; you’re an adult now, with your own life. Sometimes, work takes over. It happens. We all do it.”

“Yeah, well, someone’s gotta watch you to make sure you don’t give yourself a heart attack.”

His dad coughs. “Yes… Melissa’s been coming around a bit, when we’re both off, so it’s… don’t worry about me, Stiles. You have your own life.”

He has to smile at that. “Does she make you eat stuff that’s green?”

“Frequently.”

“Impressive.” He rolls his eyes. “I’m gonna go grab dinner now, but I’ll see what I can do about Christmas, alright?”

“Alright. Keep safe.”

“You too, Dad. Watch the cholesterol.” A pause that he doesn’t want to think about. “Love you.”

“Love you too, Stiles.”

Isaac watches him turn off his phone. “You know your personal life isn’t going to change whether or not Laura races someone on New Year’s, right?”

“I know.” Stiles bends down to retie his shoe. “But I’d rather lie than stab him in the heart.”

Isaac snorts. When Stiles asks him what for, he just shakes his head and leans over to dig a book out of his bag.

***

The meet opens on Thursday at half-past noon with a mile-and-one-sixteenth $16,000-purse claiming race for female maidens three years and older. A little more than ninety minutes later, the starting gate opens for the fourth time that day, and The Yogimeister, with Dina aboard, surges from the #6 slot.

Stiles is standing in the track kitchen, watching the television mounted on the wall. The race is also a mile and a sixteenth, and also for three-and-older maidens, but half the entries are male, and the purse is $45,000 dollars. And Derek, he knows, is standing by the rail, gritting his teeth.

The nine-horse field roars around the clubhouse turn to head down the backstretch, seeming to collapse in on itself as the jockeys fight for the rail, their mounts bunching up in tight formation. #2, a filly named Gritty Grudge, takes the lead, and Yogi comes up on her flank immediately, refusing to let her slow up. The first quarter goes by in 23 1/5, and Stiles wonders what the hell Dina is doing, pushing so hard so early. The leaders are already opening daylight between
themselves and the pack, who can’t match the pace.

Gritty Grudge doesn’t give an inch and though the time for the second quarter is a slower 24 seconds flat, there are a solid two lengths between Yogi’s hindquarters and the third-place horse’s nose as they come out of the turn. Then it’s down the length of the backstretch, and the pack is really just fighting for place and show money now. As Stiles watches, Yogi is inching up, nose level with Gritty Grudge’s hip, then her saddle, then her shoulder. He’s still coming as they start to turn for home, outside position working against him as the filly skims along the rail. He stops gaining ground, but doesn’t back off.

“C’mon, c’mon,” Stiles mutters.

A hair over two furlongs are left as they come out of the turn, and Dina’s hand flicks back, just once, the quickest snap of the whip against Yogi’s flank. He drives forward until he’s at Gritty Grudge’s throatlatch and her jockey responds in kind, striking just behind the saddle. Something happens – Stiles can’t see it clearly: it’s too fast; the camera’s at the wrong angle – but the filly swerves outward, and there is a moment of bumping, something gone wrong, and Gritty Grudge stumbles off-stride for half a second before recollecting herself.

That half-second is all Yogi needs. Dina hits him again, twice, hard, as Gritty Grudge tries to come back, but she’s almost a length off the lead now, they’re at the finish line, and The Yogimeister has broken his maiden on the ninth try.

It’s nothing to write home about, nor is the time (1:47 1/5), but Stiles is grinning all the same when he walks back to the barn with twin grilled ham and cheese sandwiches. “The ugly bastard finally won,” he tells Isaac, who is grazing Howard and doesn’t even bother to ask what Stiles is talking about.

“Derek probably shit himself watching,” is all he says, followed by, “Did they have pickle chips?”

“Out of luck.” Stiles tosses him one of the sandwiches, then unwraps his own. “Seriously, though,” he says through a mouthful of food. “Nine tries to break his maiden. What the hell does Derek see in him?”

“Someone who hates everything as much as he does, probably. This is my food; go back to your grass.” Isaac nudges away Howard when he pokes his nose at the sandwich. He waits until the gelding drops his head before tearing into it.

Stiles is already halfway through his own. “Someday, I’m gonna ask Derek about Yogi. Someday soon.” He plucks a loose bit of cheese off the wrapper and pops it in his mouth. “Where’s Laura? Does she know?”

“I told you: she’s never around, this time of year. She’s probably sweet-talking some fat Texan into sending us more pieces of shit like this one.” He pokes at Howard with the tip of one sneaker. “More sour, useless, broken bastards to turn into something profitable, like we don’t have enough already.”

“Huh.” Stiles cocks one hip to let his weight rest against the fenced boards around the wash stall. “Derek says we’re getting two of their two-year-olds in January, though. Twin fillies. If they’re anything like Bury, that’ll be good, won’t it?”

“Stiles,” Isaac says with exaggerated patience. “Do you know why twin horses are crazy rare? Because they’re weaker than single foals, and generally die within a month, if they even survive until birth. I don’t care if they’re by Sleipnir and out of a Pegasus – they’ll be worth less than shit
as racers.” He purses his mouth into a thin line. “The best we can hope for is some decent outside stock coming in. If we’re lucky enough to get another Schizo or Sass, that’ll be a miracle.” His head turns. “Look who’s coming home.”

Yogi’s coat is slick with sweat and his sides still heaving with the force of bellows when he comes plodding down the road beside Derek. They’re both wrecked. The bare planes of Yogi’s back gleam in the sun, while Derek has pulled off his t-shirt, and the tank top underneath is sticking to his chest. Dina is nowhere in sight: back in the jockeys’ room.

Isaac’s expression telegraphs how much he’d enjoy making a crack about Derek running the race alongside Yogi, but he keeps his mouth shut and just gives Stiles an indecipherable look. Stiles makes a face back. Isaac rolls his eyes.

It’s the drained slump of Derek’s shoulders that does it. Stiles finishes off the last bite of his sandwich, balls up the wrapper, and jams it into his pocket. Then he walks out to meet them.

Derek focuses on his feet first, before he tracks his gaze up, up, up, until he has to tilt his head back just the tiniest bit to meet Stiles’ eyes. The muscles of his face stiffen.

“I’ll take him.”

Derek comes to a halt just in front of Stiles. His face stays blank.

“If you want, I mean. You look pretty wiped, Sourwolf.”

That gets the barest hint of a twitch; surprise, amusement, he doesn’t know. But the lead rope is dangling from Derek’s fingers, then dropping into Stiles’ palm. “He’ll need a long walk,” Derek says. Then he’s brushing by Stiles, nodding a greeting at Isaac, and disappearing into the barn.

Yogi is docile for once in his life. He clip-clops along beside Stiles with his ears lax and to the sides, listening around them as they pass other barns and horses. Once in a while he attempts to stop and nibble on the thin grass lining the pathway, but Stiles always clucks and tugs him onward, keeping him moving until his coat is dry and his breathing is back to normal. In the wash stall, he’s a little more himself, pinning his ears and trying to attack the hose when Stiles brings it up near his head. It’s not like McGatsby, who shoves his face into the stream because he likes it; Yogi attempts hose-icide. He leaves Stiles alone, though, except for the bit where he tries to use him as an itching post when Stiles first unclips the cross-ties holding him in place.

Stiles calls him an ugly bastard to his face, but scratches at the white star on his forehead and smiles when the gelding grunts with pleasure. “You’re a softie after all, aren’t you? Goddammit – I knew it. You and Derek are two of a kind, I bet. He’ll put up with anything from Laura. You, yeah, you’re the Grumpmeister when you don’t know people. Sourwolf and Grumpmeister: what a pair. But then you’re in a good mood ‘cause you won your race, and now you’ve been walked and had your bath and you get to chill in the sun – yeah, I see how it is. You just want to be loved. You’re a total wuss.”

Yogi steps on his foot.

“Shit, shit, okay, I take it back, you’re not a wuss – move.” Stiles shoves at the gelding’s shoulder until he eases his weight to the other side and lifts his hoof off of Stiles’ sneaker. “A little bitch is what you are, you...” He stubs at the ground, making sure he can feel all of his toes. “You’re still a Grumpmeister. Jesus fucking Christ.” Bitting his tongue, he looks around. Isaac’s back inside the barn, which he’s grateful for, because talking to a horse is fine, yeah, but his dad raised him to be a respectable young man and all, and slingling out ‘Jesus fucking Christ’ under casual circumstances
really doesn’t qualify. He’s blaming Erica. And Boyd. And Jackie. And Dina. Even Isaac, a little bit. And all the other riders: Jorge and Eddie and Ben and all those guys. Yeah. Them.

Isaac would be laughing his ass off if he could hear Stiles’ thoughts right now.

Sighing, Stiles lifts his free hand to Yogi’s neck, scratching along under his mane. Yogi twists into the itch, and he has to smirk a little at that. “Maybe you aren’t so bad,” he murmurs.

Yogi jerks his head, tearing loose another mouthful of grass.
“For Lack of an E and Golden Lining have both broken well, and they’re heading for the rail, but here’s Rob The Cook on the inside, pulling past to take the lead for the seventh running of the Real Quiet Stakes.”

Stiles bounces on the balls of his feet and curses under his breath. He’s standing at the rail, one of a cluster of handlers with their charges in the race. The starting gate is to their right, with the horses breaking to run counterclockwise, so for now there’s nothing to be seen except a fuzzy line of movement racing away around the clubhouse turn.

“First quarter in twenty-four flat, Rob The Cook by a half-length, Golden Lining and For Lack of an E battling for second, Deified three-quarters of a length back, Fit Flat in fifth, almost three lengths off the pace, and Zackattack trailing. The ground is boggy by the rail; they’re staying out where it’s drier, and we have the half in forty-eight, Rob The Cook keeping a twelve-second clip, Zackattack picking up a bit, level with Fit Flat, both still three lengths back and the leaders holding together. And they’re coming into the turn, Golden Lining putting on some pressure, swinging onto the rail.”

He can see them now: the bright chestnut on the rail – clear-cut in a field of browns and bays covered in kicked-up mud – inching up the line. Ernest is on the outside, distinguishable only by his blaze, but even that fades when Rob The Cook swerves out, right in front of him, flinging dirt into his face. Ernest shakes his head, stride stuttering. On his back, Lydia drags her spare set of goggles down over her chin with one hand even as she maneuvers him wide through the turn to get out from behind the other colt.

“Golden Lining is in the lead, and here comes Zackattack down the stretch!”

The leaders are pouring on speed now, straining clear of Ernest and Deified. Fit Flat is going nowhere, falling off the pace, but so is Ernest, who is continuing to jiggle his head back and forth even as Zackattack roars by on the outside.

Stiles’ ears are ringing from the screams all around; Zackattack’s jockey has plenty of horse left, and he comes even with Rob The Cook and Golden Lining as they sweep by the eighth pole, and then it’s a three-horse race for the win, but Stiles isn’t watching them. Deified is trying to come up on Ernest, who is obviously in distress, and Lydia cracks her stick across his hindquarters when he continues to falter and drift out. The leaders sweep under the wire abreast of one another with the audience screaming over the photo finish, but all Stiles cares about is the little wall-eyed colt who thrusts his head down and sticks out his nose to beat Deified for fourth place by a neck.

He vaults over the rail with five other grooms as the field slows beyond the wire. The stewards are busy checking over the finish snapshots when he jogs up to Ernest, who is hanging his head, swinging it back and forth, blinking incessantly.

“A clot of dirt came up and hit him full in the face,” Lydia gasps as she swings off and starts undoing the girth. “Left side. He couldn’t concentrate afterwards.” Her green-and-black nylon silks are an almost uniform shade of brown over the front, as are her boots and helmet. There are raccoon-esque circles of clean skin around her eyes when she pulls off her goggles. She spits into the dirt and props the saddle against one hip. “We could’ve had a four-way photo, if not for that.”

“Probably,” Stiles agrees. Ernest’s bright blue eyes look clear now, and he’s not shaking his head anymore, though he’s still blinking more frequently than usual. “Who’s the track vet here?”
“Morell. I’d bet she noticed him falter. She’ll be over as soon as they’re done with the drug tests.”
Lydia spits again and makes a face like she just licked dirt off her teeth. (She probably did.)

There’s a roar from the crowd as the photo finish results come up: it’s Zackattack by the flare of a nostril, with the boggy inside track keeping Golden Lining just slow enough for Rob The Cook to take second.

Lydia claps Stiles on the shoulder. “I’ve got a mount in the ninth race. Tell Laura about the eye; he ran well.” And then she’s tracking off toward the jockey’s room while Stiles leads Ernest back toward the barn.

Laura catches up to them within seconds of stepping off the track. Beside her is a rotund Latino couple; the man hangs back while the women clucks and waddles up to Ernest’s head once he halts.

“Oh, Lydia says he got dirt—”

“I saw.” The woman – Something-that-starts-with-a-V Roman – murmurs to Ernest to keep him calm as she sets her fingers around his eye to examine it. He still flinches away when she brushes too close, and she tsks in her throat, withdrawing. “Get the vet to look at it, would you?”

“Of course,” Laura says immediately.

Ms. Roman nods, then looks to her husband. “I’ll see you at home.”

He inclines his head at the obvious dismissal, slips his hands into his pockets, and strolls away, whistling.

“I’ll stay, if you don’t mind, until he’s been checked.” She smiles like she knows there’s no way for them to refuse, then begins to lead the way into the maze of barns with the sort of attitude that declares ‘I own this place’. Laura grins at Stiles for a fleeting second before moving up to keep pace with Ms. Roman. Stiles keeps his mouth shut.

***

Her name is Vanessa Roman. She’s Panamanian by heritage and was born in the US, though she moved to Colón for eight years after high school. She will be sixty-eight next month. Her fortieth anniversary is in March. She started working with horses when she was thirteen, spent her years in Panama as a groom/trainer at an eventing barn, then got into flat racing in her late thirties. She trained some, but found she had a fantastic touch for breeding and breaking in the babies, which requires a lighter, steadier hand. She’s been doing that for twenty-five years. Her husband knows nothing about horses, but he likes to photograph them during races or in the paddocks at their farm.

All this and more Stiles learns while they’re waiting for the vet to turn up, and then for her to flush out Ernest’s eye to clear out all traces of contamination. Vanessa interrogates him plenty in between spilling anecdotes; when she finds out that he’s from Beacon Hills, she calls out to Isaac, who is oiling a saddle: “Beacon Hills: aren’t you from there, too?”

“Technically.” Isaac doesn’t look up.

“‘Technically’ my fat brown ass; I remember you saying you were.” She makes a tsking noise
again, then turns back to Stiles. “Did you know?”

He blinks. “No.” Isaac doesn’t talk about his life pre-Hales. It’s a thing. But Stiles doesn’t talk about his life pre-Berkeley, unless he’s telling some story about Scott, so it’s not like that’s such a surprising thing. It’s just… a thing. A thingy-thing that is a thing.

Ernest snorts as Morell finishes tending to his eye. He stamps a foot impatiently.

“I got you, buddy. I got you.” Stiles is maybe a little gladder than he should be to turn his back on Ms. Roman and lead Ernest back to his stall while Morell speaks to Laura. Hollywood Park’s track vet is a slender, dark-skinned woman who looks too clever to be trustworthy. She doesn’t waste time, though, and Ernest is peaceable once Stiles forks over his dinner.

When he reemerges from the stall, Laura and Ms. Roman are sauntering towards the clubhouse side-by-side with Morell stalking along ahead of them, stride long and businesslike as she heads for her next patient.

“That was weird,” he says to Isaac. Then: “Are you really from Beacon Hills?”

“Not for a long time,” Isaac snaps back, and that’s the end of it.

Derek is hunched over the desk in the tack room when Stiles stops by the doorway (he didn’t even come out to greet Ms. Roman). There’s a tiny TV on the corner where Laura would keep a clock: the ninth race is playing out on mute. Papers are stacked all over the desk, but Laura does that too. Derek turns around after Stiles has been standing there for almost a minute. “What?” He’s not wearing his leather jacket today. Stiles doesn’t know why he notices that.

“What?” he says, and withdraws. Derek watches him until he moves out of sight around the door, over to Booze’s stall. “You ready for your race next Saturday, boy?” Stiles tugs on the chestnut forelock flopping over Booze’s forehead. “You ready to show everyone who’s boss?”

The colt whuffles and flicks his ears to the sides.

“You gonna put a smile on Sourwolf’s face?”

Booze butts at Stiles with his nose.

“One of these days he’s gonna kill you for that.”

“For calling him Sourwolf? Naaah.”

Isaac scoffs, wedging the oil-damp sponge into the tight space under the skirt of the saddle, around the stirrup bar. “You’ll see,” he says. “People snap. You’ll think they’re fine and happy for the longest time, but then...” He cracks his gum. “Then they’re not.”

“You’re cheerful,” Stiles tells him. “How about you go back to whatever tragic bohemian novel you crawled out of?”

***

“Man, what the fuck did I tell you on Tuesday? ‘Watch out for Pim Byrns’ freaks,’ I said. Fuck, how dumb are you?” Boyd’s irritation is a front; he rattles Stiles’ bone structure by shaking his
shoulder for a few seconds, then lets go and slaps him on the back with a grin spreading across his face. “Damn fool. Who’s out first?”

“Booze. Breeze him three furlongs, sharpen up his speed, see how his splint’s doing.” Derek doesn’t look up from his clipboard. “Ben: McGatsby. Run them together, but don’t make it a race. Ed and Erica: Pig and Slaw. Four-eighths, but separate. Make Slaw do it slow.” His chin comes up, eyes flashing. “Where’s Jorge?”

“Pim’s barn,” Ben says, letting Isaac boost him into McGatsby’s saddle.

“Doing what?”

Ben is younger than Stiles, and he looks like a porcelain doll atop McGatsby, but his grin is true that of a true Iowan farm boy: wide and clear. “Pim’s gonna have him race that albino in the Prevue on the twenty-second.”

“There’s no such thing as an albino horse. He’s white.” Stiles glances at Derek. “Isn’t Slaw in the Prevue?”

“Her first race against the boys,” affirms Erica. She tickles the filly’s mouth with her fingertips. “She’ll kick his ass. What’s he called? Ghostchant?”

Ben shrugs. “Something like that.”

“We can’t know what’ll happen until they race.” Derek grumbles a curse. “If Jorge’s gone… is Jackie down here yet? Someone needs to get on Sass.”

“I think so. Text her. Where’s your sister?”

“Busy.”

“With?”

“Getting me and Stiles more fuckin’ nutballs to look after,” Isaac snaps, inserting himself into the conversation. “Any more questions, or are you gonna do your damn job?” He matches Ben glare for glare.

“Enough,” Derek says. He’s got one hand on Booze’s bridle, ready to lead him out to the track. He waits until Ben drops Isaac’s gaze in favor of collecting his reins, then nods at Boyd to start walking. “Jackie’ll take Sass out with the second set,” he tells the collective barn. And then they’re off.

***

It’s Wednesday before Allison comes to visit. She turns up at the Hale barn around four, as they’re wrapping up mucking out the stalls and switching over to unbaling hay. “Knock, knock,” she calls from the entrance.

Derek is crouched next to Stiles with a pair of twine cutters in his hand; he looks tempted to throw them at her head. “Argent.”

She saunters in, forcibly casual. Watching her, Stiles realizes that this is the furthest thing from a
friendly visit. She’s barely bothering to glance at Derek, choosing to survey the shedrow instead. When he checks behind him, Isaac is frozen midway down the aisle with a wheelbarrow of hay.

Allison clicks her tongue. “Where’s Laura?”

“Out.” Derek uncurls his spine to stand. “What do you want?”

She paces closer. “I heard you’re running your little speedball filly in the Prevue.” She smiles. “Gotta tell ya: I’d hate to see that perfect record tarnished. Don’t give me that look; I’m doing this as a friend – as a favor to your grooms.” She stops several paces from the hay bale Stiles is kneeling beside. Her eyes lock onto Derek. “I wouldn’t send your girl to the Prevue, in your shoes. Let her storm the Generous, instead.”

Derek’s lips roll back from his teeth. “Did you give Byrns the same spiel about his albino?”

*No such thing as an albino horse.* Stiles wants to say. *Genetically impossible; he’s white.* But he doesn’t risk his neck by intervening.

He wishes he had, though, because Allison’s “Ghostchant is white” carries the sting of an insult. “And of course not. I don’t give a shit about his handlers. Clay can run Pim’s beastie into the ground. He’ll do the same to Cold Slough if you give him the chance; he’s a heartbreaker.”

“Alright,” Derek says. “We’ll see that she never gives him the chance, then.” His smile is full of teeth.

Allison seems amused. “Think it over. Your sister might have recognized good advice when she heard it.”

“You wouldn’t have set foot in the barn if Laura was here. Get out.”

Allison’s bow is deep and mocking. “As you wish.” Her swagger is as pronounced on the way out as it was coming in.

***

“How come you never told me you were from Beacon Hills?”

“Because it was none of your damn business, maybe? And it’s been days since you found out; so what?”

“I dunno. But you knew Scott and Allison and I were – one of them must have said something, right?”

“Yeah.” Isaac sighs. “Yeah, I knew.” Across the room, he rolls onto his side to face Stiles. “I’d see you guys around, sometimes – you three were attached at the fuckin’ hip.” He snorts.

“You… I don’t remember…” Stiles props himself up on one elbow, trying to think. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-five,” Isaac says, like Stiles hasn’t spent almost two years thinking they were the same age.
“That…that would be why I don’t remember you, then.”

“Yep.” Isaac clicks his tongue. “I dropped out of school the day I turned 18 – you were, what, freshmen? Sophomores? Anyway: dropped out, moved to San Fran, and…” He laughs. “I kept alive on my own for three years before the Hales scraped me out of the gutter. They were working at some show barn then, Laura teaching kids on the flat, Derek grooming horses. Got me a job with them for a year or so, before they decided to come back to the track. When that happened… I followed.”

“Why?”

“You know, some days, I wonder what I was thinking. Those horses are older, slower, calmer, and they’re mostly mares and geldings, so there’s no Stoner jumping around trying to take your arm off.” There’s a rustle that Stiles interprets as a shrug. “But Derek dug me out of a pretty rough spot, so I guess I felt like I owed him. They’ve really only got each other, ya know? And I don’t have anyone. So when they asked, I said yeah, and that was it.”

Stiles ponders that for a second. “What was the bad spot? If that’s okay, I mean-”

“I’m gonna need a lot of fuckin’ alcohol before I talk about that.”

“Alright, I – okay, that’s good, that’s fine; I was just, you know, curious.”

Isaac grunts. “You talk too much.”

“Well, people indulge me when I talk, so…”

“You’d start World War Three in a day and a half if you ever became a politician.” Isaac rolls back over so that he’s lying flat, eyes on the ceiling. “Don’t ever become a politician.”

“Fuck you.”

Isaac is silent.

“That was lies and slander right there. I will sue your ass if necessary-”

“You’ll get three bucks and a shitty bike. Good luck. Go to sleep.”

“See? You’re indulging me by talking back, and those three bucks will help pay for the coffee that you tricked me into buying every morning.”

“Sucks to be you,” Isaac says, then pulls the covers over his head and stops responding.

***

Dina storms into the barn spitting venom. “I’m gonna kill Clark,” she announces. “I’m gonna rip his fucking spine out.”

Laura has been back for a few minutes: her expression has been livid the whole time and she hasn’t said a word, and Isaac is pacing circles outside with Booze by his side. Neither Derek nor Stiles opens their mouth. It is Saturday, November 17th, and they both just watched on Derek’s tiny desk television as the perpetually-skittish colt bolted right out of the gate for the fifth race. He covered
the first half-mile of the six furlongs in forty-three and two-fifths seconds before Dina got him back under control (if you could call it that) with nothing left in the tank. Of a twelve-horse allowance field, he finished dead last. Clark Mack, on the colt one slot to the inside of Booze, brought his charge home in front.

Dina’s still rolling: “Fuckin’ cracked him on the ass right out of the gate, I swear, I just lodged a fuckin’ appeal.”

“None of the cameras caught it.” Laura’s tone is stone-cold. “We’ll get nothing from the stewards. As far as I’m concerned, you’re the one who couldn’t stop him.”

“The horse went off like he was fuckin’ shot.”

“Well it’s a pity how every horse isn’t perfectly behaved, with a silk-smooth stride and wings sprouting from their shoulders. Next time, I’ll let someone who knows how to ride take him out.” Laura turns away, presenting Dina with the back of her head. “Stiles, you’ll bring Scotch Fitzgerald to the paddock for the seventh race. Isaac’s going to be busy for a while.”

Stiles stares at her, then over her shoulder, where Dina is glowering like she wants to rip out Laura’s spine. Her gaze flicks to his, just for a moment, before she pivots on her heel and stalks away. Booze snorts and throws his head up when she passes, skittering around to put Isaac between them.

“Stiles? Did you hear me?”

“Bring McGatsby to the paddock,” he repeats back. “I can do that.”

***

McGatsby is a fairly big horse, standing sixteen hands at the shoulder, but he’s composed of long, slender wires, so there isn’t much mass to him. (He’s sort of like Stiles as a horse with a way nastier temper.) In the paddock, he prances in circles and snaps at Stiles while Laura buckles the girth and boosts Lydia into the saddle, but he’s really not very impressive once one looks around: Marilyn Marrero, Scottie Maxwell, and Chris Argent all have horses here today.

The On Trust Handicap isn’t the biggest race in the world, with a purse of just $80,000, and the Hollywood Derby and The Matriarch are only eight days away, too close for this to serve as a tune-up for the best horses, so nothing here is the cream of the crop. But that doesn’t mean the competition is weak, either; Marrero consistently produces solid low-grade stakes winners, and Maxwell tends to send out sardonically-named horses that can run forever. And the Argents are the Argents.

Today they have a colt named Silverbled running – he’s sixteen hands, like McGatsby, with bunches of muscle flexing under his bright bay coat, very much unlike McGatsby. He’s got eight wins in ten starts, plus one show, and though he can’t run for anything on turf, this is a dirt race, and he’s easily their worst enemy on the field today. Marrero has a small, dark chestnut filly named Raunchesstra who could give Phoenix Flight a run for her money in a ‘hindquarters capable of powering rockets’ competition. Ben is on her back; he gives them a cheeky grin when he saunters into the paddock. He’s only a step in front of Clark Mack, who strides over to where Scottie Maxwell is adjusting the throatlatch of Katrina Bayou’s bridle. The mud-brown mare is
notoriously quick over boggy tracks, which is the sort of horrible irony that tends to accompany all her trainer’s horses, but it hasn’t rained for ages and she’s five years old, just like McGatsby.

Stiles slaps Lydia’s knee for good luck as they move out onto the track, watches McGatsby rattle his head back and forth until she lets him pick up a jog, and thinks about how, if not Silverbled, they would actually have a decent chance of winning.

The Argents’ colt is in slot #8, all the way on the outside, while McGatsby has #5, Katrina Bayou, #2, and Raunchesstra, #6. The race is seven and a half furlongs, so it starts from the chute, and Stiles resigns himself to relying once again on the announcer’s calls until they come around the turn. He starts to go stand with the other grooms, then spies a familiar pair of shoulders hunched inside a leather jacket by the rail.

He slips into the spot beside Derek with only a moment’s hesitation. “I was wondering why Laura was the one in the paddock.”

“Oh, paper, she’s everyone’s trainer. I’m the assistant.” Derek’s eyes don’t leave the post parade.

“Everyone except Yogi.”

“I own him. It’s different.”

“Mmmm. You’re gonna tell me that whole story someday, right? Why you bought that nut? Because I get more curious every time I accidentally press on my thumbnail and it starts hurting again. And it’s still completely black, thanks very much for asking.”

Derek ignores the latter half of that entirely: “It’s gonna take a lot of coffee before I tell you about that.”

“Jesus fu- you with the coffee and Isaac with the alcohol; I’m never going to learn any sordid details about you two. Not cool, dude.”

Derek cocks his head to the side to regard Stiles with raised eyebrows. He’s just opened his mouth when the starting gate bursts open and eight Thoroughbreds spring forth. He turns away.

From behind them come running footsteps before Isaac practically skids into the rail next to Stiles. Breathing hard, there is color flushed high on his cheeks, and his eyes are bright. Stiles claps him on the back as the running monologue of positions spills from the loudspeakers.

Derek straightens up to pull off his jacket as the field thunders down the backstretch, Raunchesstra in the lead and the pack bunched up behind her, with McGatsby trailing on the rail by a length and a half. The jacket ends up slung over the fence on Derek’s other side, and as he leans forward against it once more, his shoulder brushes Stiles’. He pulls away quickly.

The half goes by in forty-six and four-fifths. Jackie steps on the gas as they start swinging around the corner of the turn for home, running wide to get around the pack. Silverbled gets his lead change and starts to move up, while Katrina Bayou hangs tight in third behind him, though she’s visibly tiring.

They hit the stretch, and McGatsby is stampeding like a freight train, but there’s another horse to factor in: a bright bay like Silverbled, but with a much smaller build, and he’s passing McGatsby, then Katrina Bayou a second after that as she fades completely. Both Ben and his filly see him coming – “Timed Grace is making his charge; they’re neck and neck!” – and Silverbled is still pressing hard at her flank. McGatsby is wide of everyone, digging in with every stringy, mean inch of his body, but he can only do so much against such competition. Timed Grace takes the prize by a
length, and Raunchesstra staves off Silverbled for second place. McGatsby takes fourth, and it’s only once Isaac is hauling himself over the rail that Stiles realizes he has a hand fisted in Derek’s T-shirt and was literally trying to climb him in excitement during the run down the stretch.

“Shit, sorry,” he says, letting go to promptly fall on his ass.

Derek shakes his head and leans down, grabbing Stiles’ arm and yanking him back to his feet. He doesn’t say anything, but his expression is a tad less pinched at the corners than Stiles would expect. They just lost to the Argents (again), after all.
Up Against the Ropes

Stiles sleeps in the tack room on Saturday night because Bush and Pig both have races on Sunday. Bush’s is a $52,000 allowance, nothing to panic over (yeah right), but Pig is in the Cat’s Cradle Handicap. She’s been antsy for the last few days, knows a race is coming. Bush has been meaner, too, a bit more of a bully, but he’s five years old to Pig’s three, and for him Sunday is just another day at the office.

It wouldn’t matter to Stiles if both were sure bets to win; he’s learned that he’s going to be scared shitless every time one of his horses runs. He read a biography of Ruffian once that talked about how everyone in her barn lived in fear when she went out to race, because a horse with that much heart, you knew, would run even when her legs were no longer capable of bearing her weight – and that was exactly what killed her. Even one like Booze, who only ran so fast because he was scared, might take himself down through fear alone. And if McGatsby’s foreleg, or Yogi’s, had snapped during their runs down the stretch, would they have tolerated being pulled up while the competition tore on? Would Ernest have let Deified collect the fourth place that he fought so hard to take?

Saving a horse after a breakdown requires stopping them before irreparable damage is done to the leg. Bush might succumb to the pain and limp to a halt, but Pig, who blazed through the slop to cover eight and a half furlongs in a minute and forty-three seconds for the Miss America? Would she back off? Would she even feel the pain?

Stiles sits up and runs a hand over his buzz cut, isn’t surprised to find himself shaking. The bad ones never run hard enough to hurt themselves, they say, but the best will kill themselves doing it.

He rolls off the cot and stumbles into the aisle in his sweatpants and Batman T-shirt. It’s almost two. Greenberg, their night watchman down here, sits in a folding chair at the end of the shedrow, a small radio on the ground next to him playing the softest strains of some country group. He doesn’t speak, just nods once when Stiles waves a greeting.

Bizarre as it is, he wishes Finstock had come down with them, because he’s grumpy and insane, but he’ll pace the aisle from dawn to dusk, and he would have woken Stiles the second Bury had been down in his stall for more than an hour. The big black gelding frequently lies down, but it’s bad for his ribcage to spend too much time like that. The one-hour mark isn’t particularly special, even if horses on average only spend half an hour off their feet each day, but it’s reassuring to know that someone’s aware. Finstock keeps track of the horses. In comparison, not resenting Greenberg is a task Stiles doesn’t have the energy for, not so close to a race.

When he steps over to the stall right next to the tack room, Bury whickers, thrusts out his forelegs, and shoves himself upright, shaking straw from his blanket as he does. He butts his head into Stiles’ chest, twisting his neck into it when Stiles scratches under his chin.

“Would you stop, boy? If you were hurting, would you stop running?”

Bury closes his eyes and leans into Stiles’ hands.

It was stupid to expect any different, but a knot clenches tighter in his stomach, while something damp prickles behind his eyelids. Nobody knows until it happens. Nobody knows.
The winners of Sunday’s first three races all test positive for doping. Dermorphin is a relatively new illegal painkiller, because it only occurs naturally on the backs of certain South American frogs, or else needs be synthesized in a lab, but it’s wicked powerful. The horses are maidens and claimers, nothing special, and all the trainers have previous drug violations, but the triple whammy stings the California Horse Racing Board, and the strings of tension get plucked ever-tighter with each offense. By the fourth race a lot of sideways glances are getting cast at Morell, until the winning colt clears the tests and everyone sighs in relief. Morell’s not the only vet on the grounds, and many trainers like to bring in vets from their stables or home tracks to minister to their animals when they go to meets. But she is officially in charge of the track, so doped horses are going to make her look bad even if she’s never touched them before pulling a blood sample post-race.

Stiles doesn’t have much time to spare for sympathy; Bush and Pig’s races are the 7th and 8th, respectively, so he’s plowing through as much of his late-afternoon work as he can in the morning since he’s going to lose a solid ninety minutes, even if he’s lucky. He’s also doing a portion of Isaac’s work, in exchange for Isaac dealing with Bush post-race so Stiles can bring Pig to the paddock. It’s a mayhem of wraps and laundry and grooming, and he’s going to have to stay late to properly muck out stalls, but he’d rather do that than miss watching his skinny mud-lover run.

Bush goes off as the 30-to-1 long shot and takes second after running mid-pack for most of the six furlongs. It’s not a bad showing from the oldest horse in the three-plus field, and he’s in a decent mood afterwards, dropping his head to snap at the grass of the turf course when Lydia jumps off his back. (She gives Stiles a smug ‘you didn’t think I could get him to show’ grin and taps him on the head with her crop between collecting the saddle and trotting off to the jockey’s room to weigh in before getting on Pig.)

Derek’s at the paddock with Laura when Stiles brings Pig out, and he’s the one who settles the thin flaps of leather and cloth across her shoulders. “Moving up in the world, eh?” Stiles teases him, because he’s too nervous not to make a joke.

Derek tugs on the girth until Pig pins her ears and snaps at Stiles.

“Rude.” He tickles her snip with a fingertip until she perks up again. He almost asks Derek if he thinks Pig would keep running with a broken leg, but realizes that this is probably not the best time. Superstition is a powerful force.

Almost as an afterthought, he scans around them to check out the competition. Pim Byrns and Matt Daehler both have nice-looking, fit fillies in the handicap: Mirror on the Wall is better known for her turf exploits than her dirt ones, but Clain has come home in front nine out of ten times, on both dirt and grass. The Cat’s Cradle is a dirt race, and she has stormed Hollywood Park before, so the stunted filly – who barely hits fifteen hands – goes off as the favorite. Apart from her size, Clain also stands out due to the white stockings that extend past her hocks, glaringly bright against the seal brown of her coat, and she almost takes the hand off a small child who reaches over the fence towards the “pwetty pony”.

Laura slips away to Mr. Gray’s box as they leave the paddock. At the gap in the rail, Stiles unclips the lead line and feels his heart start to clog up his trachea. “Kick ass,” he tells Lydia.

She taps him on the head again. “Always.” Derek is at Stiles’ side, and he and Lydia share a nod as Pig steps out onto the dirt. No ‘good luck’. No ‘take care’. It’s out of their hands now.
This time, Stiles spares only a moment’s consideration for the line of handlers before following Derek to his chosen viewing spot. There is no banter; Stiles’ brain has mired itself in anxiety to the point where anything short of catastrophe seems impossible. Derek keeps silent when Stiles leans against the rail beside him, but he doesn’t lean away when Stiles’ arm brushes his every few seconds because of all his nervous trembling and fidgeting.

Pig almost gives him a heart attack when she stumbles two strides out of the gate and throws Lydia onto her neck, but she finds her feet and charges after the field. She’s barely gaining, though, and they’re five furlongs down and in the turn before Stiles realizes that Lydia is sitting, letting Pig drive while she gropes for her stirrup. He almost screams, hanging over the rail and barely bothering to breathe while he watches. But in the space of one magical second, coming out of the turn, Lydia gets her foot in the stirrup and her butt out of the saddle and snaps her crop back against Pig’s flank.

Stiles’ little mud-runner is fourteen lengths off the lead with a quarter of a mile left and she’s been sprinting hard for five and a half furlongs, but she’s got a well as deep as any mine shaft, and her will does not bend, nor her legs break, nor her breath falter. With a furlong to go she is eight lengths back, five at the half, and three at the wire, taking fifth, but she sails clear of the victorious Clain within a handful of strides.

Stiles lets his head hang, the top of the rail digging painfully into his stomach. “Oh my god,” he mutters. “She made it; she made it.”

Next to him, Derek has just begun to stir when people in the crowd begin to scream.

He snaps up so harshly it feels like he’s done permanent damage to his spine, but Pig, Pig…

Pig is fine. She’s dancing and wheeling under Lydia, and Mirror on the Wall is slashing at the air as she rears, but it’s another horse who’s down on the track. #1, some mare whose name Stiles doesn’t even know, is snorting and thrashing around on the ground, her jockey having jumped clear but trying to inch back in to calm her while the outriders swarm. The mare flails on senselessly.

A hand is on his arm. “Get Pig. Get her out of there. I’ll find Laura.”

Stiles’ chest is tight, but he climbs over the rail anyway and stumbles towards Pig. She steps on his foot half a dozen times in as many seconds because she won’t stand still, but she lets him grab her bridle and doesn’t bolt off.

Lydia drops the reins, and Stiles draws them over Pig’s head as she swings off, letting them play out through his fingers so the filly doesn’t feel trapped. The unknown mare thrashes to her feet as Lydia is pulling off the saddle, and she nearly gets trampled when Pig hops and tries to spin around Stiles. There’s a white ring around the brown of her irises.

The mare’s reins are looped around her left foreleg, and she jerks her head, eyes rolling, until the leather snaps and she can rear. The outriders start to close in, but she lashes out when one gets too near, then drops back onto all fours and turns tail to bolt, stirrups flapping and broken ends of her reins whipping around her front legs. She goes down again – and stays down – a few feet from the outside rail separating the track from the grandstand.

Pig is snorting and blowing, and Stiles is honestly thinking about swinging aboard bareback so he’ll have better control of her, but Lydia props the saddle against one hip and grabs the other side of the bridle before she gets out of control. “Let’s go, girl.”

They all but sprint around the track after Pig, who wants nothing more than to run back to her stall.
once they get moving. It’s a long trip around to the backstretch, but both humans have to plant their feet to slow her when they meet Derek with Laura and Mr. Gray on the path to the stables.

Almost before they’ve stopped, Laura is sinking into a crouch, running her hands over Pig’s legs, checking for excessive heat. “She feels fine,” she informs them after a tense minute. “There’s nothing obviously wrong. Walk her out.”

They make it back to the barn without a single bad step from Pig, so everyone breathes a little easier. Once they get home, though, Isaac comes out to meet them with a grim expression.

Stiles knows it’s ridiculous to hope, but as soon as Gray and Laura have gone off to have their special trainer-owner discussion, he still asks: “The mare?”

“They just put her down in front of ten thousand people. They’re not even sure of what was wrong with her.” Isaac looks away, jaw locked up tight.

Derek sounds dead tired when he says “Welcome to racing.” He looks between Stiles and Pig. “Take care of her and get out of here. I’ll do the stalls. You too,” he adds to Isaac.

They’re too drained to argue, and a few minutes later, Isaac folds his arms over the door of Pig’s stall as Stiles is giving her dinner. “I don’t know about you, but today’s been hell, and I need a drink.”

“Want me to call Allison, and we’ll all go out?”

“I…sure.” Isaac’s fingers dig into his own biceps. “That sounds good.”

***

Allison drags them out to some new Mexican place where they serve actual tacos instead of the corrupted American version, and instead of plastic they use that stringy cheese that they’ve perfected down in Oaxaca. Stiles pigs out on beef tacos while Isaac has some sort of chicken quesadilla, and Allison shows up both of them by getting these tacos with slow-roasted ham slices that have been, like, infused with pineapple juice and make Stiles drool just from the smell. She lets them each try a bite, and Stiles nearly breaks into the kitchen to propose to the chef.

They don’t talk about horses – not at first anyway. Allison tells them how Scott is doing, based on their daily phone conversations (he’s buried under all the schoolwork he’s been putting off, and there are still races being run every day in San Francisco), asks about Stiles’ dad (still alive and whole), and tries several times to teach Isaac to pronounce “pollo” correctly, though he all but directly refuses to comprehend the Spanish pronunciation of double ‘ll’s after his second shot of tequila.

“You’re better than Scott,” she concedes after Isaac has kicked Stiles under the table twice for laughing at him. “Not by much, though.”

“Was that a compliment or an insult?”

“I don’t know, what do you think?”

Isaac studies her with the curve of his mouth hooked up in one corner. “I think you’re horrible.”
Allison slaps his chest as he recoils, laughing. “I know where you live,” she mock-threatens. “I have leverage with your roommate.”

“Leverage? What leverage? You have no leverage with me,” Stiles protests.

“I have Scott.”

“Witch,” Isaac mutters, then leans back in his chair to catch the waitress’ eye. “One more?”

“Tequila?” She nods and strides off.

“Alcohol’s not gonna fix everything, you know.”

“Shut up, Stiles.”

The tone turns ugly with Isaac’s glower before Allison nudges him with her leg, redirecting his attention away from Stiles. She nods at the empty glass in front of him. “This next one is capping it. It’s not even eight.” Nevertheless, when the waitress comes back, she asks for a margarita, and Stiles gets a second beer because it has been a hell of a day and hypocrisy makes the world go ‘round. Isaac just collects the third tequila against his chest, slumps back in his seat, and stops talking.

Stiles and Allison go back and forth in softer tones for a little bit; they discuss workout times, track gossip, the big stakes that are coming up. The Hales and Argents will face off in more than just the Hollywood Prevue: Schizo and Silverits are both in The Matriarch, Stoner will be going head-to-head with Hand And A Half in the Citation Handicap, then again for the Hollywood Turf Cup three weeks later, and Sass will meet Born Soldier for the Hollywood Derby. And that’s not even mentioning the lesser competitions: the Native Diver Stakes, Cool Air, Bayakoa, Soviet Problem…

“The fact that you two still get along probably deserves a medal,” he says of her and Isaac.

“Isaac’s too pretty to hate,” she fires back, grin wicked.

Stiles looks back and forth between them. “Pretty, yeah, but what else is there? He hasn’t exactly got a winning personality.” Isaac kicks him under the table. Again. “See? Violent.”

“Isaac, behave.” Isaac sticks his tongue out at Allison. She pokes him in the ribs. “Gelding isn’t a thing that only happens to horses, you know.”

The tongue disappears. “Was that a threat?”

That was passive-aggressive flirting. Stiles thinks, and wonders when he devolved into a third wheel.

Allison’s smile softens into something less devious when she pats Isaac’s knee, then reaches over to pull the empty glass from his fingers and set it on the corner of her placemat. She replaces it with her hand in a strangely intimate move, setting palm to palm until Isaac’s wrist relaxes back against the table. Her tongue flicks up against her teeth as she watches his face, but he’s staring at their hands, and the moment hangs, so delicate, so crystal-fine, that Stiles doesn’t dare move until the waitress swings by to drop off their bill and the world lurches back into motion once more.

***
“Have you ever seen something like that before – that mare today?”

“Once or twice, yeah.”

“Really? How does that happen?”

Isaac grunts, irritated. “Horses are breakable; sometimes they break. But they’re valuable animals, and their trainers have no use for them when they’re broken, so they drug them up and run them anyway and hope for the best.”

“That is so… I don’t have words for how fucked up that is. Does everyone do that?”

“Most. I think the Argents are too proud to risk their reputation like that, and Laura’s too hellbent on building us back up ‘the right way’ that she’d never consider it. It takes arrogance, these days, to run in the US without drugs. The top trainers are more careful, with so much at stake, but whether it’s forty thousand in an allowance or five million for the Breeders Cup, if they think they can get away with it, they’ll probably try it.”

“That’s sick.”

“People are sick,” Isaac retorts.

“Yeah well…” Stiles huddles into his pillow. “I wish they weren’t.”

***

Horseraces could never be called ‘boring’, but Isaac is grateful when Howard’s showing in a $45,000 allowance on Tuesday involves no runaways or stumbles or breakdowns. The four-year-old gelding takes second, a length and a half back from the leader, and the drug tests find nothing suspicious from anyone.

It’s good for the track to have a quiet couple of days; Morell almost lost her job when she obeyed the owner’s demand to put the mare from Sunday out of her misery without conducting a thorough examination. And for the horses, uneventfulness tends to be a good thing. Jackie sums it up Isaac’s thoughts on the matter pretty well while watching him hose down Schizo on Tuesday morning: “When hell breaks loose during a horserace, you won’t find a single atheist on the track. And I ain’t religious, but I’ll tell you: every time I go out, I pray to Luck that we’ll all come back alive.”

There are a lot of prayers hanging in the air these days. The Prevue is the beginning of a round of intense stakes, and it takes about four brain cells to connect the dots between that and the exponential jump in unfamiliar veterinarians around the backstretch. Racing has turned into a game of how many drugs you can get away with, as he told Stiles. Higher-level trainers are just better at getting away with cheating. Granted, Laura would slit her own throat before doping, but she’s too damn righteous for anyone’s good a solid fifty percent of the time. Chris Argent’s similar, and the trainers from overseas – like Pim Byrns – are either too used to the EU’s stringent drug laws or too enamored of their ‘dignified’, non-doping style of racing to ever consider breaking from it.

At least that makes Europeans easier to beat. But they also run clockwise sometimes over there, which is better for the horses because it’s not always putting the heaviest strain on their left foreleg,
so you could argue that the Americans are really just idiots. Set a record, and you’ll get away with anything they can drop the charges for.

He fucked a French steeplechaser once: a sharp-edged blade of a man who had a real fetish for bragging about ‘propriety’ in racing. He might’ve had a point, but he got boring… quickly. They only saw each other the one time.

Americans may be dumb, but at least the jockeys – even the steeplechasers – know they’re part of the mud, same as the grooms and horses and trainers; same as everyone who isn’t an owner, really. Even the goddamn vets are just trying to pay down their mortgages and feed their kids in a world where no one wants to watch a horserace unless it’s a performance, unless it’s a showdown, unless it’s glorious.

Gladiators, he thinks, stepping around Schizo to toss a pitchfork-load of manure into the wheelbarrow. They’ve turned the horses into fucking gladiators – the only difference is that the audience doesn’t expect them to die, just run and run and run off into the fucking sunset, like there’s a happy ending waiting for them there, instead of a roiling, boiling Hell.

***

His phone rings as Cold Slough steps out of the paddock, prancing with her head up high. Laura and Stiles are on either side of her, the latter with one hand on the lead line and one on Slaw’s neck to keep her steady. Sitting tall on the filly’s back is Jackie, grim as ever. The camera rolls away as Stiles unclips the shank, and Isaac puts the phone to his ear. “You’re watching?”

“Of course – three of my favorite people have a stake in this race,” and Isaac very definitely does not flush at that. “You trackside?”

“Nah, barn duty.” He hunches over in the desk chair, pulling one knee up to his chest and curling an arm around it, eyes on the screen. He hasn’t talked to Scott since the night before they left, when Isaac had his Monumentally Stupid Breakdown, but it’s been three weeks and Scott… doesn’t seem to remember. Isaac refuses to examine how he feels about that; it’s dangerous territory. Instead he asks what Scott thinks of Slaw’s competition.

Scott whistles through his teeth. “Jesus, dude, she’s gonna have to run hard. You seen Ghostchant?”

“On my screen right now. Nasty son of a bitch.” The albino – or white or whatever the correct term is – colt is giving his pony hell, biting at the protective leather pads covering his neck and running up against him, in between hopping around and just generally making Jorge work to keep him under control. Behind them comes Scottie Maxwell’s Jack’s On Trial, a bulky, dull chestnut colt with a blaze splotted over his left eye. Both he and Ghostchant are in the sixteen, sixteen-one range and solidly built, even for two-year-olds, but the next in line is Allison’s beloved Thy Claymore, a liver chestnut beast who might as well be a WWE professional in a lineup of rookies.

“Yo, dude, tell your girlfriend to quit giving her horses steroids before the stewards catch her. Don’t laugh at me, motherfucker, I’m serious.”

Scott ignores the order: “He’s a monster, isn’t he?” He sounds proud.

“If that thing is less than seventeen hands, my life is a lie. Shit. He hasn’t always been that big, has
He? Have I never seen him before?"

"He was a lot skinnier back during the summer – broke his maiden first time out in May, then had
a nasty bit of gas colic and was out of commission for a couple months. They’ve been bulking him
up since he came back; he ran once in September, some allowance that he decimated."

"They did well. He looks like the Hulk."

"I know, right?" Scott’s laugh sounds like he’s forgotten to breathe. “Think anyone’s got a chance
besides those three?"

"Maxwell’s colt, maybe – she’s a great trainer, so he’ll give it hell. Beyond that? Nah."

"He’s going off at fifteen-to-one; that’s… less than decent,” Scott notes.

"Who’s the favorite?"

"Clay: Five-to-two. And Ghostchant’s eight-to-one. Huh."

"And Slaw?"

"Eighteen-to-one."

"Fuck."

"Here she comes,” Scott murmurs as the camera rolls back to where she’s being led into the #2 slot
of the gate. Isaac’s missed the #1 horse, but to Slaw’s outside is Helen Rebdol’s filly Seven Hates
Nine, under Eddie Han, then Ghostchant and Jack’s On Trial – who is piloted by Dina, he realizes
– with Thy Claymore in the #7 slot. He doesn’t pay attention to the rest of the field, because the
most novice of handicappers has only to look at the toteboard to see where the competition is. Even
Slaw will be lucky to have a chance.

“I’m rooting for you guys,” Scott tells him as the gate swings open and Booze slams a foot into the
wall of the tackroom.

“Fuck.” Isaac jumps up, catching the phone between his ear and shoulder, hesitating just long
enough to watch a wave of horseflesh spill from the starting gate. Then he bolts into the aisle. “Tell
me what’s happening, Scott; Booze’s being dumb.” The colt beats at the wall three more times in
the handful of seconds it takes Isaac to get into his stall. “Easy, boy – Scott, it’s only seven
furlongs. C’mon.”

A beat of silence, before “You were right; you were right – it’s those four,” and he’s breathless
when he adds, “Nobody else matters.”

Booze lashes out with his hind feet when Isaac grabs his halter, buck-jumping his way into the
aisle. “How fast?”

“Twenty-two and four fifths. Those four head-to-head.”

“They’re babies.”

“They’re still doing it.”

Booze is throwing his head around even once Isaac has him clipped into the cross-ties, ears pinned.
Rather than get himself killed trying to find the problem, Isaac just sets a hand on his neck and
tries to radiate confidence instead of near-panic. “Keep talking, Scott.” Please.
“Jack’s On Trial’s gone – Clay and Ghostchant are pulling away—”

“What? Where’s—”

“I don’t know, she’s just, just, falling back with Jack, I don’t…”

“Can she see them?”

“Clay and…? I don’t – they’ve got her by a length. Fuck, fuck, she’s losing, she’s – don’t, fuck, c’mon, don’t give – yeah.”

“Scott?”

“She’s not done! She’s not done! She’s going; she’s –“ Booze slams his shoulder into Isaac’s, sending him stumbling against Schizo’s stall “– after them oh my god oh my godohmygod she’s got them she’s in front –” he can hear the faintest roar from here “– she’s won; she’s won!” and Scott is screaming in his ear. On the cross-ties, Booze tries to buck, to bite at the ties, but Isaac can’t do anything except slump down to the ground against Schizo’s door.

She’s won.

A mottled brown cat pokes its head out from Booze’s stall; the colt pins his ears and bays while trying to skitter away, and Isaac closes his eyes and laughs. Stupid horse. “Fucking hell.”

Scott’s mouth is running on auto: “Allison’s gonna be pissed but, man, watch the replays. Stiles must be having a fit. She ran her heart out. I think there’s a photo finish for second, they were so close, but go, like, buy yourself a drink or something. She had them by a neck. She totally won.”

***

Allison walks into the barn with a slender paper bag dangling from one hand. “Where’s Jackie?”

Stiles nods at the tack room just as the double-doors swing open and Laura stalks out, Jackie half a step behind her. “Right here.”

Allison inclines her head in a half-nod, holding out the bag. “A bottle of Sangiovese, compliments of my mother.”

Jackie’s smile is all teeth, and she takes the wine with a light flashing behind her eyes. “Remind your grandfather that little girls can put up a fight too, eh?”

Jaw working soundlessly, Allison’s eyes crinkle at the corners nonetheless. “I’ll leave it up to you to drive the point home. Still: congratulations on the ride.” She nods once to Laura, then turns on her heel and leaves – there’s no swagger this time, just efficiency of movement.

“She’s smarter than she looks,” Stiles hears as the two women retreat back into the office.

***
The first thing Gerard does after Victoria climbs off is quote Winston Churchill. “This is not the end,” he declares. “Nor is it the beginning of the end; but it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

She nearly jumps back aboard to trample him into the mud, rage sparking through her veins as she glowers up at him. She’d told them that Clay needed a race in October. A sharply-honed weapon still rusts when stored away. Two months was far too long a gap for a two-year old with more testosterone than brain cells, she had warned. Another horse might have enjoyed the break, but Clay was too young, too wild, and when it had counted, coming down the stretch today, he had been more interested in heckling Ghostchant than going after the Hales’ filly.

So, while Gerard spouts off grand schemes of ‘retribution’ and ‘revenge’ to Chris, Victoria turns to Allison. A good ride on a good horse – even (or perhaps especially) an underdog – deserves recognition, especially when it proves a point. “Get a bottle of wine out of the cooler in the office,” she tells her. “And bring it to Vaca.”

Allison looks startled (and Gerard cuts off his tirade mid-sentence), but she jogs off ahead of them, back to the barn. She’s been and gone by the time owner, trainer, and jockey step into the office, with Clay led off to the hotwalkers by his groom.

Gerard begins to speak as soon as the door shuts behind them: “I have to wonder what, exactly, prompts the runaway favorite in a race to lose, not just to another highly-touted colt, but to a filly that has never raced against males before. I have to wonder-”

“I have to wonder why I was ignored when I told you to put the colt in a race in October. I will not be blamed for the performance of a horse who never had a chance. You should be grateful he didn’t savage anyone coming out of the starting gate. Do not blame your lack of foresight on me.” Beside her, Chris stirs. He’d been afraid that another race would ask too much of Clay too soon, and she’ll have words with him later. Right now though, Gerard is the larger thorn in her side, and he doesn’t improve his standing when he continues his attack:

“The Hales are a gutted shadow of their former glory, and I will not watch that child parade victorious when she should have backed out of this business after her family burned.”

“This is horseracing,” Chris interjects, “not a war.”

Gerard shakes his head and sighs. “Life is a war. A war-”

“If it’s a war, it is one you cannot win. You might as well launch an assault on time itself. Let the Hales have their victory, and listen to me when I tell you how to beat them in the future. I will have no more of this nonsense.” Victoria walks out on that. She has another horse to ride.
A thousand pounds of Thoroughbred coil and flex under Erica as she guides Scotch Fitzgerald onto the dirt. “Easy, Mick,” she murmurs, letting the reins tick through her fingers as they pick up a jog to catch up to Derek on Yogi. Boyd’s already halfway around the oval with Booze, galloping two miles to smooth off his harsher edges. For once, Laura is free from owners and journalists, standing by the rail with her stopwatch, and it feels like old times.

“Four-eighths,” Derek reminds her as they pick up a canter side by side, with Mick (she keeps telling them to call him that; McGatsby is stupid and a mouthful) on the outside, working fractionally harder to match Yogi’s stride on the turn.

At the pole, Erica rises in the stirrups and eases her hands up Mick’s neck as he lunges forward. Derek does the same beside her, and time sputters and stalls, lurching forward on the downbeat, but smearing, slow, on the upbeat, dragging itself along resentfully, and the sounds of running horses are all that can be heard: snorting exhalations and thundering hooves, with the creak of leather and her own shallow breathing buried in the rush. Nothing human can compare. Not Laura in her most blistering rage; not Boyd in the dark, twisted corners of the night.

Yogi’s pinning his ears and trying to get his head down to buck – he’s falling off the pace, so Erica nudges Mick into his space until her knee is brushing Derek’s, bumping with each stride, and Yogi becomes fully aware of the horse next to him. He gets his head into the run, then. The final furlong is the geldings streaking along, bulling after one another as much as they can under wraps, and Erica stretches her heels deep into the stirrups to let her whole body roll with the movement.

It ends too soon, as ever. Their time is a solid one: forty-nine flat for a half-mile. Of course, Boyd meets with them back at the barn with news of a trip over the same ground in a hair over forty-eight seconds on Leocardian, and rumors that filter in of a :46 3/5 run by Helen Rebdol’s Powerful Mars are confirmed when Laura checks the official times. Matt Daehler’s Clain gets three-eighths in thirty-six and a fifth, but an Argent filly really steals the headlines when she nails five furlongs in fifty-seven flat. Stiles is bubbling over about it; her name’s Phoenix Flight, and he’s been watching her reel off victories (she’s four for four) since the early fall. Erica isn’t really clear on how he knows about her, but the Hales have never faced her, so for now, she’s irrelevant to Erica.

After getting in Pig’s work (:48 1/5, thanks very much) she swings over to Scottie’s barn to offer her services. The trainer brings her own crew with her whenever she ventures off the East Coast, but once in a blue moon there’s an open spot for a freelancer to ride.

She’s in luck: TickyTackyHouse’s regular exercise rider has food poisoning, so Erica hops aboard. Liver chestnut with both a snip and a star, her mount is a brick shithouse by the standards of three-year-old fillies, and she owns the track. “You’ll see her in The Matriarch,” Maxwell notes when Erica pulls her up after five eighths in fifty-eight and one-fifth. “Keep an eye out.”

“Think she’ll win?” Erica jumps down and starts running up her stirrups.

Maxwell is a short, white woman with glasses and black hair going prematurely gray at the temples. She was born and raised in the Bronx, and the look she gives Erica is a couple steps away from a death threat. “She’ll do what she does best, and she’ll do it as well as she can. That’s all that can be expected.”

“I see,” Erica says, because she does. When a horse has been bred for running, what else is it going to do?
She’s still thinking of that conversation while standing at the rail as the field loads into the gate on the turf chute for the day’s third race: the Cool Air Stakes. BurymewhereIfall is in the #3 slot under Eddie, and Lydia’s aboard the #6 horse, a pale chestnut filly named Sevas Tra.

The bell shrills; the gate snaps open; the horses plunge forth.

The start of a race is always chaotic and confused, with jockeys gunning for spots on the rail, on the lead, clear of the pack, and so forth, and the Cool Air is no exception. But half a dozen strides out of the gate, the two pacesetters slam into each other, and the needle on the scale tips from homeostasis towards chaos.

This is no bump; this is no casual brush; this is one horse reeling and another plowing down on its knees, jockey launched over its head, while twelve other Thoroughbreds bear down on them with no room to maneuver. The jockey curls into a ball just before impact, while their mount throws its head up and leaps back to its feet. A “6” emblazoned on its saddle pad shines white under the afternoon sun.

Boyd grabs Erica around the waist when she goes to climb over the rail, and reels her back tight against his chest while Sevas Tra takes off, leading the field as it charges over and around Lydia. The crowd is screaming in one voice, and several people from other barns are frozen, already halfway across the dirt. None of them on this side of the track can do anything; fourteen horses are about to come charging down the turf stretch. They have to watch a pair of assistant starters kneel down beside Lydia while the ambulance rumbles over, nobody even worried about the race anymore, because Lydia isn’t moving, is still curled up with her knees against her chest and her arms shielding her head. And when the EMTs get to her, when they try to lift her onto a stretcher, she barely even moves then, just spasms and (Erica hears later, doesn’t blame her) shrieks.

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Bury takes fifth. That’s fine. Laura has bigger issues on her plate right now, like the $150,000 at stake in the Citation Handicap, for which she no longer has a jockey. Dina would normally be her first choice as a backup, but Laura dawdles over calling her until almost three, an hour and a half before post time.

Dina sounds amused when she picks up. “I was starting to think you were done with me, Hale.”

“You already know what I’m going to ask.”

“That I do.” Dina is chewing gum, and the sound of it – obnoxiously audible for Laura’s benefit, she’s sure – picks at her fraying nerves. She waits, but Dina says nothing, and the gap in conversation stretches with squish, squish, squish...

Laura caves. “Do you want the ride or not?”

“I don’t know. You sure there’s not someone who can actually ride you can put on him?” And that’s just digging at Laura now; Stoner is perfectly suited to Dina, unlike Booze, who needs a far calmer hand. She’d hoped to see some tempering of Dina’s viciousness aboard a more-skittish animal, but it seems as though the jockey is going to have to adjust her style on her own time. And right now Laura needs someone who can keep Stoner’s ass in line so he doesn’t start acting studdish and climbing up the backs of any mares.
This is fifteen-hundred dollars we’re talking if you win, you know. Fifteen-hundred right in your pocket.”

“I know,” Dina says. “And that’s the only reason I’m gonna get on the damn horse. You certainly don’t deserve my sympathy.”

Laura doesn’t give a fuck who thinks they owe her sympathy. She closes her eyes. “Thank you.”

***

Stiles hears nothing about anything until well into the afternoon, when Isaac leads Stoner back into the barn. He’s grazing Bury after hosing him down, and looks up as the pair ambles out of the sunset. “How’d it go?”

“Hand And A Half scratched. He tore everyone else apart – four length lead; they never had a chance.” Isaac laughs, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “They doubled up on the drug tests. Nobody knows what happened; even Laura’s just…” He gestures loosely, then shakes his head. “I don’t know. It was crazy. He’s not the sort of horse to just blow everyone away like that.”

“Probably wanted to get back to his girlfriend,” Stiles says as Sass jams her head over her stall door and whinnies.

Stoner knickers back, and Isaac rolls his eyes, tugging him over towards the wash stall. “Dipshit. She’s out of your league, dude.”

“They can be in love. There’s no law against that.”

Isaac ignores Stiles once Stoner plants his feet and pins his ears, blowing deep breaths at Sass. “If you drop your cock out, I will actually geld you on the spot. Move your ass, you fucking-” With no small amount of cursing, he wrestles Stoner into the wash stall, then clips on the cross-ties. Bury watches the proceedings with a curious tilt to his ears, swishing his tail a few times before he goes back to grazing.

“Do you actually think horses can feel love?”

Isaac groans. “You and the deep conversations – seriously?”

“C’mom, you know you want to.”

“No, actually, I don’t.”


Isaac’s brow furrows up as he runs the hose over Stoner’s stomping feet, letting him adjust to the water temperature. “I would say yes for platonic love, but I dunno about romantic. That’s a whole other spectrum.”

“What do you think of him and Sass, then?”

“They’re like really good friends? Kind of? Fuck, I don’t know.”

“I think they’re best friends who are completely in love with each other, and everyone knows it
except for them.” Stiles leans his weight against Bury’s shoulder, scratching along his back. “And maybe they’ll get horse-married or something, or maybe they won’t, but they’re gonna be best friends until they die, because she’s the only creature with a vagina that’ll put up with him, and he’s secretly got a soft spot for her attitude.”

Isaac flicks a severe look at him. “They’re horses, dude.”

“So?”

“So Stoner’s gonna retire this year or the next; he ain’t got a whole hell of a lot left in him. Sass’ll get bred to some fancy string of stallions year after year, start popping out foals that run like hell, then end her days in some pretty green field in paradise. And, I mean, he might go to stud, but that’s not likely. If he’s lucky, someone will take a chance and cut his balls off and turn him into a show jumper.”

Stiles is not at all a fan of where this conversation is going. Still: “And if he’s not?”

“He’ll get sold again and again and again and eventually wind up in some Swedish slaughterhouse. Same for a lot of the guys in here: Yogi for sure, Bush, Howard – almost certainly Booze. They’re too intractable to do anything but race, and poor-quality stallions aren’t worth shit. They’re dog food on back-order.” Isaac runs the stream of water over the flex of muscle in Stoner’s shoulder, face is closing off.

Stiles opens his mouth to argue.

“Yo, nutsacks!” And that would be Jackie coming towards them.

Stiles shuts his mouth.

The jockey ambles up in street clothes – jeans and a black T-shirt – while tapping her crop against her paddock boot with each stride. She cracks a grin at Stiles for only the second or third time ever. “The hospital called,” she says.

It takes a second to sink in. Then: The hospital called.

Fuck.

***

The reporter catches her trackside, where she’s waiting by the grandstand for Derek to appear out of the crowd so they can walk back to the barn together. “Ms. Hale,” she calls. “Can I get a comment on your victory?”

Funny how she’d left McKearn’s presence as soon as possible to avoid interviews like this. But the woman is already too close to slip away from. Laura plasters on a smile: “It was certainly easier than we expected – Hand And A Half’s scratch changed the game a great deal.”

“What will you expect a different race in the Turf Cup, then, if she returns to appear in that, as she is expected to?”

Laura shrugs one shoulder. “Her absence today makes sharpening up to face her trickier, yes, but
she’s going to have to get on the track sometime between now and then, if she runs. We’ll be watching when she does.”

“I see.” The journalist scribbles something on her notepad, continuing with her next query: “Now, Dina Fasano rode Shifting Wind to win the Citation today, as we all know – and this is no insult to you, Ms. Hale, but Fasano turned in a completely disastrous performance aboard Thirteen Shots less than a week ago. There have been rumors that you two were done with each other. Why bring her back for today?”

“If every jockey were perfect for every horse, we’d have a hell of a lot more dead heats. You have to mix and match. There was a… incident at the beginning of Thirteen Shots’ race, and Dina handled it to the best of her ability at the time –”

“When ‘the best of her ability’ results in the horse coming home last, wouldn’t that indicate that the jockey shouldn’t even be on that animal, though?”

“Generally, I would agree-”

“So is Fasano perhaps too inexperience to handle troublesome animals?”

Laura bristles. “Most racehorses weigh nine or ten times as much as their jockeys – there’s a limit to what they can do when the animal starts to go out of control.”

“But is it really wise for a trainer trying to get her–their barn back on its feet to be taking such risks with their races?”

“Well I certainly don’t think that I’m willing to risk making an enemy of a jockey who, under most circumstances, is a perfectly capable rider. The Citation’s worth a hell of a lot more than the forty-eight thousand from that allowance race.”

Smiling indulgently, the reporter proceeds to ignore the second part of that statement. “Another enemy, you mean. Would you care to tell me a bit about your experiences with Clark Mack, who currently has the second-most wins for this meet? You two aren’t on very good terms, I’ve heard.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Laura spies Derek, a dark spot in the midst of the cheerful crowd, and turns her head to watch his disgruntled expression turn downright sour once he spies the journalist. Collecting herself, she starts to step away. “You’ll have to excuse me–”

The reporter protests: “But Clark Mack…”

“He’s sitting pretty behind Jackie Vaca – who is a friend – with the number of wins this meet. That’s all you’ll be hearing from me.” And then Derek is mere feet away, carving a bubble of personal space in the crowd with his glare. She goes to him.

“Ms. Hale!” But that’s the end of it. The Hales are moving, stride-for-stride, as quickly as they can. They’re done with her.

“I hate reporters,” Laura mutters once they’re clear of the crush, far around the track from the grandstand, on the quieter paths of the backside. “They’re parasites.”

“You looked like you handled it fine.”

“Yes, well…” She trails off, then shakes her head, disgusted. “I’d just like to get back to the horses.”
Derek nods. “How many new ones have we got coming in?”

“Not counting the twins? Three. Maybe four. Gray’s sending another – a colt; he’ll be three when we get him in January with the others. Karen Bellini’s got a gelding, a five-year old. Plague. Decent horse. She’s deliberating – April, she told me, at the latest. It’s us or Maxwell. Same with Schizo’s half-sister: owner’s being tricky. Then there’s the Whittemores’ colt.” Her sentences are getting shorter, sharper, coming out faster. She is not going to get worked up in the middle of the backside. So instead she says “We’ll come out fine” and doesn’t let herself pick up the pace any further.

Jackie is waiting for them back at the barn, sitting on the fence, legs dangling, watching Isaac graze Stoner. Erica’s there too, leaning back against the rails, shoulder-to-shoulder with Jackie. They’re of a height, resting like that.

Erica greets them with a nod. “Hospital called,” she says. “They’re talking major back injury – don’t know the extent of it yet – but she’ll live. They know that.”

“She won’t ride.” Jackie keeps her eyes on Stoner, studying the gleam of his back, the swish of his tail. “She ain’t ever getting on a horse again.”

“You keep saying that – you don’t know,” Erica grouses.

Isaac sighs and shakes his head, as if in agreement (though with whom is up for debate), but Jackie merely shrugs. “You’ll see.”

***

Two days after Lydia’s spill, Derek is sitting next to her in the hospital while the field of The Matriarch parades across the television mounted on the wall. She’s propped the bed at an angle that it affords her the least pain – they’re talking damage to the vertebrae, but not the actual spinal cord. Wonder of wonders, her nerves all seem to be intact. Just half an hour ago, she made Derek help her hobble over to the bathroom so that she didn’t have to use the bedpan.

Braced against his shoulder, she’d felt lighter than ever: she’s frequently in too much pain to eat because the doctors are being so careful with the morphine due to her size. They’re walking the edge of a vicious cycle with this. There’s a tray on her lap right now, but she hasn’t touched it. Her eyes are too focused on the screen.

Derek nudges her arm. “Laura’s never gonna ride you back if they have to put thirty pounds of lead on the horse’s back to make weight.”

She sniffs and swats him away, but then, after glowering at the tray a moment, picks up a dull, pitted apple. Meeting his eyes, staring him down, she very deliberately sinks her teeth in to tear free a chunk of yellow flesh. Still staring, she chews, swallows, makes a face. “Happy?”

He raises an eyebrow.

She slaps the side of his head. “Watch your horserace.”

“Hasn’t started yet.”
She brings up her hand again; he wrinkles his nose and leans back out of range. Scowling, she stabs a finger at his chest instead. “Don’t get cocky with me, Hale.”

“Says the woman in the hospital bed.”

“Temporary physical setback. Up here –” she taps her temple, and takes another bite of apple “– everything still works just fine. Wait until I’m back on my feet. I know your schedule as well as you do. You’ll never sleep again.”

Derek snorts. “I’m terrified.”

She rips the core from the apple with her teeth, then, dropping it into her palm, starts picking out seeds and flicking them at him until he throws an arm up to shield his face. When he lowers it, she’s smirking at him.

“Cute, Martin.”

The next seed bounces off his cheekbone. “I have a question.”

“Stop throwing things; maybe I’ll answer.”

Lydia huffs, then sets down the core and nibbles a bit more on the actual apple, expression distant. “When was the last time you trusted someone besides Laura?”

“Every day,” is the automatic response. “I have to.” *Trust the handlers to do their jobs, the jockeys, the exercise riders, the vets. Trust the owners to trust us. Trust the exercise riders to know when a horse is hurting, the vets to play fair, the jockeys to bring their mounts home in one piece. Trust Isaac to keep himself together. Trust every person to look after their own goddamn health.*

Lydia scowls. “Alright – when was the last time you did it willingly?”

The first image that comes to mind is Stiles leading Yogi away down the paths of the backside. “I trust when I need to,” Derek says.

When Lydia sighs, she sounds more exasperated than resigned. “Your race is starting.”

***

The starting gate smells like the several thousand pounds of metal that it is: cold and tangy, a blue streak across the green of the turf track. Schizo is coiled under Jackie, waiting for the bell. She knows the fillies to watch out for in this lineup: Powerful Mars, of the :46 3/5 half-mile; TickyTackyHouse (five-eighths in :57 4/5 under Erica); and, of course, Silveritis from the Argents.

The gate opens to the peal of the bell. Schizo lunges out in the middle of a six-mare field. *“And they’re off!”* crackles over the loudspeakers.

Schizo doesn’t need to lead gate-to-wire like some, so she settles in easy along the outside of the pack. Powerful Mars and Silveritis are glued to the rail two lengths up, setting a furious pace. TickyTackyHouse is matched with Schizo on the inside, while the long shot Get Me Juice trails a good ways behind them.

With a mile of turf to cover, there’s no rush. Jackie sets her knuckles against Schizo’s red-brown
They’re in the middle of the backstretch when Powerful Mars snorts and slams on the brakes for no reason, bumping Silveritis off her stride as she lurches out. Jackie doesn’t have time to process; she can only react, swinging Schizo out further to get clear. The mare grunts and complies, bounding on into the turn, TickyTackyHouse at her shoulder.

Both Powerful Mars and Silveritis seem to sort themselves out with no harm done, but they’re level with Get Me Juice now, set back considerably as they swing through the turn.

Time jellies and sticks as they roll into the top of the stretch and the crowd rises to meet them. Only the jarred thunder of each touchdown remains, felt more than heard. Even Schizo’s deep, snorting breaths are lost under the roar, that wall of sound which may as well as be powering them just as much as the horses’ legs, pushing, pushing, pushing, straining to keep on floating for the barest fraction of a second longer than the others. The world is coming down, opening up the turf before them into a wide, shining blanket of green on which one could run forever, marking poles along that infinite white rail under the equally-eternal cycle of the sun.

They’re running, rider and horse as one; they’re running; they’re in front; they’re racing.

“Schizophrenia by half a length” and a good goddamn.

Jackie straightens up in the stirrups, easing Schizo back to a gallop, to a canter, to a trot. She uses the width of the track to turn, jogging back along the outside rain, awash in the cheering madness of people who are beyond elated with glory of a good race. (Not a great race, but a good one, yes.)

She catches sight of the broad shoulders and long stride of Isaac, and steers towards him. He grins easily when Schizo prances up to shove her head into his chest, but Jackie stumbles when she hops down, and it flickers away to be replaced with concern.

“Adrenaline rush,” she says dismissively, going to unbuckle the girth. “I’m gonna run before the fucking reporters get me.”

Isaac snorts and elbows her away. “Nice try. Winner’s circle. Time to bathe in the glory.” And he’s grinning again, the little shit, wider when she mutters a curse and stomps off in the appropriate direction, ‘accidentally’ stepping on his foot again every couple of seconds because she can.

They probably make a hell of a picture: the champion mare ambling along, calm and composed, dignified with her victory, with her 6’1” handler and 5’2” jockey joshing at each other like children.

“You’re starting to look like an adult,” Jackie notices as they step into the roped-off circle. “Five years late, but when the hell did you start getting muscles?”

Isaac snorts as Laura and Schizo’s owners swagger up. He boosts her back up into the saddle and asks, “Jealous, dollbaby?”

She pulls her left foot out of the stirrup to kick him lightly between the shoulder blades while he turns to face the snapping cameras. “Don’t flatter yourself, snotnose.” Then she hikes herself up over Schizo’s withers, grabbing a fistful of mane as the mare snorts and perks her ears up and poses, and beams for the photographers.
Laura sits with her back ramrod-straight next to Melvin Antonio – Sass’ owner – not moving a muscle while the Hollywood Derby begins, proceeds, and is won by an ugly little chestnut colt out of Pim Byrn’s barn named Leocardian. Sassy, snappy Sticky Stones, the three-year-old rising star of the Hale barn, loses by a head. She’s the only filly in the field, four lengths clear of the third-place colt, and Leocardian’s time of 1:59 1/5 is a stakes record.

It’s irrelevant.

As soon as the announcer declares Leocardian victorious, Antonio utters a concise, loaded, “Well then…” and gathers up his belongings. He exits sans farewell.

There are cameras pointing from all angles at the box’s single remaining occupant. Laura shuts her eyes and grits her teeth and does not move.

***

Stoner bellows as Sass ambles back into her stall behind Isaac. The filly has her ears pinned, and she kicks out at the wall while baring her teeth. She knows. It was close, but she knows that she lost. Stoner backs off momentarily, then shoves his muzzle through the bars between stalls, knuckering.

“Nutcase.” Isaac unclips the lead shank and flicks the stallion’s nose. “She doesn’t want to deal with you now, dude.”

Stoner rolls back his upper lip, then drops it down again as soon as Isaac’s into the aisle. He wiggles his face a little further between the bars.

Sass stands on the other side of her stall for a couple seconds, glaring at him. When she does move, though, it is not in violence that she leans over to bump noses, blowing out at Stoner. Her ears flick forwards.

“I told you: they’re in love.” Stiles waves a bottle of saddle conditioner at him patronizingly. “Don’t hate.” His eyes flick past Isaac, then, and his face brightens. “Yo!”

“Yo yourself,” goes Allison’s voice. When Isaac looks over, she’s standing down at the edge of the shedrow, hands in her jeans pockets, grinning wide. She’s not alone.

Scott should be four hundred miles northwest of Hollywood, studying or working or doing something besides standing there in a green T-shirt, bringing the sun in with him, looking as though he wants to start bouncing around like the puppy he is, but doesn’t know if it’s allowed. Stiles is already bounding over to wrap him up in a bear hug, running his mouth in a senseless stream the whole time, but Isaac can’t… can’t do anything except watch.

Derek, just back from the hospital, leans against the tack room door, not saying a word. He meets Isaac gaze and raises an eyebrow, his mouth still a flat, drawn line. Welcome to life, his eyes say. Welcome to where they promise you five weeks but only give you three.
If the pain of Scott’s presence were a papercut – there for a day and then gone – he could have borne it and moved on; even if Scott had just stayed for dinner or whatever and left Monday morning, that would have been fine – Isaac could have avoided him. But Scott is more like a mosquito bite: there’s the tiny, sharp pain of first contact, followed by a niggling itch that sticks around for days, and scratching only makes it worse.

Scott’s on some sort of leave – Christmas break, or something (Isaac doesn’t know how grad school works) – and he’s spending it down here. With his girlfriend and best friend. Of course. Because he can.

And that’s… legal. The guy’s allowed to do what he wants with his time off. Sure. Whatever. But he spends just as much time bouncing around Isaac as he does around Stiles and Allison, and it’s a hell of a lot different from being on the phone, because Isaac couldn’t climb on top of the guy, haul his head back, and kiss him through the fucking phone line.

Jesus. Allah. Fuckin’ Buddah. That was the last time they saw each other, wasn’t it? And Scott so clearly doesn’t remember that Isaac winds up with a tangled knot of desires lodged at the base of his spine every time they’re in the same room. Because, because, because…

Because Scott’s so fucking helpful, bringing them lunch and updates on Lydia, bantering with Dina, delighted when Laura routinely enlists him to check over Ernest and Slaw’s legs for the splints that two-year-old develop so frequently. He’s there all day, it seems, happy to serve as an extra set of hands, and Isaac almost feels vindicated when Yogi rips a strip of cloth from Scott’s shirt once when he gets too close. (Laura laughs at Derek’s expression and says, “Even the puppy-dog eyes don’t work on him, eh?”) Somebody has to try to get Scott out of Hollywood before Isaac does something stupid again.

But that’s not happening. Except for Yogi and Mick, who are homicidal nuts (and he’s never telling Erica that she was maybe right about McGatsby being a stupid nickname), everyone loves Scott, because he’s Scott and a puppy and hopelessly endearing, and he’s okay with Booze fritzing out at everything and Sass trying to turn him into her personal itchy post and Isaac not looking at him and Laura taking advantage of his perpetual availability to go, “Scott, grab me a turkey club from Santiago’s, will you?” or “Scott, could you run this file over to the racing secretary’s office?” like she owns him lock, stock, and barrel.

Isaac had all but stopped spending time in his and Stiles’ room even before Scott turned up; he stays out until midnight on Sunday and spends Monday night in the tack room, even though no races get run until Thursday. He can’t handle Scott and Stiles and Allison shooting the shit and getting drunk on cheap beer, and if he slept in the room, he’d surely get dragged along.

He nearly punches a wall when Scott turns up even before Stiles on Tuesday morning, bearing a large styrofoam coffee cup with six sugars and no milk, because it’s just not fair. He doesn’t punch a wall, of course, because that’s dumb, and he likes to pretend he knows how to be a reasonable adult nowadays. Instead he bottles the fear of himself up inside and runs for miles through the streets after dark, gulping down the smoggy air lungful by chilly lungful, because it’s better than being stuck in a stuffy little room with the two people who should want nothing to do with him but do; they do, the idiots, both of them.

It’s three in the morning when he stumbles into the tack room for the second night in a row, pulls down the cot, and collapses onto the bare mattress.
Wednesday, he swings by the hospital after work, ends up spending the night. It’s not even intentional – he passes out in the chair next to Lydia, and when he wakes up she’s carding fingers through his hair and threatening to pull the fire alarm if the night nurse tries to haul him out. After the man leaves, Isaac starts to get up anyway, thwarted when Lydia grabs his shoulder and tries to shove him back into the chair.

“No sneaking out,” she says. “Park your ass.”

“That’s crude, coming from you.” But he flops back down, because it’s Lydia, and the hand on his deltoid is still too weak to justify fighting against. The television is playing on mute on the wall: some late-night news show. “’M just gonna pass out again.”

She shrugs, unconcerned, and lets go. “Do it. I’ll wake you up at four-thirty.”

Raising an eyebrow, Isaac shifts into a position that’s a tad less cruel to his spine, and leans against the wall as a makeshift pillow. “You’re still gonna be awake, huh?”

“I sleep all day. Nobody comes to visit me anymore, except Derek, sometimes.” She scowls at him, then, and adds, “You’re going to kill your neck like that.”

“How about we talk about something else?”

“You should take better care of yourself.”

“Or what?”

There’s an ugly pause. Lydia looks away.

“Shit – sorry.”

“They’re letting me out on Friday,” she murmurs. “Rest for two weeks. Then physical therapy. No more ‘competitive riding’.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For never being able to climb aboard a rocket in the name of paying the bills? You should be.” She snorts. “I’ll find some other way to get by; don’t worry about me. I adapt better than you do.”

_You’re prouder than I am, you mean._ But he lets her get away with it, because frequently he thinks he’d rather have had his dignity than money for rent when things were nasty. Back during bleaker days, when he’d get up in the mornings feeling filthy.

There’s a horrible crick in his neck when Lydia flicks him awake; he’s still leaning against the wall, and the sky outside the window is black, but there’s something muzzy and warm and comforting in the atmosphere. The television’s still going: commentary on the power struggle between the Egyptian president and judges. Sterile cleaner lingers in the air.

“You’re cute when you sleep. Now scoot.”

He’s too tired to blink sleep from his eyes and raise an eyebrow simultaneously. He settles for groaning.

She ruffles his hair, then whacks his shoulder. “Out, puppy.”

“’M goin’.” He shoves himself out of the chair. “Want anything from the real world?”
“They won’t let me get away with anything in here,” Lydia sighs. “I’m fine.”

“I’ll be back tonight.”

“Good. Go.”

He bows out.

***

“So I’m not saying Isaac looking like a zombie who hasn’t slept in three years has anything to do
with Allison and Scott but, dude, Isaac looking like a zombie who hasn’t slept in three years totally
has something to do with Allison and Scott.”

Danny gives the underside of Cold Slough’s hoof a flat look, then sets it down to straighten up and
turn around. “Do I look like a guru?”

“It’s you or Derek. I don’t think Laura has a soul.” Stiles grimaces, petting at the filly’s muzzle
when she bobs her head. “And, like, I don’t have anything against Derek, but he’s really not a dude
who you go to when you’re trying to sort out your friends’ love lives? I don’t think?”

Danny walks over to the mini-forge mounted on the back of his truck to pick up a size 4 aluminum
racing plate, turning it over in his hands. “So you’re coming to me because I’m the openly-gay
farrier.”

“I… yeah.”

He holds up the shoe. “And you think there’s no chance I’ll throw this at your head and tell you to
go bug someone else because I’m paid to shoe horses, not be your magical djinn?”

Stiles sighs. “Point taken.”

***

She catches Isaac outside of the track kitchen on Thursday, falling into step beside him before he
has time to pull his disappearing act. “I feel like you’ve been hiding since Scott came down,” she
says conversationally. “What’s up?”

Isaac is very obviously avoiding looking at Allison as he stuffs his hands into his pockets and
stares straight ahead. The fact of it stings. “I’ve been busy.”

“With no races? Uh huh. Right. Hey, look at me.” She sets a hand on his arm, pulls him to a halt,
then makes him turn to face her. “What’s up with you and Scott? Did he do something?” A
thought, horrible and uncharacteristic as it is: “Has he hurt you?”

Isaac looks at her like she just asked his opinion on Anthony Weiner’s taste in underwear. “He
didn’t do anything. It’s fine.”
“Why are you never around, then? What do you do after work?”

He shrugs one shoulder, drops his gaze. “I run.”

It is impossible for Allison to comment on the possible metaphorical interpretations of that statement, because her brain gets hung up on an image of Isaac being sweaty and sticky and pleasantly worn down, with his harshest corners dulled a bit. The thought is… distracting. “Would you mind if I came along sometime?” she asks, before mentally kicking herself, because Scott isn’t the only one Isaac’s been avoiding: it’s both of them – there’s something busted-up in their relationship, too, so if the boundaries have changed-

“If you think you can keep up.”

She punches his shoulder. “I ran cross-country in college, jackass.”

“You’re not in college anymore.” And there’s her Isaac again, crawling out of the wreckage with the half-smile and loosening posture, like he gets off on teasing her. _Oh my god._

“And you’re five years old,” she snips back. “Where do you start from?”

***

“Can I ask you something about Isaac?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.” Derek runs a hand down Yogi’s damp, drying neck, then glances over at where Stiles is sweatscraping excess water from Bury’s coat. “Don’t forget his legs.”

“Yeah, yeah, Sourwolf, I know.”

When Derek rolls his eyes, he looks exasperated, but not like he’s contemplating letting Yogi loose to tear Stiles’ throat out. It’s progress.

***

She halfway doesn’t expect Isaac to be there when she rounds the corner of the Walgreens on La Brea Avenue – he’s been dodging her and Scott for four days, after all. But he’s there, waiting, in red-and-white lacrosse shorts and a gray t-shirt that showcases an unfair amount of collarbone. He crooks a smile at her and straightens up off the wall. “You came prepared.”

“Shut up, low-tech.” Allison taps a button on her watch to start the heart monitor function and slips her iPod into the holder on her arm. “Some of us want to run with a purpose.”

“Whatever you say.” Isaac rolls his shoulders and steps out in long, easy strides.
Allison follows, settling into his movement. “The airport, you said?”

Isaac grins. “Just follow the planes.”

“Alright then.” She kicks up into a jog, having warmed up walking here. “Let’s go.”

Running with Isaac is not all that different from doing it alone, really, not with her music playing and the streets mostly empty. She’d never go out this late by herself though. The sun is sinking below the rim of the horizon, street lamps are beginning to dot the ground with their yellow pools of light, and, even with the slender jackknife that is perpetually tucked into her waistband, she wouldn’t feel safe. Isaac’s presence isn’t any sort of guarantee of protection, but a 6’1” guy who gets paid to wrestle Thoroughbreds into line is still a hell of a deterrent for anyone looking for an easy victim. She’s glad to have him.

They spend a mile and a half running along Florence Avenue until its merges with Manchester Avenue, then, after almost a mile, cut from there onto La Tijera Boulevard and following that down to Westchester Parkway, then onto Northside, parallel to the runways. They pound on and on over the sidewalks, steady thud, thud, thud of their feet the only natural part of the soundscape. As they near the far end of the runways, coming up on a construction site adjacent to the airport, they cut back, almost as one, to a walk.

Allison pulls out her headphones. There is nothing resembling silence: what they have consists of the distant roar of airplanes, the rumble of cars, and the rush of their breathing. She checks her odometer. “Four miles. Good run.”

Isaac huffs. “Tired?”

“You wish.” She takes a moment to study him: the high flush of his face, the way his shirt fits over his shoulders, then says “Race you back,” and bolts.

It takes half a second for Isaac to get himself together to follow her, but he does, and she feels like a kid, like a stupid teenager, sprinting through the yellow-striped darkness between highway and runway, nothing compared to the machines flashing by, already breathless, constantly on the edge of tripping, only half-sure that she doesn’t want to be caught. Stupidity at its finest.

She’s still in front when they hit the intersection of the parkways again, and she curls a hand around a lamppost, uses it to swing herself around and grin, victorious, back at Isaac. “I win.”

Isaac slows to a halt a few feet away, pulls his shirt away from his chest, then lets it fall back to cling to the damp skin underneath. “You had a head start.”

“Barely. You have longer legs.”

“Maybe I let you win.” He takes a step closer, fake-menacing.

“Stupid of you, if you did.”

Isaac gives her an indecipherable look. “I’m a bit of a stupid person.”

Allison has a flash of thought: gathering up a handful of that t-shirt, using it to shove Isaac back against the chain-link fence that separates them from the runways; kissing him with the screams of jet engines in the background; feeling the curve of his ribcage under her palms, the heaving motion of his chest, the stutter of his heart. She wonders if he’d let her do that – and if he did, what he’d taste like; what it would feel like if he touched her back, slid a hand up her spine; if he’d feel like Scott, or different – harsher.
And what would Scott have to say about any of these thoughts?

She shivers. “We should head back.”

“At a reasonable pace this time, you mean?” Isaac glances away, fragile as a silhouette. “If we walk up to Manchester, we can take a bus most of the way back.”

They barely make it in time to catch the six-o’clock stop, but they do, clambering aboard to grab a free pair of seats and slumping down in them, half-leaning on each other in favor of the strangers on every side. It’s a cold night for L.A. – down into the fifties – and they’re both covered in sweat, so when they disembark at the junction of Manchester and Market Street, Allison doesn’t let herself feel awkward about ducking under Isaac’s arm and hooking her own around his waist.

He startles at the move, then adjusts to drape his wrist over her shoulder. “Cold?”

“Yep.”

Isaac barks out a laugh and tugs her closer, into the warm curve of his body.

She waits for him to crack a joke or tease her a bit or do something beyond continuing to saunter along in silence. He’s happy with that, though, so she tries to prod a different conversation to life: “What’re you doing tonight?”

“Going to see Lydia. Possibly passing out in her room again – that happened last night.”

“When’s she getting out?”

“Tomorrow afternoon, I think.”

“What’re they saying about her coming back to the track?”

“Nothing good.” Isaac lifts his free hand to rub at the back of his neck. “They told her no to ‘competitive riding’ – i.e., no more races. She’s… she seriously fucked up her spine. Might never get on a horse again.”

Allison winces in sympathy. “That’s… god.” She doesn’t even have words for the horror of the idea. “I’ll stop by her apartment tomorrow afternoon, see if she needs any help.”

“Good luck with that. She might stab you.”

“I might stab you,” she mutters back, then pauses. “Different question: was this alright – with me coming tonight? I kinda get that running is your thing to get away from people.”

“I’d worry more about what Scott has to say than what I do, when it comes to you running with me.”

“Well I’m not worried about what Scott has to say about this, so where does that leave me?” Allison turns her face to the side, towards Isaac, breathing in the sharpness of sweat, the softer undertone of horses, and his arm tightens around her as a muscle works in his jaw.

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Really? You have no idea, no opinion? No private belief that I’m completely insane and it’s best to pacify me so that I don’t undergo a psychotic break and start massacring innocents?” The tension sputters and dies.
“Well, since you put it that way…” Allison digs her fingers in under Isaac’s ribs and he ducks away, across the sidewalk, protesting with “You said it first!” And then he flees.

They’re too tired to get far, and as they near the track, the streets start to get congested – it’s sixty-three, after all. Dinnertime. Allison lets a couple with a stroller pass between her and Isaac, then gets a running start and leaps, locking her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist.

He staggers under her, then recovers, half-laughing, half-gasping. “Jesus…” His hands find her thighs, curve around them so she doesn’t fall, and she plasters herself a little more thoroughly against his back, splaying her fingers wide across his breastbone. “Are you sure I’m the five-year-old?”

“Perpetually,” she declares, hooking her chin over his shoulder and leaning their heads together. “Can this become a thing? Like, our thing? I feel like I never see you outside of the track.”

“Running? On cold nights? Until we’re both soaked in sweat and freezing? And then making me carry you home? You want that to be a thing?”

“Well, maybe I’ll walk sometimes. But this was…good. Tonight. This was good.”

He sighs. “Yeah, I guess it was.”

“So this can be a thing, then?”

The muscles of Isaac’s back shift as he readjusts his grip. “Sure. This can be a thing.”

***

She fucks Isaac in the kitchen, sitting up on the counter with her ankles locked around the dip of his spine and her nails clawing red streaks across his shoulders, both of them sticky and damp to begin with, and she tastes salt when she licks a stripe up the tendon of his throat.

It’s pretty cliché, as far as sex dreams go. No mention of Scott or protection or how they came to be here – only rasping skin and staggered breathing and the rush of a desperate fuck. She and Isaac are curved into each other, halfway between climbing into the other’s skin and trying to eat them alive, because delicacy is the sort of thing reserved for coherent decisions, not stupid ones, not insane ones, not deranged, debased, demented fantasies. This is sex in the kitchen while the rest of the world is operating on the standard format of life, and there’s something delicious and dangerous just in the idea, like driving fast at night with the headlights off, because something could go wrong and you’d never see it coming. Something might break. Someone might walk in.

But that would be real life, where cars crash, horses break down, and one-night stands have consequences. This corner of Allison’s brain contains only her and Isaac, and it feels strange without Scott, but that doesn’t necessarily make it bad.

When she judders awake, her entire body feels flushed, with hot blood beating down into the tips of her fingers, throbbing at the pulse points of her wrists and neck. The blankets are suffocating. She shoves them away, climbs out of bed, and pads into the kitchen, running a hand along the wall to ground herself so she doesn’t fall.

The room is cold and empty. She doesn’t know what she expected, but she still swings herself up
onto the counter next to the fridge, closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the wall. Shivering at the chill on her overheated skin, she tries to breathe. Her brain is stuffed past capacity with Isaac: Isaac backlit by the lights from the airport; Isaac sidestepping around a buck-jumping filly, playing out the lead line, running his mouth to help calm her; Isaac made of hard angles under the atmosphere of the bar; Isaac damp and salty, soft and warm, hugging her goodbye and then making a stupid face, sticking out his tongue, because they were both still drenched in sweat. Allison groans.

A hand brushes her knee. “Allison?”

Her eyes snap open. “Scott. Jesus.”

“You alright?” Scott lingers at a distance, that touch on her knee the only connection between them.

Allison sighs and takes his hand, tugging him in until she can let go to have his arms fold around her while she buries her face in his shoulder. “I’m alright,” she says into his shirt. “I’m fine.”

Scott rubs soothing circles on her back and presses a kiss just above her ear. “You’re always ‘alright,’” he murmurs, and she groans:

“Not always.”

“That’s because you never show it when something’s off.” Scott rests his cheek against her hair, and she can hear his smile when he says, “You’re crazy.”

“You’re crazy,” she grumbles back.

“Crazy about you.”

“Sap.”

“Yep.” Allison’s giggling by that point, sits back to shake her head in dismay at him. He shrugs, unabashed, then leans in to kiss her forehead. “Better?”

“Yeah. Just enough. C’mere.” She wraps her arms around his neck, kisses him, slow, and pretends those aren’t wannabe-memories of Isaac tearing apart the back corner of her mind.

***

Half the beauty of horseracing is the mathematical simplicity of running. Twelve seconds per furlong is a steady clip, a good jumping-off point. The longer the race the slower your pace, of course, adding fractions, sometimes full seconds, with every new furlong. But every horse is different – and, hell, sometimes the shitpot that went into a stall one night comes out the next morning to cover five furlongs in fifty-seven seconds. Secretariat’s mile-and-a-half in 2:24 flat? The stuff of legends, until it actually happened.

As a trainer, there are generally two options: sharpen the horse’s latent speed, or draw it out. That being said, there’s only so much you can do: Booze will never win a race longer than a mile against any competition worth their salt, while Stoner, who is physically incapable of gathering up enough speed to win a sprint, has romped home with a mile and a quarter and the entire field
behind him. The Foregos and Secretariats and Ruffians and Kelsos and Colins are few, freaks — gorgeous freaks, but freaks. They’re the ones who can work speed and stamina, whose trainers can strike the balance just right.

There’s always a balance. Always. Hard as hell to find sometimes, but it’s there. It’s Laura’s job to find it.

Numbers are the basis of this sport; not even just the times or distances: the bets, the number of days between races, the win-place-show records, the purses, the turnouts, the weights, the post positions, the sheer size of certain animals, the length of strides…

Not health. Health is the one nightmare factor. And health is also the determining factor for everything: the independent variable.

Still, Laura would rather wear grooves in her brain dealing with sick Thoroughbreds than face the emotional complexities of humans. There is no Deaton who can tell her what to do about the hollows under Stiles’s eyes, or how to construct a relationship that is not based in blood or money or rivalry. She cannot ice and bandage the monotone of Lydia’s voice when she relays the news: “no more competitive riding”. Nobody has ever taught her how to do more than function, survive, ceaselessly climbing out of bed and rolling through the day over the same hard ground that tears at the scar tissue in her psyche. How is she expected to know what Derek needs to keep on going?

When Isaac walks in on Friday and looks like he might have slept for more than two hours — maybe even four — she’s grateful. If he’s decided to slit his throat when he goes home than night, then, well, at least he’s unobtrusive about it.

Isaac, Laura likes to think, is one of those people who can be expected to get the job done.
Waiting on a War

Stiles spends Friday morning deliberating whether to ask about Christmas. (The Yogimeister’s in a race at three – it’s a small allowance, but Laura’s always in a bad mood after a loss, and Yogi’s one-for-nine record isn’t exactly stellar.) The Hollywood meet will end on December 16th, culminating in the King Glorious Stakes, while Santa Anita starts on the 26th. If he can get the last few days of the gap off to fly home, see his dad, make him eat something green – that’ll be great. Best-case scenario, he’s hoping for half the break. He called on Thanksgiving, of course, but it wasn’t the same after twenty-two years of turkeys at the old dining room table. He needs to go home.

Around one, when Yogi is starting to jack himself up with nerves, Stiles pulls together the scraps of his courage and sticks his head into Laura’s office (since she’s finally here after a month of being up and out and around, soliciting owners or doing whatever it is that overworked trainers do). “I have a question for you,” he declares.

“How about?” Laura’s twirling a pen between her fingers, staring down some sort of form with too much fine print. She doesn’t look up.

Stiles edges a little further into the room. “Christmas.”

The pen freezes. “Keep talking.”

“Okay… uh, I just wanted to go home to see my dad, you know, and we’re gonna have a couple slower days between meets, right, so if I could get, like, Christmas Eve through the twenty-sixth off that would be honestly amazing because I haven’t seen him since June and I told him I’d try to get back for Christmas and, see, this is me trying because it’s probably been three months since he had anything with real nutritional value and I’d bet that was because Scott’s mom-“

Laura holds up the hand with the pen. Stiles stops mid-sentence as she spins her chair around to face him. “We’re moving over to Santa Anita on the eighteenth. It’s an hour-long drive. Help us get everyone settled over there, and then you’re off, but I want you back for the morning feeding on the twenty-seventh.”

Stiles feels his shoulders loosen. “Oh my god, thank you-“

“And also: go get me a turkey club and find Derek; he’s not allowed to hide in the shadows when it’s his horse racing.”

“I… okay. And if he bites my head off?”

Laura doesn’t smile, but it sure seems like she wants to. “He won’t. Check the track kitchen first. Don’t let him have any more coffee than he’s already got in his system. Actually, scratch the turkey club. Just find Derek.”

***

He’s on his third refill of black coffee when Stiles plops down at his table and takes the cup out of his hands without a hint of fear. “You need to come back to the barn.”
Derek glares. He’s got a headache and a hollow pit in his stomach, and he doesn’t want to deal with anyone right now.

Stiles appears unimpressed. “Laura’s orders: your horse equals your business,” he says.

“Give me back my coffee,“

“Yeah, not happening. You look like shit. What is this, your fifth cup? Sixth?”

“Fourth.”

“And it’s clearly not helping.”

“I’m going to rip your throat out with my teeth.”

The threat – blunt, because he’s too tired to be imaginative – makes amusement flicker across Stiles’ expression. “You are a Sourwolf.” When Derek scowls deeper, he adds, “Come and get it.”

“What?”

“Come and get it,” Stiles repeats. He’s lolling back in his seat, coffee casually held as far from Derek as possible, but he isn’t scared at all. When did that happen?

“Stiles.”

“Derek.”

“Stiles.”

“Derek.”

Derek sighs and shoves his chair back from the table. “Either you give me that, or I’m going to get another cup.”

“What if I give you this and you come back to the barn?” Stiles waggles his eyebrows in defiance of Derek’s glare. “You’re going back eventually, no matter what happens. I am not above getting Boyd to drag you if necessary.”

Setting his jaw, Derek looks away, up at the television mounted on the wall, where the day’s third race is being run. Yogi’s is the fifth.

“Derek. C’mon buddy. It’s an allowance race. You’ve got to survive the next hour and a half, and then it’s done. Laura wants you at the barn.”

“Shut up.”

“Says the recluse. What’s the problem? You’ve never done this before.”

The television announcer chirps, “In a bit of insider info, that’s Katherine Argent by the rail, back in town for a visit; she’s normally in New York, running the eastern string of the Argent barn...”

Derek exhales through his nose. “Give me my coffee.”

“And...?”

“And I’ll go back to the barn. Happy?”
“Maybe.” Stiles bounces up out of his seat, still hanging onto the paper cup. “You’ll get it once we’re back there. I don’t trust you that much, Sourwolf.”

Following him out, Derek balls up napkin and stuffs it down the back of Stiles’ shirt as soon as they’re through the doors, the steals back his coffee while Stiles yelps and scrabbles at his neck. He’s several steps ahead by the time the crumpled paper flutters to the ground.

Stiles snatches it up. “Real mature, Sourwolf,” he calls.

Derek shrugs, driving an elbow into Stiles’ ribs to fend him off when he tries to copy the attack. The knot of tension in his stomach flexes, shifts, and then – by the tiniest, tiniest fraction – loosens when Stiles grumbles something about the perpetual infancy of jackass Sourwolves and recovers to fall into step beside him. They walk back to the barn in silence.

***

To his credit, The Yogimeister does not lose his shit and start killing things indiscriminately at any point – though he does nearly take off Laura’s ear when he’s getting his bridle buckled on. Stiles slaps his shoulder, mutters, “No attacking people, you dick,” as Laura jerks the noseband tight.

Isaac laughs, because he’s also a dick, and clasps Stiles’ shoulder, just for a moment, as Stiles starts to lead Yogi out to the paddock. “Remind Derek to keep breathing,” he says.

There’s no need. Derek’s doing deep, controlled, yoga-style inhales and exhales next to Stiles from the paddock to the post parade to the start, to the moment in front of the wire where Yogi’s charge falls short and sends him home fourth.

When Stiles looks at him, after, Derek shuts his eyes and breathes in deep. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Stiles nods and swings himself over the rail.

***

Lydia hasn’t had a place that she truly called ‘home’ since she graduated high school and marched out the door to take Stanford’s mathematics department by storm.

Numbers are her equivalent of comfort food: consistent, coherent, precise, and obedient. For a while in there, she was hoping to break Jean-Pierre Serre’s record by becoming the first person under twenty-seven to receive a Fields Medal, but then… then Jackson drove her home at the end of sophomore year, and got T-boned by a drunk driver within fifteen seconds of dropping her off in front of her building.

Funny, how she would go on to make part of her living aboard his parents’ horses.

Stanford told her she was welcome to all the time off that she needed, lack of physical hurt aside – emotional trauma could be equally damaging, as they frequently reminded her.
They had a point: after the accident, she stopped caring.

Numbers were not so fascinating as the dump of adrenaline into her system when she stood on the curb, frozen, while metal screeched and Jackson’s last breath stuttered from his lungs. Equations can calculate the trajectory of a tear’s path from eyelid to cheek to ground, and the curvature of a mouth opening to scream, but they don’t stand up to the raw dump of data that is a car crash – a fatal car crash.

A few weeks down the line, she went back to the eventing barn where she rode as a teenager, took a ten-year-old Arabian – Eli – out for a hack when they asked her to, and found herself hunched over his shoulders, knuckles buried in his mane, urging for faster, faster, faster, fast as he could go around the 2,000-square-foot ring. When she pulled him up, he was soaked in sweat, blowing hard, and the head trainer was staring her down, asking what the hell she thought she was – a jockey?

That was when she was twenty: a decade and a lifetime ago. (She never went back to Stanford.) Now here she is again with her life yanked out from under her – that seems to be a running theme.

She’s sitting on a stool in the kitchen of the single-bedroom apartment she rents down here, watching Isaac pile carbonara into twin ceramic bowls. She has a full lease on this place, regularly spends half the year here, what with Santa Anita only half an hour away, and Hollywood Park half that. Between here and her single in Berkeley, she rarely has to search elsewhere for housing. It’s not home, though. Those are her dishes and her sheets and her furniture, and it’s her name on the lease, but she doesn’t feel whole here. (Let’s be honest: she hasn’t been whole since a muscular silver Porsche was T-boned at an intersection twenty feet away from her.)

“Earth to Lydia,” Isaac calls as he sets a bowl of pasta in front of her. “You alive in there?”

“Shockingly, yes.” She picks up her fork. “Could you have picked a dish with more calories?”

“Yeah: seal blubber. But this tastes better, and your body can’t put a cracked vertebrae back together with nothing.” Taking his place on the stool across from Lydia, Isaac sits, arms folded across his chest, while she toys with the prongs of the fork.

“You have no idea how many years of diet restriction you’re trying to fight with one meal. I should be eating something with more vitamins.”

Isaac’s foot nudges hers under the table. “What can I help with?”

“I don’t know. Get me drugs.” She stabs her fork into the carbonara, twirls it half a dozen times, studies it for loose strands, then swallows it down.

Isaac uncrosses his arms to start plowing through his own bowl.

And it’s not that the food is bad – it isn’t; it really, really isn’t, especially not after all those cardboard-cutout hospital meals – it’s just that Lydia can’t help but count how many hours she’d need to spend in the sauna to sweat this off; how many miles she’d have to run to maintain a riding weight. The thing is, she’s down to a hundred pounds when she normally sits at one-fifteen, and the doctors don’t quite understand how she lost all that in a week, but she’s got a cracked vertebrae, so who the hell knows? Point is: she’s not trying to maintain weight right now, so she twists up another mouthful of spaghetti.

“How’s the brace?”

“Constricting.” It’s some stiff, Velcro-bound thing not entirely dissimilar from a corset, but more focused on straightening the back than controlling the shape of the whole torso. “I feel like a
finishing-school student.”
Isaac snorts. “You mean you weren’t?”

She kicks him. “Don’t get snotty, Lahey.”

“Hey now.” He points his fork at her, fragment of sausage still speared on the end of one tine. “I made you dinner.”

“I never asked you to. You’re the one who turned up with a box of pasta and demanded to know if I had any Italian sausage.”

“Truth be told, I was impressed that you did.”

“It was Thanksgiving. I had a weak moment.”

“Did you even do Thanksgiving?”

“Of course not; the Cool Air was the next day. Did you?”

Isaac snorts. “I got Thai takeout.”

“Of course you did.”

“Yeah, yeah – but you probably had, like, a protein shake, so you can’t talk.”

“I… I don’t remember what I had.”

“Exactly.”

“Doesn’t make you any less pathetic.” When Lydia goes to set her fork down, it clatters against the bottom of the bowl. Isaac doesn’t say anything, but there’s a certain softness to his expression that takes hold when she shoves her stool back and declares that she’s getting seconds.

***

“I agree with Erica,” Jackie says. “McGatsby is stupid. Your new nickname is Mick.”

Isaac rolls his eyes, Laura clicks the girth up an extra notch, and Scotch Fitzgerald pins his ears and kicks out with a hind foot. “I don’t care if you call him a tapdancing monkey, so long as you get him home in front and in one piece,” Laura tells her.

Down at the other end of the barn, Stiles knuckles the line of Ernest’s blaze and chews on his non-black thumbnail. This is very weird, what they’re doing – they should be tacking up in the paddock, but McGatsby’s been even more belligerent than usual, made nasty by who-knows-what in the days leading up to this, the Native Diver Stakes, and Laura’s the sort of trainer happy to take a fine over an extra-pissy horse.

She tugs on the girth a final time to test it, then nods to Isaac and steps out between him and Jackie, heading for the paddock ten minutes late.

Stiles looks to Derek, lingering in the tack room doorway. “You going with ‘em?”
Derek glances from Stiles to the shrinking forms of McGatsby and his attendants, then back again. He knocks the door open wider with his foot. “Grab a chair.”

***

Erica appears at Boyd’s elbow with a pair of hotdogs as he shoulders his way to the rail. She hands him one slathered in ketchup and mustard, then downs half of hers in a single bite. “W’re’s M’k?”

With four-years of Erica-ish under his belt, Boyd points to #6 in the post parade: Scotch Fitzgerald.

Craning her neck, Erica bounces on the balls of her feet as she finishes chewing. “He looks pissed.” She waits for Boyd’s grunt of agreement, then asks, “Anyone else we care about here?”

He hands her the program. “Byrn’s got Sryga in here. Slot eight. And Marrero has Scudder in two.”

She snorts. “Alright. Done. I’m rooting for the Hales and their ugly ‘nut.”

Boyd shakes his head – of course you are – and tears into his hotdog as the steel doors of the starting gate start slamming closed.

A mile and an eighth over the dirt, the Native Diver Stakes starts from the finish line and goes exactly once around Hollywood Park’s oval – a run that takes less than two minutes – so no sooner have the horses broken than a pack of assistant starters are scurrying and shouting, scrambling to get the massive contraption out of the way. As a result, Boyd loses sight of the field as soon as they round the turn, but that’s what the announcer’s for: to tell them that Scudder is leading while Scotch Fitzgerald and The Sryga are trailing the field, “going after each other,” the idiots, like they’re not in the midst of a race.

The Sryga’s a big horse – sixteen-two and a dark seal brown, and almost stately in his manner, for a stallion. Boyd rides him in the mornings sometimes. Five years old, of age with Mick, he should know better than to pick fights during a stakes run, but as the starting gate rumbles out of the way, it’s clear that’s exactly what’s happening. He’s got Mick practically pinned against the rail, bumping constantly – and it’s Clark Mack aboard, of course; it’s not the horse who’s gone mad, but the rider.

Jackie can’t get out from under him – she’s practically dragging Mick’s chin back into his chest to keep him from savaging Sryga, and there’s got to be a charge from the stewards out of this – nobody could miss it. Clark’s saving his horse and trying to work Mick into a frenzy so that, when he finally lets The Sryga go, the meet’s leading jockey won’t have enough horse under her to thwart him.

Boyd can see the exact moment the plan registers with Jackie, only a few strides from the last turn, because she lets go of Mick’s face and cracks her whip against his outside flank, and he jolts forward like someone shot him. She swings him out as they hit the turn, putting him directly in front of The Sryga, and then steps on the gas.

Mick bolts.

Head down, ears pinned, he’s still falling wide to get clear of the pack in the turn, a mindless fury down the stretch with The Sryga barely a length behind and trying to sneak up on him, and Scudder’s still in front, has been leading the whole time, this skinny brown wire of a mare – she’s
six, and she holds off the boys in her own right, though Mick’s got fire in his eyes and fury in his stride, it’s not enough, and the outstretched tip of his muzzle is only level with her hip when they trip the sensor of the finish line’s camera. A loss.

A loss, yes, but it’s Jorge aboard the mare – Jorge Gustam, who’s got a sharp smile and cocky swagger, who rides Ghostchant and Scudder and a whole slew of stakes horses, but still takes all of Laura’s mounts that he can – and he leans over to clasp Jackie’s forearm while she laughs and says something that makes him poke her with his crop, and it’s a loss that can’t be resented. Jorge had the better horse. End of story.

Not that Boyd’s in any position to say – it’s not like he’s part of the Hales’ “pack” or anything. But he likes them. They’re good people. And if he has to see them lose, he’d rather have a friend take home the prize.

“Think they’ll nail Clark for anything, since he lost?”

“Rough riding, maybe. Who knows?”

Erica scowls. “That was a shit move; they better do something.”

***

The stewards do nothing. Laura doesn’t have enough free time to be pissed.

The days start skipping, flying by as the unregimented frenzy of race days abates with the lull in stakes. In the meantime, Laura buries herself in paperwork to finalize plans for the move to Santa Anita – there’s more of a mess than usual, since they’ll have seven new horses coming in during the first few months of the new year, and therefore will be taking a larger barn. That’s better than she’d dared to hope, but their triple-victory in The Matriarch, Prevue, and Citation did a great deal to turn heads and loosen tight-drawn nerves. In January alone, the twin fillies are going to arrive, alongside a three-year-old colt named Rolling Admission, and two-year-old Spitz Spits Scat.

Those four additions will put them at sixteen horses, with only two grooms. She doesn’t like the idea, and thus isn’t surprised to find herself dialing Lydia’s number after dinner one night.

“Laura.” Lydia sounds brisk, efficient – like her old self. A good sign. “Come to offer me a mount?” she teases.

“Not quite. I was wondering how you felt about taking a job that would be a significant step down in everything from dignity to paycheck.”

Lydia doesn’t even need to think to figure that one out. “You need another handler.”

“Correct.”

Lydia groans. “You’re gonna kill me, Hale. Getting so close to the old game, but never actually playing… I don’t know.”

Laura pushes: “A couple months down the line, when you’re all healed up, we could start throwing you up once or twice in the mornings, just breezing, you know. They can’t call it competitive riding if you’re only running against the clock.”
“I’m sure they can, actually.” Lydia’s amusement is dry, but not dismissive. “Let me think it over. You never know. I might be waiting for you at Santa Anita.”

Laura grins. “We’ll be in Barn 12.”

***

Sass shoves her head between Scott’s shoulderblades, itching up-and-down, back-and-forth, grunting happily. He lets her, because Isaac’s hooked smile comes out as he watches from where he’s sitting across the aisle, disentangling and rerolling freshly-washed wraps.

Stiles is over at the training track doing something with Derek and Yogi, Laura’s barricaded herself inside the tack room, and the exercise riders are all out finishing the morning’s sets before the clock strikes noon and everyone starts gearing up for the races. Scott feels kinda odd, being here when it’s so quiet, but the Argents’ barn has Allison’s grandfather looming around every corner, giving Scott side-glances like he wants to skin him and hang him from a rafter. Since Allison’s aunt Kate rolled into town, she’s been doing the same; he’s never even spoken to the woman beyond their first introduction. A post-racism society, indeed.

So Scott is here instead. Being awkward.

Sass gets rid of her itch and pokes her nose at his spine, blowing softly. Next door, Stoner paws at the ground.

Scott jams his hands into his pockets, stepping away from them. “Can I help with anything?”

Isaac glances down at his lap, then back up. “Nothing much to help with, unless you want to drive yourself crazy doing these.”

Scott shrugs. “It’ll go faster with two.”

Isaac stops rolling. His mouth crooks up, then flattens again, but he nudges over on the tack box he’s using as a seat, shifting the basket of wraps down to the ground in front of him. Scott slips into the open space, picks up a wrap, and starts curling it in on itself. Neither of them speaks. Their shoulders brush, sometimes, or they knock elbows, but that’s to be expected from two people sitting hunched over their laps on a tack box.

There’s no magical trick to doing wraps, no real way to be ‘better’. You roll and roll and roll the seemingly-endless band of cloth, trying to keep the line straight and neat, and always hoping that there wasn’t a twist you didn’t notice somewhere in there, so that the velcro part at the end is face-down to properly hold the final product together, instead of facing out, because then you have to do the whole thing again. Every once in a while, that happens, and one of them curses while the other smiles, because it’s going to be their turn again soon.

A question stumbles to mind – anything to replace the monotony – as soon as Scott officially gives up on counting wraps: “Is this what barn duty is like, mostly, like when I called you during the Prevue? Sitting around? Rolling wraps?”

“More or less.” Isaac’s fingers are steady, twisting the bundle of cloth around incessantly, winding it tight. “It’s better than you’d think – time to breathe in the middle of the mayhem, essentially. And the TV in the tack room’s always set to the track’s races.” He finishes the black wrap he was
doing, smooths a thumb over the velcro, tosses it onto the pile of done ones and bends down to
snag a dark green strip.

“I’m coming to Santa Anita,” Scott blurts out. “With Allison. Until the middle of January. I’m…
she wants me to do New Years with her family and, and – we think we’re going to get married.”

Isaac stills, staring at his hands. “When?”

“This summer? We don’t know. It’s… It’s sort of weird. We’ve been talking about it for a while,
but it’s just… strange to think. For both of us. Nobody gets married at twenty-three and makes it
very long – not anymore."

Very carefully, Isaac starts rolling again. His motions are half the speed of before. “I see.”

Scott watches a moment, then follows his lead. “Sorry if that was, you know, awkward or, like…”
He falters, loses his words. “I just wanted you to know.”

“Don’t worry about it. And, hey.” Isaac knocks Scott’s shoulder with his own. “You’re getting
married. Congratulations.”

***

“This is a terrible idea.”

Derek gives him a pissy look. “You haven’t even done anything yet.”

“Dude, listen: anything that involves me riding a racehorse is a bad idea. Me riding Yogi just
happens to be exceptionally bad.”

“You’ve ridden before. You rode for years.”

“Yeah, on a fat little pony we sold when I was thirteen. Are you trying to kill me?”

“I’m trying not to kill him,” Derek says, nodding to where Yogi is watching their exchange with
perked ears and a curious light in his eyes. They’re standing in the huge paddock inside the oval of
the training track, alone, because this really only qualifies as a paddock due to the fence around it.
Some of it’s dirt, and some of it’s scrubby grass, but at least the whole thing is neat and level,
because once in a blue moon some idiot decides to make use of it. Some idiot like Derek.

“If you think his health is going to be in danger because I didn’t get on him, you, my dear
Sourwolf, are sorely mistaken.” Derek leans in to clamp his free hand around the back of Stiles’
neck, and the invasion of personal space cuts off his snarking. “Jesus, what?”

“We’re getting four new horses in January,” Derek says, not letting go. “By April, we’ll have three
more. Laura’s going to need me running workouts, and I can’t do that properly if I’m riding. He
hates Boyd and Erica and all the other riders, Jackie won’t get on him, and Dina can’t rate his
speed the way he needs.”

Stiles shakes off the hand on his neck. “Dude, I’m sure you can find another rider he likes.”

“Stiles,” Derek growls, and then, “He trusts you.”
“How do you know? Have you forgotten the thumb that he oh-so-lovingly tried to bite off?”

“How do you know? Have you forgotten the thumb that he oh-so-lovingly tried to bite off?”

“Almost five weeks ago. Has he gone after you since? He almost took a piece out of Scott’s hip last week – when’s the last time he did that to you?” Derek looks triumphant, and Stiles is very, very afraid.

“I feed him; it’s in his best interest not to-”

“Exactly.”

“That’s not trust, you dick – that’s survival.”

“Stiles,” Derek says. “Get on the horse.”

“Why?”

And Derek’s face bears a whole slew of ugly answers to that question, but he swallows them down to say “I’ll buy you coffee tomorrow,” and doesn’t even push his luck by smiling when Stiles throws up his hands and steps over to Yogi’s left side.

He bought paddock boots early on, because anyone can tell you that Converse are a shit choice of footwear around horses, but that’s it for him and riding equipment, unless you want to count his jeans. He wouldn’t even have considered this if Yogi hadn’t been galloped a full two miles an hour ago, and is suitably dopey and exhausted. He doesn’t even have a helmet.

Derek bends down, grabs Stiles’ left knee when he picks up that foot, and heaves him up until he can throw his right leg over Yogi’s barrel and settle into the saddle. “We’ll go out this afternoon; I’ll get you half-chaps and a helmet. Just walk him around some today.”

“I’m going to die,” Stiles says, and fiddles with the reins. Being on a horse again is a million different kinds of weird, not least because he’s now an adult aboard a racehorse, but in a lot of little ways too. The saddle is an exercise one, heavier than a racing saddle, but considerably smaller and lighter than the big English one he learned in, and it contours differently to the horse’s back. There’s also the fact that Yogi has a fucking crazy spine, and Stiles doesn’t even want to think about the damage he’d do to himself if he tried to ride bareback. But then he remembers that he’s riding again, and that Derek is watching, and he kicks his feet out of the stirrups to check their length because, hey, he’s not a totally clueless idiot.

Yogi stands very still with his ears rotating back and forth, wuffling softly and tonguing at the bit when Stiles picks up the reins again, but he’s not freaking out. Stiles clucks, and he steps out in a forward walk without any encouragement from Stiles’ legs.

“I’m going to die.”

“My equitation probably sucks horribly,” he reminds Derek. “Why did you think this was a good idea?”

Derek rolls his eyes, then goes back to watching Yogi’s movements, walking along on a parallel path a few paces to the side. “We’re not trying to win a dressage competition. What I need is for you to be able to control his speed without falling off. You’ve already got a decent base, so we’ll be rebuilding off your muscle memory, and getting him moving won’t be an issue. He’s a racehorse; he’ll go off like a shot at the slightest encouragement. We need him to listen to your hands when you tell him to slow down.” Derek’s talking and walking and not smiling, but it’s something close, and it’s making Stiles’ stomach knot up.
“What makes you think I’ll know when he’s too fast?”

“You’ll learn to feel it, especially since you’ll only be on him, not mixing up with a dozen different horses every day. Halt for a sec.” When Stiles complies, Derek steps in, sets one hand on Stiles’ foot and another on his ankle, and shoves his heel down. “He’s going to lean on you constantly while running. Make it hard for him to drag his head down; he’ll listen better.” He backs off again.

Stiles clucks Yogi into motion. “If this horse kills me, I’m making a note in my will for my dad to arrest you.”

“Go ahead,” Derek says, and, “Don’t let your lower leg get in front of the girth.”

***

In some way that surprises even Isaac, running with Allison becomes a semi-regular thing. Once every two or three days they meet to pound pavement side-by-side to a different locale, from tiny scraps of parkland to bright-light department stores to nowhere at all, because on some nights they just pick a highway and run alongside it for miles. He has one bad moment – almost backs Allison up against a nearby tree to kiss her when they’re standing at the edge of the parking lot, having run a five-mile loop that included Inglewood’s cemetery, as well as the 237 acres of property that is Hollywood Park. She’s grinning through the dark even as she’s panting, trying to get her breath back from the final dash they always make, and she punches his shoulder in retaliation for some stupid jackass comment, and he wants her so badly for a second that he doesn’t know what to do with himself.

So he does nothing, which is smart and right and something he can actually be proud of himself for.

He wants Allison, and he wants Scott, too, which is great, because they’re so far beyond the simple definition of ‘together’ that it wouldn’t even matter if they weren’t his friends. Especially because they’re his friends, though, they’re off-limits, because you don’t kiss your friends; you don’t fuck them; you don’t ask them to give themselves to you, because that is not your right, because they don’t ask for more than your company and companionship, and give theirs in return, and who the hell are you to expect more?

And now they’re getting married – fuck, this summer, married. He’s surprised and he isn’t. It’s not like everyone who’s ever had a conversation with Scott doesn’t know that he would lay down his life for Allison without a second thought. He’s crazy in love; stupid in love. Isaac can’t blame him.

He tries not to think of them at nights, in the shower, tries to picture different faces while he’s locking his jaw to keep Stiles from hearing anything more than rushing water. He tries to go with Laura, because she’s distant in all the right ways to keep there from being a problem, and she’s tough and smart as hell and the sort of person everyone is supposed to want… but she’s practically family, too, and it doesn’t work and the grip of Scott’s hands and the heat of Allison’s body flicker to mind, and Isaac is gone.

His phone is glowing when he steps out of the bathroom in sweatpants and an old t-shirt. There’s a text from Allison on it: 7 tomorrow for a run?

Sure. Isaac drops the phone onto the bedspread, then flops down on his back, groaning.
“Stiff?” Stiles is on his stomach on the other bed, doing something on his computer.

“A little. Howard and Bush bickering, you know. Nearly got an arm yanked off.”

“Huh.” Stiles knocks his shins together. “Bury stepped on my foot in the wash stall – I thought he’d broken it for a minute, I swear.”

“Last time he did that to me, I lost a toenail.”

“That’s… disgusting.”

Isaac snickers. “You stop noticing after a while. A couple years ago, when we were all working at that show barn, Laura went to get a pedicure and freaked out the woman doing it because she had four toenails missing. Speaking of nails: how’s the thumb?”

“I think it’s starting to grow out. There’s a tiny bit of normal nail at the bottom.”

“Progress.”

“I know, right? Yo, can I steal some gum?”

Isaac sits up, digs around in the pockets of the jeans hanging off the end of his bed, and tosses a pack to Stiles. “Give it back when you’re done.” He flops back down as his phone buzzes: *La Brea Walgreens to LAX again?*

*Kk.* The pack of gum wings across the room to land on his chest. “You’re welcome.”

“Thanks.” Stiles drums his fingers on the keyboard. “Sorry about the whole ditching you guys over Christmas thing.”

“It’s fine without races. Derek used to pull a lot of the weight before you came along; we can manage like that again for a couple days.”

Stiles makes a noncommittal noise in his throat. “You could probably get Scott to help, too, since he’s sticking around.”

Isaac snorts. “We’ll see.”

His phone vibrates again: *Ineloquent caveman.*

He raises an eyebrow. *Sue me. Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day, instead?*

*Nice try, asshole. Bet you can’t finish that sonnet.*

*Guilty.*

*Poser.*

*Don’t hate. Posers can be cool.*

*Yeah, but not you.*

“Why are you grinning like that? You look like a preschooler with a crush. A very scary preschooler, mind, but still.”

“Shut up.”
“Who are you texting?” Stiles comes up to his knees, eyes gleaming.

“It’s Allison. She’s calling me a poser.”

“Poser for what?”

“Eloquence.”

“Ah.” Stiles settles back down again. “Know any Shakespeare?”

“Do I look like I know Shakespeare?”

“Well you look British, so…”

Isaac sighs. My mother is a fish, he taps out.

You think you’re cute, don’t you?

idk, you tell me.

“You have the scariest freaking smile, I swear to God,” Stiles grumbles, turning back to his computer screen. “Derek’s less terrifying to deal with.”

“Ouch,” Isaac says, tone dry.

“He doesn’t smile like a serial killer, at least. He does glower like one, though – I’ll give you that.” Stiles’ voice softens as he trails away, mumbling to himself, absorbed in whatever’s on his screen.

Isaac checks his phone again: You’re quoting from a book that has a little kid creeping on his sister’s masturbation session. That’s pretty sick.

That same kid thought his mother was a fish, though.

That’s still sick.

You loved Jewel, didn’t you?

I loved the horse. The guy was crazy.

We all are.

“Derek wants me to start riding Yogi in the mornings,” and clearly this is the day of random dramatic announcements.

Isaac sets his phone down. “You say that like you expect me to be offended by it.”

Stiles fidgets uncomfortably. “I don’t know what to do about it. It feels like a big thing – I mean, it’s Yogi, and Derek’s, like, expecting that I’ll be awesome with him or something-”

“Derek’s expecting that you won’t actively try to fuck him up. He’s asking for help, not a mystical fix-it-all. However – ” he stabs a finger at Stiles “ – take note: Derek Hale asked you for help. That happens about once every three years. Do not underestimate the significance of that.”

Stiles makes a face. “I don’t get it. I’ve only been here for ten weeks, and I’m a groom. Why not ask someone who actually rides Thoroughbreds for a living?”

“Because people who ride Thoroughbreds for a living who can actually handle a horse like Yogi
don’t want to, because he’s a piece of shit and there are big-name stakes horses who need exercise. You might not ride so well, but Yogi’s not going to actively flip out on you – or he’s less likely to, anyway – because he sees you for twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and you’re familiar and you feed him and clean up his shit, and he knows that you’re not going to hurt him for no reason. Whoever had that horse for the first two and a half years of his life fucked him up, so Derek’s mission – and yours – is to make him trust people again before he gets old and jaded and never stops hating everyone.”

Stiles is quiet for a long moment. “You and Yogi aren’t so different, are you?”

Isaac’s gut twists. “Whatever shit you’re smoking, you need to stop.”

“I’m serious.”

“I am too.” He picks up his phone again to see You’re all dumb, and sighs. “Go to bed, Stiles.” This is the dummy signing off, then, in the name of sleep. “We have two races tomorrow.”

“Booze’s allowance, and Pig in the Bayakoa, I know,” Stiles tells him. “But you’re going to have to talk about your shit someday.” He closes his laptop, flicks off the light.

“Too late. I’m already old and jaded and hate everyone.” Isaac scoots up the bed to get himself under the covers. His phone buzzes one last time as he goes to set it on the nightstand.

See you tomorrow, dummy.
Massive apologies for the week's delay; there's a reason that the holidays are my least favorite time of year.

Stiles Stilinski has come unstuck in time.

Not. It only feels like he has.

Free time is a thing which he does not have anymore; Yogi – or, more correctly, Derek – has stolen all the tiny fragments of breathing room he used to have. They’re out in the paddock for an hour a day, trotting endless circles on a lunge line while Stiles rebuilds his muscle memories of posting and two-point, Derek steadfastly ignoring him every time he points out *I’m leaving on the 18th; you’re not gonna get me back into form in ten days* because damn if he isn’t trying.

Yogi bucks him off once – out of spite, surely; just to prove that he can – and Stiles spends a stunned couple of seconds lying in the dirt before clambering back to his feet. Yogi’s standing passive at the end of the lunge line, while Derek appears torn between busting out laughing and scolding Stiles for falling off his horse. When Stiles glowers at both of them and climbs right back on, his expression shifts to quiet approval. (That doesn’t stop him from nailing Stiles with “You really wanna get thrown off again?” every time his heel slips up.)

At least Derek doesn’t make them work while Hale horses are racing. Booze grabs a victory in his allowance on the eighth under Eddie Han, who then goes to take Marrero’s Raunchesstra home a length in front of Pig in the Bayakoa, half an hour later.

“No hard feelings?” he calls as Stiles jobs onto the track to collect Pig.

Stiles starts to say no, of course not, this is horseracing, but Jackie yells over him: “Me debes un trago, chino!”

“No hay problema... hombre-mujer.” Grinning, Eddie salutes them and wheels his filly away.

Stiles watches him go. “What was that?”

“Just a little casual discrimination between friends.” Jackie swings down, slaps Pig’s shoulder affectionately as the filly jerks on the reins. “Dude’s half-Chilean, half-Japanese, and didn’t start learning English until he was twenty. Always gotta be somebody giving him shit. And I’m the tranny.”

“So you beat up on each other?”

“Yes. Makes it hurt less.” Jackie unbuckles the girth on one side, pulls off her saddle. “He got three ribs broke for bitching out a pair of drunks who thought it was funny for a man to wear a blouse and heels. Barely knew enough English to say what they were doing wrong. The dude’s alright.” And then she just leaves, walks back to the jockey’s room to weigh in like she’s given Stiles exactly nothing to think about.
When he runs into Eddie later that afternoon, he asks how he likes his coffee.

***

The morning of the Soviet Problem Stakes, Slaw doesn’t clean up her feed, and Laura finds a stone bruise in her front left hoof when she checks the filly over: an ugly, swollen spot on the widest part of the frog.

She stands in the soft dimness of the stall for several minutes after the discovery, studying the dark dapples of Slaw’s coat, working things over in her head. “When was the Prevue?” she asks.

Derek, leaning against the stall door, bows his head in thought. “The twenty-second.”

“Eighteen days, then.”

“Since she raced? Yeah.” They watch Slaw poke her nose into her feed bucket, snort disinterestedly, then withdraw. “The Whittemores won’t blame you for scratching her. They’re not that greedy.”

“The Soviet’s worth twice as much as the Prevue.”

“And the Argents are sending out their speedball – Phoenix Flight, the one who did five furlongs in fifty-seven flat. She’s not gonna win against that, not like this. The check for second’s only thirty-eight thousand, if we’re that lucky.”

“She’ll be done for the year, then.”

“Four for four.”

“Still takes her out of the running for Champion Two-Year-Old Filly.”

“Like you even give a shit about awards.”

“You always pick the least convenient moments to showcase your intelligence.” Laura lifts one hand, knuckles at the ridge of Slaw’s withers. “I’ll call the Whittemores.”

“Alright.”

She can feel Derek’s relief radiating off him as he backs away so she can let herself out of the stall.

***

Bush’s third place in his allowance wraps up that week’s racing for them, so life around the barn becomes fractionally less tense as they all try to kill time until Thursday, when Howard has another small allowance. Then, on Saturday, Stoner will take on Hand And A Half – the Argent mare who scratched for the Citation – in the Hollywood Turf Cup. On Sunday, Ernest will run in the King Glorious Stakes, closing out the meet.
Isaac, for some reason he can’t put a finger on, just wants the year to be over. Crossing the line to 2013 will make all Thoroughbreds one year older and sweep a fresh load of horses into their barn, but that’s not what he’s waiting for. His skin feels tight – itchy – until it becomes difficult to sit still for any period of time.

He’s hesitantly about texting Allison to run two days in a row, from turning her presence into some sort of necessity, so he starts heading out on his own again. It’s good; it works; it keeps all his emotions in check. And it’s healthier than drinking.

They say you burn the calories of a hamburger when you have sex. Because that is somehow totally relevant. And, shit, but why does he know that? Where did he even hear that? Did he fuck a dietician at some point? (Probably.)

And he’d laugh at himself but, really, there’s a point where ‘funny’ gives way to ‘pathetic’. He’s pretty sure he’s past it.

Thursday, Howard runs fifth. It’s not a big shock to anyone.

That night, Isaac is on his way to grab a burrito from Chipotle for dinner when an overcompensation-style red pickup pulls up next to him at a stoplight, driver laying on the horn hard enough to make him jump.

“Yo, Lahey!” Jackie’s behind the wheel with Eddie in shotgun while Boyd, Erica, and Jorge share the open back.

“Yo, Vaca,” he retorts. “What do you want?”

“We’re gonna go get falafels and troll around and pretend we’re not getting drunk because we’re smart people instead of losers who have to be up by five. You should come.”

“What, and listen to you all talk about horses as if we don’t make our livings off the fuckin’ things?”

“Exactamundo. C’mon. There’s room in the back.”

“Because the lack of seatbelts totally isn’t illegal or anything.”

“Like the cops give a shit. Fuck them and you, snotnose.”

“Fuck you too, dollbaby,” he says, and, “Move your ass, Gustam,” as he climbs in, tucking his knees up to his chest to fit. Jorge kicks him in the ribs intentionally, Erica cackles, and the chill night air strikes him full in the face as the pickup rumbles back into gear, rolling towards downtown LA. And Isaac hooks his elbows over the rear hatch of the truck bed and breathes it in deep.

***

“I’m gonna throw up.”

“You’re gonna throw up? I’m the fuckin’ asshole’s handler; how do you think I feel?”

“You probably feel cynical and bitter and hopeless about everything, because that’s your default
setting and you have no soul. At least you get to be at the track. I have to sit in the friggin’ barn—”

“Because being up close and personal to a potentially devastating loss is so awesome, right?”

“But you’ll be there!” Stiles flaps an exasperated hand at Isaac while keeping the hose pointed at Ernest with the other. “You know how infuriating the hose pointed at Ernest with the other. “You know how infuriating the stupid TV is—”

“Dude, I got a play-by-play of the Prevue over the phone from Scott; you do not get to complain about your lack of race-watching privileges. Suck it up. You’re watering the mud—”

“Screw you,” Stiles grumbles, and turns around to redirect the spray over Ernest’s belly (the colt jangles his head on the cross-ties, trying to grab for the pocket where he knows Stiles stashes his peppermints). “You don’t have to deal with a Sourwolf who’s entirely focused on you for an hour every day—”

Isaac forces a wild laugh. “Oh, the horror of being asked to ride a racehorse! Whatever shall you do—”

Shit. Stiles ducks his head, flushing. “Okay, fine, it’s not it’s… shit, okay, whatever. It’s not like I wanted to—”

“Stiles.” Footsteps behind him; Schizo huffing in exasperation. “Turn around.”

Stiles turns around.

Isaac cracks him across the face with an open palm – not hard, but with enough speed to make him flail in surprise, dropping the hose and spooking Ernest, who rears, shrilling. Schizo bays once, and he quiets, ears back and decidedly unhappy-looking.

Rubbing at his face, Stiles bends to pick up the hose. “That was unnecessary.”

Isaac shrugs. “You deserved it.” Retreating to Schizo’s side, he sets his spine against her barrel, half-leaning on her, arms folded across his chest. “Some of us have never been on a horse, period, you know.”

“So the correct response to me complaining is to hit me? Jesus, I hope you never have kids; you’d be a horrible parent.”

Isaac’s expression does complicated and painful things for a couple seconds before it settles on ‘indifferent’. He shrugs. “Not exactly something I was planning on, anyway.”

And wow, if that reaction isn’t a neon sign screaming ‘my parents/family were in some way abusive’ then nothing is. “Shit, were you – was that – is there, uh, oh my god, you were –”

“Shut up, Stiles.” And Schizo isn’t quite dry yet, and she makes an irritated grumble when Isaac tugs her head up, but he takes her inside anyways, avoiding Stiles’ gaze while Stiles stands there, probably appearing every inch the bumbling idiot that he is.

And he’s watering the mud again.

***
Allison loops her arm through Scott’s, tugging him close. “So. Who are you rooting for?”

He grins. “Can’t say.”

“Sure you can.”

“Nope. No comment. May the best horse win.”

“Alright,” she says. “So that’s a vote for Hal, then?”

“I’m not saying.”

“Stoner,” Erica volunteers from Allison’s other side. “He’s totally pulling for Stoner. Boy’s gotta love the runt of a stallion.”

“Nobody asked you, Reyes. I’m… neutral.”

She laughs at him, all predatory confidence. “Whatever you say, McCall. It’s a two-minute race.”

Two minutes of eight horses running for a $250,000 purse – a mile and a half over the turf, and everyone knows who’s here to win. Besides the Hales and Argents, Pim Byrns has brought back Mirror on the Wall to prove her worth on turf, and Matt Daehler – the sly, slender guy who totes a camera around 24/7 and has a suspicious habit of appearing in the same locales as Allison – has four-year-old gelding Tell Me Your Tales here today. They’re both dull brown, average-looking animals, Mirror on the Wall distinguished by the stripe that runs from between her eyes to just above her upper lip. That being said, Stoner’s own muddy shade isn’t particularly distinct, and his build is, if anything, thinner and more angular. Hal is the biggest and sleekest and brightest of the four major contenders even with her dark chestnut coat. Timed Grace – the dark gelding (pun intended) who stole the On Trust Handicap – doesn’t get a second glance; he’s an unknown on grass.

Allison’s hand finds Scott’s and grips tight as the horses load.

They break from the far side of the last turn to steamroll through it and down onto the stretch with the first furlong burned up in a hair over eleven seconds. Mirror on the Wall is running the show already with a length and a half’s lead; Dina has Stoner tucked in behind her on the outside, barely clear of the pack, which is three-deep to the rail. That’s how they stay as they come out of the turn, Mirror on the Wall keeping up her snappy clip to close the quarter in :22 2/5 and extend her lead to three lengths.

“That’s too fast for a mile and a half,” Allison mutters, and Erica nods agreement:

“Jorge’s trying to make ‘em chase her so he can rate back. Not working out so well.”

The half goes by in :45 1/5 – still lightning fast. Mirror on the Wall is running four and a half lengths ahead.

Their visibility of the field plummets as they swing through the clubhouse turn to hit the backstretch, but there doesn’t seem to be much going: Hal is stalking along with the pack like some sort of lion amongst the lambs, and everyone is waiting for her appearance.

Jorge’s bid falls flat entirely, so he slows Mirror on the Wall enough to let the pack creep up on her gradually – not giving away the lead entirely, but accepting circumstances for what they are.

Things start to get interesting as they roll down the backstretch. Tell Me Your Tales gets gunned
from the outside to bound past the pack and Stoner and come eye-to-eye with Mirror on the Wall before skidding by her, too. His jockey – Ben – is in full control, urging the gelding forward with hands buried in his mane, still three-quarters of a mile from the finish.

Erica looks disgusted. “Men,” she says, and leaves it at that.

“I don’t…” Scott is confused on several tiers.

Allison sighs. “Ben thought Mirror was getting tired, not that Jorge was pulling her up-”

“He’s also just an idiot, period. Not gonna get anything out of this; they’ll eat him alive in the stretch. What the fuck’s Daehler doing running in a Grade Two anyway? Scummy piece of shit.” Erica spits onto the dirt track, crooking one finger up to pick at her teeth. “Men,” she says again.

The field takes Ben’s lunacy in stride – literally – by seeming to ignore it completely. Stoner keeps half a length clear of the pack, slowly gaining on Mirror on the Wall, and Hal continues lurking. The time for the mile is 1:36 pounding into the turn; the field is pulling in on itself, engulfing Stoner and Mirror on the Wall, closing on Tell Me Your Tales, and the moment for the stretch run is coming.

A chestnut streak cuts along the inside as Hal makes her move. Heads turn amongst the jockeys; Ben goes for his whip, but his cause is far beyond lost. The Argent mare rolls by, as do Stoner and Mirror on the Wall, and the pack closes around him.

Timed Grace makes no brilliant charge this time around, Tell Me Your Tales does not recover, and the leaders, all worn by the blaze of the first half, barely stay clear of the pack. That doesn’t stop it from being the stretch run that the press was hoping for: Shifting Wind and Hand And A Half; Stoner and Hal; six-year-old stallion and four-year-old mare giving each other hell for leather as best they can for that final thousand feet.

And Scott is screaming – no names; no words; just screaming – as they rip by, driving at each other’s nosebands, the back-and-forth exchange of the lead with the bobbing of heads, and there’s only a furlong left when something in Stoner breaks, and his forelegs are flying up and out in front of him, and it’s crazy and it doesn’t make sense and his ears are pinned back against his skull and something’s gotta be wrong but he’s in front – in front and going further and they’re at the wire, and Stoner is freaking out, not wanting to be pulled up, not happy until he’s clear of Hal, and then he’s rearing, hopping, rearing again, like he doesn’t want to put his front feet on the ground, like they’re magnetically repelled, like he’s well past crazy and decided that now was the time to prove it.

“Goddamn,” says Allison and “Hot damn” goes the guy on Scott’s other side and “Holy fucking Christ” is Erica’s input and Scott’s feeling weak-kneed and slack-jawed and maybe also giggling hysterically because hot damn, goddamn, what did they all just see?

“I need to watch more races,” he tells Allison, and squeezes her hand, turning his head to catch Isaac striding out onto the track, all long limbs and swagger, and Stoner coming back down to earth just like that, trying to savage Isaac a little bit, trying to rile him up, but none of it, none of it’s cracking the wide-open grin that’s practically splitting Isaac’s face when he turns in their direction.

They’re calling the official time at 2:27.95 – a sluggish final half, not that you’d ever have known it from the fervor, from that run. Jesus.

Allison’s phone buzzes, and she pulls it out. No penny-pinching, it reads. She scowls at it.
Erica flicks a dismissive finger at the screen. “Lemme guess.”

Allison shoves the phone back into her pocket. “We’re gonna get dinner and hang out on the seventeenth, before the move to Santa Anita. Loser today has to pay.” She lifts the arm not attaching her to Scott and flips off Isaac when he waves in their direction. “Asshole.”

Scott laughs, Erica rolls her eyes, and, across the track, Isaac splays a hand over his heart, still grinning. Dina has to lean down and smack the back of his head before he turns his attention back to Stoner.

***

For art, as with everything in life, the best way to improve is to practice. Holly Guinig has already spent more hours than she can count sketching photographs from the internet and posed arrangements of motley object collections in the classroom, and now she has her sketchbook with her at J Nichols Kitchen, where she’s eating dinner before returning to her dorm room to finish studying the Mythology final she has in two days. It’s still early for dining – not even six-thirty – so the restaurant is empty except for her and a cluster of teenage boys in the back when the door opens to admit a young couple.

Holly does a quick profiling: they’re white, in their early twenties, dressed casually in sweatshirts and jeans – the woman has on paddock boots, so they’ve probably come from the track – and the man has cheekbones that could be registered weapons. He holds the door open for the woman, says something Holly can’t hear, and ducks away when she slaps at his chest.

Her tuna melt gets a lot less interesting all of a sudden.

They take a booth across the aisle from her, the one by the window, as she casually maneuvers the sketchbook from her bag to the tabletop next to her plate. Her illustration teacher in high school told stories of riding the subways for hours in New York City, sketching the commuters and other travelers all around him. This is her opportunity to do the same.

The woman has a hell of a jawline, Holly thinks. She could be a model. Hell, she looks like a model right now, even with her jeans and her boots and the sleeves of her pine-green sweatshirt pulled down to her knuckles. She’s picking at the cuffs a bit, elbows propped on the table, eyes on her friend or boyfriend or brother or whoever he is.

No, boyfriend; boyfriend it is. People don’t look at their siblings like that, or their platonic friends. And what Holly can overhear of their conversation is…um. Well. Not romantic at all. (But surely she wasn’t wrong?)

“…I think Laura knew he didn’t have a chance. She wanted to see how he’d do, Roman – the owner – was game, and, hey, she got twelve thousand bucks out of it. He’s just not that caliber horse.”

“Agreed. Didn’t Jack’s On Trial run in the Prevue?”

The man folds his forearms onto the edge of the table. “Yeah. He got… fourth? I think? I don’t remember; we all know who the big gunners were for that one.”

“He did well though – it’s the caliber of the race, like you said. And he came out on top today.”
The girl rubs at the back of her neck. “We should have put Clay in; he would’ve stolen the show.”

“But then you’d have kissed the Malibu goodbye.”

“That’s true; that’s what we’re saving Clay for. Think Byrn’s got the same plan with Ghostchant?”

The man snorts. “Malibu winner gets a hundred and eighty grand. Jack’s On Trial walked away with a hundred and ten. I think everyone going to Santa Anita’s gonna run for that extra seventy K. Maxwell’s the smart one for taking the Glorious. Between the Malibu and La Brea, there’s plenty of incentive for trainers to wait for Santa Anita.”

“And they’re on the same day, opening the meet. Hell of a tactic.”

“Welcome to California.” The man’s laugh is harsh – everything about him is, once Holly gets past the sculpture of his face, with its utterly fantastic cheekbones and jawline and mouth. His shoulders are a hard line – not just muscle but tense muscle that has been that way for so long it probably feels normal – while his hands are dry and raw, the knuckles cracked in some places, and he projects an air of biting cynicism that’s palpable even from ten feet away. And this is all in a setting where he seems happy.

When the waitress asks for their meal orders, his face closes off into something removed and businesslike that doesn’t break until the girl is gone and his dinner companion calls him a scrooge. He tears off a corner of his napkin and flicks it at her, then, while she rolls her eyes and sticks out her tongue.

Maybe they are in a relationship. You never know; people will surprise you with who they manage to be compatible with. These two certainly have a Lady and the Tramp vibe going with all that sandpaper harshness butted up against the confidence – the dignity – that seems so suited to the woman with the oversized sweatshirt.

“Is that Scott’s?” he asks, and she nods:

“I stole it. One of these days I’m probably going to go through my closet and find that gray one he thinks he lost in San Fran.”

The man ducks his head, fingers toying with the tines of his fork. “Nice.”

That burns out the couple idea, then – or not. Friends can borrow clothes. The three people Holly shares an apartment with swap clothes incessantly, minor detail that one of them is a man notwithstanding. Or there could be a ménage a trois going on here, with one member simply absent. It’s not like polyamory’s a crime.

That would be cute, actually. With these two? Very cute. Even with the unknown quantity of this Scott fellow, there are images of mornings – perhaps even days – spent sprawled across a bed, all tangled up in one another, that lend themselves very easily to the mind’s eye. The more they talk and the more she observes, the more she can see it. There is comfort in their movements: loose hands, flicking fingers, the relaxation of the man’s shoulders, the ever-present curve of the woman’s smile. These are people who could spend all day side-by-side and think nothing of it, because they are safe with one another.

Their food arrives (steak for her; spaghetti with tomato sauce and meatballs for him) and the waitress pivots on her heel afterwards to ask if Holly has finished with her tuna melt.

“I’m… oh, I’m, um, yes, I’m done. Thank you.”
The waitress gives her a tight little smile and clears away the plate, saying, “I’ll be right back with your check.”

Holly nods: dull, dumb, distant. She’s barely drawn anything, she realizes. She’s been too caught up in watching.

***

“You would be the dude who goes out to eat and orders something he could’ve easily made at home.”

“They don’t let us cook in the rooms,” Isaac says, and, “I could say the same thing about that steak.”

“It’s a good steak!” Allison protests.

Isaac rolls his eyes. “And you don’t think this is good spaghetti?”

“I’ve never had the spaghetti here because I like to at least pretend that I’m eating somewhere nice.”

“Delusional as ever, I see.”

“Shut up.” Allison sets her cutlery down, eyeing Isaac’s plate. “Is that any good?”

He gives her The Eyebrow, smirk tugging at his mouth. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe. Why so curious?”

“Because you’re stupid, obviously. I want to know if that was worth going out for.” When Isaac makes no response except to keep on smirking (smartass) she sighs, letting her head drop to one side. “Give me a bite.”

For a second in there, Isaac’s clearly thinking of a thousand and one snarky jackass responses to that demand, but in the end he comes out with… nothing. No raising of the eyebrows. No comment whatsoever. He picks up his fork, twirls a small load of noodles around it, and offers it over the table to her.

She keeps her gaze on his while she leans in to take it, gets a front-row seat to the spark of something in his expression when she closes her mouth around the fork. The spaghetti’s good. It’s irrelevant. Isaac is staring at her like he doesn’t even know it, and—

“Get a room!” from the pack of teenage boys filing out the door.

Isaac rears back, lips curling away from his teeth in a snarl, but the boys are leaving, already gone; the moment is lost.

Except.

Except Isaac glances back at her, probably intends it to be only a moment, but his eyes linger, catch
on her mouth. Does he want to kiss me? And suddenly this is the night at the airport again, but real, so real, because there is something not unlike fear in Isaac’s eyes when he directs his gaze north again, and now it’s her turn, really – does he want to kiss me? I think I want to kiss him – and wow he really has got a nice mouth; has she never noticed that before? It’s all pretty and pink and curved and, oh god, she’s staring; he’s staring, eyes wide; why is she still staring, why does she need him so bad it hurts; she wants to kiss him, so she looks down and away and shifts in her seat, and Isaac’s foot nudges hers under the table.

She very deliberately does not stiffen, but instead glances back up. Was that some sort of signal? And Isaac’s fidgeting and looking around, but when she swings her legs back and knocks him his eyes jump back to hers, still wide-open to make her emotions tangled as can be, but he twitches one eyebrow when their knees knock a few seconds later, and she doesn’t know if that was serious, if any of this was, so she kicks him, hard, right in the shin.

And he jumps, of course, and sputters an “Ow” and then he’s laughing, because yeah, yeah this was ridiculous, and she’s staring at his mouth still, at the bare line of his teeth, thinking about kissing him, about that dream she had of sex in the kitchen, and there’s a sudden thought of biting that has blood rushing up to her face because Isaac – Isaac biting. And, god, there’s nothing wrong with Scott being soft and sweet and warm during sex – she loves it, really, she does – but, oh god, with all the jagged edges and sharp angles of Isaac added in, what if, what if? What if she had Scott and Isaac, soft and sharp, with teeth and nails and up against walls, but blunted, maybe, by Scott and the Scottiness of him, taking care of everyone, always; what if they were three?

But she can’t think of that now; they’re in public, and she’s still staring at Isaac’s teeth.

***

Allison had made some remark about not getting drunk because they had to be at their barns by five, and he’d almost lost it right there in the restaurant. Even ignoring the tension that had ground at his nerves since that moment – had she wanted to kiss him? Had he been imagining that? – the five a.m. comment prompted a bolt from the blue: Allison, curled against him, warm and sleepy in the dark. And he’d wondered if she was a cuddler; if she was someone who liked being kissed awake; if that was a thing with her and Scott: cuddling and kissing in the black predawn – and, Jesus, what is wrong with him?

They’re standing outside her apartment now. The clock is ticking. He should go.

“So tonight was fun,” she says. She’s smiling at him.

“Yeah, yeah.” He’s shuffling his feet. “Not a bad end-of-meet party.”

And she laughs at that because, yeah, what party? They went and they ate and they didn’t even get drunk. Hell of a life. “I’ll see you tomorrow, I guess, maybe,” she says. “And if not… yeah, this was fun.”

Isaac shrugs. “Anytime, so long as you keep paying.”

She swats at his shoulder. “Asshole.”

“Yep.”
At that, she sighs. “I… yeah. Are you sure you don’t want to come up for a cup of coffee or anything?”

_Coffee: the universal euphemism for sex._ “No, I should – I should go pack.” Like they’re moving far.

“If you’re sure.” She’s smiling at him again: so, so warm.

“I’ll see you around.” And he – he doesn’t even know why he does it _(_I want I think she wanted to kiss me I want I want to kiss her I want_), but he bends to kiss her, just on the cheek, because that’s a safe territory, except she turns her head. And maybe she _did_ want him to kiss her; maybe it’s an instinctive reaction, but he lands not quite on her cheek, not quite on her mouth, only the corner of it, and she’s still so warm, so easy, so sure.

She’s still smiling while he recoils, flushed and awkward, mumbling “sorry, sorry.” – somehow there’s nothing forced about her expression – but he doesn’t even wait for her to say anything; he’s shuffling his feet and jamming his hands into his pockets and _oh god help_ just backing away from it all.

He’s halfway down the street before he glances over his shoulder to see her still standing in front of the building. After that he doesn’t look back at all.

The room is empty – Stiles is out – so he gives himself fifteen minutes before he starts packing. In the meantime, he crawls onto the bed, drags out the plain gray sweatshirt that is stored under the pillow, and buries his face in it. It still smells faintly of Scott: horses, the vet’s office, and a safe, warm place to hide.

***

It’s a forty-five-minute drive to the airport with Stiles fidgeting in shotgun and doing his level best to talk Derek’s ear off. He’s jittery, incessantly twitching, tugging at the straps of the backpack in his lap, poking at the knobs of the dashboard until the heater roars to life and he jumps back as if scalded. All the while there’s a running monologue of sorry-I’m-leaving-you-guys-but-the-move-went-well-don’t-you-think-and-wow-the-new-barn-is-huge-I’ll-tell-my-dad-hi-from-all-of-you-how-many-horses-are-coming-in-anyways-will-you-really-be-fine-for-eight-days-I’ll-be-back-the-night-of-the-twenty-sixth-and-hey-thanks-for-giving-me-a-ride-that-was-cool-you-know-sorry-for-leaving-again.

Derek half tunes him out – it’s the same thing looped over after a certain point, steadier than the radio, reassuring in its own way. He’s still listening, though; he hears when Stiles veers off track to ask, “What are you guys doing for Christmas, anyway?”

He clears his throat as they roll onto the state highway’s exit ramp. “We’re not really religious, but we’ll do dinner with Isaac, and maybe a few of the riders. That’s as far as we go with holiday traditions.”

“Huh,” Stiles says. “So, no tree, no eggnog, no merry good cheer?”

“The meet starts the next day.” They merge left onto Interstate 105.

Stiles fists his hands in the hem of his sweatshirt, bobs his head. “This is true. Bury’s running,
“Right?”

“In an allowance.”

“You guys planning to retire him soon?”

“Not yet.” Derek makes himself loosen his grip on the steering wheel. “He’ll be seven; he can still have another year running allowances.” And we have no idea what we’re going to do with him once he’s retired. “If you’re going to worry about retirees, save it for Howard and Bush. Their time has come and gone, and they were never that good to begin with. Stoner at least might get another year; he’s been getting better with age, somehow. That Turf Cup win means a lot.”

“When will—who’s their owner? I want to say Byrns but I know that’s not right.”


Stiles nods, leaning back in his seat, throwing one arm up on the windowsill. “There ya go. When will he call it, you think?”

Derek shrugs. “Whenever he decides that they’re not making enough to be worth it. Could be tomorrow, could be three years from now. His choice. But with the way they’re running, tomorrow’s more likely.”

“And then they’ll just get shipped off to some slaughterhouse, right?”

When Derek glances over, Stiles mouth is turned down, and his brow is furrowed. Yes, the honest part of his brain says, Yes, that is a very real possibility. The honest part of his brain also says he should do the same thing with Yogi, ASAP. “Bush is dull and dumb enough that he could be turned into a schoolhorse, and he and Howard are sort of a package deal. They’re idiots, but they’re brothers and best friends, and if they fall into the right hands then somebody will figure out how to make them worthwhile.”

“If,” Stiles reminds him. “If, if, if.” His gaze is calculating. “Yogi would probably get shipped straight to the slaughterhouse.”

It’s a deliberate move towards a deliberate end, but Derek is not in the mood to be antagonized so Stiles can satisfy his curiosity about the horse. He grits his teeth. “If Yogi gets sold, I’ll still have first say as to where he ends up.”

“Suppose no one wants him.”

Suppose I throw you out of my car. “There will be someone.”

“Bull.”

“There will.” He almost misses the exit for the airport—yanks the wheel to the right, then straightens them, and sets his foot on the brake.

Stiles sits in silence for the last forty-five seconds of the trip, until Derek pulls up at the curb of the Tom Bradley terminal, throws the Camaro into park, and pops the trunk. “Thanks for the ride, again,” he says. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.” Before Derek can figure out what that means, Stiles is climbing from of the car to
haul his duffel from the trunk. He stands there on the curb, duffel slung over one shoulder, backpack over the other, squinting in the bright winter sunlight. He waits until Derek rolls down the window. “Happy holidays, Sourwolf.”

*Don’t call me that.* He blinks at Stiles, stares at him. Who the hell is this boy, anyway? But he doesn’t want to think about that any more than he has to, so he turns away and shifts into drive without saying anything. Stiles waves as he’s pulling off from the curb – Derek catches it in the rearview – and he lets his nails dig into the leather of the steering wheel, because that’s a better move than waving back.

It’s a long drive to the new barn.
Lydia does not meet the Hales when they roll up with their trailers full of horses to their new home on the backside of Santa Anita Park. After a decade of crawling out of bed at o’dark-thirty, she is taking full advantage of her ability to sleep in. She wakes up at ten, putters around her apartment until eleven, then changes from sweatpants into jeans, climbs into her car, and heads over to the track.

Though the entire property is roughly the same size as Hollywood Park, Santa Anita’s dirt oval is a mile instead of a mile and an eighth, with the extra space taken up by a hillside turf course that somebody probably thought up while tripping acid. Both tracks can stable roughly two thousand horses, and at Santa Anita, just as at Hollywood and Golden Gate, the security guard waves Lydia onto the backside without bothering to ask for identification.

“Didn’t I hear you had a bad fall?” she asks.

Lydia makes her mouth smile. “I did. Still healing up.”

“And yet back at the track already.” The guard shakes her head and sighs. “Ya’ll are a type. Can’t beat you away with a stick.”

“No, you really can’t.” And Lydia folds her arms across her chest and strolls on by.

The Hales aren’t the only ones moving in today, and for a moment she thinks Laura gave her the wrong barn number when she walks in and sees no one. Then Stoner cranes his neck over his door, baying at her while Sass snakes out to nip him, and Isaac pokes his head out of a stall further down the line. “Decided to show up after all, Martin?”

“I thought about giving Maxwell a call, offering a hand there. Coulda gone to Byrns, too.” She takes a couple steps down the aisle to Schizo’s stall. The mare’s ears perk up, and she comes over to the door to say hello. “Where is everyone?”

Isaac pulls a face. “Derek’s driving Stiles to the airport so he can fly home, and Laura went… I don’t know where Laura went. Probably telling the track officials we’re here or something.” He shrugs. “You need her?”

“Just wanted to say hi.” She cocks her head to the side. “Lotta empty stalls.”

“We’ve got four horses coming on the first. Three or four more over the next couple months, too. It’ll fill up.” Isaac watches her pet Schizo for a moment, then turns back to whatever he’d been doing when she walked in. “You sticking around?”

“Maybe.” Lydia gives the mare a final pat before stepping across the aisle to peer into the stall. They’ve set it up as a feed room, of course; it’s almost time for lunch. “I have a sneaking suspicion that you’re about to ask me to help.”
Isaac knows her too well; he smirks and hunches one shoulder and mutters something about “If your back isn’t hurting too much…” until she pulls the door open and stomps inside. “Oh, sorry, was that a ‘yes’?”

“You, Lahey, are an idiot.”

He nudges a feed bucket in her direction with his foot. “Whatever you say. That one goes to Bury.”

***

Beacon Hills appears exactly the same as it did when Stiles visited in June, except for the part where there are no leaves on the trees and the cruiser’s thermometer reads forty degrees when he climbs into it in the airport parking lot.

“Jesus.” He’s in a sweatshirt and long-sleeved shirt and jeans, and he’s shivering like he’s buck-ass naked. “When did the Ice Age start up?”

“Sometime while you were in Hollywood, getting tan and living it up with movie stars.” His dad starts the engine, and Stiles jams the heat up to the max.

“First of all: do I look tan? And you have no idea what L.A. is actually like if you thought I was partying it up the whole time.”

“Well, all I ever got out of you was “I do a lot of stuff with horses,” so I don’t know what you want me to think.” There’s a mischievous twinkle in his dad’s eye. “I had to tell people something.”

“You are unbelievable,” Stiles mutters.

His dad chuckles and claps him on the shoulder. “Welcome home, Stiles.”

That first night, Stiles passes out at ten and wakes up twelve hours later when his dad knocks on the door and sticks his head into the room. “I’m heading out,” he says. “There are pancakes on the counter.”

“Mmmhrgh.” Stiles rolls over. “There had better not be any sausage. Or bacon.” He cracks one eye open.

His dad is smiling. “No breakfast meats,” he swears. “I was good.”

“A’ight.” Stiles closes his eyes and goes back to sleep.

***

“You’re coming out with us for Christmas, right?”

Isaac settles Ernest’s bridle on its hook and picks up Bush’s. “Figured that was a given.”

“Just clarifying.” Laura shuffles several sheets of papers between her fingers. “You want to invite
“You really want an Argent in your crew?” Isaac laughs. “They’re doing New Year’s Eve with her family; I don’t know about Christmas. I don’t think any of us are religious enough to give it significance.”

Laura shrugs. “We’re gonna go get Chinese and bullshit for a couple hours, so if you think they might wanna come around for that, go ahead. I know Jackie’s coming – Lydia, too. You know the crowd.”

“Of course.” Isaac slings a girth over his shoulder to go with the bridle, steps back towards the door. “I’ll bring it up.”

“No booze,” Laura calls at his retreating back.

“No shit, boss. No shit.”

Laura rolls her eyes, turning back to the papers on her desk. Seven new horses, four coming in the first week of January. She doesn’t feel ready for them, not nearly ready, but they can hardly back out of anything now. She can’t even put a finger on what, exactly, is bothering her. Jackie would never let her down, and even the other jockeys would benefit more from riding well than throwing a race. The horses will come to her with whatever raw talent they possess, and Isaac and Stiles are intelligent and reliable handlers, for all their relative inexperience. If there is a fault in their system, it is Derek’s commitment to Yogi overwhelming the attention he pays to the other horses. (But that’s why he got Stiles involved; Laura’s brother tends to be far more intelligent than she gives him credit for.)

Derek’s multitasking inabilities might not be their only problem. Plenty of people can tell you about the effect of stress on a racehorse – but how many human ailments spring from the same source? Laura tries to remember the last time she had anything resembling a vacation, and laughs. “The President doesn’t get days off,” she reminds the corkboard over her desk. *I am the President of this barn, this train which does not stop for anyone.*

She hasn’t had sex since college. And what was everyone’s excuse for breaking up with her? “You’re always busy; you’re always working; you’re always studying.”

*Tell me something I don’t know.*

Groaning, Laura curls in on herself, wrapping both hands around the back of her neck and kneads at the tense muscle there. Four days until Christmas, five until the meet starts, ten until the fillies arrive. Maybe she should revoke the ‘no drinking’ rule, just for a day or two. Maybe she should also buy a shotgun and start blowing her horses’ brains out – and maybe she should start with Booze for irony’s sake.

“No drinking,” she growls at the stack of papers. *No booze.*

***

Scott’s phone buzzes as he’s sitting down to lunch, Allison’s name flashing on the screen.

“Guess who I just talked to,” she says when he picks up.
“Well, I just talked to Isaac for the first time in a zillion years, so, um, I don’t know. Who?”


“Wanted to know what we’re doing on Christmas. Hales are taking a bunch of people out for dinner – nothing major ‘cause the meet’s the next day and all, but, you know. There’ll be food.”

There’s a beat of silence. “Laura Hale just crawled out of the woodwork to tell me almost the exact same thing, with more of an emphasis on ‘you should really, really come along’.”

Scott huffs out a laugh. “That woman scares me.”

“Ditto.” Allison swallows audibly. “Isaac’s a cool dude, though.”

“Yeah,” Scott agrees. “Yeah, he is.”

***

“So how’s Scott doing these days? You haven’t been talking about him that much.”

Stiles blows out a breath, scrubbing a hand over his freshly-renewed buzzcut and eyeballing the Christmas-tree rim design of his plate. “Well, yeah; we’ve been a couple hundred miles apart for most of the fall, and he’s got school and I’m working, so… I mean, he came down to Hollywood a couple weeks ago – he’s there now, gonna do New Year’s with Allison’s family.” He stabs a piece of roast chicken and gulps it down between breaths. “They’re getting married this summer – maybe. Possibly. At some point.”

“So I heard. His mother’s delighted.” The Sheriff’s tone is wry, half-amused. “Most casual engagement I’ve ever seen. Does he even have a ring?”

I don’t think Allison’ wants one,” Stiles confesses. “A racetrack isn’t the best place for expensive rocks.”

His dad grunts. “Probably true.”

They both lapse into silent thought as the ghost of Stiles’ mother coalesces from the fogs of memory to hang in the air between them. She had lost her ring twice before deciding the idea was ridiculous – “all that money to broadcast something the world should already know” – and stopped wearing them. A thin silver band still encircles the Sheriff’s finger.

He clears his throat. “What’s it like working at a track, anyway? High-stress? How’s the company?”

“Good, um – yeah. There’re a lot of tight nerves when we have horses running, but, you know, it’s more interesting than driving forklifts. Eat something green.”

His dad rolls his eyes before jamming a fork’s load of green beans into his mouth. He asks while chewing: “And how are the people?”

How aren’t the people? “Characters. The other groom, Isaac, he’s – well, there are worse people to spend twelve hours a day alongside, but he’s a bit abrasive, and by ‘abrasive’ I mean he bleeds sarcasm and breathes cynicism and… okay, once you get past the overwhelming bitterness and the
various angles of his face that are sharp enough to slice carrots with, he’s alright. Survivable, anyway. He’s from Beacon Hills too, actually; he’s a couple years older than me. Isaac Lahey ring a bell?”

“Lahey?” His dad leans back in his seat. “His father used to be swim coach at the high school. I don’t remember ever meeting the kid.”

“He can be pretty unremarkable when he wants to.” With his hood pulled up and the swagger leached from his step, Isaac can disappear into any crowd, and his personality has a geographic gradient. Even slinking around the empty backside, he does a fair job of becoming unrecognizable from a distance. It’s only around the Hales and their crew that he straightens up and transforms into the Snarkmaster General. Allison also has that effect. And sometimes Scott. It’s a thing.

“Does he come back here to visit?”

Stiles clears his throat. “I don’t think he has such a great relationship with his dad.”

“Huh.” The Sheriff rubs at his chin. “He had an older brother, I think, who got killed in action overseas. That’s gotta be hard on a parent: losing one kid and having the other drop off the map.”

Stiles is more than a tad wary of the direction this conversation is taking. He shrugs and takes another bite of chicken. “Do you know who the Hales are?”

“Your bosses?”

“Yeah – a brother-sister pair. Derek and Laura. Somebody burned their house down a couple years back, killed pretty much their entire family. There was a whole big thing on the news about it. Anyway, I think they’ve made their own little family with Isaac and a couple of the riders – they all sort of hang out and lean on each other and… yeah. It’s not like the guy’s floating out alone on the big empty ocean of the world.”

“His father is.” Stiles’ dad gives him a pointed look over the tabletop.

Stiles shifts in his seat. “Yeah, well… you know what? It’s Christmas. Let’s talk about something less depressing.”

His dad grunts. “How ‘bout them Cowboys?”

***

Taste of China is a large, well-reputed establishment festively decorated with tinsel and miniature Santas that are completely out of place against the Oriental-themed backdrop. Their eight-person group – composed of the Hales, Scott and Allison, Isaac, Lydia, Jackie, and Eddie – takes up one huge, round table in a back corner. Scott winds up slotted between Allison and Jackie, facing the room. They order a whole mess of food and pass plates around with anyone grabbing bits of whatever they feel like while talking a mile a minute.

Jackie and Eddie eat primarily steamed vegetables, though the former demands a particular dish of shredded duck that she then proceeds to monopolize. “If you mention making weight I’ll stab you in the eye with this,” she threatens when she catches Eddie’s smile. A chopstick is poised menacingly between her fingers. “Voy a te apuñalo con esto. En su ojo.”
Eddie laughs. “No te diré nada.”

“Fuckin’ chino.”

“Hombre-mujer.”

“Cut the shit,” Lydia says. “We’re scaring the neighbors.” True enough: a young girl at the next table is peering over the back of her chair at them. When Isaac, who’s in the spot nearest her, turns around and pulls out one of his child-eating grins, the kid shrinks down and cowers. Lydia swats his arm. “That wasn’t your cue to be terrifying. Stop it.”

“You stop,” he grumbles, and leans across her to grab the fried rice.

She elbows him in the stomach before he even reaches the bowl, and he chokes, snapping back. There’s a spasm of movement as one of them kicks the other. The gesture is reciprocated back and forth between them, punctuated with shoving and insults, for several seconds until Laura clears her throat loudly enough to be heard over the scuffle.

“No abusing the cripple,” she orders.

“She’s not a cripple,” Isaac protests at the same moment Lydia snaps “Get out” in a tone less offended than amused.

The girl is peeping over her chair again. When Scott smiles at her, she ducks down until only the frizzy black mass of her hair. In another minute, though, she pops over the rim once more, offering an impish grin back at him. She’s missing her left front tooth. He waves, and she giggles, then waves back.

Jackie leans around behind Scott. “You’ve got competition, Al.”

Allison laughs, and Isaac’s head snaps in their direction like he’s been startled. The girl shrinks down again. None of the adults at her table even look around; she’s the only kid there, and everyone else is white. Scott looks down at his plate, saying nothing.

***

They’re all outside, huddled together for a last moment as they bid one another farewell before splintering off. Allison finishes hugging Lydia, tells her to take care of herself, lets go, turns around, and almost runs into Laura Hale. They’d only exchanged a few words over the course of the evening; both Hales had seemed happier to observe than interact. (Derek barely opened his mouth, and Allison is pretty sure that the last time they spoke, she was pressuring him to back out of the Prevue.) She smiles at Laura, though, because the woman invited them out and picked up the tab after all, and feeding eight people a decent meal doesn’t come cheap.

Laura cocks her head ever-so-slightly to the side as she shakes Allison’s hand, looking at her, really looking at her, with a paradoxically distant intensity, like Allison is a puzzle that Laura would gain nothing from solving, yet intrigues her all the same.

“Thanks for tonight,” Allison says.

Laura nods, drops her hand, steps away. “Don’t let Isaac get pneumonia from all his running.”
Taste of China’s door swings open, and a family exits: four white adults and one tiny brown girl. They’re the group from the other table. The adults ignore the crew from the track; the girl turns her head, recognizes them, and waves.

Scott waves back, and so does Eddie. Jackie grins, and Lydia does a little wiggle with her wave and grabs Isaac’s arm to make him wave too, even as he’s rolling his eyes. Laura turns her gaze on the girl, that same removed curiosity, gives her a smile that does not have a border. Derek Hale lurks at the corner of Allison’s vision.

The girl looks at them, all of them. She’s walking backwards now. Her arm extends, finger protruding to point a wavering, cautious line to Jackie. “You ride the horses.”

Jackie inclines her head. “That I do.”

One of the adults turns around. “Come on, sweetie, let’s get home.”

The girl nods, still stumbling backwards. “Merry Christmas, Ms. Vaca.”

Jackie chokes as the kid walks away, and it’s only Laura spinning to grab her that keeps the jockey from going to her knees. Jackie, Jackie who is perfectly open about her hatred of children, Jackie in jeans and a t-shirt and a dark green jacket with five o’clock shadow drawn across her jaw, rasps, “I want to adopt that kid,” as she scrabbles to get her feet under her again. “I’d give a limb to adopt that little shit. How the hell did she know my…?” She catches her balance and trails off.

Isaac leans over, nudges her shoulder. “You ride the horses.”

***

After two hours on the tarmac, two more circling above LAX, an hour of actual travel in the air, and a final hour in a taxi through a torrential thunderstorm, Stiles shoves a key into a lock, twists against the grate of metal and rust until the deadbolt clicks, and hauls himself and his bags into an empty room. Santa Anita does singles. And I shall take Buddha as my lord and savior... He trips across the carpet, dropping things as he goes, until he can faceplant onto the bare mattress.

His watch reads 2:49.

“Crap,” he mutters, and goes to sleep.

He gets woken by a slap on the back with Isaac bellowing into his ear: “Rise and shine, sleeping beauty; we’ve got horses to feed!”

“How did you get in here?” he grumbles, blinking away sleep from his eyes. Everything feels gummy and thick, from his skin to his teeth – he needs a shower. He shoves himself up to his elbows.

Isaac is fully-dressed (of course) and grinning unbearably wide (of course) when he says, “You leaving your door wide open helped.”

“Shit,” Stiles groans. “How much time do I have?”

“It’s four-forty and still pissing down rain – you’re gonna get soaked either way. Shit, strip and
stand outside for five minutes if you’re desperate for a shower. Everything’s going to be mud
today.”

*Screw it.* Stiles doesn’t even change out of his clothes from the trip – just pulls on his boots. He
does grab his toothbrush and duck into the bathroom, however. “There still racing?” he calls out.

Isaac snorts. “It’s Santa Anita, dude. After their fiasco with the drainage when they tried the
synthetic track, they’ve got one of the fastest natural dirt runs in the country – only place where
more world records have been set is Hollywood. Yeah, they’ll run. None of ours are going out for
another two days, though, so chill.” He gives Stiles an impatient look when he reemerges from the
bathroom. “You ready?”

“Yes, I –” Isaac tosses a lightweight rain slicker at him “– thanks?”

“Thank Laura.” Isaac unfolds his own and pulls it on; they’re black with the Hale logo – an H
superimposed on a triskelion – emblazoned over the left breast. “Let’s go.”

Stiles nearly falls eight times between the bunk house and the Hale barn, and he’s soaked to his
knees by the time they trudge in under the eaves. There, though, everything is dry and if not warm
then warmer than the deluge outside. Stiles mumbles a couple gratitudes to a handful of
miscellaneous deities and heads over to the feed stall, where… “Lydia?”

She glances back over her shoulder. “You’re late.”

You sure you’re allowed to bend over like that?” and Stiles is really awkwardly confused until
Lydia says “Nope” and straightens up and he catches the outline of a back brace under her
sweatshirt. Right. Cracked vertebrae. He’d forgotten about that.

“She’s taking Bury from you,” Isaac reminds him.

“Right, I… right.”

Lydia nudges the door open wider with her foot so she can slip past Stiles. “Do his horses first,
Isaac; I want my coffee.”

Stiles glances at the downpour outside. He closes his eyes, inhales, exhales. It takes everything he
has not to groan or crawl into the nearest available bed.

***

Derek knows as soon as he looks outside that he’s not going to have Stiles gallop Yogi that
morning. With the move, they’ve lost a place to ride in solitude, so there’s nothing that can be done
outside of a regular workout. He hates the idea. There’s nothing for it. Yogi has a race on the
twenty-ninth, and any work longer than a blowout today would be a stretch. A work tomorrow is
out of the question.

Derek wonders which god, specifically, he did so much to piss off.
When one knows one has to be at work by five in the morning, it’s sort of difficult to be cheerful about staying up past midnight. That’s not to imply that Stiles resents the celebration they’re having – not after his year. It’s been a hell of a trip.

In the days since Stiles’ return, Yogi has taken a third in an allowance while Booze missed victory in the Daytona Stakes by the length of Silverbled’s head and Mick came rolling from far behind the pack in the Robert J. Frankel to finish well clear of a field that included Five Three Eight, a bright bay gelding out of Pim Byrn’s barn. He hopes it’ll be easier to breathe once the new horses turn up. Everything seems to be flying by him – the days at home felt like nothing at all – and if time could slow down enough for him to process everything that would be great.

Time has zero intentions of complying. Even now, packed into the track kitchen with a slew of riders, grooms, and miscellaneous backside workers (because where else are they going to have fun without getting drunk?) to watch the ball drop, the countdown is happening more faster than it should – too fast.

Stiles turns around, searching for Lydia – because yeah, New Year kisses are dumb, but he’s dumb, and Lydia’s amazing, and maybe just this once? – and spots her leaning against a table by the back wall, next to Isaac. They’re shoulder-to-shoulder, eyes on the television mounted high on the wall, holding a conversation too quiet to eavesdrop on.

The countdown hits ten seconds. Stiles doesn’t even bother to test his luck. He snags a glass of champagne off the counter – courtesy of the stewards, and the only alcohol present – and tries to distance himself from Boyd and Erica in anticipation of the epic face-sucking that he was warned to expect. (Quite nice of them to alert him, really.)

Five seconds left when he’s accosted by Jackie and Eddie, who each throw an arm over his shoulder and swap manic grins. He’s not entirely sure that they’re sober.

“Sonríe antes de muerdo te.” Definitely not sober. Yay for lightweights.

“Smile before you what me?”

Jackie bares her teeth.

“Happy New Year!”

“Jesus Christ.” Stiles rolls his eyes and drains the champagne glass amid the hoots and whoops and cheers, ducks out from under the jockeys’ grips – he’s pretty sure they don’t even notice – and glances around the room.

Isaac’s kissing Lydia. Or, rather, Lydia is kissing Isaac, tucked in against his side, one hand curved around his jaw, tilting his chin down so she doesn’t have to stretch up on her toes. It’s closed-mouthed and chaste from what Stiles can see, and they part even as he watches, with Isaac saying something and Lydia jabbing him in the chest with a finger as she responds. And then… and then nothing. Isaac straightens up and Lydia yawns and people are filing out because the party’s over, time to go to bed, happy New Year, don’t get run over before you get home.

He follows the crowd out, waits for Lydia to separate from Isaac before he falls into step beside her.
“Hi, Stiles,” she smiles at him. “Happy New Year.”

“You too.” He checks around them for Isaac, sees him nowhere. “Quick question: you and Isaac, is that gonna be, like, a workplace romance thing or…” Lydia is staring at him like he’s grown an extra head. “Or am I completely out of my mind?”

She laughs. “Isaac and I haven’t been together for a very, very long time. So no, there’s no ‘workplace romance’ to worry about.”

“Oh, okay.” He can feel his ears flaming red. “I just thought…”

Lydia raises an eyebrow.

“…Nevermind.”

She smiles again, easy and in control. “It’s New Year’s.” Her hand finds its way to the crook of Stiles’ arm, and she leans up to press a kiss to his cheek before stepping away. “I’m off,” she says. “Happy New Year, Stiles. Good luck.”

He blushes and presses his fingertips to his cheek as he turns to watch her go. “Yeah, I… Happy New Year.”
I'm going to direct everyone's attention to a horrifically painful and accurate Isaac meta here - sunsetpanic.tumblr.com/post/32369369841 because agony makes life fun, and if you're reading this story, you should expect it.

Chris Argent sees the fillies delivered himself – rides over in the back of the trailer with them, even, and helps unload them. When he leads the first one down the ramp, Isaac almost drops the hoofpick that he’s fiddling with. “Jesus Christ.”

Argent gives a tight little smile while the filly snorts, twisting her head and buck-jumping as soon as her feet hit the dirt. She’s big. Big as in tall, and big as in bulky; she’s gotta be at least seventeen hands – Bury-sized – and there’s a tremendous power threatened by her shoulders and girth and the short, flexing length of her neck.

Isaac looks dazed, never taking his eyes from the brown-flecked gray of the filly’s coat as Argent hands him the lead line and returns to the trailer. The filly prances a half-circle on the end of the shank, nostrils blowing wide to better take in her surroundings. As she pivots, a wide red-brown streak on her left shoulder comes into view. Stiles points at it. “What’s up with that?”

“IT’s called a blood-marking,” Derek murmurs. “They happen sometimes in fleabittens.”

“Seriously?” It looks like she got hung up on a nail or something; the mark stretches out from the base of her neck, spreading forward over the point of her shoulder and reaching down to her elbow. “Seems like it should hurt.”

“That mark’s about as harmful as a stocking or a blaze, or being wall-eyed – there’s nothing wrong with her. Far from it.” Argent reemerges from the depths of the trailer with the other filly following at his heels. This one is a plain bay, almost a full hand smaller than her sister but still a large horse, and she’s leaner. She gets handed off to Lydia, and Argent stays long enough to shake Laura’s hand before closing up the trailer and driving away.

The gray neighs after it in a tone that Stiles imagines means “And don’t come back!” in horse-speech.

“We have two more coming later this week,” Laura is saying. “Stiles will get one; Isaac, you’ll have another.”

Isaac nods, lets the lead line play out as the gray jangles her head. “They got names yet?” Both halters are bare of identifying brass plates.

Laura smiles. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You think the world’s gonna crack if someone knows their names before they race, boss? Really?”

“You have your dumb superstitions; I have mine. Let’s get them inside.”
Isaac smirks and clucks to the gray. She drops her head, steps forward, and snaps her head to the side, jaws gaping. Isaac barely leaps back in time to miss losing a chunk of his ribs. “Shit.” He slaps the filly’s shoulder; she pins her ears and picks her head back up, staring him in the eye.

Lydia laughs: “Three cheers for the attitude. Call her Bitch.”

“Tempting. Call that one Sane.” Isaac nods at the bay, grips the shank right up under the gray’s chin before moving again.

“Put them in between Mick and Schizo. We’ll leave the stalls by Booze empty for as long as possible.”

“Sure thing, boss,” Isaac says as the gray plants her feet just inside the barn and neighs loud enough for it to ring back off the rafters. Schizo whickers, Stoner snorts and blows and thrusts his head out into the aisle, and someone far down at Ernest’s end of the barn – probably Yogi – kicks at the wall. “What, you wanna be boss? You’re not the boss; she’s the boss. Get over it.”

The gray flicks her ears and drops her head to Isaac’s level, letting him lead her onward.

The bay follows quietly, swinging her head around and sniffing at everything, but making no fuss. She goes into her new home without complaint. As soon as Lydia steps out and closes the door, she pokes her head out to look around. The gray paces several rounds of her stall, nosing at the water buckets and empty hay net, going over it like a bomb-sniffing dog deep in enemy territory. All three handlers withdraw across the aisle to observe.

“I take back Bitch,” Lydia tells them. “Call the gray Boss.”

“She could be Laura as a horse, you know, with the attitude and the stubbornness,” Stiles offers. “Boss is good.”

“And the bay?”

Lydia hmmms to herself. “I liked Sane, but that feels forced, and it’s only because of her sister.”

“It’d be helpful if we knew her real name,” Stiles calls down the aisle to the trainers. “C’mon, Sourwolf.”

Derek turns his face away. Laura makes a zipping motion across her mouth. “Hold your horses,” she says, and grins at the faces they all pull.

“By the way…” Stiles elbows Isaac in the ribs. “What happened to twins being worthless?”

Isaac opens his mouth, closes it, shrugs.

“It’s the Hales,” Lydia says. “They’re only here because of impossible luck. If anyone’s going to have race-worthy twins, they are.”

“But how?”


***
“Let’s see these freaks of yours” is Jackie’s greeting when she swaggers into the barn late on Saturday afternoon after decimating the San Pasqual Stakes aboard Schizo.

Stiles points her towards the fillies. “Guess which one we call Boss.”

The filly in question snaps out of her doze as Jackie approaches. When she decides that the human is too close, she pins her ears and half-rears, hopping up and down until Jackie stops walking.

“Alright – that’s your turf. Fine. Not going near it.” She backs up two steps, then cuts a wide detour around Boss’ stall, coming to stand in front of the bay’s door instead. “Hey, hey, lovely lady. You gonna act less like a stallion than your sister?” When she holds out her palm, the bay noses over it, lipping gently as though searching for treats. “We got a name for this one?”

“Not yet.”

Jackie taps her foot thrice. “Call her Guapa.”

“…handsome?”

“Handsome, lovely – same difference. She’s both.”

“You’re gonna give her an ego complex.”

“All racehorses have ego complexes,” Jackie says. “All the jockeys, too. And the grooms have a pretty shitty record now that I think about it.”

“Hey, now-” Jackie pivots on her heel to give Stiles The Eyebrow. “Did you teach Isaac that – the sass-master eyebrow, whatever that is? … Okay, fine, whatever; I have an ego complex and we’re calling her Guapa. Happy?”

Jackie beams. “Never.”

***

“Oh my god I’m gonna die.”

Derek has his shut-up-Stiles face on with the pinched mouth and narrowed eyes, and he looks like he gives exactly zero shits as to whether or not Stiles dies, so long as he actually gets on Yogi. As for The Yogimeister, he’s giving Stiles the eye like he fully intends to kill him as soon as he’s given the chance.

“Shut up and get on the horse,” Laura says as she walks by, with, “Where’s Erica?” close on the heels of the order.

Stiles doesn’t know where Erica is. He only knows that Derek is eyeing him with a hint of strain creeping into his expression, and, okay, it’s Yogi – he’s ridden Yogi before; never in the morning, never at anything faster than a trot, but still, it’s Yogi, he can do this. Own it; own it; own everything you do.

He blinks and he’s in the saddle, Derek at Yogi’s head, walking them out to the track, Yogi
snorting and high-stepping and generally feeling good, and Stiles is gonna die any second now; he’s sure of it. “I am seriously questioning your judgment, FYI. Now and forever and always.”

“Stiles,” Derek says. And that’s it. Just, “Stiles.” Not exasperated, not angry. Tired. Owning it. Shit. They’re at the gap in the rail. Derek turns around to face him. “Do a long warm-up – trot him all the way around on the outside rail, going clockwise. When you get back here –” he points across the dirt to the two-eighths pole – “get a little beyond the pole, then turn him around and gallop him around once – one mile.”

“Okay, okay.” He nudges Yogi out onto the dirt to pick up a trot. He can do this. If a horse can’t trust his rider, he can’t trust anything. Derek is trusting him and Yogi’s trying to trust him and, okay, he’s gonna get them through this; he’s gonna lean his weight against the tresses with Derek and Laura and Isaac and Lydia and Jackie; they’re gonna do this; they’re gonna get out of the mud.

And, shit, that’s profound for a morning workout. Kind of dumb, too. Really dumb. Who the hell does he think he is? He’s a six-year-old, twenty-three-year-old on a pony, on a racehorse. The angriest racehorse he’s ever seen.

“What if he’s angry, and I’m scared?”

“Then don’t let yourself be scared. Own your emotions. Own your hands and your legs. Own everything you do. You’ll be fine, then.”

He is not going to cry in the middle of a workout.

Too fast, they’re at the quarter pole. Stiles circles Yogi in across the track, takes a firm hold of the reins and a chunk of mane, hunches over the horse’s neck, and, as they pass the pole again, clucks and squeezes.

There’s a moment of anticipation as Yogi’s head comes up and he rocks back on his haunches – and then he explodes.

It’s only Stiles’ grip on his mane that keeps him from flying off, and it’s really all he can do to hang on for the first couple furlongs, knuckles pressed into Yogi’s neck, trying to stay sunk in his heels and let his knees absorb the shock of each stride, and they’re flying – whipping along the rail, leaning into the turn, and shit, shit, is this too fast? It’s only a workout; it’s gotta be too fast. But Derek didn’t say…

Yogi’s head starts to drop, so Stiles collects the reins an inch, opens the angle of his hip a fraction to try to keep him up, give him something to balance against, and Yogi… Yogi stops plowing down and goes up and forward again.

The clubhouse turn is come and gone; the backstretch flashes by in an instant; they’re turning again, and Stiles breathes, breathes, makes himself wait for the pole before standing all the way up and cutting Yogi down to a canter. “Easy, boy, easy.”

Yogi huffs and pins his ears, throwing his head down to practically knock against his knees even as he breaks to a fast trot and curves them out across the track again, out of the way of the other workouts. As they approach Derek, Stiles sits down again, leaning back as he pulls, weight in his heels, leather biting into his hands until Yogi finally, grudgingly, walks.

“One forty-five for the mile,” Derek says, taking hold of the reins, pulling them over Yogi’s head. “With a hundred and sixty pounds on his back. Good.”

Stiles grunts, swings a leg over Yogi’s rump to dismount, lands on his feet, and promptly falls on
his ass in the dirt. “Shit.”

A laugh startles out of Derek. “You alright?” Derek. Derek is laughing. Laughing at Stiles but still – laughing.

“I… just galloped a racehorse and almost started crying over my mother; no, I am not alright. He closes his mouth.

Boyd trots them by on Bury. “Need a hand, Stilinski?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I’m good. Gimme a sec.” Stiles gets his legs in order, but when Derek extends a hand, he grabs it, lets himself get hauled upright. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Yogi sighs, butting his head against Derek’s shoulder to scratch an itch. Derek lets him, eyes on Stiles as he unbuckles his helmet and pulls it off. “Here, I got him.” Stiles reaches for the reins, and Derek hands them over.

“How’s your thumb?”

“Healing. Finally.” It’s purple instead of black, and there’s a clear line of undamaged nail at the base.

Derek nods, and even the laugh lines are gone from his face when Stiles glances over. “Don’t let him do that to you again.”

“I… wasn’t planning on it?”

Derek’s mouth twists, but all he says is, “Good; get him home,” before he turns away to clock Bury’s run.

***

SpitzSpitsScat is exactly the sort of horse his name implies. He’s two years old when he prances into the Hale barn, sixteen-two, corded with bunched muscle and packing in the swagger, with the nameplate on his halter polished to a gleaming shine and his coat an infuriating snowy white.

“That horse is never going to be clean,” Lydia observes as Stiles leads the colt past her to the empty stall next to Ernest.

Erica, who is waiting for Pig, elbows Jorge in the ribs. “Think the reporters’ll know him from Ghostchant?”

“If they know horses. Ghostchant has blue eyes – this one brown. Otherwise, very similar. We’ll see.”

The colt nips at Stiles arm as soon as he unclips the lead line. “That was unmerited, you dick.” He calls out of the stall: “Can we call this one Bitch?”

“Overruled,” says Erica. “I’m not missing the chance to have a horse named Spitz.”
“No. Stop. You’re not his groom.”

“No. Stop. You’re not his groom.”

“Scat,” Lydia offers. “Call him Scat.”

“Spitz.”

“You’ve already re-nicknamed Scotch Fitzgerald, you can’t-”

“Spitz,” says Jorge.

“Spitz,” repeats Erica.

“Call him Scat,” says Boyd.

“Spitz,” Erica snaps back.

“Scat,” says Lydia.

“Bitch,” says Stiles.

“Spitz,” says Isaac.

Derek sticks his head out of the tack room. “Scat.”

Laura slams the trailer door shut. “Spitz. Four-to-three. Argument over.”

***

Monday, the day after Sass literally *runs away* with the Monrovia – blazing through six and a half furlongs on the hillside turf course in 1:11 4/5 to finish three lengths clear of Mirror on the Wall – Rolling Admission arrives. She’s a tad under sixteen hands, black, three years old, mellow as can be when she is led into the barn. Last year she started six times without winning, though she showed once and placed twice, and Laura claims to see potential in her.

Stiles doesn’t know if he believes that, but the filly is well-built with a spark in her eye, so maybe she’ll take a bit of conditioning and start snapping off wins. You never know with this sort of thing. That’s alright. Stiles’ job is to trust Laura to know what the hell she’s doing.

Lydia is the one who starts calling her Skater – not for any discernible reason, she just… does. And it sticks. Skater the Sweetheart. And she is – a sweetheart, that is. Solid and bold and black, speckled with birdcatcher spots around her withers, and mellow as jello, like a SoCal surfer perpetually goofy and high on weed. Scott in a horse’s body. It’s impossible not to like her.

Stiles has to sit down for a minute the first time he hears her name, though.

***

Wednesday, he’s cooling out Yogi after their workout when a tall, sturdy white woman with waves
of honey-blonde hair falls into step beside them. Yogi huffs and pins his ears. “You work for the Hales?”

“Yeah.” He looks for a press pass around her neck, doesn’t see one. “Who’re you?” Yogi is slowing his ambling pace, stepping more carefully, one eye on the woman. “Watch out; he doesn’t like strangers.”

“Oh, old Yogi and I are far from strangers.” The woman reaches around behind Stiles, runs a hand along Yogi’s spine. “We went around the block once or twice together.” Yogi kicks out with a hind foot and she withdraws.

Stiles shortens his hold on the lead. “Who are you?” he asks again.

She ignores him. “Did you know that, in his first race, he almost killed his jockey by rearing up in the starting gate, and then threw the man into the rail before they’d gonna a quarter of a mile? He went careening across the track, after, trying to attack any outrider who got too close. They had to back off and wait until he calmed down. Took almost an hour. Horrible embarrassment for the owner and trainer. Hell of a fine for delaying the next race, too.”

Yogi lashes out again behind, trying to swing his back end around to get at her. Stiles nudges him over to put another foot between horse and woman. “You were there, weren’t you? You were one of them – the owner, the trainer.” She smiles. “Both.”

“Clever boy.”

A chill shoots down Stiles’ spine. He moves so his shoulder is brushing Yogi’s, walking faster. They’re almost back to the barn. “So you’re, what, visiting to relive the bad old days?”

“I came out west to spend the holidays with family, and I’m heading home soon,” she says. “So I thought I’d stop by before I left – see how the bastard was doing.”

They’re coming up on the barn now; he’s gotta let Yogi stop and have a swallow of water, get him away from this woman. He can see Lydia hosing down Howard – he has a race on Friday. They’re almost there.

“I’ve got to run now, kid, but I need a quick favor: tell Derek I said hello, will you?”

“Hello from whom?”

She beams. “Oh, he’ll know.” She starts to walk off – stops mid-stride. “Actually, give him a kiss from me instead.”

“What?”

She leans up, smacks a wet one onto his cheek, and drops down again. “See you around, kid.” Her wave is casual, lazy with success, and she doesn’t look back once as she swaggers off.

***

“I’m leaving on the fourteenth – in five days.”

“I know.”
Scott scrubs his knuckles together. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

Isaac looks up, startled. Scott is watching him in that helplessly endearing way, big brown eyes open and soft, broadcasting every moment of Scott sorting through memories, trying to decipher the exact moment that he stepped wrong. Isaac’s mouth goes dry. “You didn’t do anything.”

Scott blinks. “But I—”

“No it’s not,” Scott says, stubborn. “Even Allison says you guys have stopped running together—” shit “—and we’re, you know.” He stops, throws his hands wide. “You’re our friend.”

“Sorry,” Isaac mumbles.

Scott looks horrified. “Don’t be sorry, just be…” He lowers his hands. “I want you to be happy. You look more like you’re slowly killing yourself.”

Isaac drops his gaze to the floor. “You should go.”

“Okay,” Scott says. He starts to back away.

Isaac squeezes his eyes shut, drags in a shuddery lungful of air, then rasps out, “Stop” on the exhale. Scott freezes and Isaac shoves himself off the wall of the tack room, takes two steps to close the space between them, grabs twin fistfuls of Scott’s shirt, and kisses him. They’re not drunk this time – there’s no aftertaste of alcohol and Scott is all here, one hundred percent awake, alive, sober, warm and soft under Isaac’s hands, the faint scent of cotton and a harsh laundry detergent-

Not Scott.

Isaac skids back to consciousness with his face shoved into the blankets and his heart beating a million miles an hour. He wants to puke or claw his face off or maybe just throw himself out the window, get it done and over with quickly. No. It’s not happening. All of it. Any of it. None of it.

Picking his head up, he glances at the clock. A few minutes past midnight. Four and a half more hours. He’s barely slept at all. He… can’t. Even when he punches his pillow into a better shape and tries to settle himself once more, it doesn’t work. His brain has too much to tangle itself up in; he can’t do this – any of this.

He needs to go to the barn. It’s a dumb thought, but if he’s in a puzzle with the horses and Hales, at least he knows where he fits. With that in mind, he kicks back the covers (so grateful to no longer be sharing a room) and rolls off the mattress. He pulls on t-shirt and sweatshirt in distraction, barely remembers to lock the door on his way out.

It’s a clear night, temperature low in the forties, light pollution beating back the stars. There’s a new moon.

Isaac means to make a beeline for the Hale barn – maybe to sack out on the cot in the tack room after a round of the shedrow – but that’s before Chris Argent materializes from the darkness. They both stop short. “Argent.”
“Lahey. You’re up late.”

“So are you.”

“I have a sick horse.” Argent cocks his head to the side. “Question: how close are you and Allison?”

Isaac shifts his weight, thinks about running. “We jog together sometimes. Why?”

“Just wondering.” Argent slips his hands into his pockets, forcibly opening his posture. “You have any plans for tonight, Isaac?”

“I… no.”

“Do you know who Phoenix Flight is?”

“One of your horses,” Isaac says. “She the sick one?”

Argent sighs. “Colic. We don’t think it’s serious, but if you could get Allison to go home and get some rest instead of worrying herself to death, that would be… appreciated.”

“Where’s Scott?”

Argent’s mouth twists. “She threatened to shoot him if he didn’t leave. We’ve been waiting for Morell to drive over from Hollywood.”

Isaac doesn’t laugh. “Lead the way.”

***

Allison has already circled the twin Argent barns four times with Phoenix when she sees two familiar figures approaching and stops walking. Phoenix grunts, eyes dull and head hanging low as she halts beside Allison. Behind her, Gerard and Aunt Kate are standing in the left-hand barn’s doorway with Morell, conversing in the light of the dimmed overheads. Emerging into view in front of her are her father and Isaac, with the former’s face drawn tight and grim and the latter’s locked down tight.

“What are you doing here?” she demands, and the two men break stride to look at each other.

Her father stiffens his spine first. “You need some rest, Allison.”

“Like hell I do.” She glowers at him, then at Isaac. “You’re a biggest hypocrite alive if you plan on taking his side on this.”

Isaac tilts his head back, sighs. “Did I ever say I was?” Her father glares at him, and he shrugs. “Did I?”

Allison fusses with the lead line. “I need to keep her walking.”

“Allison-”

“Alright,” Isaac says. He saunters over to stand beside her.
Her father looks at them, sighs. “You’re wasting your time.”

“Seems like a worthwhile endeavor.” Isaac folds his arms behind his back. “Sir.”

Chris turns away. “Keep her moving.”

They do.

They start out in silence, only the treading of their feet and Phoenix’s labored breathing punctuating the quiet of the backside. Everyone else is asleep – from Byrns’ stable to Daehler’s, Maxwell to Marrero, hundreds of horses with heads hanging, knees locked, quiet. Even in the Argent barns, Rapier, Silveritis, and Clay – the three hell-raisers – sleep on. Isaac keeps his pace slow, ambling along with her and Phoenix, enough distance between them to show that he doesn’t think he has the right to be here. She wonders about how to fix that.

On lap twenty, she halts Phoenix to listen for gastrointestinal activity. There’s still nothing – hasn’t been since this afternoon, after lunch, when she started sweating and hyperventilating and tried to roll in her stall. Morell steps in, then, to give her a shot of sedative, and they start walking again to see if that helps.

Somewhere around lap thirty-two, Allison finds herself fiddling with the buckles of Phoenix’s blanket for the sake of something to do, and realizes Isaac must be even more bored, if not quite as distraught. “You don’t have to stick around. I know you’ve got work tomorrow.”

Isaac scuffs his feet in the dirt. “Yeah, well, at this point I’d only lie awake worrying about you, so better to be here.”

“Lunatic.” She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear, pulls the cuffs of her sweatshirt down over her knuckles. “Thank you,” she mumbles.

Isaac laughs. “For following you around after you told your fiancée to get out?”

“Shut up,” she says, because she’s going to have to apologize to Scott later, once Phoenix is out of danger. “You’re the only one who hasn’t tried to make me go home.”

“Because I’m clearly the only person smart enough to realize the futility of that.”

“And yet still dumb enough to walk with me.” Isaac’s hands are limp by his sides. She reaches out with her free hand, slots their fingers together. His palm is warm. “Thank you,” she says again.

His gaze flicks to hers. “Whatever you need.”

She forces a smile. “Careful about saying that. Never know what you might be signing yourself up for.”

Isaac huffs. “I’m not too worried – haven’t got much worth taking.” His fingers flex against hers, thumb stroking over the bones of her wrist. “It’ll be fine.”

“Since when are you an optimist?”

Lines of his face drawing tight around his eyes, Isaac glances from her to Phoenix, then ahead, at the purple-blue-gray shapes composing the backdrop of the backside in the middle of the night. “I don’t know,” he says. “Since you needed me to be.”

Allison doesn’t trip over her own feet, but she feels as though she should – like she should have a
more adequate response than continuing to walk on, walk on, walk on. Something prickles at her eyes, and the light spilling from the barn doors is streaky and watery on their next pass, but she says nothing. It takes too much effort to do more than move.

By lap forty, Gerard and Kate have gone to bed. On lap fifty, Morell administers mineral oil via a stomach tube to prevent gas from building up in Phoenix’s intestines, and then they go back to walking. One lap of the two barns is roughly a thousand feet. They’ve been walking for more than three hours.

“She took me a mile in fifty-seven seconds,” she tells Isaac at one point. “Fifty-seven flat. We joked that she would be one of those great mares, you know – Ruthless, Goldikova, Zenyatta. She’d been invincible.” Her throat closes up after that.

Isaac doesn’t let go of her hand.

On lap sixty-seven, Phoenix stops without warning, going to her knees. Allison screams “Dad!” like a child, but that doesn’t stop the filly from rolling, groaning in pain and kicking up a small dust cloud while she thrashes on the ground, even as Chris and Morell come running. None of them try to get close while she’s down – Phoenix wouldn’t recognize her own mother at this point – but Morell steps in to grab the dangling lead line as soon as she stops and scrambles back to her feet, eyes ringed with white and nostrils flared.

“We need to get her to the hospital,” Morell tells them. “She might have twisted her intestines –” Phoenix drops her head, groaning, and Morell tugs her forward to keep her from going down again “– and this has gone on for too long already. Even if we don’t operate, I need her in a more controlled environment.”

“Alright.” Chris is already moving. “I’ll fire up the van.”

Allison goes to follow him. “I’m coming with you.”

He doesn’t turn around: “No, Allison. You’ve been walking for four and a half hours, haven’t slept a wink, and the workouts are going to start in less than an hour. You need to go home and rest. You’re taking today off.”

“Like hell-”

“Allison.” Her father’s face is worn when he spins to face her – he’s exhausted. He’s been up all night, too. “We don’t have time for this. Go home or don’t; sleep or don’t – it’s your choice, but there is nothing you can do for her now, nothing that putting yourself through more stress will achieve. It’s out of our hands. I’ll call you as soon as there’s any news.” He turns on his heel, then, and stalks off. Morell follows with Phoenix. The filly’s head hangs low; she isn’t taking steps so much as shambling.

Allison does not go to her knees screaming, though the impulse is strong. She stands in place and watches them load up and drive off into the predawn black. There are still hours to go before sunrise.

Behind her, Isaac clears his throat. She’s not crying when she whips around, nor when he takes a hesitant step towards her, saying, “Allison?” with his hands open and half-extended as if to catch her. But when he does catch her – when she throws herself at him, locks both arms around his neck and buries her face in his throat – there are wet streaks on her face that smear into his shirt, and she maybe apologizes for that somewhere in there, maybe, but Isaac doesn’t even seem to notice; he doesn’t settle for hesitant half-touches or mumbled reassurances, but instead curls in around her,
solid and warm with a hand splayed over curve of her ribs and his cheek pressed into her hair. And he holds her for many minutes, holds her until she feels a little less fragile, a little more human, until she’s ashamed of the tears – which he never mocks her for, and that’s not like Isaac at all, to ignore weakness – and standing on her own doesn’t feel impossible anymore, until he’s tracing soothing designs on her back, breath steady against her ear while she slumps against him.

“Sorry about this,” she mumbles.

He turns his face to the side, brushes his mouth over her temple. “They called that ‘being human,’ last time I checked.”

She hiccups a laugh. “You’re being nice; I must be really fucked up.”

“You’re not fucked up,” he says. “C’mon. I’ll buy you breakfast.”

And she doesn’t want to let go of him, to face other people, but the track kitchen has just opened, so there’s no one there and they go find a table that’s wedged back into a corner by the heaters because her metabolism and blood sugar have both plummeted to the point where she’s shivering, and Isaac even strips off his sweatshirt and drapes it over her before going to get them food. He brings her decaf coffee, but also a plate piled high with eggs and bacon and pancakes, and she’s half-asleep by the time he gets back, with everything all fuzzy at the edges. He lets her rest her head against his shoulder and runs soothing fingers over her arm while she huddles into him. It’s nice.

Afterwards, she ignores him when he tries to make her go home. “Not until my dad calls,” she tells him.

“Alright,” he says. “But I gotta go to work.”

She doesn’t say don’t leave me because she has at least that much dignity left, but goes with “I’ll just lurk around your barn, then,” because that is clearly so much better.

Isaac just looks at her. “You’re about five seconds from falling asleep right there.”

“You got me decaf,” she mutters. “’S your fault.”

“There was a purpose to that,” he reminds her.

Fifteen minutes later she is curled up on a cot in a Hale tack room with Isaac’s sweatshirt still draped over her, plus the blankets, and the man himself is kneeling on the floor in front of her. “I’ll text Scott to tell him where you are,” he’s saying. “Get some rest.”

“Mmhm.” Her phone is in her jeans pocket, a reassuring weight at the top of her thigh. “Thank you, again.” She presses her face into the pillow.

Isaac clears his throat, readjusting the sweatshirt to cover her a bit more thoroughly. “Don’t even worry about it. Any of it.”

“Optimist.”

“When necessary.” He sits back, collects himself to rise. He looks like shit. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“M’kay.”
Isaac closes the door behind him when he exits, leaving her in cool, comforting, leather-scented darkness. Allison pulls her phone out to set on the mattress by her head – the better to hear it when it rings – and tugs the sweatshirt higher over her shoulders. It’s pale gray, and maybe it’s just her location or the craziness of the last few hours but, as she’s falling asleep, she thinks it smells a little bit like Scott after a shift at the clinic. There’s Isaac too, though, and a hundred horses.

***

Her father never calls her. She wakes up to light streaming in through the tack room’s open door and Stiles trying to sneak out carrying a saddle and bridle without disturbing her. Her phone is glowing with a text.

*From: Dad*

*No intestinal torsion. She’ll be fine.*

It’s eight in the morning. Allison goes back to sleep.
Savior

Chapter Notes

Should also be known as "that chapter where a demisexual tried to write about people who weren't on the asexuality spectrum".

Stiles is confused. There are strange women trolling around the backside giving out kisses, Isaac is running off a cup of coffee every hour and some sort of demonic speed, Allison is asleep in their tack room, and he has more questions than answers about a lot of things.

He goes after Derek first, grabbing him coffee during a lull in workouts as an excuse to pump him for information. “I have a question,” he says as they lean against the rail watching Dina breeze by on Ernest. “Or a request, anyway. Tell me about Yogi’s old owner.”

Derek clasps his hands together, thumbs on the stopwatch. “I only met the auctioneer, the agent from the sales barn. The owner was some claiming trainer who’d given up on him after six weeks.”

She hadn’t been the only owner, then. “Okay… what about the owners before that?”


“Alright, alright.” Stiles winces. “He’s been trucked around all over the place. Okay. Who had him for his first race?”

“The family that bred him.”

“How was…?”

Derek hold up the stopwatch as Ernest trots over. “Thirty-five and four. Go get on Skater, see how she goes for half a mile.”

“Can do.” Dina jumps down, and Stiles takes the reins automatically, sick sensation gathering in his stomach.

He dawdles until Dina is gone back to the barn, until Derek is giving him a stern eye. “Go get him cooled out.”

“She told me to give you a kiss,” Stiles blurts out. “Yogi’s first owner – first trainer. She’s been here-”


“Who is she?”

“Irrelevant. Laura needs Spitz tacked up to walk laps. Get going. We have two-year-olds to get into racing form.”

Stiles groans, “Come on.”
Derek gives him a sour look. “Kate Argent.”

“What?”

“Chris Argent’s sister. Get out of here.” Derek turns away, even though none of their horses are on the track. It takes Stiles a minute of staring at the stiff lines of his back before he picks the pieces of his brain out of the dirt and leads Ernest back to the barn, lost for words.

***

January tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth. Bush, Howard, Pig, Stoner. Allowance, allowance, San Fernando, San Gabriel. Second, third, second, first. The casualness of all this is somehow disconcerting to Stiles, who seems to hold dear the days when every race felt akin to a life-or-death situation. And he won’t. Stop. Talking about it.

Boyd’s the one who cuts him off mid-sentence: “There’s always a shift in focus during the winter. All the energy gets directed towards the babies, and the races… they’re important, but less. For a good reason. Don’t you have horses to tack up?” He pats Boss’ shoulder as Stiles slinks away, and the filly pins her ears. She’s on cross-ties, at the wrong angle to bite, but there’s a definite threat implied when she stomps a forefoot.

“Chill,” Isaac tells her, smoothing the saddlecloth over her spine. A light foam pad goes next, with the saddlecloth folded back over it, then a pommel pad as an extra layer of cushion, and then comes the saddle, settled carefully behind her withers. This time, Boss hikes up her left hind leg to lash out at air.

“Do me a favor,” Boyd says, “And stick around for a bit after you walk us out there.”

“Sure.” Isaac unclips the cross-ties one at a time to slip the martingale over Boss’ head, then reclops them onto the metal rings of her halter. She goes easily enough for that. As soon as one side of the girth is buckled, though, her ears go back. “Watch her.” He steps around to her other side, slips the girth through the largest loop of the martingale, and pulls it up to buckle into the saddle. Boss sucks in air, swelling her belly to limit how far the girth can be tightened.

“Smart girl,” Boyd murmurs. Isaac lets him step in to adjust the stirrups’ length while they wait; the filly has to breathe eventually. When she decompresses, he jerks the girth up another couple of holes, until it’s snug enough to keep the saddle in place. Boss sighs.

“Sorry, girlie.”

She dips her head when he removes the halter, and accepts the bridle without fanfare, though she still tongues at the bit curiously while Isaac fusses with the headstall to make sure it’s not pinching her or set incorrectly. The last thing anyone wants is a racehorse who’s afraid of their bridle. When he scratches behind her ear, she grunts and shoves her head into it, following him when he withdraws.

He smiles, calls her “Bossy,” and shoves her away so he can test the tightness of the noseband.

Derek comes over to boost Boyd into the saddle while Isaac keeps a firm hold on the reins, and then they’re on their way out to where the training track is laid within the inside rail of the turf course.
“Take her a mile,” Laura says when they reach her. “Slowest gallop you can manage, but I don’t want her cantering.”

Boyd nods, Isaac lets go, and Boss twists as she leaps up into the air. Boyd doesn’t fall so much as leap off of his own accord in favor of getting thrown – he even lands on his feet. Boss tosses another buck, then comes down, snorting, in almost exactly the same place she started. She gives them a huff and a flick of her tail.

“Cute,” says Boyd. “Real cute.” When Isaac tosses him up again, he gets a solid hold of the reins before letting all his weight settle onto her back. This time Boss’ front end goes up, up, up, until she’s wavering on her hind legs, trying to blow a challenge without opening her mouth. Boyd doesn’t tighten up on the reins any more, but lets them go slack as he leans forward. When Boss touches down again she stands perfectly still, ears pricked.

“Bitch,” Laura calls her.

Boss tosses her head, then very casually rocks back on her haunches and takes off. She gets five strides in before Boyd collects her back to a trot. Her hind end skips into the air at the restraint, but he keeps her moving, weight placed more towards her back end to stay seated.

Isaac laughs a bit, watching them. “Hell of a mare.”

“Isn’t she?” Laura’s smile is wicked.

***

Laura pulls Boyd and Erica aside after their workouts on Monday. “You know any decent riders who don’t have serious commitments,” she says, “tell them there’s an open spot on some green two-year-olds.”

The riders share a glance. “The new one? Isabel?”

Erica grins. “Read my mind.” She nods to Laura. “We got someone – older woman, fresh up from Florida. I’ll pass her a note.”

“Alright.” Laura taps her pen against the desk. “Thank you.”

***

Erica kicks her boots up on Lydia’s coffee table, mug of tea clasped between her palms. She directs a pointed look across the table at Allison. “So,” she says. “You’re getting married.”

“This is what we’re talking about on girls’ night? Really?” Lydia takes a seat on the couch next to Allison with her own mug.

Dina, next to Erica, snorts, and Jackie tucks her knees up against her chest in the armchair off to the side.
Erica smiles. “I’m just curious about why Isaac’s the one who wasted a night walking with you, if you’re about to tie the knot.”

“What, when I had a horse who we thought was going to die?”

“And you told your fiancée to fuck off. I’m just saying… nobody would blame you for taking a break…”

Jackie makes a frustrated noise. “That is bullshit, and I need alcohol if you’re going to do this. You’re lucky there’re no races tomorrow.”

“Agreed.” Lydia sets down her mug. “As the only person here who has actually slept with Isaac, I can tell you to stick with Scott. Much healthier.”

“Whoa, whoa. When did this happen? You and Isaac?” Dina sits up straighter, eyes flashing at Lydia, her grin wicked.

Jackie flaps a hand at her. “Old news. Years past its expiration date.”

“So what’s the deal, then? I’d fuck him; have you looked at the guy?”

“We’re not arguing about the kid’s attractiveness, the question is dropping Scott for him, which even I can say is an abysmal idea.” Jackie scrubs a hand through her short hair – a move that Erica has begun to associate with short-haired, high-strung, AMAB people. Stiles does it frequently. Isaac, too.

She turns back to Allison. “Had you even considered the idea?”

And Allison flushes. “I’m engaged.”

“Isaac’s a parasite,” Lydia says. “Don’t fuck him, even.”

Dina interjects with, “I’m sorry, Isaac’s a parasite? Everyone from the damn circuit’s a parasite!”

“You don’t need to tell me that.” Lydia fusses with her tea. “Trust me, we did our best to suck the life out of each other. Kid wasn’t even at the track yet – already busted up and broken. God knows I didn’t help. Stay away from him.”

“Damaged goods fucking damaged goods; that must have gone real well,” Jackie says dryly.

Lydia laughs. They’re all watching her now.

“What happened?” asks Allison. She’s got her brow all wrinkled up; not many people know the end of the story. Erica’s one of the few, Jackie’s another. There aren’t many women riding this high in the California racing circle; they tend to clump together.

“He was losing his grip, and I told him I had places to go and horses to ride, and if he ever felt like climbing out of the gutter, he could call me.” Lydia’s smile turns rueful. “Got a call… three years ago? Two and a half? Anyway, he called… wanting to know if I’d get on a young beast of Laura Hale’s. A big, wild fellow named BurymewhereIfall.” She shrugs. “And that was it.”

“Would you ever sleep with him again?” Erica asks.

“Now? No. No way.”

“That’d be like fucking a sibling now, I think,” Jackie says. “Would you sleep with-”
“Careful, careful – she’s the one living with Boyd.” Dina’s smile is all teeth.

“I was going to say Derek Hale…”

“Derek Hale is an emotional train wreck – he’d be even worse. At least Isaac’s capable of holding a conversation without looking like he wants to commit a massacre.”

“Yeah, well, his sister’s a frigid fucking bitch and he has to live with her, so that’s almost expected –”

“– Isaac doesn’t even have that excuse –”

“Everybody shut up,” Jackie snaps. “Next person who rags on a Hale’s attitude gets kicked in the face, unless you also lost your entire family before you turned twenty. What have any of you survived?”

The room goes silent. Allison is balled up in her corner of the couch; she’s barely spoken. She’s watching Lydia, who’s watching Jackie, who’s glowering at all of them.

Dina shifts uncomfortably. “I still think you should fuck Isaac.”

“Because that’s so healthy.”

Allison scowls. “Is nobody hearing me when I say I’m engaged?”

“Allison scowls. “If nobody hearing me when I say I’m engaged?”

“There’s no one in love, and you two are stupidly in love, and he is just dull enough not to realize that there’s some rampant sexual tension going between you and Isaac, but that’s not gonna last forever. Fuck Isaac once and get it over with. Do it in a tack room, even – or, wait, isn’t Scott leaving in a couple days? You can have a month or two of burning it out, then. No shame. Nobody would blame you-”

“I would,” say Jackie and Lydia as one.

“Because you’d totally do that to Boyd, right?” Allison’s color is high in her cheeks, but her voice is hard. Poor girl.

Erica grins. “Honey, I’d bring Boyd with me.”

***

Lydia drives Allison over to her apartment afterward, throws the car into park in front of the building. “Your palace awaits.”

Allison starts to get out, then pauses halfway through unbuckling. “I have a question.”

“Does it involve sleeping with Isaac?”

“No, I…” Allison blushes, then gets herself together. “Not quite.” Lydia waits while she fidgets. “What was he doing when you were together? You said he wasn’t at the track yet…”

“Oh.” Lydia can’t help a smirk. “Let me give you a hint. Think of Isaac’s mouth – ” the red returns “ – and his shoulders – ” Allison ducks her head “ – and… oh, I don’t know, that pretty neck of his,
and how he looks after one of your runs, all damp and flushed. You think about that, and you think about
an eighteen-year-old kid on his own in San Francisco, scrabbling to feed himself, and you tell me what you think he did.”

Allison takes a deep breath. “I’m having a hard time believing that you dated a hooker.”

Lydia shrugs. “If you’re going to have sex, might as well go with someone who knows what they’re doing.” She taps out a beat on the steering wheel. “Has Scott ever gone down on you?”

Allison recoils, one hand coming up to cover her mouth. “No, oh my god. That is…” She falters and trails off.

“Isaac’s great at it. You might not even have to ask.”

“I’m sorry; hold up a sec. Didn’t you just spend hours telling me not to sleep with Isaac?”

“I still think it’s a terrible idea,” Lydia says. “And I think you should stick with Scott, because he’s far healthier, more balanced, et cetera. But go stand in front of a mirror and think of Isaac, and you’ll see what I’ve been watching all night. Scott is a homemade cookie from the jar on the counter. Isaac’s the crack pipe hidden in the back of the sock drawer. Scott’s a lot better for you than Isaac, but you want to know what happens if you take a hit off that pipe, and sooner or later curiosity’s going to get the best of you.”

Allison doesn’t smile. “You really think he’s that bad.”

Lydia sighs. “Someday I may write an algorithm to decide if he was worse for me, or I for him. And maybe he is better than he once was – seven years is a long time. But I don’t think that much has changed. Stick with Scott.”

“Why can’t I have both?”

“What, Scott and Isaac?”

Allison is chewing on her lower lip. “Yeah.”

“I…” Lydia sits there and blinks and tries to process the image, exceedingly aware of the seconds ticking by. She clears her throat. “Why would you do that? One’s not enough?”

Swallowing, Allison says, “Why not? I didn’t see anyone arguing with Erica.”

“Erica’s idea of polyamory caps itself at a one-night stand. Neither you or Scott is that sort of person.”

“I never said one-night stand.”

“I’m well aware,” Lydia sighs. “I like Isaac. I like him a lot. He was broken when I found him, worse when I left, and if you don’t want him to drain every ounce of energy you have-”

“He spent four hours walking circles to nowhere in the middle of the night with me, and I never asked him to,” says Allison. “I don’t think he’s the same Isaac you had.”

“You think so?” Lydia shrugs. “Try and get something useful out of him, then.”

Allison flinches. “I don’t want anything from him; I want him happy.”

Lydia rolls her eyes. “Happy. Right. Good luck with that.”
Allison’s mouth tightens into a thin line, and she shakes her head. “We’re never going agree on this. I’ll see you tomorrow. Thanks for the ride, and the tea.” She climbs out, pulls her hood up against the gusting wind, and walks inside.

Driving back afterwards, Lydia stares out through the windshield, running her tongue over her teeth. “Isaac deserves to be happy,” she tells the bumper of the truck in front of her, and sighs. “Isaac… deserves to be happy.” She shrugs and turns up the radio, starts drumming on the steering wheel again as she waits for the light to go green.

***

Isabel Rodriguez arrives at the Hale barn on Thursday morning with her helmet dangling from one hand and her crop from the other. “I’m looking for Laura Hale,” she tells the redhead grazing a large black gelding outside.

The woman looks her up and down without remark. “Inside,” she says. “Last tack room on the right. Watch the asshole by the entrance.”

Isabel nods and walks in, giving a wide berth to the stallion who marks her passage by lunging to the front of his stall with ears pinned. A groom – this one a tall, wiry white man with freakish angles to his face – raises an eyebrow at her as he takes hold of the halter of the copper-colored colt in the aisle who keeps one rolling, white-rimmed eye on Isabel as she passes by.

The tack room door creaks when she opens it. Laura Hale is dark-haired, white-skinned, and hunched over a desk full of papers. She glances up, sits back. “You’re Isabel.”

“Rodriguez. Isabel Rodriguez.”

Hale clicks her tongue. “Out from Florida?”

“Gulfstream.”

“On Thoroughbreds?”

“Wasn’t barrel racing, if that’s the question. And no quarters.”

Hale doesn’t smile. “Why make the switch out west?”

“Got sick of the Southerners.”

A tiny twitch of the lips. “You know Jacqueline Vaca?”

“Name’s familiar; haven’t met her.”

“You share an opinion.” Hale turns her head, cracks her neck. “Isaac!”

Footsteps – the groom with the bizarre face pokes his head through the door. “You called?”

Hale points her pen at Isabel – “She’s getting on Booze with the next set. Tell Erica she’ll be on Guapa instead.” – then returns to addressing her. “Take him three furlongs breezing slow.”

Isabel nods, Isaac raps a “Sure thing, boss,” and she follows him out.
“Let me guess,” she says once the door is closed behind them. “She’s putting me on a horse who will try to kill me.”

“She’s trying to make you fuck up and rip his face off. Booze is scared of everything.”

“Like a spring two-year-old.”

“You better believe it.”

“Alright then.” Alright.

***

“I’m flying back to San Francisco tonight.”

“Weren’t you supposed to leave on Tuesday?”

“School doesn’t restart until the twentieth, and Deaton gave me an extra couple of days.”

“Ah. Good luck with school, then.”

“Thanks.” Scott scrubs his knuckles together. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

Isaac looks up, startled, while Scott fidgets senselessly. “You didn’t do anything.”

Scott blinks. “But I—”

“You didn’t. Don’t. It’s fine.”

“No it’s not,” Scott says, stubborn. “Even Allison says you guys have stopped running together –” Isaac’s eyes spark “ – and we’re, you know.” He stops, throws his hands wide. “You’re our friend.” He sighs. “And I know we haven’t really been together so much lately, but it’s gonna be weird to not have you or Allison around, so, you know.” He shrugs. “I’m gonna miss you. You’re sure everything’s fine?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Isaac says. “I’m just fucked up. Makes everything harder than it needs to be.” He gives a half-smile. “Sorry.”

“No be. You shouldn’t have to be.” And Scott watches as Isaac gets that slightly crazed look in his eyes – the one he has, sometimes, when he doesn’t know how to do what he wants. It only lasts a second.

“Idiot.”

“You know that, originally, ‘idiot’ only meant unusual, right? Not stupid?”

“Really now.” Isaac’s tone has shifted to a dry sort of amusement.

Scott glances away, towards the rows of saddles lining the wall; his eyes snag on a familiar blotch
of color slung over one of the empty racks. “Is that my sweatshirt?”

“I… don’t know?” Isaac’s voice hitches at the end to turn the statement into a question.

Leaning over, Scott snags the sweatshirt – it is his; he’d thought he’d lost it somewhere at Golden Gate Fields. Figures. “I’ve been missing this for ages – should’ve known you’d stolen it.”

“Yeah, well, maybe that wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t leave everything everywhere.” Isaac smirks when Scott sticks out his tongue. “Don’t act like that’s not true.”

“Shut up. Does this even fit you? You’re like a million miles taller than me.”

When Isaac rolls his eyes and holds out a hand, Scott tosses him the sweatshirt and watches him shrug it on. He is taller than Scott, but also has smaller shoulders, so it does fit him, actually – even hangs a little loose if he leaves it unzipped. He raises an eyebrow at Scott and cocks his head to the side, throat bare down to the dips of his collarbones.

Scott swallows. “Do you have something against normal necklines on your shirts?”

The eyebrow arches higher. “Does this bother you?”

Scott looks away. “It’s fine. Do what you want. That was weird of me.”

“It bothers you.”

Scott forces a laugh. “I’m not gonna, like, rag on you about your propriety or anything, dude, you just… forget it. I’m gonna make this weird. You look good. That’s all. That’s it.”

“No,” Isaac says. “It’s not.” He’s smiling, but not like he’s won something. More like he’s comforting mourners at a funeral.

Scott sighs in frustration. “Don’t look at me like that, I’m gonna…” He stops. “I am an idiot.”

“Allison,” Isaac rasps.

“I’m gonna talk to her, I’m gonna-”

“Don’t leave her.”

“I’m not.” Scott kisses him again. “I want… can I be greedy? Can I have both of you?”

Isaac grabs his chin, holds him still, bites at his mouth. “Anything,” he says, while Scott gasps. “Anything you want.”
Scott makes a strangled noise that Isaac swallows greedily before letting him go. They’re both panting. “I’ve gotta talk to Allison,” Scott says between breaths. “And when you guys come back to San Fran, we’re gonna figure this out. All of us.”

Isaac whines, “That’s April.”

“I know, I-”

Isaac’s kissing him again, spinning them around, pressing him back into the wall. “I’m not that patient,” he growls, slipping a leg between Scott’s and more or less short-circuiting his brain in the process.

“I know, I know, Isaac, stop.”

Isaac freezes.

Reaching up, Scott kisses him. “I don’t want to screw this up. I’m sorry. I want this to work, it’s all crazy…”

“I kissed you.” Isaac sounds like he’s dying. “Before we came down, that night when we all went out and got drunk, I kissed you in your apartment, and after I thought I’d ruined everything.”

“That’s why…?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s why.” Isaac swipes a thumb over his cheek, presses his face into Scott’s neck. “You’re insane.”

“I know.”

“And you’ve got a plane to catch.”

“I know.” Scott pets at Isaac’s hair, carding his fingers through it.

“And however easy you think this is gonna be, something’s gonna get fucked up.”

“I know, I know this feels too easy, I know, but we’re gonna work it out, okay? We’ve got this. Can you trust me on that one?”

Isaac sighs. “I trust you.”

Scott’s heart damn near explodes out of his chest. “And you call me crazy.”

“Crazy and fucked up – we’re a hell of a pair. Plus Allison.”

“Yeah… yeah.” Isaac’s kissing him again. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Plane.”

“Yeah.”


“I’m gonna miss you.”

“Stupid boy.”

“Yep.” Scott tugs on the sweatshirt, goes up on his toes to kiss Isaac. “You gonna keep wearing
this?”

“Of course.”

“Great. I’m gonna figure this out. We’re gonna figure this out. Promise.”

***

Stiles sees Scott off with a wave and a hug and a slap on the back, tells him to say hi to Deaton, take care of himself, and eat something designed for human digestion at least once a week. He also obligingly stands there whistling and doesn’t eavesdrop when Scott draws Allison aside – they hold hands and murmur to each other with serious expression, but then Allison kisses him and bounces on the balls of her feet and they come back to Stiles with freshly-laundered smiles.

They bid Scott a final farewell as he passes through security, then Allison drives Stiles back to the track and drops him by the bunkhouse, and they head off to their respective beds, the better to resume the daily grind on Saturday morning.

He’s so goddamn tired.

***

“We need to talk about Isaac.”

Allison doesn’t even know what that is supposed to mean. She lies on her empty bed in her empty apartment and tries to empty out her head. Isaac, she decides, is going to be the death of all of them, and she feels a vicious sort of satisfaction when she slides a hand down the front of her jeans, imagines what he and Scott would look like together, tangles of limbs, his sharpness abutted by Scott’s gentleness, arches her spine; Isaac’s hands on her thighs, his mouth on her, all these things she could have, Lydia says she could have, she wants.

“I don’t want anything from him,” she’d said. Not anything, just him. Him and Scott.

She gasps into the dark.
For Heaven Hath Fury

Chapter Notes

This chapter brought to you despite by laptop's best attempts to commit suicide and bring about the loss of my various notes, spreadsheets, and plot points for this 'verse.

“MexicanJumpingBean? Really?”

“Says the woman rubbing BurymewhereIfall.”

Lydia shrugs as she tucks the program away in her back pocket. “You named him, not me.”

“This is true.” Laura leans against the rail and pulls a cigarette from a pack and lights it. She gives Lydia a warning glare. “Don’t tell Derek.”

“I wasn’t aware you had a habit.”

“Exactly.” Laura takes a long drag, then plucks out the cigarette and spits into the dirt. “Hate the taste. I just need one… once in a blue moon.”

“So you’re waiting another two-point-seven years until your next one, then?”

“Shut up,” Laura says as the horses explode from the gate.

This is only an allowance race – for a sixty-five-thousand-dollar purse, but still only an allowance. Four-year-olds and up, a mile and a sixteenth – a tad more than once around the mile-long dirt track – with a field of six. Every horse except Bury is brown, so it’s a tide of varying shades of mud that whips past the grandstand for the first time.

Bury is tucked in on the flank of the leader – Eddie’s on him, where Lydia should be, and a flash of jealousy distracts her as they hit the clubhouse turn. Eddie was on Bury when she fell, too, and of course she doesn’t blame him, doesn’t know who stepped on her spine, or who was guiding them, would certainly never think it was intentional; there are few direct rivalries between jockeys. Even this high in the game they tend to leave the bitterness to the trainers. But she was only on Sevas Tra because Laura wanted to give Eddie a test run before sending him out in a stakes, and while there are plenty of better horses in the world, Lydia is fond of Bury. He was the first Hale horse she ever rode, after all. You only get to say that once.

Did she ever thank Isaac for that call? She must have. Sometime, somewhere, over the years. It’s been too long to remember. She hopes she did.

“Shit,” says Laura.

Lydia snaps back to the present to see Bury thundering down the stretch – where did the race go? – with the #1 horse pressing his case along the inside. #1. MexicanJumpingBean.

“Shit,” says Lydia.

The horses whip past the wire while the crowd shrieks, but the two women are at the wrong angle
to see who was in front at the point of call.

“Photo,” Laura mutters. “I hate photos.” She hops the rail beside Lydia and five other grooms while the field circles in on itself past the finish line, breaking to canter, to trot, to walk, with a great deal of unseen exertion on the part of the jockeys. Lydia has been in those boots many, many times before.

Eddie is flushed with excitement, gibbering cheerfully when they reach Bury: “We were in front, I’m telling you, boss, in front by a head, maybe – he was at his throat, you know? But we were up there, I promise.” He stabs a finger at the toteboard. “Watch, watch-”

A photo snaps onto the screen, and it’s a remarkably easy call, in the end, thank god. MexicanJumpingBean was at Bury’s throat latch and another stride might have taken him past, but the race was a mile and a sixteenth, not a mile and a sixteenth plus one stride. Interesting how that’s all it would take to change the outcome, sometimes. One stride. Maybe less. The half-second bobbing of a head, enough to stick a different nose in front.

You’re drifting, Lydia.

Laura is drawing Bury’s reins over his head and handing them to her with a small smile. The cigarette has disappeared. When? “You doing alright?” she asks.

“Of course.” Lydia pats Bury’s shoulder. “Let’s go, big boy. The winner’s circle is waiting for you.”

***

“C’mon, Stilinski, you’ve got two horses running today. Get your ass up so we can go.”

Stiles shoves his head under the pillow. “How are you even in here again?”

“You keep forgetting to lock the door. C’mon, it’s almost five. We’ve got feeding and workouts, and the San Pedro goes off at one.” For a moment, all is quiet, but then Isaac drags the blankets off Stiles’ bed and snatches away his pillow. “You want coffee? I’ll tell Derek he’s doing the coffee run today, but we gotta go. Ask Lydia for Sudafed or DayQuil or whatever the fuck you need once we’re at the barn. Let’s go.”

Stiles groans. He’s stuffed up and his head is throbbing and the last thing he wants to do is wrestle a bridle onto Spitz or muck out a stall, but Isaac’s pulled out the half-desperate, I’m-a-starving-puppy-with-nowhere-to-go eyes on him, the asshole, so he mutters a couple of curses that would make his father’s brow furrow and collects himself enough to drag on jeans.

In the background of getting dressed, he’s semi-conscious of Isaac talking to someone on the phone, no smile, and he hangs up with a clipped “see you in five” when Stiles finishes tugging on his boots. “You ready?”

“No,” says Stiles. “But let’s go.”

Isaac laughs like the asshat that he is. “No worries, little princess. Derek’s gonna have coffee waiting for you.” When Stiles punches him in the stomach, he only laughs louder.

***

“Two today, two on the twenty-sixth, and then we’re done until February. You doing alright, Stiles?”
“I’m fine.” Stiles coughs into his elbow. “No, seriously, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“You sound like you have tuberculosis.”

“Great.” He coughs again – deep, wracking coughs that come out of his chest. “It’s just a cold; I’m gonna run over to Walgreens later and get some Vitamin C tablets or something.”

Laura pauses with a hand on Ernest’s throatlatch. “The Santa Ynez post time is three-thirty. Get Derek to drive you between races.”

“No, it’s fine, seriously, I can wal-” Laura’s already got her phone out. “…Or you can make all my decisions for me. Alright then. Hey, here comes Jackie. Hi Jackie!”

“You look like death warmed over, Stilinski – stay the fuck away from me. I’ll cut your nuts off if you get me sick.”

“Hi. Thanks for the warm greeting. Good luck in the race and stuff. Do you want a leg up, or will being touched by the diseased cause you to whither up and die?”

Jackie whacks him on the leg with her crop, making Ernest startle and jump. “Get me on the damn horse, Stilinski, but don’t you dare sneeze on me.”

***

Derek drives Stiles to the Walgreens because Laura tells him to, not because Stiles is hunched up and sniffing for the entire trip, too tired to lament or praise Ernest’s placing (Jack’s On Trial won, with Golden Lining in second) or call Derek a Sourwolf when he drags him to the car in the first place.

(He never misses a chance to call Derek Sourwolf.)

Derek makes Stiles list off his symptoms, loads him up with DayQuil and NyQuil and cough syrup and demands to know if he’s had a flu shot this year – he hasn’t, and Derek hasn’t either, but he chastens Stiles for his lack of caution anyway as they’re driving back to the track.

Slaw comes out of the gate for the Santa Ynez with a firecracker under her tail, goes straight to the front, and leads from gate to wire with a red Argent filly – the aptly-named Red N Raw – eating her dust the whole way. Stiles cheers as loudly as anyone, and he beams like a groupie with a rockstar in the winner’s circle, but Derek finds him puking his guts out in the bathroom half an hour after they get back to the barn.

Derek pulls him to his feet as gently as he can manage and tells him to get out of there – go back to his room, take some drugs, have some hot tea or something, and get a full night’s sleep.

“The horses,” Stiles protests.

Shaking his head, Derek nudges Stiles in front of him into the aisle. “I’ll take care of them. Get out of here; go to sleep.”

Stiles doesn’t seem have the energy to protest after that, so he does what he’s told, and when he comes in the next morning he claims to have passed out for almost twelve hours straight. He isn’t fully recovered on Wednesday, either, but he’s better – reports that he can breathe through his nose a solid forty percent of the time, so, you know, progress.

That’s all that counts.
The new exercise rider scares the shit out of Stiles. She’s squat, thick-waisted with slightly Mongolian features – according to Jackie, that’s indicative of South American indigenous ancestry, though Boyd claims that she’s Cuban. She’s older than any of them, somewhere in her forties, steady enough to keep Booze at a consistent twelve-second clip, and she carries an aura of ‘I know what I’m doing better than you do’ for all that she barely speaks to any of them.

Isabel. Her name is Isabel Rodriguez. Sometimes she’s on Spitz, sometimes she’s on Guapa – she’s never been on Boss because, as Laura says, “I need the bitch trained, not broken” – when the two-year-olds get walked with riders on their backs, and when they do their long, slow gallops on the training track. Not asking for any real speed – not yet – but building them up. Seeing how they go. It’s a study of horses.

Guapa goes out with the dignity of a Grand Prix jumper: she gives exactly what’s asked of her, no more, no less. It’s too early for Laura to say if that’ll cause problems later on, if she’ll be another Skater. (The black filly doesn’t seem to have any drive to win. When they sent her out beside Mick she kept pace the whole time, but didn’t fight at all when he insisted on shoving his nose in front.)

Comparatively, Boss is more interested in asserting her dominance over Boyd than running. It doesn’t matter if they’re walking or galloping, period, because as soon as he asks her for anything she goes up and down, bucking and spinning all around, resisting forward movement as much as possible. She was even worse for Erica, who has a shorter temper and gave in to the impulse to fight her; Boyd sits on her back with loose reins and deep heels and waits until she gets tired of leaping around. “Bury was the same,” Laura says. “That’s why we gelded him. If she’s anything like him, she’ll find her niche in racing.”

And then there’s Spitz, who is all swagger when on his own but immediately quiets in the presence of horses with dominant qualities, like Stoner, or Bury, who gets used a lot as a modified lead pony when they take the babies out as a group. He hates Mick with a passion, but all it takes is Schizo (Babysitter No. 2) blowing a warning for him to fall into place behind her. He sort of reminds Stiles of a young boy with a crush on his teacher who’s trying to show off and get attention by beating up all the littler kids. Telling him that bullying won’t get him anywhere is useless.

Stiles feels like a horse psychologist. He should become a trainer.

Laura wakes up on Saturday with a fire raging in her throat and elfin warhammers pounding behind her eyes. She gurgles and rolls from the bed, catches herself on the dresser, then the corner of her desk, then lurches into the bathroom, where she bangs her elbow on the doorframe before stumbling sideways into the counter. She goes to her knees in front of the toilet, retches – a horrible noise, half-gagging, half-sobbing – for a long string of agonized moments until her entire torso feels hollow. She collapses with her cheek pressed into the chilled porcelain seat, and that’s how Derek finds her an indeterminate amount of time later.

“Laura,” he says, flicking on the light. “Shit, Laura.”

There is rustling as Derek crouches beside her. Splaying a hand between her shoulder blades, he rubs in small circles, soothing. “You’re not coming in today.”

“Fuck you,” she rasps. “Two races.”
“They’ll run whether you’re there or not. Jackie and Dina know Schizo and Mick better than anyone else. It’ll all be fine; get back in bed.” When she mutters a grudging assent, he grips her under her elbows, lifting her back to her feet as gently as possible, and he catches her when she staggers into him. “Let’s go, big sis,” he murmurs, and she manages a smile at the endearment.

It hurts. Everything hurts. Not until she has been settled under the covers can she speak again: “Water. Jug from the fridge.”

“Meds?”

“Ibuprofen. Tylenol.” She beings to cough, harder with each bout, until Derek skids the trashcan across the floor to her bedside just in time for her to vomit into it. After, she folds in on herself to become a shivering ball under the blankets.

Derek sets the jug on her nightstand beside a half-full cup of water and several tables. “Water. Meds.” He leans over to grab her phone from the desk, pokes at it, sets it on the edge of the nightstand. “Phone is on. I’ll come back every chance I get – after the workouts, lunch, between races – do you want anything? Soup?”

“No.” She tugs the sheet up to her chin. “You’re late.”

“I know.” He ducks off for a moment – water runs – before returning with a damp washcloth. He kisses her forehead, then folds the cloth over it. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

Nodding, Laura shuts her eyes. “Go watch my horses run, Der.” She listens to his footsteps fade, to the door opening and closing, and relishes momentarily in the silence broken only by the pitter-patter of rain ticking off the window panes.

(Shit, it’s raining. Shit.)

***

Derek keeps a hand on Schizo’s shoulder while the mare prances in place under the sprinkling rain in the saddling paddock. Two horses over, Silveritis is getting her girth buckled, and on the far side of her, Marilyn Marrero is testing Scudder’s noseband.

Jackie taps his knee with her crop. “Any last confessions, Hale?”

He grunts. “Don’t lose. Don’t die.”

“Not quite what I was looking for, but alright,” she says, buckling on her helmet. “I can do that.”

“See, it’s all this positive energy that keeps me working hard at my job.” Isaac cracks his gum, hands Derek the lead shank, and moves around him to toss Jackie up into the saddle. “Good luck, dollbaby.”

“Go fuck yourself, snotnose.” She kicks him in the head without any heat, and Derek clears his throat as Isaac’s fending off the attacking foot.

Isaac steps away. “Post time. Safe ride.”

Derek wishes Laura were here. As he leads Schizo out to the gap in the rail, Jackie pokes her crop between his shoulder blades. “Deep breaths, Hale. This old girl knows what she’s doing.” She smiles at him when he unclips the lead line. “Now get your ass up to the owner’s box and cheer for
Smiling back isn’t an option, but he clasps her knee in momentary gratitude while she guides Schizo past him to strike out into a trot over the dirt. The mare’s coat is a burnished, coppery red even with the sun hidden behind drizzling clouds while her neck is arched, her step springy, sinews bunching and flexing easily. Only a moment behind her is Silveritis, deceptively petite and pretty with her musculature streamlined into more aerodynamic angles. Ingando – a dark bay Kentucky-bred mare well clear of sixteen hands – follows.

The seconds stretch and stretch and stretch; the #9 horse, chestnut Hell Come Handily, has started her warmup before Derek musters the willpower to turn his face towards the grandstand.

***

The field of the Santa Monica is four-plus for fillies and mares only, a crew of veterans capable of battling to the bitter end – not that there’s much battling that can be done over seven furlongs of dirt, even for a $250,000 purse.

They start from the chute on the far side of the track, the grandstand almost invisible through the drizzle that has persisted since the morning. Silveritis loads quietly to stand at attention as Victoria grabs a fistful of mane in preparation. She’s gathering herself; while the other mares fidget and flinch, all her energy is directed forward, intent, ears pinpricked to await the bell. As soon as it sounds, she surges up and out – as if another half-second of waiting would have sent her crashing through the steel doors.

The pack breaks in a wave behind her. There are eight other horses in the field, but for those first few seconds as they burn across the dirt, the Argent mare runs alone. Victoria keeps low over her neck to minimize drag while they pound along the backstretch. Over the loudspeakers their order is rattled off: Silveritis, Scudder, Voz de Paz, Hell Come Handily, Schizophrenia, Octuple Threat, and Ingando, with Alcatraz Aficionado and Hawthorn both trailing.

The crowd’s cheers – if there are any – get swallowed by the rain.

Sneaking a glance under her arm, Victoria tightens up on the reins a notch to encourage Silveritis to save herself for the stretch; Scudder is a length back on the outside and not going anywhere – she seems to be having trouble with the slick turf – and they and Octuple Threat have Voz de Paz boxed on the rail, for all that she’s trying to sneak up, while Schizophrenia runs out, clear of the pack.

So they go into the turn. The announcer broadcasts Hawthorn’s early attempt to gain ground when the pack swings wide, but Silveritis leans into the rail to lead on. It’s hurtling into the stretch that the grandstand comes to its feet.

Victoria loosens her grip on the reins, striking once with the whip to urge Silveritis onward, and looks back again to see the dried blood of Schizophrenia’s coat, a mud-splattered chestnut pressing at her hip, both mares bearing down past Voz de Paz as she tires, Schizophrenia in particular a synergy of muscle and bone bulling through the ricocheting molecules of water in the manner of a great white shark. Victoria blinks and they’re level with Scudder, passing her, coming up on Silveritis with Jacqueline Vaca’s eyes focused on some far distant point, coming past now, hooves brutalizing the dirt, the muck, the mud, flinging it up with each stride.

Digging in with her left heel, Victoria shoves Silveritis out far enough that her shoulder abuts Schizophrenia’s, saddle and stirrup and Victoria’s leg hooking against Vaca’s to shorten Schizophrenia’s stride as she tries to avoid tripping.
Vaca utters half a shout under the cheers. Outside of them, Hell Come Handily stretches in the manner of foxhunters from olden oil paintings; at the point of call, it is she who carries the lead.

Victoria waits until they’re a full stride past the finish line before inching Silveritis again. She ignores Vaca’s snarl to stand straight up in her stirrups, easing Silveritis back while the mare snorts and jerks her head to chomp at the bit. She knows she’s lost, of course, but better a second than a third – better a willing concession to an outside party than an obvious loss to an old enemy. And indeed, that is how it lines up: Hell Come Handily first, Silveritis second by a half-length, and Schizophrenia third by a nose, with Alcatraz Aficionado and Scudder fourth and fifth by some lengths. Voz de Paz lapsed to sixth.

As they high-step a trot back towards Chris and Gerard, Victoria beams.

***

Roughly half an hour after the Santa Monica, the Crystal Waters Stakes field bursts from the gate into the stretch of Santa Anita’s turf course. Dina sits chilly aboard Mick, letting him take up position behind a gelding named Grade Four (out of Scottie Maxwell’s barn) at the rear of the five-horse pack led by The Sryga. Their positions remain relatively unchanged until the end of the backstretch, when Dina steps on the gas to let Mick start picking up positions. At the top of the stretch they level with The Sryga while Grade Four tears up the inside track for the final sprint, but Mick sticks out his nose and catapults his narrow frame into the lead.

He prances over to Lydia after, swagger in his stride while he stomps his feet and tosses his head and acts like he didn’t just run a mile and an eighth in a minute and forty-seven seconds and would happily do it again.

Dina jumps down with a grin. “Not a bad run, eh?”

“No,” Lydia says. “Not bad at all.” She doesn’t smile.

***

A jockey with the experience of Jacqueline Vaca knows better than make excuses for herself, for her ride, for any of it, ever. For her to stop by the Hale barn as they’re closing up for the night isn’t necessarily unusual, but the tight-drawn rage on her face and the stiffness of her shoulders is. Lydia is buckling on Guapa’s blankets two stalls over from Schizo, so she hears Jackie slide out the deadbolt to let herself into the box.

“Hey girl,” she says when Schizo turns from her hay net to whicker. “How you doing?” Her hand comes up, stroking the dull red curve of Schizo’s neck. “That was my fault today – shoulda let you run more, I know, you wanted to; you knew better than me. I’m sorry.” She presses her face into Schizo’s neck, shoulders bowed, her hand tangled in that red, red mane.” Schizo stands perfectly still, and even Boss, in the stall between her and Guapa, has her ears pricked and her eyes on the jockey.

Lydia goes back to adjusting Guapa’s sheet; finishing up the clasps in the front, she knuckles the filly’s crest as a reward for her patience.

“Fuck Argent,” she hears “You’re a good girl. You knew she wouldn’t let us by – that was my fuck-up.”

The door creaks when Lydia opens it, and he puts her full weight into slamming the deadbolt. The echo rings through the barn.
“You alright, Lyds?”

“Don’t call me that,” she says. “I’m fine. You wanna grab some burgers? Stiles?”

Stiles pokes his head from Pig’s stall, far down at the other end of the barn. “You paying?”

“In your dreams.”

“Fuck yourself, Stilinski.” Isaac snaps his gum as he locks up the main tack room. “I’ll do burgers.” His head turns. “Jackie?”

Lydia stiffens.

“Fuck no,” drifts from Schizo’s stall. “Some of us have to make weight tomorrow.”

“Alright.” Isaac steps across the aisle. “I’ll stop by with a thing of curly fries, then? Later?”

“Pendejo.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Lydia turns to busy herself with collecting her belongings as soon as she hears Schizo’s stall door open. Isaac keeps his words too soft to eavesdrop on, but within a minute there’s a solid thunk of flesh-on-flesh succeeded by his cackle.

Jackie’s voice sounds like her throat’s been scraped raw: “You’re gonna get yourself hurt one of these days, Lahey. Better watch out.”

***

Laura mutes the television as Derek walks in. She’s lying on the couch with a plate of dry toast untouched on the coffee table, wrapped in a fluffy purple robe, face half-shoved into a pillow from her bed, hair damp. On the arm of the couch by her head is a glass of water. “Hey,” she says.

“Hey.” He shoves his hip against the door to close it enough for the deadbolt to slide home. “How you feeling?”

“Dead tired. No, actually, I take that back. I’m post-mortem, and I’ve done nothing but sit and sleep all day.”

“You’ve got a lot of sleep to catch up on, and you’re sick.”

Laura makes a hoarse, disgruntled noise. “Don’t patronize me, Der.”

That is most definitely not a smirk tugging at his mouth. “You sound like Stiles.”

“No, Stiles sounds like me. Older. Seniority.”

“Alright,” he acquiesces, hanging his jacket over the armchair to dry. “You’re rubbing off on Stiles.”

“Much better.” Laura shuts her eyes, tips her chin back. “Jackie kicking herself senseless over the Santa Monica?”

“What do you think?”
Laura’s brow furrows. “Of course she is. I should have been there.”

“We won the Crystal Waters.”

“That wasn’t the one that mattered. Too late now.”

Derek comes around the back of the couch to set a hand on her head. “You needed the rest.” The commercial ends; trackside coverage from Japan kicks on. “What’re you watching this for?”

“I finished Game of Thrones, and there’s no new Shameless on until tomorrow.” She reaches one arm up to poke him in the ribs. “You should make me chicken noodle soup.”

“Think your stomach can take it?”

“Only one way to find out.”

“Alright, boss.” Derek bends down to kiss her hair while she groans and tries to shove him away, and he drags a blanket over her sweatpant-clad legs before heading into the kitchen.

***

Hale doesn’t come in on Sunday or Monday either. Her brother still turns up (and that’s how Isabel thinks of him: as the brother, or simply Derek) but he doesn’t have the natural dominance of his sister, and the grooms and riders hold a different sort of recognition for him – it’s more casual; he’s a coworker instead of an employer. And he’s got a soft spot for that Stiles kid, the one who rides his scrappy piece of claimer nonsense.

Isabel has seen a lot of horses, but it takes divine intervention to make a horse with that hellish combination of short legs, high withers, long neck and back, bony spine, narrow chest… the thing – not horse, thing – is a train wreck, and she can’t even pretend to be surprised when she hears the story of his first race from a woman at the trackside.

There’s one morning that she’s breezing that snippy filly they call Sass when she gets to watch The Yogimeister split off the rail at the half-mile pole and corkscrew across the track with his chin knocking against his knees and his hind end flipping into the air. Stiles hits the dirt, rolls himself into a ball to avoid the slashing hooves, and that’s all Isabel sees as Sass swings by.

When they circle around later (after five eighths in fifty-eight flat) Stiles is back in the saddle, but sitting, cantering the wrong way like he’s warming up again, reins short to hold Yogi’s head up and straight. The geldings ears are pinned and he’s swishing his tail, skittering around every few steps, but he’s behaving, more or less. Still ugly as all Hell.

Isabel doesn’t ask why they’ve kept the thing, because they’re not asking her to get on him, and most of their other horses are of semi-decent quality. The fillies and mares are all good runners – except that one two-year-old, the gray they call Boss, the one who likes to fight – and most of the males respond well to a firm and steady hand. Besides, the money’s good. That’s one thing she’s never going to complain about.

***

After Isaac starts sneezing on Tuesday, Stiles isn’t surprised when his phone gets tampered with so that his alarm goes off the next morning at two-thirty instead of four. He takes one look at the clock, spits a non-parental-approved curse, resets the alarm for the correct time, then buries himself under his blankets again. When he arrives at the barn two hours later, Lydia is sniffling and red-nosed, glaring daggers in his direction.
“You gotta blame Isaac,” he tells her. “He’s the most recently infect-” someone punches him in the kidneys “-holy crap ow that was – Jackie!”

“Put a sock in it Stilinski.” She brushes past him to head towards where Isaac is unlocking the feed stall, complexion pale and looking sulky.

“What’re you doing here this early? It’s hours before workouts.”

“Couldn’t sleep; was up all night coughing.” She sighs, glancing around. “I’ll do a caffeine run. Who – not Stiles – needs coffee?”

“Oh come on.”

“I need my handlers moving.” Laura’s face is drawn and pale, but she insisted on coming in yesterday, and she seems steady enough, walking in beside Derek. “We have hungry horses waiting. Feed tubs: go. And grab me a triple-shot espresso, will you, Jackie?”

“Lyd?”

“-Ia. Black.”

“Same, Der? Alright. Lahey? Usual?”

Isaac sticks his head back out of the feed room. “Please?”

“Blow me. Back in five.” She punches Stiles again – in the shoulder this time – before stalking out, tugging her sweatshirt’s hood up to ward off the predawn chill.

Derek watches her go, then casually steps over to Stiles. “How do you like your coffee again?” He keeps his eyes straight ahead as he says it, never even flicking to the side, but there is no way he misses Stiles’ sputter or the rattle of Ernest’s empty feed tub hitting the ground.

***

San Francisco hasn’t changed since Scott’s trip to Hollywood, but Golden Gate Fields seems empty by comparison, Deaton’s office unbearably quiet between patients. He intentionally doesn’t call Allison for almost two weeks because he doesn’t know how to put off the conversation about Isaac. When she calls him, late on a Thursday night, he almost chokes between inhaling bites of a burrito when he sees the caller ID.

“Hey,” he says, picking up.

She sniffs, voice thick. “Hey.”

“Everything alright?”

“Yeah – just a cold. Stiles had it first – everyone’s been getting sick, nevermind that it’s in the sixties all day, every day. Laura Hale got the flu or something and was out for three days.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah.” Allison coughs from deep in her chest. “We beat them while she was out – kinda. Silveritis got second in the Santa Monica; that bloody bay – Schizophrenia – was third. Some British filly won: Hell Come Handily.”

Scott musters a laugh. “Do I say ‘congrats’ or ‘that sucks’?”
“Congrats’ll do. Mom’s been really smug about it, you know, so…yeah.”

“Congratulations, then.”

“Thanks.” She giggles, then sniffs. “I’m tired.”

“You sound tired. Should probably go to bed, then.”

Allison sighs. “I know.” She clears her throat. “You said we needed to talk about Isaac-”

“Uh, yeah, all of-”

“-don’t want this to-”

“-I meant face-to-” Scott stops. “What was that?”

“I don’t want this to get weird,” Allison repeats. “Wherever we go with this, we can’t let other people… we gotta go carefully with this.”

“I know,” Scott says. “I love you.”

Allison’s laugh is wet. “I love you, too. I’m gonna go to bed now – I just wanted to say that.”

“Alright. Sleep tight.”

“Sure thing. Bye.”

“Bye.” The line cuts out and Scott sets his phone down, staring at the remnants of his burrito. “I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing,” he tells it.
On February second, three different Hale horses go out for three different races: Howard in a $58,000 allowance at two-thirty, Sass in the Strub Stakes at four, and Booze in the Arcadia Stakes a half-hour after that. With two horses set to be running one right after the other and his cold running him ragged, Isaac is miserable. Lydia only has Howard to worry about, but she isn’t much better on the health scale. Stiles keeps his head down and stays out of the way all morning, and when a van rolls up to the barn after the end of workouts, he’s the one with an empty stall ready and waiting.

The colt that prances down the ramp is a liver chestnut with thin lines of white encircling all four coronets, average in height and wiry in build. “Meet Centrifuge,” Laura tells Stiles. “He’s one of Gray’s stock – was supposed to come over in January, but they decided to give his old trainer one last run with him.”

“Didn’t work out, I guess.”

“Not so much.” She hands him the lead. “He’s zero for five – placed once and showed twice. Not much stamina, but good over turf.” She pats the colt’s shoulder. “We’ll find a niche for him.”

Centrifuge bobs his head, nudging Stiles’ hands until he pets his nose. “Charmer, are you? Let’s go, boy,” he says, clucking encouragement as when he steps through the barn doors. The colt pricks his ears and follows, alert but docile as he follows Stiles to his new home next to Spitz.

Boyd is loitering there, watching. “Isn’t a centrifuge something scientists use for chemistry – for separating stuff out of mixtures?”

Stiles shrugs. “Dude, I left lab science behind in high school, so whatever you’re telling me, I’m just gonna smile and nod. If Bill Nye didn’t teach it, assume I have no idea.” He unclips the shank. “Who?”

“Bill Nye the Science Guy. Didn’t you ever watch those videos?”

Boyd gives him a confused look. “No?”

“Might have been before your time,” interjects Erica from over by Pig’s stall. “Dude made a bunch of sciencey lesson-video things in the mid-nineties that they started showing to middle school science classes to keep the kids interested. Weird dude.”

“Awesome dude,” Stiles protests. “It worked, after all.”

Erica snorts. “He was a weird fucking dude.” She points a warning figure at Stiles. “I can see where your head is going. If you try to name that colt after him, Stilinski, we’re gonna have a problem.”

Stiles closes the stall door behind himself and waits until she isn’t looking to stick his tongue out and flip her off.

***

The Whittemores’ colt doesn’t arrive until Wednesday the sixth, and it’s another chestnut, a sleek and pretty fellow a few shades lighter than Centrifuge, but with a whole mess of white all over:
he’s got a wide blaze, front socks, and rear stockings – one of which stretches well past his hock on up to his stifle. Two years old, he’s cocky and studdish already, but Lydia tucks him into line with a snap of the shank and a stern tone of voice.

“What’s his name?” Stiles asks as the trailer drives off.

Lydia shrugs, reeling the colt in to check his halter. “He’s got a nameplate.” Her voice falters. “Jackson W.”

“That’s not gonna be a nightmare with a jockey named Jackie, clearly.” He laughs and runs a hand along the colt’s barrel, grinning. “It’s like they wanted him to be human or something.”

“Stiles, shut up.” Isaac sounds like he’s been gargling glass shards.

“What? What’d I do?”

Isaac ignores him. “I can take him if you want, Lyds; I’ve got three empty stalls.”

“No, it’s fine.” Lydia shortens her hold on the lead. “It’s just a name.”

“Dub,” Isaac says. “We can just call him Dub. From the ‘W’.”

The smile Lydia pulls out is razor-sharp. “That’s cute. And we’ll censor all coverage of car crashes and the Whittemores too, won’t we, and also put out a bulletin telling the announcers not to call his name during races, right?” She marches the colt inside before any of them can formulate a response.

Stiles looks from Isaac to Laura to Derek. “Someone care to explain?”

The Hales both shrug while Isaac sighs and scrubs a hand through his hair. “You don’t want to know,” he tells Stiles. “Just forget you saw any of that – and don’t push her about it. You’ll sleep better at night.”

***

Lydia doesn’t ever directly react to the Whittemores’ taste in horse names, but she’s in a fairly volatile state, so Isaac feels justified in his decision to spend his lunch break far away from the Hale barn and her randomized bursts of obsessive control. He swings by the track kitchen for a sandwich, grabs a cup of French onion soup as an afterthought, and finds a quiet spot by the rail to eat and watch them harrow the track before the first race.

Allison finds him halfway through his grilled ham-and-cheese; she flops down next to him on the tiny patch of grass at the head of the stretch with a smile and a sniffle. “Hey.”

“Hey. You’re sick?”

She wrinkles her nose. “A little, yeah.”

He hands her the soup. “Me too. Blame Stiles – he had it first.”

“Nice.” Allison scoops up a spoonful of broth. “Horrible day to be sick.” She has a point: the sun is bright in a cloudless sky, it’s warm enough for them both to be in T-shirts, and the congestion in Isaac’s throat makes him feel more than a bit resentful.

He nibbles on his sandwich. “Better this than the nightmare Laura came down with.”
“True, true.” When he glances at Allison, she’s watching him, soup cup in her hands. “We don’t run together anymore.”

“We’re sick.”

“Not until recently. It’s been weeks.” She puts the cup down to touch his arm, and though he sees it coming, he still flinches at the contact. “You talked to Scott?”

“Yeah.” He flushes. “A bit.”

Her smile is soft. “This is all sorts of crazy, isn’t it? Whatever this-”

“If I try to have a conversation about this right now,” Isaac says, “I’m either gonna throw up or run.” He’s shaking, he realizes, and that alone scares him; his reflexes are all tied into knots, and how did Scott manage to make this seem simple?

Allison lifts her hand to curl it over his shoulder. “We’re going out for dinner tonight,” she tells him. “Chinese or Thai or whatever the hell, and you’ll tell me about the new Hale horses and I’ll bitch about my family, and we’ll each act like we know we have the better horses, and we’ll leave all the screwy, scary talks for when we get back to San Francisco and Scott, okay?”

I knew you were too good for me. “Okay,” he says.

“Good. Let me try some of that sandwich.”

Isaac blinks and falters at the sudden shift, then gets himself in order. “Give me back the soup, then.”

“Fine.” Allison hands it over and snipes in to grab the sandwich out of his lap. Her cackle turns the heads of the men dragging harrows over the track as they drive by.

***

Back when there was a chance she might stay small enough to be a jockey, Allison got rigorously trained into thinking on her feet and anticipating every possible scenario while aboard a horse. Lately, she’s been using those skills more with Isaac, who has more similarities to a racehorse than he’d probably care to know about. He’s skittish and wary, similar to an abused animal in that he’s hellbent on keeping people happy – and, honestly, you don’t wind up with someone like Lydia for any period of time unless you can read her well enough to not even have to ask “How high?” when she says “Jump.” Allison thinks he’s maybe more than a bit relieved to have her calling shots in their crazy mess of a relationship, because if someone’s giving orders, that’s a goal that can be seen and met, right?

She’s going to give herself a headache.

They go out for Americanized Chinese, for wonton soup and fried rice and General Tso’s chicken and cheap American beer, and by the time they’re wincing sympathetically over the Whittemores’ horse-naming foul it feels as though they’re back to the good old repressed-taboo-sexual-tension days, which is somehow better than the rampant confusion of late. She doesn’t know what happened between Scott and Isaac just before Scott left, but it seems reasonable to assume that there was a breaching of some dam, a crossing of some line. It makes for excellent mental imagery.

Her apartment is on the way to the bus stop that’ll get Isaac back to the track, so he walks her there, chatting about the upcoming San Vicente (“Slaw’s gonna steamroll right over you guys again.” “In your dreams, asshole – have you seen Clay lately?” “Yeah, eating her dirt.”).
They stop in front of her door, and she turns to look him in the eye. “I have coffee.”

A combination of pain and amusement flickers across his face. “Allison…”

“Allison.”

His expression sharpens, tilting. “Allison.”

“Allison.” Playful, now.

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

Isaac.

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Allison.”

“Isaaaaaac.” She smiles as sweetly as she can manage and dumps every ounce of sugar available into the syllables.

Isaac rolls his eyes, grumbling “For fuck’s sake,” and doesn’t resist at all when she yanks him against her and kisses him. He tastes like the cheap little peppermints the restaurant had in a bowl on the counter, and he’s soft in the most unexpected places, the lines of his torso imminently breakable, the skin over his jugular delicate and fluttering when she brushes it with her thumb. His movements are less fragile: only a moment of consideration before he pins her to the wall of the building, hands tracing sweeps over her face, her jaw, seemingly torn between drinking her in and anticipating the signal to withdraw, but leaning heavily towards the former.

She drags him in closer. His breath is hot in her mouth, and she wants to haul him inside, into her bed, and never let him leave. A terrible idea. While they separate to breathe, Isaac going no further than to rest his forehead against hers, she cards a hand into his hair. “I think we need a ground rule,” she murmurs, voice croaky and hoarse. “No sex until we talk to Scott.”

Isaac hiccups a laugh and pulls back – he doesn’t move far, but it feels like miles, and she is terrifically glad that he maintains his grip on the junction of her neck and shoulder. “You’ve talked to Lydia, haven’t you?” he asks.

“Of course,” she says. “You know we all hang out.”

“No.” Isaac’s grin is openly reminiscent of a hyena’s and she wants to taste it again. “You’ve talked to Lydia about me.”

Against her will, Allison blushed. “Yes.”

The grin grows. “And…”

“That was girl talk – it’s none of your business.”

“Yeah, okay.” Isaac exaggerates his survey of their surroundings as if checking for non-existent observers, then leans in again, close, mouth an inch from her ear. “There’s a long list of things I can do, plenty I don’t mind doing, and a couple -” his thumb touches her pulse point “- that I rather enjoy doing.”
Allison sighs. “I said that for your benefit, not mine.” When Isaac chuckles, she turns his chin towards her and kisses him again. “You should come inside,” she murmurs. “I’m done with sucking face out where the whole world can see.”

He does, though it takes a while to get up there. There’s a lot of slow making out that happens in the elevator, and it continues against the door once they reach her apartment, with plenty of warm hands sneaking underneath shirts to drift over skin, the careful pressure of mouths and teeth slipping towards something harsher and more desperate. It’s an easy trip down a slippery slope, but she still gasps openly when Isaac pushes off the door to back her against the couch.

His palms skate up her thighs. “Still sure?”

“I’m trying to make this easier for you.”

“Says the woman who told me to come inside. Pun intended.”

Allison grunts pulls away, resting her weight more fully against the couch. “Definitely no sex if that’s your argument.”

He hums deep in his chest, beams, and kisses her again until her stance loosens and she’s hooking her fingers into his waistband on impulse, and then he breaks away to give her a bemused look.

“You’re making this very confusing.”

“You’re making this very difficult.”

“It’s a gift.”

“No shit.”

More dumb grins, more licking their flavor off his teeth, the hands on her tightening and lifting until she’s actually sitting on the back of the couch – and when did Isaac get muscles? When did he grow out of being a lightweight pile of bones and skin who watched Scott tend to an injured horse like there was magic happening before his eyes? She has to tug at the neckline of his shirt, has to go for the dips of his collarbones, has to mark him up, confirm that he’s still flesh and blood, and he groans without restraint as she drags her teeth over the thin skin.

“Jesus.” And he lets her do it, skimming touches over her ribs and tilting his chin up. “What happened to no sex?”

“Not sex. ‘S a hickey.” Isaac groans again while she smirks into his neck. “Down, boy.”

“A little trickier than that,” he grumbles.

She pulls him down to her again.

They do not, in fact, have sex on the couch or against a wall or door or any of the other typical settings of fantasies – what they do is migrate onto the couch properly over a span of nudging and holding and tilting and curving; Isaac’s under her on his back; there’s still as much physical contact as possible, but the tone is softer now, sweeter. She could spend an eternity here; Isaac feels solid and steady, a thousand miles from this afternoon, and he’s warm and she’s tired, and there’s a slow slide of minutes ticking by until she falls asleep on top of him.

***

At 4:30 a.m. the backlight of her watch snaps on as it commences a high-pitched beeping that jerks
them both awake.

“Shit.” Allison squeezes her eyes shut again and buries her face in Isaac’s shoulder. “Do you need
a shower?”

He huffs, running a hand down her spine. “I’ll live. You got a coffeemaker?”

“Yeah – it’s automatic. Should be done already.” She shoves herself up off the couch.

“Toothbrush?”

“Keep one at the barn.” Isaac sits up after her, leans over to tuck a flyaway strand of hair behind
her ear. “A razor, too.”

Allison wrinkles her nose. “You wanna steal one of the shirts Scott left, just to have something
clean?”

Isaac hesitates. “Sure.”

She did laundry yesterday and sometimes sleeps in Scott’s shirts, so it’s no hardship to dig one out
before jumping in the shower. She rushes through the motions of washing her hair, incredibly
aware of Isaac’s presence just a few feet away, and of how simple it would be to drag him in here,
how easily he’d come along, what she’d do with him in an enclosed space. He’s probably shirtless
right now.

Allison turns down the hot water the last few seconds before she steps out, trying to flush the
arousal from her system.

In the kitchen, Isaac is leaning against her counter, drinking her coffee from one of her mugs,
wearing one of her boyfriend’s shirts, smiling at her when she walks in. “Hey.” It’s still dark
outside.

She ducks her head, going for her own cup. “Hey. Sorry about the falling asleep on you last night
thing.”

“Not a problem.” Isaac lingers at the corner of her vision. “Thanks for not kicking me out.”

“I invited you in.” You dummy.

“Yeah, well, you coulda if you wanted to.”

“Isaac.” Allison looks up at him, and his smile has broken into its half-hooked imitation. “I like
having you here,” she says.

Isaac tilts his head to one side, argument flickering in his expression, then steps into her space and
kisses her.

Allison arches her spine, gripping the edge of the counter, stretching up into the motion while
Isaac’s presence closes around her, his stubble rasping against her skin, the taste of coffee in both
their mouths. She could stay here; she’d love to stay here. When Isaac sets their bodies flush
together, she shudders. His palm – burning hot – settles over her waist.

“We should get to the track,” he murmurs.

“We should.” She tugs at his shirt to get at her hickey from last night. “In a minute. I drive fast.”

***
It’s a twenty-minute drive from Allison’s apartment to Santa Anita, a trip of empty streets and intersections under a purpled predawn sky lit from below by light pollution. A quiet journey.

Isaac sprawls in shotgun, running his tongue over his teeth as corner after building after signpost rolls by. “Lydia’s gonna have a riot,” he mutters as soon as the idea strikes home.

“You think?”

“I know.”

“Great.” Allison picks with blunt fingernails at a bit of stitching on the steering wheel. “No prizes for guessing what the first question’ll be, there.”

Isaac laughs. “Can’t blame a woman for knowing what she likes.”

“Lydia’s on her own level, I think. Like, I can’t imagine she’s, you know…” Allison falters, sneaking a glance at him when they pause at a stop sign. “She can’t be easy to get going.”

Isaac smirks and props one elbow up on the windowsill, slumping a little in his seat, thoroughly enjoying the stutter of her gaze. “Lydia is incredibly difficult to get off. Yawn-yawn-get-moving-because-I’m-falling-asleep difficult.”

“I sense some subtle bragging in there.”

He snorts. “I said difficult, not impossible.”

“Bragging.”

Cue a shrug. “Yeah, maybe a bit.” When he turns his head, Allison goes back to staring straight ahead, her hands tight on the wheel. “Wanna know the record?”

“You timed yourself?”

“She did. Jockeys, you know?”

“Don’t even get me started,” Allison grumbles. “Ten minutes.”

“Six and a half.”

She sucks in a breath. “Either you’re lying, or she’s not as hard as you’re making her sound.”

“Or I’m just that good.” When Allison snorts, he grins. “I have the funniest feeling,” he says, “that no one’s ever gone down on you.”

“I have the funniest feeling that you’re about to get slapped.”

“But am I right?” Allison’s face is a bright, bright red; she keeps her mouth firmly shut. “I’m gonna go with a ‘yes’.”

“Shut up.”

Isaac cocks his head to the side, studying her expression. Men act like women are mystical, incoherent creatures whose wants must be discerned from wretchedly unintelligible symbols wrought invisibly in the air, and that is such bullshit. You listen and you watch, and when she reflexively arches into your touch, that’s a solid fucking bet that you’re doing something right. Lydia took some figuring out, some serious observation, a whole lot of experimenting – and even
then, she never was a simple creature, but he could understand her. By comparison, Allison is… straightforward.

“Three minutes,” he says.

“What?”

“I’m estimating: three minutes for you.”

“For what – when you…” She stops. “You’re not that good.”

“Says she of nil experience. Care to test that theory?”

“Allison.”

“Allison.” And she’s shifting a bit in her seat now, uncomfortable, restless, and he’s grinning at the windshield as the rear wall of the grandstand comes into view. “You’re gonna get off in a bathroom at the first chance you get, aren’t you?”

“Shut up.”

Isaac opens his mouth to snark back, then changes his mind and closes it. He could reach over right now, set his hand against her, give her something to rock into, right here in the car. He could do it – a solid grip, the crook of a finger; it’ll do wonders. And that’s a step up from getting off alone in some gritty bathroom, surely. “Want some help with that?”

“Allison. No.”


Allison makes a strangled sound. “Pretentious-”

“That wasn’t an insult, Al.”

She takes a deep, shaky breath. “The second I stop driving, I’m gonna punch you.”

“Okay.” He slings an arm over the back of her seat. “Have at me.”

***

She doesn’t punch Isaac. She seriously contemplates the idea, but she doesn’t. Instead, she shoves him up against her car as soon as he gets out and slots a leg between his, mussels up his hair and kisses him until her mouth stings with the force of it. He’s hard and looks like a demented wreck by the time she backs away, smirking, and he seems torn between amusement and exasperation.

“Is there a diagnosable condition involving sadism?” he asks while she skips ahead of him towards the barns.

She calls back over her shoulder: “Dunno, but I’m sure Laura Hale has it, and you’ll find out all about it if you’re any later.” It’s 5:13, so he may not be job-in-danger late, but he’s not exactly on time, either. “Better get moving, Lahey.”

“I resent you,” he mumbles, and just for that Allison keeps on skipping, so he has to trot to catch up with her.
She detours to the Hale barn to stay with him – she doesn’t have to be anywhere for a few more minutes – and, as they linger before it, thinks about kissing him right here, where Lydia’s liable to walk right out and see them. That notion gets derailed by a “Look who decided to show up!” and Stiles emerging from a stall with a pair of feed buckets, his expression jumping from irritated to startled to confused to shocked. “What are you doing here?” he demands.

“Saying… hi? Hi, Stiles.” She waves at him.

Lydia pokes her head from a different stall, gives her and Isaac a once-over, smirks at Allison in her best I-told-you-so fashion, and withdraws. Laura Hale is nowhere in sight, but Derek spares exactly enough of his attention to raise an eyebrow at them before he goes back to studying his clipboard.

Meanwhile, Stiles is clearly doing a great deal of mental math – too much – and has his mouth hanging open, and Allison needs to redirect his train of thought now-

“There are Thoroughbreds waiting to be fed.” Derek flips to a new sheet. “Isaac, I need Stoner fed and tacked and ready to go out with the first set.”

Isaac’s hand touches Allison’s shoulder before he moves away. “Okay,” he says. “No problem.”

***

“You know Allison and Scott are engaged, right? Like, going-to-get-married-this-summer engaged? About-to-officially-combine-their-lives engaged? In-an-exclusive-relationship engaged?”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Isaac says.

“Then give me an idea? Because you don’t turn up late, and you don’t ever come with Allison attached, and definitely not looking like you were just necking like seventh-graders-”

“Go away, Stiles.” Isaac jerks on the lead shank when Stoner tries to crank his head around to bite him. “I have work to do.”

***

“So… Wanna explain what the deal is with you and Isaac?”

Allison gives him a flat look over her sandwich. “It’s a long, long story.”

“I’ve got half an hour. Condense it.”

“No.” She tears off another bite. “Scram, Stiles.”

“Should I be calling Scott?”

“If you want. Knock yourself out.”

“I’ll just-” Stiles blinks. “Wait, seriously? Is that, like, reverse psychology? Do you actually not want me to call him? Are you trying to trick me into not doing it by making me think that I don’t need to?”

Allison shuts her eyes and sighs. “Stiles, I’m sick, I’m tired, and I barely know what’s going on right now. Call Scott if you want, if it makes you feel better. I don’t care. I have to go ride.”

***
“Hey, do you know what’s up with Isaac and Allison?”

“Um,” Scott says. “No?”

“Oh, really? Because Isaac turned up late today, and he walked in with Allison, and there may or may not have been hickeys, and it’s all way too casual to make any sense, and I don’t want to be the guy who brings the bad news to break you two up or whatever, but I’m pretty sure there’s something of the non-PG-rated variety going on there…”

“Stiles, breathe.”

“I’m breathing! I’m breathing and I’m freaking out! How are you – how are you not freaking out?”

“Because it’s okay,” Scott says.

“What is okay? Do you know what’s going on?”

“Kind of. Don’t worry about it.”

“Because…”

“It’s a long story.”

“That is the exact same thing Allison said, and this time I don’t have half an hour free to try to make you tell me about it. Come on, Scott, I thought we were bros. Best bros. Bros-forever bros.”

“We don’t see each other that much anymore; it’s been ages since we hung out,” Scott points out, voice soft, and Stiles flinches away from his phone a little. “I trust Allison, alright? And I trust Isaac.”

Stiles makes himself recover enough to say “Seriously questioning your judgment right now, dude.”

“I know, but – you gotta believe me on this one. It’s all gonna be fine.”

“I… don’t know about that, buddy. But, hey, it’s your relationship’s funeral.”

***

“Scott is insane. I’m pretty sure Allison and Isaac are fucking around half-behind his back, and he’s just… okay with it? Like, I think he knows, kind of, because last time I checked they had a pretty honest relationship, but it wasn’t that sort of open…”

When Derek looks up, Stiles is watching with beleaguered intensity while Derek tallies workout times. “What?”

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Your friends are having a threesome,” he says, and goes back to what he was doing.

“Woah, woah, how do you get from Allison cheating on Scott to threesome?”

“Logic.”

“What? How?”
“From what you’ve said, it sound like your friends have clearly fumbled themselves into a triad relationship and are figuring it out on their own.”

“It’s a long-distance threesome, if that’s what it is,” says Stiles. “And it’s not just my friends: your part-time vet’s assistant is in this mess. Also Isaac. Isaac is involved in this. Our Isaac.”

“Isaac can take care of himself.” Derek furrows his brow. “Why are you even out here?”

“For Nye. Also nobody involved is giving me straight answers and Lydia just rolled her eyes at me when I tried to bring it up and Laura has better things to do than talk about cross-state racetrack intrigue.”

“And I don’t?”

“No,” Stiles snips. “You clearly don’t, since you ‘logicked’ that there’s a threesome going on instead of slightly-unconventional cheating.”

“And you are clearly brainless, since you didn’t.”

“That hurt,” Stiles protests, splaying a hand over his heart. “You wound me with your lack of courtesy, Sir Sourwolf.”

Derek squeezes his eyes shut. “Go get on Yogi.”

“I breezed him five furlongs yesterday – a minute solid, remember? And he has that race next Thursday: the six-and-a-half-furlong allowance.”

“Then go tack up Spitz.”

“I thought I was supposed to bring in Nye – who’s about to finish his warmup, by the way. They’re not so very far away from the three-fourths pole over there.”

“They’re only going half a mile. Erica can walk him back to the barn.”

“But…”

“Do you want to get on Spitz?”


“Then go tack him up for Isabel to go out with the next set.”

“But Isaac-”

“Stiles.”

“- Allison’s an Argent.”

Derek sinks his teeth into his bottom lip for a second before he responds: “I got that already. Go bring me Spitz.”

“I resent you,” Stiles grumbles, but he nevertheless hunches his shoulders and slinks off in the direction of the barn.

***
“Fuck.” Allison has her head thrown back, spine arched almost completely off the bed, sheets clenched in her fists.

Isaac lifts his chin, grinning. “What’d I tell you?”

“The clock’s still running,” she rasps, and bites down a groan when his mouth touches her again, open and hot, lighting wildfires along her nerve endings; she’s got stubble burn on the inside of her thighs that is going to make riding tomorrow hell, but Isaac’s her here and now, using his tongue like a fucking weapon, and she slams awake with the force of a car wreck.

“Fuck.” She shoves her face into her pillow and rolls over, across the empty bed, groping under the sheets in a warped fog. She comes hard, shuddering, sweat-soaked and panting in the black.

“Fuck, Isaac.” Climbing up, stumbling to the bathroom, splashing cold water onto her face and neck and pretending she isn’t wondering what she’d look like to him right now – for all that she can see his wicked grin curving in her mind.

She checks her phone – 4:15.

She texts You’re an asshole to him without explanation, then hops into the shower. It’s early enough that she has time to get herself off again quickly and still blow-dry her hair after, so she does both things and feels quite satisfied about it. At four-fifty she’s in the kitchen with her coffee when her phone buzzes.

I bet I know what you did this morning. Sweet dreams?

“I resent you,” she mumbles, pouring herself another cup before tapping out You’ll never know.
But We Are Many

They come out of the gate for the San Marcos from halfway up the hillside turf course; Stoner is sandwiched between the hindquarters of Leocardian and Powerful Mars while Hand And A Half bounds clear, and Grade Four breaks a step late but makes the most of his disadvantage by cutting to the rail behind a black East Coast mare named Shalt. Dina tries to let Stoner find his stride as they hurtle down into the stretch, but the stallion won’t settle – he changes leads three times before they hit the clubhouse turn, keeps trying to veer into Powerful Mars. “Now is not the time to turn into a stud colt,” she snarls at him, and they battle it out through the turn until she caves and takes him down a notch, speed-wise, in the name of conserving his energy and not having him climb up the mare’s ass.

They level with Grade Four, seven or eight lengths off the pace, before Stoner gets his testosterone under control, so Dina settles in to hope for the best. The stallion isn’t a closer like McGatsby, who can stalk behind a field for a mile before slamming on the gas into the stretch; Stoner runs best when flanking the leaders, menacing them, pushing at them until his moment comes to sail clear on by, having browbeaten them into tiring early. It’s a speed vs. stamina debate, and if there is one thing Stoner has in spades, it’s stamina. Holding him back before asking him to run? Well, they’ll have to see how it goes.

The field strings itself out along the backstretch; Hand And A Half has played a devious game by blazing the first quarter (twenty-one flat) and then cutting back to a clip that sets the clock for the half mile at :46.6, having opened up enough of a lead that Powerful Mars and Leocardian are duking it out as if battling for first, while Shalt occupies Stoner’s traditional position of harrying Leocardian’s inside flank.

Two lengths off of Shalt, Grade Four lopes along parallel to Stoner: two brown horses trailing the field. Grade Four is a lighter seal brown, with a snip and rear socks instead of a stripe and front ones, and a better-defined build for all that they’re both an inch under sixteen hands in height, but to novices, they’re practically identical.

Clark Mack is riding Grade Four. Dina tries to ignore that – she knows all these jockeys anyway, except for Shalt’s. Victoria Argent is obviously leading the charge with Hand And A Half, Jorge got himself the spot aboard Powerful Mars, and Ben Sull has Leocardian again. The politics of the situation are irrelevant: they’re all out here to win. There just happens to be more bitterness between one pair of jockeys than the rest.

She’s preparing to haul Stoner outside into the final turn when a hole opens between horses as Shalt plasters herself against the rail to save more ground. Split-second decisions being an integral part of her job description, Dina doesn’t think before loosening the reins, letting Stoner surge up towards the gap. Clark Mack and Grade Four move with them, though, and they aren’t cemented against the rail – Stoner ends up semi-corralled behind Leocardian, almost clipping his heels, and it’s into the turn they go as Grade Four starts to inch by while Shalt moves up.

Dina is furious, mostly with herself, but also with Mack, and a spurt of viciousness keeps her from hauling Stoner up again to take him around – by far the safer move – and instead she leans in, nudging his weight over until two-thirds of his chest is clear of Leocardian with the stretch spreading out before them and Hand And A Half raging far ahead. Don’t fuck with my horses, she thinks.

Powerful Mars swaps her leads, drifting out, and Leocardian falls those last few inches to the right.
Dina lets the reins go slack and presses her face down into Stoner’s mane. “Take us home, boy.”

The seven-year-old stallion with a race record of thirteen wins in twenty-five starts who comes down Santa Anita’s turf stretch for the San Marcos is not the same horse who saw four birthdays come and go before breaking his maiden, nor even the same one who blew away the field of the Citation Handicap, or who battled with Hand And A Half to the bitter end for the Hollywood Turf Cup. He is not a sprinter and never has been, but he gives a damnable good impression of one as he propels his skinny body between Leocardian and Shalt, neck stretching out into the wind. Dina rocks with each stride, hunched low and not even bothering to go for the whip – he wouldn’t feel it, wouldn’t care. He’s already giving her everything. From the grandstand, a cascade of screams hollows out the world into a shell of grass and horseflesh, and Hand And A Half is a long, long way ahead as she rolls smoothly towards her victory, hindquarters flexing and bunching and her tale a grandiose orange flag, albeit one that neither billows nor snaps in the wind, and her hooves gouge wounds in the dirt; she’s bigger than him, bulkier than him, and they’ve already covered more than a mile and an eighth – there would be no shame in saying “you’ve done enough” and holding on for second.

With five strides remaining, Stoner is still three lengths back; with two, his nose is level with the flowing end of Hand And A Half’s tail. When one forty-foot leap is all that’s left, Dina holds her breath while Stoner gathers himself and uncoils, stretching over an impossible chasm of turf and time, and touches down on the far side of the wire with his head at the mare’s shoulder, mouth gaping open and ears pinned, and he flashes by her on the next upbeat, half a second too late. Lost.

The official time is 1:59 flat, Dina sees, once she’s brought him down to a manageable pace. Average, by the measure of champions – by the standard of Secretariat and Ruffian and all the other Hall-of-Famers. For Hand And A Half, an impressive time, but nothing earth-shattering. For the seven-year-old son of nothing, ten furlongs in less than two minutes on a turf course full of turns is… something else. Something that has his coat slick with sweat and his chest heaving, and his neck arched up and feet high-stepping like he’s all kinds of ready to go out and run the race again.

“You done good, boy.” She shoves her crop into her boot and abandons all pretense, scrubbing her knuckles over the length of his neck. “You done amazing.”

***

Of course it’s a Monday when Stiles gets kicked in the chest.

He’s clipping Yogi, because his coat may be fluffy and stupidly soft to the touch, but it’s also suffocating for a Thoroughbred to run in seventy-degree weather with a winter coat. So Stiles is clipping him, as all the other horses have been clipped (including Boss and, dude, he did not envy Isaac at all on that one, because even Spitz didn’t actively try to eat the razor whenever it touched him). But Yogi… well, he’s fine at first. Relieved, it seems, to be losing the insulating weight of his coat. And then Stiles moves up his neck to cut the bridle path behind his ears, and he flinches – not away, but up, up, onto his hind legs, and Stiles barely has time to register any of this before an elephant decides to sit on his chest and, hey, when did the overheads get moved off the ceiling?

“Selits,” someone says. “Selits this? Yako uoy?”

“English,” he mumbles. The light blurs; he can’t breathe; he’s underwater. He needs to sit down. His legs are already bent?

Derek takes Stiles to the hospital; in the meantime, Lydia and Isaac double-team Yogi to finish the clipping job, Isaac keeping him busy with a hand on his halter and a twitch on his lip while she mans the razor. They get through without any other disastrous incidents, then stick him back in his stall and wait for news. No races today.

At four, Laura’s cellphone rings: Stiles will be in the hospital for “a day or two” because he has a concussion and at least one cracked rib, but his life isn’t in danger.

Lydia demands to be put on the phone: “I have no problem with taking care of Pig and Slaw and even that brat of a two-year-old for a couple of days, but God help you, Hale, I had better be getting a serious raise if you want me near your lunatic after today.”

For a few seconds there is only the distant beeping of hospital machines to be heard over the line. “I’ll look after Yogi while Stiles is out,” Derek says. “Don’t worry about him.”

“Good.” She hangs up.

“I’ll take Spitz and Nye,” Isaac offers. “You want Ernest or should I take him, too?”

Lydia shakes her head, brushing by him on her way out of the office. “I’ve got him; I just don’t want to deal with that piece of shit in the back.”

Derek is sitting beside Stiles’ bed when Lydia and Isaac march into the hospital room. When she tells him “Time for a walk, Hale,” he gives her a disgruntled look, but Stiles flaps a hand at him and tells him to get out, go find some curly fries and bring them back; hey Isaac, tell me how Yogi’s doing.

Lydia takes Derek by the arm and draws him out into the hallway while Isaac parks himself in the now-empty chair. The door clicks shut behind them as they pace along. “How is he?”

“Chatty as ever. His thoughts get fuzzy every so often, but they’re more worried about his ribs. Three cracked, they’ve figured out, so he’ll need to take it easy to keep them from separating and potentially puncturing organs. They’re keeping him for at least twenty-four hours but he should be fine so long as nothing unusual pops up on the scans.”

“Has anyone called his father?”

Derek makes a sour face. “Not yet.” Lydia waits. “Isaac lived-”

“No.”

Derek stops.

“Isaac’s not his boss, you are. And it was your horse who kicked the kid.”

Derek opens his mouth, closes it, then restarts. “His father isn’t listed as his emergency contact –
the McCall kid is.”

“You’re joking.” And yet Derek’s expression is the exact opposite of humorous. “What kind of—”

“I asked him about it; he said his father had enough on his plate already and didn’t need anything else to worry about. Said to let him be.”

“If his son’s in the hospital, he should know.”

“Really.” Derek raises an eyebrow. “Did your parents ever hear about your back?”

Lydia huffs. “My parents and I are not on speaking terms,” she says. (They never could get behind her refusal to return to school, or her acquired adrenaline addiction.) “Stiles still goes home for Christmas. Find a way to get in contact with his dad, call him, and tell him his son is a dumb fool who’s lucky to be alive.”

“Why? So he can sit home and worry to no end?”

“No – she he can maybe kick some sense into Stiles before this stupid racing addiction eats him alive. Thoroughbred racing is collapsing, Derek.” And suddenly she’s off, spitting facts at him as they come to mind, the pretentious fool. “Do you know how many racehorses die each week in this country? Twenty-four. Twelve hundred per year. Do you know many trainers get caught doping every year? Also twelve hundred. Do you know how many tracks have closed since they started persecuting dopers? Do you know how many how many trainers have dropped out of the game since then – how many riders have been out of mounts? How many grooms? I jockeyed for a lot of people, Hale, and I know you up at the top think everything’s fine, with your two and three and four-hundred-thousand-dollar purses, but the bottom is falling out of racing, and I’m almost shocked that the man who won’t get rid of a charity-case claimer hasn’t realized that. What Stiles has right now is barely more than a dead-end job in an industry with Stage Four ovarian cancer. People like you and I? We’re invested in this life; I can’t drop it for a six-figure desk job, and you wouldn’t either – not after everything you and Laura have put into making your family part of this game. Stiles is too smart to be burying himself in this – get him out.”

Derek’s upper lip rolls back. “Cute speech,” he says. “People have been saying that since they realized how widespread the cheaters are. The number of registered Thoroughbreds hasn’t dropped in that time. There will always be horses, and there will always be dopers, and there will always be races.”

“How do you know?”

“Because there are always going to be people who will bet money on which horse or dog or runner will come home in front. Always. It’s human nature.”

Lydia arches her eyebrows. “Bettors can take their money elsewhere. And how do you know there’ll be enough left, if the government gets involved in the crackdown? Steroids are drugs, you know, and not all of them are legal. Who’s going to pay admission if the show isn’t worth watching anymore? Without people actually turning up to place bets, how are the tracks going to pay for the purses? How are they going to stay open? The answer is all over the country, Hale: they aren’t.”

Derek cocks his head to the side an inch, glowering at her out of the hollows of his skull without saying a word. A moment passes while she glares back, before Derek inhales, yanks his arm out of her grip, and then spins on his heel and walks away.
“Do you remember anything?”

Stiles shakes his head. “Nope. I get up to taking him out of his stall, and then it cuts to some doctor shining a light in my eyes and asking how many fingers she’s holding up. What has my life turned into? My thumb’s most of the way healed, and then the asshole goes and kicks me in the chest?” He holds up the thumb in question, showing off the mottled purple-red of the nail. “How are the others?”

“Me and Lydia split them up – we’ll manage for a couple days. None of them are racing before Saturday, except Yogi. Get back on your feet by then and we’ll be fine.”

“Mmmm.” Stiles lets his hand fall and relaxes against the pillows. His eyes close. “Are you guys having a threesome?”

The non sequitur startles a laugh from Isaac – but only a brief snicker, because he’s been half-expecting it for days. “I don’t even know what we’re doing, but yeah, maybe something like that. God knows we’re unbalanced enough on our own.”

“No shit.” Stiles cracks his eyes open, brow wrinkling up. “I have, like, this fuzzy half-memory of you and Scott making out in front of me, but I don’t know-” he turns his face towards Isaac “-am I, like, a prophet, or was I reading your dreamy brain waves, or-”

“No, that happened. The night before we came down.”


“Not technically right now, but sure, whatever makes you happy.” And it’s Stiles’ turn to snigger gleefully until his face twists and he mutters an owowow and something about ribs. Isaac waits for him to get under control again. “Had enough?”

“Nope – never.” Stiles shifts onto his side, facing Isaac. “Wanna spill on how you got two people to fall in love with you when I can’t even get one?”

“Last I checked, you had your sights on Lydia. She’s kind of ruling over the ‘unattainable’ end of the spectrum, dude.”

“Weren’t you sleeping with her when you were, like, eighteen?”

Isaac kicks his feet up to rest them on the bed’s railing. “I was sleeping with a lot of people when I was eighteen.”

“What?” Stiles cries, then winces at the sound of his own voice.

“It paid the bills.”

“I have a concussion,” Stiles says. “If I demand all the answers about your severely-fucked-up life story I’m going to give myself a heart attack on top of that. Just tell me how to make people want to get in my pants – or to make them let me get in their pants.”

“Lydia?”

“Anyone.”

“Something fractionally less general, please.”
“Fine.” Stiles licks his lips. “Say… say I had an interest in… Derek.”

Isaac’s feet smack to the floor. “Did you just come out to me?”

“Dude, if you didn’t know that I swing both ways, you deserve Scott.”

Isaac smiles. “I’d argue with that. But, uh, first Lydia, now Derek…” he leans forward. “Is somebody harboring a little workplace romance fantasy, there?”

“Oh my god shut up – I take everything back. I don’t want your advice; don’t talk to me.”

“A ‘yes’, then.”

“Shut up.”

“Watch your step,” Isaac says. “Don’t take anything for granted. Derek’s almost as fucked-up as I am – what you’re doing is pretty solid, actually, with Yogi and all-”

Stiles flails. “What sort of bullshit-”

“-he likes you already.”

The flailing stops. “Come again?”

“You put up with Yogi; a lot of people won’t do that this high up: deal with a claimer, much less ride him.”

“Yogi’s not a claimer.”

“The horse won one allowance race because the leader stumbled. He’s a claimer born and bred, and a freak besides.”

“He was close enough to the lead that her stumble made the difference, but alright then, Cheery McFluffpants. Have it your way.”

Isaac grins. “I will.”

“Don’t do that – that’s terrifying. How do Allison and Scott put up with you?” Stiles pauses, blinks, then takes that thought and runs with it: “What are you going to do when you all have to see each other every day? Are you going to get double-married. Is bigamy still illegal if you’re all married to each other?”

Isaac pulls one knee up to his chest, wrapping an arm about it. “I… presume so?”

“Shit.” Stiles flaps a hand at him. “Oh, whatever, you’ll work around it. You should all change your surnames to combine them. Not, like, hyphenating, but smush them together in some way that sounds cool – a portmanteau. Arcalhey? Largall? No, no, McArhey. Yeah, c’mom, Isaac McArhey: it sounds awesome, right?”

“You are ridiculous,” Isaac says. “You have a concussion. Go to sleep.”

“That’s exactly what they tell you not to do, isn’t it? You’re trying to kill me so you can hide from my awesome name-smushing powers.”

“I’m trying to save my brain cells while I still have some left.” Leaning back in his chair, Isaac glances through the glass pain of the door. “Hey, Derek’s coming back.” He grins. “And he
brought you curly fries.”

***

Allison is staring into her empty fridge when Isaac calls. She picks up with “Hey – how’s Stiles?”
A laugh. “Alive, sticking his nose into our business, and nursing a crush on Derek, it looks like.”
She has to work that one over for a bit. “Really?”

“He’s got a concussion and a couple cracked ribs and they’re keeping him in for at least twenty-four hours, so the crush thing might be temporary brain damage somehow transferring from Lydia to Derek, but… yeah. All of that.”

She hums. “And that’s the only reason you called?”

“That was my pretense.” Isaac clears his throat. “You wanna go grab something at that Mediterranean place on Huntington? I’ll buy.”

“Finally. You need a ride?”

“Nah – I’m still at the hospital. I’ll grab one from Derek. Twenty minutes?”

“If I can find something not covered in sweat and horse hair. See you then.” She hangs up on his laugh, then wastes a minute staring at her phone before punching the air and whooping.

***

Any day that ends with Allison Argent straddling him in the front seat of her car and sucking bruises into his neck can pretty easily be defined as a good day, no matter what it started with. When Isaac walks into his room afterwards, the clock’s inching towards midnight and his throat feels like half the skin’s been torn off in the most achingly good way imaginable, and he’s that fuzzy sort of tired that makes ever jacking off seem time-consuming and pointless. He crawls into bed within ten minutes of unlocking the door, and falls asleep curled around his extra pillow, back pressed to the wall.

***

Tuesday afternoon, the hospital calls Scott to tell him that they’re keeping Stiles for another day ‘as a precaution’. He calls Isaac to relay this information, and winds up explaining to a semi-infuriated Derek Hale that, hey, he doesn’t know anything more than what they told him, but they’ve probably got a reason for keeping Stiles – it’s not like they kidnapped him and stole his organs and shipped what was left off to Pyongyang. Derek can still go visit him, so stop growling or whatever that noise is, okay? Give Isaac his phone back. Thank you. How are things with Allison – how are they doing? When are they coming up? Mid-April, probably? Goddamn, “I miss you, dude.”

“It’s been three weeks,” and Isaac’s laugh sounds slightly forced.

“What, I’m not allowed to miss you?”

The laugh stops. “I don’t understand you, McCall.”

Scott swallows. “You understood me pretty well when you had me pinned to a wall.”

“Yeah, I understand that you and Allison are both closeted sex fiends who really need to work on
communicating what you want. I should be getting paid.”

“Seriously?”

“The sex fiends thing? Yeah. Jesus. We’ve all got problems.” Isaac cracks his gum. “Hey, I gotta run, but I’ll talk to you later, alright?”

“Sure – tell Al I said hi if I don’t talk to her before you do. Don’t let Derek rip your throat out.”

“Can do. Derek’s harmless. Take care of yourself, Scottie-boy.”

Scott shoves his face into his arm to hide a grin that nobody’s around to see. “You too.”

***

By the time the hospital lets Stiles go, it’s Wednesday night. His ribs have – supposedly – been thoroughly bandaged, but he still moves gingerly as he climbs into the Camaro, and Derek keeps his foot lighter on the accelerator than normal when they peel off from the curb to begin navigating through traffic.

“They told me not to ride for three weeks,” Stiles says. “And to keep away from loud noises and bright lights.” He licks his lips. “If you swing by a CVS I can grab earplugs for race days.”

Derek thumbs at the steering wheel. “Yogi goes out tomorrow – if I run him again before the end of March, he won’t need a work between now and then.”

“You sure?”

“Who’s the trainer?”

“Laura.”

“For Yogi?”

“You. Fine.”

Derek doesn’t smile, but he flicks on the turn signal and cuts his speed down to less than twenty miles an hour before spinning the wheel to pull into the CVS parking lot. “You’re staying in bed tomorrow – away from the track.”

“When did I turn into a magically incapacitated patriarchal puppet of a damsel in distress?”

“When my horse kicked you and you almost cracked your skull open on the cement flooring.” The Camaro lurches when he throws it into park. “Ear plugs: let’s go.”

“You sound like Laura.”

_As do you. “Let’s go.”_

***

Jackie taps Isaac’s spine with her crop as she saunters up behind him while he’s picking dirt out of Stoner’s hooves. “Wanna buy me dinner, Lahey?”

He drops Stoner’s foot and straightens up, hands on his hips while he stretches his spine. “Maybe. What’s up?”
“The sky. My blood pressure, too, if you go get yourself FUBAR’d by some angry white dude out to protect Allison Argent’s good name.”

“As opposed to getting FUBAR’d by an angry Latina transwoman for no reason in particular?”

“Yep.” She leans over to pat Stoner’s neck. “Me, the Hales, and these horses got an exclusive right to messing with you. Nobody else’s allowed.” Right on cue, Stoner steps on Isaac’s foot in the process of craning his head to the side to touch noses with Sass, who blows once and nips Isaac’s shoulder before bouncing back into her stall.

“You all suck,” Isaac says, shoving at Stoner until he lifts his hoof. “If you and Skater lose tomorrow, I get to pick the restaurant.”

“Great. Should I make my reservation at your favorite Indian place, then?”

“By ‘favorite’ do you mean ‘the one that gave me food poisoning’? Because I hate you, Vaca, and I will sabotage Sass for the San Luis Rey if you do that.”

Jackie smirks; when Sass pokes her head out again, she tickles the filly’s nose with a fingertip.

“Remember who looked after you while you were blowing chunks over everything in sight, boy. I’ve got nine thousand dollars coming from that race if we win – don’t you dare try to take that away from me.” She pauses. “What’s Laura gonna do with this idiot?”

“You mean, ‘what’s the media gonna do with him?’” Isaac cracks his gum and shrugs. “He and Hand And A Half have each won a race, each by a neck. They’ll have to do a tiebreak or something – Argent’ll probably push for the idea just to piss Laura off.”

“The Frank E. Kilroe Mile’s a turf run in the beginning of March, $300,000 purse. Might throw ‘em up against each other for that.”

“That’s the same day as the Santa Anita Handicap, isn’t it?”

“Yep-aroo.” Jackie rolls her crop between her palms. “And me and Schizo are gonna kick ass all over that baby. Seven-fifty purse, here we come.”

Isaac rolls his eyes at her. “And I, meanwhile, will be over here having heart attacks all afternoon while you and Dina go play around with fire and burn your goddamn hands off.”

“Yeah, okay, Argent-fucker.”

Isaac’s posture stiffens, and he ducks his head, the line of his jaw hardening. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why? Because it’s true and you don’t want it to be, or because it’s not and you do?” She pokes the crop at his kneecap. “I’m not asking for details, but you better not get yourself hurt. I don’t spend my day off babying every loser dumb enough to eat shellfish during the wrong month.”

***

The Yogimeister flips Dina into the dirt during their warmup, takes off along the length of the post parade towards the starting gate, delivers a severe bite to the arm of one assistant starter, and comes within inches of trampling two others before he’s caught, and also gets kicked in the chest when one of the other racers wheels out from under her jockey’s control when he gets too close. Later, when he finds himself back in his stall without having run anything resembling a race, he starts kicking at the walls, throwing his long, strung-out body all around the confines of the stall, baying and screaming like he’s being murdered.
By the time Derek gets in to calm him down he’s torn open his neck on the hook for the feed bucket and has blood sheeting down over his shoulder. Derek calls Morell, and then thinks about dialing Stiles’ number, and then doesn’t, because Yogi’s eyes are rolling and he’s trying to start a fight with Boss whilst standing in the middle of the aisle. Derek drags him outside to wait for Morell someplace far away from other horses.
When Skater goes out in a maiden special on the fifteenth, Erica parks herself at Isaac’s elbow on the rail with all the other handlers and pretends not to spend the entire race waiting to shield her eyes from the dismal sight of her horse falling apart and getting left in the dust. That’s not quite what happens. Skater is a solidly-built, solidly-trained, solidly-ridden filly, but down the stretch her instinct to win never kicks in, and she comes home behind two other horses.

“That could have been worse,” Boyd says.

Isaac cracks his gum. “You’re considering pneumonia a step up from cancer.” He gives them a bitter, sharp smile, then climbs over the fence.

Erica raises her eyebrows. “Someone’s cheerful today.”

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Alessandra Cordoba has been an agent for thirteen years after raceriding for the same amount of time as part of the earliest generation of female jockeys, and she has met many riders exactly the same as Jacqueline Vaca: skinny strips of muscle tougher than beef jerky with too much spine and pride and not enough tolerance. She has also had many conversations exactly the same as this one. Shit, this isn’t even the first time she’s had this conversation with Vaca this year, and you’d think money and survival would come before the pithy shadow of honor at the end of the day, as they do in most circumstances, but then again:

“Matt Daehler can suck my dick – I’m not getting on his bitch.”

Alessandra twists the cap off her pen and taps it on the page listing the lineup for the Santa Maria Stakes, post time 2:10 tomorrow afternoon. “Clain’s gonna sweep this field off their feet, Hale included. Gustam shot himself in the foot with that rough riding suspension, so don’t be stupid, Vaca. Purse is two hundred – one twenty to the winner. Twelve thousand bucks for three minutes of work, so why the fuck do I gotta sell this to you? Ride the damn mare!”

A muscle in Vaca’s jaw twitches. “I’ve already got a mount for the race.”

“Yeah, a mount who’s gonna lose. Hey, what’s four years old and has won thirteen of her fifteen starts? Clain. What hasn’t? Nine Yard Run. Tell Hale lo siento, sorry, I gotta go make nine thousand bucks more than I’d get with you – and that’s if her filly gets second. I am handing you money on a plate, Vaca; why you gotta make my life so fucking difficult?”

“I’m not getting on Daehler’s mare.” Vaca clasps her hands together, knuckles gone white and tendons tight while she knocks her weight from foot to foot. “Call the follónand tell him I said no lo siento, not fuckin’ sorry, go fuck yourself.” Her lip curls up. “’Cause I ain’t getting on his fuckin’ horse.”

Alessandra sighs. “Don’t do this, Vaca. Be the bigger man. Ride the mare, get your win, go home happy with twelve thousand bucks. This isn’t that hard.”

Something tilts in Vaca’s expression. “Call Ed Han, then, put him on her. He could use the money.”

“That illiterate little Chinese shit you brought me? Why the fuck would I do that? Daehler wants you.” She stabs a finger at Vaca’s chest to emphasize. “You, not some dumbass teenager.”
Vaca shrugs. “He ain’t getting me. I’m doing the lío a favor by not hanging him out to dry completely; if he thinks his mare’s so fucking good, put Eddie on her – the kid’s twenty-two, and he’s got a brain that he knows how to use, and you haven’t had a fucking problem with him. He’s not committed to Laura Hale. Ride him on the mare, and if she wins, then she fucking wins and I’m wrong and all’s still fucking fine at the end of the day.”

“Daehler-”


“You’re making a dumb fucking move, Vaca,” Alessandra warns.

“I made a dumb fucking move the first time I got on a horse. Everything since then’s been pretty damn clever of me, actually. Now, we done here? I gotta go win a race.” Without even waiting for an answer Vaca raps her fist on Alessandra’s desk, then straightens up, gives her a full second of Vaca’s favorite you-can-suck-my-dick-too smirk, and walks out.

The screen door slams shut behind her.

***

As it turns out, Clain isn’t the only one for them to worry about. Scottie Maxwell sends out TickyTackyHouse, who gives Pig a run for her ugly money and beats her out for second by a nose. Eddie Han goes home with twelve thousand dollars in his pocket; Jackie takes twenty-four hundred. The respective trainers receive the same amounts, though Stiles, as the groom, will get ten percent of Laura’s cut – one percent of the total winnings. It’s small comfort that this follows on the heels of the Sweet Life Stakes, which sees Ernest get steamrolled over by Ghostchant by a margin of eight lengths, though he’s well clear of the rest of the field.

The losses throb in her chest.

Laura takes an hour after the Santa Maria to retreat a quiet corner of the backside and chain-smoke her way through cigarette after cigarette after cigarette, sitting at a picnic table under a tree, staring at the barns lit up by the afternoon sun. That’s where Jackie finds her after the tenth race.

“I hate claimers,” she says by way of greeting. “Fucking lazy, scrappy little pieces of shit.” She plucks herself down at the table, posture loose – forcibly so. She’s in street clothes again. “I’m sorry about today, Laur.”

“Ernest never had a chance against Ghostchant,” Laura sighs. “And the track’s too dry for Pig to be happy.” She contemplates the cigarette smoldering between her fingers. “Not bad, if you look at it that way.”

“You’re still not happy.” Leaning across the table, Jackie snatches the cigarette, takes a drag, then stubs it out into the table. She holds out her hand. “Give.”

Laura hesitates, then hands her the pack, and watches as it gets lobbed into the trash. “I paid for those, you know.”

“Great. Now you’re not practicing paying your hospital bills thirty years early.” Jackie stands up, goes to the trash can, spits out the gum that she’d been chewing, then comes back to sit down again and unwrap a new piece. “I don’t have many friends, Hale, and I don’t wanna lose the ones I got any earlier than I have to.”
Laura smiles a little. “Who would you lecture then?”

“Oh, everyone, same as always. Pint-sized rabble-mongering and all that. I’ve stopped giving a shit.” She huffs. “I still remember that high school health class, when the principal sat in on our discussion of STDs, and you made some comment—”

“About the need for more information on safe sex, as opposed to abstinence-only programs.” Laura itches for a smoke, but she doesn’t look at the trash can.

“Right, and the creepy old cracker fuck came over and put his hand on your shoulder, and asked you to please, m’dear, elaborate on that, tell us more, and you got this look like, fuck you, you creep, and told him to get his goddamn filthy hands off you—”

“And all the way across the room, in the back of the room, this tiny whip of nothing started cracking up like the class was Comedy Central. And the more flustered he got, the harder you laughed.”

“Of course – he was pissed as hell, and it was hilarious.” Jackie smirks, then shrugs. “Hey, kept him from going after you.”

“Yeah, it did.” Laura sets the edge of her thumbnail against her teeth, but doesn’t bite it. “Thank you.”

Jackie looks away. “Shut your goddamn mouth, Hale.”

***

For the San Vicente, Slaw turns in the worst performance Boyd has ever seen from her, and her five-for-five win record gets shot off its hinges while Red N Raw redeems herself from her loss of the Santa Ynez. She’s not alone: Golden Lining, a gray filly out of Daehler’s barn named Hotfast, Jack’s On Trial, Helen Rebdol’s seal brown Seven Hates Nine, and a dark chestnut filly from Jenna Ortega (trainer of Shalt and Hell Come Handily) named Hath Fury all parade home in front of the dark gray filly under Jacqueline Vaca.

“At least Nye broke his maiden,” he says weakly while Erica flat-out sinks to the ground when the order comes up on the toteboard. Stiles has already flung himself over the rail, and Boyd watches him skid up beside Slaw, who doesn’t even spook – her head is hanging, and when she comes to a halt, she seems an inch from splaying her legs out to brace herself.

“Oh my god,” Erica mumbles.

Stiles keeps one hand on Slaw’s neck while Jackie yanks off the saddle, and Boyd can see the jockey’s mouth move, can imagine the words coming out: It’s okay, girl; we’re gonna get you home now; you’re okay, I promise.

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“She’s running a bit of a fever,” Morell notes, “But that seems to be it. Feels sound – no swelling, no excess heat. Want me to do an X-ray?”

“Anything,” Laura tells her. “Everything.”

***

Nothing.
Erica is riding Spitz on Thursday morning when a transformer explodes across the street from the track and a dozen high-strung Thoroughbreds decide that the appropriate response is to go ballistic. She isn’t the only rider to lose control of her mount – isn’t even the only one who gets thrown. But when the outriders swarm over the track and the loose horses and runaways are collected, she’s the only one who isn’t spitting curses and brushing dirt off their clothes.

She’s curled in a ball by the base of the three-eighths pole, right where Spitz threw her, limbs juddering and spasming, the wet reek of urine staining the air around her.

When Laura calls Jackie in, she turns up with Eddie and Jorge in tow, all three with grim expressions, but they and Isabel wrap up the workouts handily, and they wave off the extra money Laura tries to give them.

“Did anyone know?” Isabel asks at one point.

“Boyd, probably.” Jorge’s shoulder cracks when he shrugs. “But no – not us. I have seen her fall before, too.”

Isaac interjects: “She never fell; she aborted. The second she knew what was coming, she’d jump off. She said it hurt less when she controlled the fall. I used to make fun of her for it – say she was too chickenshit to hang on and fight.” His gaze drops, and he picks at Booze’s leadline with cracked fingernails.

After lunch, Stiles catches Isaac cleaning bits in the front tack room. “So I have this theory that the Hales are cursed,” he says. “I also got Scott to ship down my Xbox, and there’s a bunch of cheap booze sitting in my fridge. Want to pretend like the last week or so just didn’t happen, except for the purposes of supernatural speculation?”


“So my dad’s a sheriff, you know, and he’s got this saying about repeated events, okay? One’s an incident; two’s a coincidence, and three’s a pattern. And the Hales totally have a pattern going, alright? I swear – I’ve got this. People who work around them and their horses get hurt. One,” Stiles counts off on his fingers. “Lydia cracks her vertebrae. Two, I get kicked in the chest for a package deal of three cracked ribs and a concussion. Three, Erica gets thrown, has a seizure.” He looks to Isaac eagerly. “You got me?”

Isaac holds up a hand. “Fault: Lydia wasn’t riding a Hale horse. She was on Sevas Tra when she fell.”

“But-”

“Hales have got enough people trying to make them out as bad luck. Quit it.” Isaac stretches along the length of the couch, shoving at Stiles’ knee with one foot. “They were the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Seriously?” Stiles’ eyebrows arch. “How?”

“You’re brain’s on evil-omen setting, fucktruck. You know how long it takes most trainers to get to where Laura Hale is? Decades. Even running off the repute of the old Hale name, she’s still thirty. Still doing great.” He pokes Stiles with his foot again. “And you’re riding off her fuckin’
coattails, so quit being an asshole about shit.”

Stiles makes a face. “How were they good for you, though?” He pauses. “Actually, rewind. How did you even get from… where you were before to grooming racehorses? Wait, no I remember this conversation. They were at some show barn? And they got you a job with them?”

“A hunter-jumper place up at San Francisco, yeah. And before that…” Isaac rubs at his jaw, smirks. “You can say it, you know: I was fucking people for money. Prostitution. A sex worker. C’mon, say it with me.”

Stiles shoves his foot away. “Unlike you, I have boundaries, and a comfort zone, and also a personal space bubble.” But he pauses, curiosity flickering to life – to a full burn – on his face, and Isaac drains his beer while Stiles works his tongue around the word-jam building up in his mind. “Did Derek… did he ever…?”

“Fuck me?” And Stiles blushes. Isaac tips his chin up, running his tongue over his teeth, letting Stiles wriggle himself into knots waiting for an answer. “Nope.”

“Oh.” Stiles’ relief is palpable.

“I kept waiting for him to, though – to try, or to show an interest, or anything. Waiting… for months. Guys that look like Derek, act like Derek – they tend to take what they want, and say fuck you to everybody else. I was totally waiting, any day now, any day now he’s gonna crack, all that paranoid logic and shit.” He hmmmms to himself. “After a couple months of jumping every time he walked up behind me, I kind of flipped shit on him, said, you know, fuckin’ come at me, I know you’re watching.” A new can of beer finds its way into his hands. “And he just… stood there and looked at me. Not like I was right, not about that – holy shit, I’ve never been so off-target in my life, and I’m counting this mess with Scott and Allison – but like what I’d said was in some ways… valid? Like he agreed with me – that I should have been scared of him? Like everyone should be scared of him, not just skinny white boys with pretty faces?” He snorts. “I don’t think the idea of fucking me ever registered with him until I went apeshit, but even after – he was so, so not considering the idea. Never a chance.” He tips the can up and drains half of it in one go. “That answer your question?”

“If he’d wanted to,” Stiles says. “Would you have let him?”

Isaac feels himself go very still. “I… don’t know.”

“No clue?”

“No clue.” Isaac shrugs. “I hope no. Derek’s not my type when I’m not getting paid.”

“Oh,” Stiles says again. “What is your type?”

Isaac snorts. “I went from Lydia to Scott and Allison, dude, I don’t fucking know. Those three are about as distinct as you can get while still remaining human?”

“Would you say that I’m your type?”

“Please don’t be going where I think you’re going with this.”

“I’m just asking.”

Isaac rubs a hand over his eyes. “No, Stiles, you are not my type, mainly because you talk too fucking much, but also because, physically, I’m pretty sure fucking you wouldn’t be a million
miles away from fucking myself, and I’m not that narcissistic.” He pauses. “Maybe if you were dealing with the me from five years ago. I was pretty narcissistic back then.”

Stiles gives him a once over. “I wasn’t aware that you were made of anything besides sarcasm and self-loathing.”

“Hahaha, look how hard I’m not laughing.” This time, he outright kicks Stiles’ knee. “I used to fake a London accent pretty well, and my hair was longer and darker, so I’d toss on eyeliner and be the best fucking screwed-up British college student in town.”

“Stop talking,” Stiles says, but it’s weak.

“It wasn’t intentional when I started, by the way. Not really. I just… I didn’t have anything resembling muscles until I got in with the horses, so it was this face on however-many-inches of skinny, lanky body, and after I wound up on my knees in a couple of corners and alleys, I sort of did a cost-benefit analysis and said, fuck this, I’m gonna get paid the next time some creep touches me.” He tangles his fingers around one another and hangs on tight. “That made it on my terms, kind of. I said “pay me” and they said “how much?”” He can’t look at Stiles; his throat is closing up. “It worked. They got what they wanted, and I paid my rent and bills and sometimes had a little extra for stupid whatevers, and for a while in there I got to go and fuck Lydia, before she cared that she had a pile of used goods on her hands-”


He curls in on himself, around the beer can. “Don’t you fucking dare pity me, Stilinski.”

“I – okay, okay, no pity. I… empathy – no, sympathy? Is sympathy allowed? Can I…?” Stiles scoots closer and, when Isaac turns his face away by shoving it into the back of the couch, because he doesn’t want to have to look at Stiles right now, a hand settles tentatively, awkwardly, on his hair, falling down to his shoulder, squeezing a little. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Isaac hiccups. “I’m not.” He blinks at the plaid design of the couch, then shuts his eyes fully. “The Hales pulled up out of the blue one night – in the Camaro, get that. Laura was driving, but Derek was the one who told me to get in, and I figured it was maybe an incest thing, or a boyfriend-girlfriend-plus-one thing, but…” His mouth is going dry. He has to uncurl to finish sucking down the beer. “We drove for hours that night; I’d never seen them before, had no idea who the fuck they were, no idea how they found me. But they knew my name, and that I liked horses, and somewhere between ten at night and four in the morning I wound up agreeing to look into this barn where they were working. And at that point I was such a nightmare of a train wreck that I woulda done anything to get out. Their arrival felt like divine intervention.”

“Was it?”

Another hiccup, but one that mutates into a snigger. Isaac shakes his head. “Couple weeks earlier, I started getting wasted pretty regularly with this hundred-pound hunk of Guatemalan sarcasm after she found me puking my guts out in the bushes beside this Indian restaurant.”

Stiles cracks a grin. “Jackie.”

“The one and only. Don’t know why she wasted her time.”

“Because she can do a half-decent job of pretending to be a good person, even if the rest of us can’t?” Stiles shrugs. “Also, she’s Jackie.” He pauses. “Can I be horrible?”

Isaac groans. “There ain’t a lot stopping you.”
“Have you and Jackie ever-”

“No. So no. Never even on the cards. Nada nunca.”

“Would you want to?”

Isaac sighs. “She’s my friend,” he says. “Nowadays, I do my best to avoid fucking my friends, because the chances of it leading anywhere healthy are in the toilet. And if you ask me to make out with you or anything along similarly idiotic lines, I will punch you. In the face.”

Stiles pouts. “Not even a little bit?”

Isaac sighs. Again.

“I have a concussion! And cracked ribs!”

“You’re also disgusting.” For a minute in there, Isaac legitimately contemplates kicking Stiles in the nuts, but then the kinder portion of his brain regains control and he just shoves Stiles back to the other side of the couch. “Also: I’m kind of… committed? And what happened to Derek?”

“Sourwolf McBroodypants is still Sourwolf McBroodypants. I don’t think he cares about anything that isn’t Laura or Yogi – I’m not even allowed to change the bandage on his neck, like Derek thinks I’m gonna poison him as retaliation for kicking me or something.”

“You were just citing your injuries as a reason for me to kiss you.”

“I’d kiss anyone at this point! I’d kiss Laura, and she’d probably break my face for it, but still – god, I can’t even play the horny teenage boy card anymore, I’m just a horny guy. I’ll accept pity; this is awful.”

“Funny how I mysteriously lack the urge to pity you at all.” Isaac sits forward on the couch. “Do you have anything non-liquid and edible in that fridge, or is there only beer?”

***

“Early March,” reads the list on Laura Hale’s desk.

2. Schizo, Santa Anita H 750K, Mar 2
3. Stoner, Frank E Kilroe Mile 300K, Mar 2
4. Yogi, 58K Allw, Mar 3
5. Booze, 56K Allw, Mar 3
6. Slaw, San Felipe 300K, Mar 9
7. Pig, Las Flores 100K, Mar 10
8. Get Howard Allw.
9. Bush shipped out?”

Isabel runs her thumb over the pad, then spins it around on the desk and walks back out into the
aisle, where all three grooms are tacking up horses. The twin fillies are going to get broken out of the gate today, and Hale has declared that she’ll be riding Bury as their quasi-lead pony, since Reyes and Boyd are both out today – doctor’s appointments, they claim. Twenty-four hours after going down with a seizure, Reyes had better be seeing some sort of medical professional.

Jacqueline Vaca is standing by the head of the filly they call Boss, staring her down. “This is going to be interesting,” she says to no one.

“I’ll bet.” A tiny black woman pats Guapa’s shoulder. Her grin is wicked. “Real interesting with that one.”

“I’d prefer to keep this as boring as possible, if you please.” Hale turns on her heel in the aisle, spying Isabel. “Rodriguez – Dina’s taking Guapa out today, but stick around: Stoner needs a blowout. Derek’ll be running workouts today; he’s already trackside.” She glances between the two jockeys. “We set?”

Vaca cracks her neck once to each side. “Rock and roll. C’mon, snotnose, I ain’t getting younger.”

“I can see that.” Isaac grabs Vaca’s bent knee and heaves her up, up, up until she swings her leg over Boss’ rump and settles into the saddle. When she leans over to tap the top of his head with her crop, neither he nor the filly flinches away.

***

As soon as the Hale trio is clip-clopping out to the track, Stiles bolts for the track kitchen. He grabs a large black coffee, scrawls ‘Cheer the fuck up, Sourwolf’ on it in orange Sharpie, then scoots back to the barn to start throwing tack onto Yogi. Boots, pads, saddle, breastplate (more useful than a martingale with the steep slope of Yogi’s freakish withers), girth, bridle; all settled and adjusted and cinched within the confines of the stall.

When Stiles pulls out the bridle, Yogi practically shoves his face into it, lipping for the bit. “You bored, boy? You ready to go? Let’s go.” He leads Yogi into the isle into the aisle; Isaac and Lydia both give him personalized versions of The Eyebrow.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Being badass.” He beams at Isaac. “Give me a leg up?”

Isaac looks from him to the coffee sitting on a tack box. “You’re insane.” But he boosts Stiles into the saddle nevertheless, and sets a hand on his knee when Stiles winces at the jostle to his ribs. “You gonna be alright? Want me to walk out with you?”

Yogi is standing at attention, ears pricked. Stiles pats his neck just below the healing gouge and he doesn’t move. “I’ll be fine. Hand me that coffee?” Isaac does, and he clucks Yogi into motion, and they go plodding out. Yogi’s a little high-wire without someone beside him, a little more inclined to freeze anytime he registers something unexpected, but he doesn’t spook or bolt, and Bury and the fillies are still warming up when they reach the rail.

Derek glowers as they approach him. “What are you doing?”

“Riding the horse that you put me on? Here, have some coffee.” Stiles hands down the cup with some effort – Derek looks at it like it might bite him – and keeps his face carefully blank against the spike of pain in his chest. Not enough.

“You’re not supposed to ride with your ribs.”
“Boo-hoo,” Stiles says. “And is Yogi not supposed to run with his neck? How far we going?”

Derek glances at the writing on the cup. His mouth twitches. “Half a mile. Breezing. Quickly – before they break from the gate.”

“I love you too, Sourwolf.” Stiles wheels Yogi around and trots onto the dirt – every step is a stab of a knife, but he keeps his seat light and takes deep breath after deep breath as they go. It’s warm enough that he feels safe cutting the warmup short; a few strides past the half-mile pole he wheels Yogi around to the rail, heaves his weight out of the saddle, and clucks as he fists his hands in Yogi’s mane.

The ignition takes him by surprise. It’s been a month since Yogi really ran, of course – but Stiles doesn’t need touch him besides the knuckles in his neck. He just goes. Stiles finds himself grateful for the length of Yogi’s body: it minimizes the rocking motion, smooths his stride, tempers the pounding, and Stiles ribs take less of a beating for it. While he and Yogi whip around the turn, he glimpses Bury and the fillies lining up before the gate. And when Stiles looks down, the dirt is a blur beneath them. Everything beyond Yogi seems distorted.

He holds his breath.

“Forty-seven flat,” Derek tells him once they get back. “Did you…?”

“All him. Aaaaaaalllllllllll him.” Stiles collapses forward, ignoring his ribs’ protest, and wraps his arms around the base of Yogi’s neck. “Going rockstar on us, boy?”

Derek grumbles something in the back of his throat, then scratches Yogi’s ears when he butts his head against Derek’s arm. All of them look towards the commotion of the starting gate, set up down at the far chute leading onto the backstretch.

Boss is wheeling in front of the gate, picking up her feet to swagger about; Bury loads, then Guapa, and then the big gray filly lets herself be led into the steel enclosure.

Yogi sighs.

The gate snaps open. Bury, the old hand, has himself in line to lunge out first, Guapa at his shoulder. A beat behind them is Boss – like she needed that extra second to get her huge frame in gear. She surges level with the gelding and her sister within strides, already trying to push past. They don’t let her. Guapa shows some grit for the first time as she digs in for a fight and refuses to back off the lead. Bury holds the line between them for another stride or two before Laura lets him fall away – the fillies have at least thirty pounds on him, after all.

And then it’s just the girls running, jockeys curled low against their necks, sister on sister, ripping up the backstretch, and Stiles reaches up to touch his face, to feel his own grin. Yogi shifts under him as he turns his head to watch their progress; Derek’s hand remains on his neck, rubbing distractedly. The three of them stand spellbound.

It’s still early, the sun’s first rays beginning to pierce between the eastern hills, and something intangible and supreme lingers in the air. For now – maybe only now – the Hales and their horses own the track.

Stiles licks his lips, searching for the fading taste of that magic, even as the jockeys rise in their stirrups, rims of their helmets glowing, slowly easing their mounts out of their run.
Nobody says anything when Reyes reappears at the track on Monday, spends ten minutes in Laura’s office, then leaves, heading for Scottie Maxwell’s barn. When workouts start at six, she goes out galloping TickyTackyHouse. After, though, she returns to the Hale stable to climb aboard Sass. Boyd had returned on Sunday, but said exactly nil about her in the interim. The seizure reigns as the gilded, vaudeville elephant in the room, and everyone politely looks away from it whenever either of them walks into the room.

Sass behaves herself under Reyes and (impressively enough) doesn’t make any mischief until they get home. Ten minutes after Isaac puts the filly back in her stall, Isabel walks by to see her with her head jutting into Stoner’s stall. One (or both) of them has chewed away the wood encircling the base of one of the metal bars dividing their stalls, so now Sass has her head shoved through the new hole. Her chin is resting atop Stoner’s withers while the stallion has his neck twisted around so they’re an inch or so from touching noses.

“Lahey.” Dina’s voice startles her. “Your assholes are being disgustingly in love.”

Isaac shrugs. “They’re not hurting each other. Let ‘em be.”

***

Allison forces deep gulps of air into her lungs every few strides as she runs, arms pumping, driving herself to stay in line with Isaac despite his longer legs. It’s been ages since she ran – her mother has a mandate against unnecessary exertion while sick. They’re only lapping the track today. Not a short distance, per se, but shorter than usual, and Isaac slows as they near the entrance to the parking lot once more. “Getting tired?” she teases, but she’s grateful; there’s a queasiness swelling in her belly.

“Yeah,” Isaac admits. “Maybe.” They fade to a walk. “You wanna go another round?”

“Nah, I’m good.” She pokes his arm. “Wouldn’t want to damage your ego.” He grunts, then slings that arm over her shoulders to reel her in against his side, and she hums as they pad across the asphalt. “I talked to my dad today,” she says. “Phoenix is doing well – they think she’ll be able to race again sometime this year. Not ‘til the end, maybe, might be too late to have a three-year-old season, but she’ll get on a track again at some point.”

“That’s… good.”

“Not for you guys.”

“I know not for ‘us guys’. But that’s good for you; she’s your girl.”

“My girl.” Allison laughs. “Like Boss is your girl?”

Isaac makes a face. “Jesus, no, Boss is my dominatrix. I think… I don’t have a ‘girl’ or a ‘boy’. Stoner’s my asshole, Sass is my asshole-management-system, Booze is my spaz… maybe Schizo’s my girl. But she’s more like a woman – she’s my woman.”

Allison hooks her arm around his waist. “I’m your woman.”

Isaac huffs, his grip tightening. They’re at her car now, and he spins her, careful, brings her around in front of him and kisses her, soft and chaste and half a question. Then he pulls away. “Is that how
“Yeah, you idiot.” She reaches up on her toes, curls her arms around his neck. “That gonna be a problem?”

“I don’t know – you might have to cut a deal with Jackie and Laura. They’ve both got pretty solid stakes.”

Allison shrugs. “They have theirs; I have mine; Scott has his.” She kisses the corner of his mouth. “I just want a piece.”

The line of Isaac’s jaw softens. “Might not get such a good one. Might get the worst.”

Sighing, she rests her forehead against his shoulder. “Stop trying to scare me off.”

“Allison grins. “Be glad you’re not here – we probably reek.”

“Great.”

“Speak for yourself,” Isaac says.

Allison kicks out with a bare foot, missing him by a mile. “Put a shirt on and get down here.”

“I’m coming; I’m coming.” He drags a clean shirt over his head, then folds himself on to the ground at her elbow, knees pulled up to his chest, facing the camera. “Hey, Scottie-boy.”

Scott’s smile crooks into a grin. “Hey.”

“Wanna tell me why you went – what, eight years? – without going down on your girlfriend?”

Allison shoves at Isaac’s head and he recoils, cackling, while Scott flushes bright red on the other end of the webcam. “Be nice.”

“No way,” Isaac says, still leaning away. “I mean, dear shit, please tell me you weren’t returning the unperformed favor, Al.”

“Well, I wasn’t, so shut.”

“You guys must have a terrifically boring sex life. what was it, all missionary position with the
light o-

She slaps a hand over his mouth. “That’s enough about sex until I’ve seen you naked, buddy.” When Isaac’s eyebrows shoot up she adds: “Don’t; I can see where your mind is going.” Once he sighs and nods his acquiescence, she removes her hand to pat his cheek while he rolls his eyes. She looks to the screen; Scott has his arms folded on his desk, chin tucked down behind them to hide his smile, but the crinkles around his eyes give him away. “What?”

“Nothing.” He seems pained. “I…nothing.”

“Scott.”

“Nothing.”

“Liar, liar, I’m gonna send Lydia after you and she’ll set all your pants on fire.” Isaac shifts his body around to throw an arm carelessly-not-carelessly over Allison’s waist.

Scott picks his head up. “You guys fit together,” he mumbles. “That’s all.”

Allison sucks in a breath.

“We’ve got a piece missing,” Isaac says. “Don’t freak yourself out.” His palm curves over her ribs.

Scott makes another one of his scrunched-up faces. “I’m not freaking out.”

“You’re talking to the master of silent freak-outs and you are nowhere near as subtle as you think you are.” Isaac’s shoulder twitches. “Or are you gonna make me hold you down and prove that?”

Scott clears his throat, seizing the opportunity to switch subjects. “Might enjoy that.”

Allison lets him get away with it: “I’d enjoy watching that,” she offers.

Isaac turns his head to kiss her cheek, then beams into the camera, leaning in closer against her. Scott’s trying to hide his blush again; it isn’t working.

***

The Frank E. Kilroe Mile is exactly what it says on the tin: a mile’s run around the turf track, breaking from the head of the stretch. Hand And A Half stands as Stoner’s main challenge, of course, but the rest of the field is far from strangers: Pim Byrn’s Five Three Eight, Marilyn Marrero’s Scudder, Scottie Maxwell’s TickyTackyHouse, Helen Rebdol’s Powerful Mars, and that Kentucky mare, Ingando, round out the list of entries. They come out of the gate in a ragged line of horseflesh, and Jackie sets her legs in a butterfly while she leans forward to stretch her back muscles, chin tipped up, eyes on the screen that’s been mounted on the wall of the jockey’s quarters.

It’s 4:16. The Santa Anita Handicap goes off at 4:49. She scrubs an agitated hand through her hair as the field rounds the clubhouse turn.

***

He knows the mare beside him, knows her stride and her scent and the yellow shine of her coat; knows her intent. So many of these others are familiar too: the near-black filly holding the lead; the bay gelding pressing at her hip; the other mare, the brown, outside on his flank. But it’s the chestnut he must watch. She will give no ground she is not forced to. She will fight.
When the push comes, when she swaps leads to move up, he follows – too eagerly. Her hind foot slashes along the inside of his foreleg, and he stumbles. The pack tries to swallow him up. He mustn’t let them. The human on his back barely has to touch him, only clucks encouragement, the line of her crop laid against his neck, and he does what she asks.

There’s a howl from the watching humans. He charges after the chestnut, straining to drive himself farther, faster, every stride ever longer, longer, faster, until it hurts – she won’t go home first; she won’t – while the stripe of needling teeth sinks into his leg, right where she caught him, and he snorts, strains on – can’t extend, can’t – must – can’t, and he stumbles again, almost goes down, and the human won’t let him run now; his leg won’t respond properly; the pack’s all around, reeking of sweat and triumph; the human’s hauling up, shouting, and it’s all wrong – but they’re done. He’s done.

***

Emilia Roberts wheels Toby Blue across the track to forage through the swarm of racehorses, outriders, grooms, and reporters. They’re extra-concentrated around Scudder and Hand And A Half: the upset-er and the upset-ee, respectively. Shifting Wind is at the rear of the group, Fasano already off his back, the groom, Lahey, bracing the horse with a shoulder, taking part of his weight so it’s not all set on his three good legs. Emilia lets Tony pace a circle around them. “Morell’s on her way, guys. Hang tight.” She can already hear the rumble of the ambulance traversing the track.

“You need a hand?” Ingando’s handler starts toward Shifting Wind as if to help somehow; Lahey’s snarl makes him recoil:

“Don’t touch my fucking horse.”

The groom backs away. “Okay, dude, Jesus, whatever.”

Fasano pulls off the saddle as Toby grunts a warning and steps out of the way of the approaching ambulance. Morell appears clinical and efficient as she directs the loading of the stallion – Lahey goes with him while Fasano stays on the ground, saddle and pads in her arms, watching them tear away towards the backside.

Toby snorts. Emilia turns him around again, scans the grandstand. “I know, boy; I know.

***

Half of what killed Ruffian was that she broke down mid-race, fighting for the lead. Shifting Wind saw the wire flash by, watched the other horses slow enough to know that his work was done, and his injury is nowhere near as serious as Ruffian’s. He’s still hot, blowing and in visible pain, but he’s also not scrambling to finish a race. They get him from the ambulance to his stall with a minimum of trouble – the filly next door works her head most of the way into the stall through the bars, and the horses nose at each other while Morell examines Shifting Wind’s leg and takes X-rays. She doesn’t think there’s a break – definitely not a major one – but the swelling alone indicates a serious problem with a tendon.

That’s what she tells them after a few minutes: “It’s a tendon issue, something badly torn, possibly separated completely.” She looks up at the owner, not remembering his name (rich white men blur together after a while). “Human terms: he’s taken out his Achilles.”

“Shit.” Isaac rubs a hand down the stallion’s flank and Laura Hale sighs as she turns away.

The owner – Guy McKearn, that’s his name – rubs his chin. “So he’s done with racing?”
“If there’s a best-case scenario for recovery, you might be able to start training him again in a year. Maybe. Eighteen months would be more likely.”

“He wouldn’t race again before he hit nine,” Hale points out. “Nobody short of Kelso makes a comeback at nine, and not after eighteen months off.”

McKearn nods. “But would he be worth anything as stud?”

“He’s a stakes winner,” Hale says. “Between the Hollywood Turf Cup and the Citation Handicap and the San Gabriel – yes, he will pull in a better-than-decent stud price.” She props her hip against the stall door. “He could make you a lot of money that way.”


McKearn shrugs with a wry smile. “Haven’t got a lot of options left, do I?”

“Not so much.” Hale inclines her head, then beckons to Isaac. “If you’ll excuse us, we have another horse to worry about right now. We need to be down at the paddock for the SA Handicap in a few minutes. But do let me know when you decide about Sto- Shifting Wind – you know how to reach me.”

***

Jackie swaggers up beside Isaac while Laura’s tightening Schizo’s girth. “So the idiot’s gonna live?”

“Apparently.”

“They gonna stud him?”

“Probably,” Isaac doesn’t look at her. “Not much else they can do with him – he won’t be sound for a year at least.”

“Great.” Schizo pins her ears at Laura’s adjustments and swishes her tail in warning. Jackie taps her nose with a fingertip, then trails it up and down the length of the white stripe marked on her face until her ears flick forwards again. “Do me a favor, snotnose?”

“What?”

“Be an optimist for like five minutes.” When she glances up, his expression registers somewhere between bemused and despairing. “I could walk out of here with forty-six thousand dollars today, and it’s gonna fuck up my game if I’m worrying that you’re gonna go slit your wrists behind the shedrow because nobody’s watching.”

Isaac rolls his eyes. “I’m not gonna-”

“Good. You’re doing excellent job. That’s my boy.” She pats his arm. “You know what I could do with forty-six thousand dollars?”

“A lot of damage.”

She grins, but it’s hollow. “Damn fucking straight.” She cracks her knuckles, then has an idea strike her. “Hey, Laur?”

“What?”
“Hold your animal for a second?” When both Isaac and Laura blink at her with brows wrinkling up in confusion, Jackie sighs. “Hand her the reins, idiot.” She waits until he does, then opens her arms expectantly while he stands there looking dumfounded. “This isn’t rocket science, kid. Give me a hug.”

“Why?”

“Because I fucking said so, that’s why.” She waits. And waits. And ignores the odd eyeballs from bystanders, the curious glances from Scottie Maxwell and Ben and Jorge, because she’s had people staring at her her whole life at that is so irrelevant right now. And it’s worth it, because when Isaac does stoop to hug her, he presses his face into her shoulder and very much doesn’t cry, but his grip’s far tighter than the prerequisite for fine-fine-I’ll-give-you-a-hug-you-crazy-person. She keeps her mouth shut about that. He’s got a string of horses to worry about, and she’s got a race to run and – willingly given or not – hugs are nice.

She pats his arm once he’s straightened up and is trying to get his game face on again. “Take a breath, Lahey. Nobody gets to make it out alive. We’re all in the same boat.”

***

For the last decade, Laura has maintained a standing conviction that there is nobody in the world less likely to fuck her over than Jackie Vaca, so when the bulked-up Raunchesstra steals the day and Silveritis sticks her nose in front of Schizo’s to take second, she doesn’t allow herself the gluttony of rage – not at the jockey. Not at her friend.

It’s Schizo’s second loss this year, with the San Pasqual as her only victory thus far. And that’s okay – the mare is five years old; she’s not necessarily going to be able to tap into the same quick-burn speed of previous seasons. It’s okay, Laura tells herself. It’s okay. Anna Schweitz is okay with it – they still walked away with ninety thousand dollars. Isaac’s still out of it, still stuck on Stoner, still thinking he should have caught some forecasting hint of the injury, so he’s far from devastated about the Handicap. Jackie is… not okay with it (she’s viciously kicking herself for not pinning Raunchesstra and Ben behind her on the rail when she had the chance when Laura talks to her), but she’s never okay with losses, not when she was riding, when she thinks she could have done something.

It’s all strangely anticlimactic. The Handicap was supposed to be the big race, and it was in some ways, but Laura knows that she spent at least half of it with her thoughts and attention elsewhere. Between Stoner, Clinical Sanity’s impending arrival, and her need to get gate permission for and find races for the two-year-olds already under her care, she never saw the moment that’s bugging Jackie so much, and thus hardly feels justified in getting outraged about it.

They ran. They lost. They’ll continue on.

***

The Hale crew doesn’t waste energy on sparring with Allison when she walks into their barn; none have the spirit for that. Isaac is currying Stoner in the aisle, standing bandages on the stallion’s front legs; Sass is watching them over her stall door with great interest.

Allison waves to Stiles before extending that same hand for the stallion to sniff. “He’s gonna be alright, then?”

“If McKearn decides to put him up for stud, yeah.” Isaac shrugs. “He should; it’d be worthwhile. But he’ll be leaving soon either way.”
“You gonna miss him?”

“No,” Isaac says too quickly. A pause. “He’s a dumb asshole, but Sass will miss him. For a couple days.”

“Uh-huh.” Allison shoves her hands into her pockets. “You’re coming home with me after work.” And she knows how bad it is when Isaac doesn’t crack a joke at that.

“I’ve gotta stay here and watch him.”

Lydia sticks her head out of a tack room. “Objection: you’re going somewhere else tonight.”

“I’ll stay here,” Stiles offers. “I mean, I was planning on it anyway, ‘cause Yogi’s got his race tomorrow and all that, but I ain’t squishing onto that tiny-ass cot with you, bro.”

Isaac opens his mouth, leaves it hanging a moment before he speaks. “He’s my horse.”

Lydia rolls her eyes. “I don’t see your name on his papers.”

Stiles’ rebuttal is – somehow – gentler: “Believe it or not, I’m actually slightly capable of taking care of these guys; I’ve kind of, you know, been doing it for five months now. Between me and Sass, we’ve got him covered. Get yourself outta here for a couple hours.”

Isaac sighs, and when he looks to Allison, she smiles. “I… fine.” He knuckles the slope of Stoner’s shoulder. “Alright.”

***

She drags Isaac home after he’s re-hosed and re-wrapped Stoner’s leg, dosed him up on bute, and seen him properly confined to his stall. Back at her apartment, they watch a couple old episodes of The Walking Dead and finish off the remnants of a lasagna she got from the Italian grocery a few blocks over, and they’re in the midst of piling plates into the dishwasher when she touches his arm.

“You really want me to comment on that?”

Allison sighs, dropping her hand to brace against the counter. “Tell me you want to be alone tonight and I’ll drive you back to the track, but you can’t go sit in the barn and worry. You’re not allowed to.”

Isaac just looks at her.

“What?”

His head cocks a few degrees to the side. “Nothing.”

She chews on her lower lip. “You staying?”

The smile turns bitter. “If you’ll have me.”

“Oh, Isaac.” She closes up the dishwasher, then steps in front of it to curl her arms around his neck and press her forehead against his collarbone. “You’re always welcome here.”

He grunts, then presses a kiss into her hair. “You’re not so bad to be around.”
She flicks his skull. “Jackass.”

“Yep.” Tucking his chin down, he presses their mouths together, soft movements in a soft moment. “Can I steal your shower?”

“’Course. Through the bedroom – extra towels in the cabinet.”

“Alright, thanks.” His palm slides down her spine before he pulls away, slips off. “Be right back.”

Allison starts the dishwasher and tosses the aluminum lasagna pan into the recycling, then follows. She keeps her mind carefully blank as she strips off her jeans and tank top and pulls on sweatpants and one of Scott’s old shirts, which hangs red and soft and loose off her shoulders. When Isaac re-emerges, he’s bare-chested but still wearing jeans, hair toweled dry. Allison stops in the middle of brushing hers. “I’m not exactly fearing for my innocence, you know.”

The blank mask of Isaac’s face cracks as he raises an eyebrow that’s trying a bit too hard to be rakish. “Was I supposed to recognize that immediately from the lack of chastity belt?”

“Very cute,” Allison says. “C’mon, you’re not sleeping on the couch.” She sets the hairbrush atop her desk and plops onto the edge of the bed. “Come on.”

Shaking his head – but in disbelief, not refusal – Isaac shucks off his jeans and climbs under the covers. “You and Scott will never cease to amaze me. I could’ve gone commando today.”

“Yes, because that would have made complete logistical sense.”

“It might have.”

“Uh huh.” Allison clicks off the light, plunging them into darkness, then sweeps her legs under the blankets. “You just wish you had.”

“Always.”

And that’s where they pause, because Allison’s brain stops churning out stupid retorts and starts focusing on the part where she’s in a bed with a nearly-naked Isaac Lahey. She isn’t even wearing a bra. (This feels relevant somehow.) Maybe she should have put a little more thought into this; it’s been years since she shared a bed with anyone who wasn’t Scott. And Isaac is, well, Isaac. Too pretty for his own good and hell-bent on ruining any sort of happiness that tries to touch him.

Isaac’s an indistinct shape in the blue-black; she reaches a hand towards him, knuckles brushing his arm. He shifts at the touch, uncoiling so they can pull together in the middle of the bed with her foot snaking around his calf and his arm draping carefully across her waist. “Hi,” she says.

His grin catches a sliver of light from the streetlamp outside. “Hi,” he says back. She can’t see his eyes.

Allison rolls over, pressing the line of her spine into his chest and clasping his hand against her belly to keep him close. His next exhale ruffles her hair.

“A fan of spooning, I see.”

“Captain Obvious strikes again.”

“Captain Obvious is more perceptive than you give him credit for.” Isaac’s arm presses down, tightens, lining up their bodies more thoroughly as he bends himself into the curves and dips of her.
His hand slips under the hem of her shirt, curls itself over the jut of her hip. “Say the word.”

She almost stops breathing. “What are you, a Princess Bride character?”

“Whatever you need me to be.” He kisses the hinge of her jaw and she groans, turning her head to the side to kiss him over her shoulder – a horrible angle, but they make it work, for a minute, anyway. His hand stays where it is, but she doesn’t say anything about it and he doesn’t slide it any lower, and by mutual unspoken agreement they don’t go any further, though she falls asleep with the weight of his palm-print burning into her nerves.

***

She wakes up with Isaac’s face pressed into the top of her spine, his mouth mumbling incomprehensible curses while her alarm beeps louder with each repetition. She gropes blindly for a couple seconds in the predawn black and utters a grunt of triumph when she nails the correct button and a blessed silence falls. “I win,” she says, cutting off in a yelp when Isaac yanks her back across the bed. “What, are you not gonna let me get up?”

“Nope.” He re-settles himself around her, twining all of his long limbs up in hers.

Breathe. “So you’re gonna be late and set Stiles off again?”

“Sure.” He’s mouthing at her neck, firing a bolt of heat down her spine.

Get ahold of yourself, Argent. “Really now.”

“Mhmm.” His hand flattens over her stomach.

Dear Jesus God. “Gonna get yourself fired one of these days.”

“We’ll see.” His thumb curls, nail tracing over her skin. “Allison.”

She forces an exhale. “Yeah?”

“Yes or no.”

“Isaac.”

“Yes or no, Al.” His other hand touches her back, tracing where her shirt’s been rucked up over the course of the night. Everything’s hot and dry and her mouth feels disgusting and she is tired of being the one who’s in charge of everything. So fuck it.

“Jesus shit, Isaac, either you get me off or I do it.”

“Al.”

She grabs his wrist and shoves it down. “Yes.”

Isaac’s inhale is a snarl and he bites at the line of her throat, teeth catching at the skin while his fingers slide past the hem of her panties, flex up against her, into her, like he’s been studying a map of her nerve endings since forever. She whines, tipping her head up, feeling him roll against her, longer than Scott, always sharper, more intense, infuriating –

Oh, fuck.

“Stop.”
Isaac freezes.

“Shit, we shouldn’t be doing this. Shit.” She bolts from the bed, and Isaac lets her. She snatches jeans off the chair and a shirt from the dresser, clean bra, clean underwear, not a word as she scrambles into the shower. She shouldn’t have said yes – so, so, so should not have said yes; that was the exact opposite of proceeding cautiously. She mumbles a “dammit, Isaac” as the water pounds against her shoulders, cold – she needs it cold. So cold.

Maybe she’s making this into something bigger than it is. Is getting off to thoughts of somebody cheating? No. No. It’s good they stopped. You can’t have a functioning relationship without boundaries, not with three people involved when one is hundreds of miles from the other two, before anything’s been properly discussed. That was a good call on her part. Fixing a mistake. Minimizing the damage. Good call.

Because she forgoes blow-drying her hair, she has a few extra minutes, so she pulls on her clothes without haste and takes a deep breath before venturing into the kitchen. Isaac has a cup of coffee already set up for her on the counter, but the man himself is far off to the side, hunched in on himself, vulture-like, hollow-eyed with a self-depreciating twist to his mouth. “Sorry about that,” he says while Allison is still standing in the doorway, staring at the mug.

She blinks and shakes herself. “Don’t worry about it.”

He snorts.

“No, I mean it.” She picks up the mug. “You stopped.”

“You had to tell me to.”

“Yeah, after I gave the most emphatic ‘yes’ imaginable.” When Isaac turns his head away, lips rolling back from his teeth, she sighs. “Isaac, I shoved your hand down my pants. Stop abusing yourself.”

Isaac ducks his chin, tucking it against his shoulder, but she can see the smile tearing at his mouth. She steps closer. “Why would you still be here, if I were mad at you?”

“It’s my job.”

“No, your job is to look after racehorses and yourself. It’s everyone else’s job to beat up on you.” Allison puts down her coffee, then takes the cup out of his hands. Isaac’s head comes up, watching her, while she fists her hands in his shirt and leans up to knock their foreheads together. “Stop beating up on yourself unless you’re gonna beat up on me, too.”

“It’s my job.”

“No, your job is to look after racehorses and yourself. It’s everyone else’s job to beat up on you.” She kisses him, closed-mouthed, until he sighs and settles his hands on her hips. When they break apart, she doesn’t go far. “Don’t run away.”

“Nowhere to run to.” He digs him thumbs into the dips of her hipbones. “Stuck with the Hales.” His eyes crinkle at the corners. “And you and Scott, if I don’t scare you off before it’s too late.” When she kisses him again, he tilts his head to the side, working her mouth open – not moving otherwise, but holding her, using her walls to support himself.

“I’m not leaving,” Allison gasps, once she can breathe. “You’re not gonna scare us off.”
“I can try.”

A knife twists in her chest. “Yeah, well…” She lifts one hand to thumb at the sharp line of his cheekbone, and doesn’t spare a glance for the clock. “You’re wasting your breath trying.”

***

“Stiles.” A hand on his shoulder – not shaking, just resting, warm and solid. “It’s almost five.”

“Go fuck yourself, Isaac,” he mumbles, trying to burrow deeper under the blankets.

“Wrong – grumpier,” the owner of the hand says, and Stiles opens his eyes to find a not-grumpy-at-all Derek Hale watching him.

“Um,” he says. “Sorry?”

Derek’s mouth twitches. “I’ll get the feed tubs started.” And then he’s gone.

Stiles rolls off the cot in typical Stilinski, flailing fashion to set about getting dressed. Halfway through zipping up his jeans is when he registers the coffee cup sitting off to the side on a tack box. There’s writing on it. He scans it, blinks, then leans in closer to read it again.

Rise and shine, Little Red.

He sticks his head through the tack room doors. “I’m an inch taller than you!” he calls into the aisle, then retreats in search of his paddock boots.
Stiles has to wait for a lull in workouts before he can corner Isaac in a tack room with a bridle in hand and try to pretend that he hasn’t worked himself into a frenzy over the course over the last three hours. It doesn’t go so well.

“Under what hypothetical circumstances,” he asks, “would you roll out of bed even earlier than usual to buy someone coffee and leave it for them without comment except for the slightly derogatory nickname on the cup?”

Isaac blinks. “First of all: that way too specific to be hypothetical. Secondly: what was the nickname?”

Stiles gnaws on his lower lip and tries to act like he can’t feel his face burning up. “He called me Little Red. Which is dumb and doesn’t make sense anyway because I’m an inch taller than him—” Isaac is cracking up. “Okay, whatever, screw you anyway.”

“You call him Sourwolf,” Isaac says between snickers. “And you wear red hoodies all the time – it makes perfect sense. Gimme a sec – and hang up that bridle.” He pushes past Stiles to poke his head through the door. “Yo, Lyds, get in here for a sec?”

“What are you doing I don’t need mocking disapproval from – Hi, Lydia.”

She steps into the tack room with hands already on her hips and her eyebrows raised in criticism. “What’s going on in here?”

“Stiles is having a crisis because he doesn’t know how to respond to any reciprocation of his horribly awkward flirtation attempts.” Isaac leans his weight against a tack box in the corner. “Personally I think this is just leftover brain damage and he’s gonna come to his senses any day now and be all after you again, but, I mean, whatever. Nobody asked me.”

“Oh that’s a glowing endorsement.”

Isaac shoots him an amused look. “Dude, you cracked your head open on the floor and turned around in the hospital and decided you had an interest in Derek Hale. As far as I’m concerned, I reserve the right to be suspicious. You don’t make the snap from being apathetic about someone to wanting to sleep with them overnight.”

“Clearly you have never seen any feel-good-bohemian-ugly-dude movie ever,” Lydia sidebars.

Stiles, for his part, gets angry: “It’s not just like that, you – I – you… with you and Scott, what the hell? You have this guy who, you know, doesn’t treat you any different from anyone else – he’s grouchy or he’s a big, goofy puppy to everyone and he is how he is for weeks – for months, and great, fine, whatever… and then it’s different. He’s looking at you differently, or asking you to ride the horse that nobody else wants to deal with, or talking about you to all his friends incessantly,
and it’s not just like “hey, yeah, hi” anymore, it’s “hey, here’s a coffee; hey, let me call you Little Red; hey, let me take you to the hospital; let me trust you when I don’t trust anyone except my sister” – and it’s, I… yeah, okay, I hit my head. But it didn’t just happen one day.” He swallows. “It just took me a while to figure it out.”

Isaac glances at Lydia before tossing up his hands in surrender. “I am officially out of my depth here; the ball’s in your court.”

Lydia arches her eyebrows. “Poor word choice. I don’t court, Isaac.”

“Nobody’s-”

“I give up,” Stiles says. “Why did I ask you two for anything?”

“Because you’re an idiot,” Lydia snaps. “You want to know what to do with Derek? Figure it out on your own terms.” She smiles. “Clearly that’s been working out thus far. Now, since you’ve been wasting my time for several, I have a colt named after my dead boyfriend to tack up. Excuse me.” She slips between Stiles and Isaac, leaving them staring at each other.

“I can’t tell if that was sarcasm or genuine advice.”

Isaac shakes his head and shrugs. “I don’t know. You gotta figure out your own shit.”

***

This sucks. This whole situation. It sucks, okay? It sucks. After all, it’s not like Stiles has been operating blindly sans recognition of Derek’s physical attractiveness, okay? He’s seen Derek shirtless multiple times, only for a handful of seconds, always swapping out shirts after workouts and such, muscles of his back flexing, and Stiles notices these things, okay, he notices Derek’s muscles and his face and his expressions and his eyes and how he carries himself and how he looks terrible in orange-and-blue stripes, and he’s pretty sure Laura bought that shirt and told Derek to wear it because Stiles has only seen it once, back in November, and that’s Laura’s idea of a joke when it comes to Derek – she has this love of beating up on him like somebody’s stereotypical notion of a proper older sister, as if she’s supposed to forfeit professionalism in the name of petty dominance.

And that’s another thing that kills Stiles, because Derek is not a submissive person. Derek is Type-A, Alpha-male, Stoner on full throttle, determined to run the show whenever Laura isn’t around. Laura’s more than Sass though; Laura is Boss and Schizo combined, and for her, Derek is Spitz – reeling himself into line without reprimand ASAP upon her arrival. Stiles is a sheriff’s kid; that sort of willing obedience twists him up in this inexplicably good way. Guys like Derek just don’t automatically ask “how high?” when told to jump. It’s a torturous thing. All of this he describes to Slaw while picking shavings from her tail and Ernest while brushing his coat, and he’s addressing the frog of Yogi’s foot on the matter when somebody hauls him up by the collar of his shirt.

“Ask him out to dinner if Yogi wins today,” Laura tells him. “And stop discussing it with the horses.”

Stiles swallows. “Seriously?”

Laura smiles, gripping his shoulder and giving it a firm shake. “Seriously; they don’t speak English. Now get back to work.”

“Is he going to win just because you said that?” Stiles asks as she starts to leave.
Laura pauses, turns around. “Of course.” Then she walks off.

***

“Oh dear god, your sister is a prophet.”

Derek snorts. “She said he’d win?”

Stiles has gone to his knees in the dirt, elbows and chin still hooked over the rail. He moans. “Yeah, yeah she did, oh my god.”

Yogi is prancing on the track – his neck is too long to arch properly, but it’s obvious that he’s proud of himself. These horses know their job; they’re well aware of when they win, and they revel in it.

“You should buy me dinner,” Stiles says. “As celebration.”

“Tuesday night – there won’t be any races.” Derek grabs Stiles’ shoulder and heaves him forward over the rail until he yelps and twists and lands on his rear on the other side. “But first you have to go get Yogi.”

Stiles shakes his head, standing up to brush himself off. “Do my ears-”

“Get going, Big Red.”

“Oh – oh. I’m Big Red now, huh? Is that how it is?” Stiles throws his hands wide as he backs away, a grin splitting his face. “Big Red Riding Hood in the house!”

Derek ducks his head and doesn’t smile – he doesn’t – at the dirt where no one can see.

***

Derek sits across from Stiles in an amused silence, listening to him ramble on with the furor of someone who refuses to acknowledge how nervous they are. Stiles does a great deal of speaking with his hands, though not the sweeping, flailing gestures he made when he first turned up: his movements are still loose, but confined within the span of his torso as opposed to being flung out helter-skelter. His fingers clench, release, twist around one another, flick, snap, spread; his knuckles are red, the calluses on his palms visibly dry, edges of his nails cracked and threatening to bleed. His thumbnail has faded to mauve. Derek refuses to look at his mouth. The remnants of the taco on his plate are safer – Stiles’ hands are safer, his shoulders, his eyes, his wrists, the dark hair covering his forearms.

“Why did you ever let me on Yogi, anyway?”

Derek stares at the oil painting above Stiles’ head. It’s a desert with a chain of mountains in the distance and a lone horseman riding away from them and the sunrise – or sunset – between the peaks. “When he bit you, you didn’t react until he’d been tied up in the trailer.”

“I… what?”

“Your thumb-”

“No, no, I get the reference, I just… what? That’s your logic?”

Derek picks up his fork to shuffle rice around his plate. “You’ve seen Lydia smack Mick when he tries to bite her. He stops, and five minutes later he’s trying to use her as an itching post. That’s
how it is with Isaac and Stoner, too. The first day we had Yogi, he tried to bite Laura and she slapped him away, and he went after her again immediately with intent to murder. He’s spent his entire life looking for a fight.” Stiles has gone still. “And in the middle of loading him into a trailer, at the worst possible moment for him to go off, you didn’t give him anything to fight, and you didn’t try to punish him later, when he wouldn’t have understood the reason why.” Derek drops his gaze into his own lap. “So that’s why I wanted to see you on him.”

Stiles shuffles in his seat. “Dina does almost nothing but fight with him.”

“Not recently; not anymore.” And because he’s not looking anywhere near Stiles, is consciously pretending that he’s talking to himself, Derek can say it: “We have you to thank for that.” He swallows.

Derek’s phone buzzes in his pocket at the exact moment that Stiles flinches. They both fumble for their devices to see a mass text from Laura: Horse incoming.

“Shit,” Stiles says. “Shit, what, how? How is she coming now?”

“Traffic.”

Their phones buzz in unison once more. Isaac: I gotcha. Keep on keeping on, lovebirds.


“I’m sure he knows.” Derek turns off the screen and shoves his phone back in his pocket while Stiles snorts and scoops up a forkful of black beans.

After swallowing, Stiles chews on his lower lip for a couple seconds, then opens his mouth at the exact moment Derek realizes that he’s staring. “This Schizo’s half-sister?”

He forces his thoughts into motion. “Yeah.”

“Two-year-old?”

“Three.”

“Ah. Think she’ll be any good?”

“For six starts she has three wins, a place, and a show. All allowances and maidens – took her three tries to break her maiden. We’ll see.”

“Of course you say that.” Stiles sits straighter, hands vanishing under the table to fuss with his napkin. “I heard Lydia might be riding her.”

“Maybe. That’s between her and Laura. I’m not the one in charge.”

Stiles snorts. “Does it hurt you to say that?”

“No.” Derek ignores the prickle of anger under his skin. “She’s my sister. She has more experience, more connections, and, overall –” he swallows “- better judgment. I’m not sure what you’re trying to imply.”

Stiles tilts his head to the side. “That’s unusual, is all: a guy ceding control to his sister.”

“I’m not sure what your definition of ‘usual’ is,” Derek says. “What are you implying? Do you think I…?”
“Nothing,” Stiles says. “I don’t know.”

“You expected me to have a problem with-“

“You never say anything, I don’t know,” Stiles complains. “There is such little intersectionality between the feminist movement and anything else, lots of guys-”

“I don’t have a problem with Laura running the barn.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. “I was just wondering. Because, you know, if you look at the male-to-female ration around the track, and then in our stable, we’ve got a pretty level comparison of identities, especially compared to everybody else and I… don’t know, I just thought that might somehow be relevant.”

“To…?”

Stiles blushes. “I don’t know. Us?”

“Us,” Derek repeats. He runs his thumb along the edge of his life. “Laura’s had a lot of boyfriends. A lot of them didn’t last very long, because they had a problem with that part of her, with her power. Most. She hasn’t dated in a while.”

Stiles whistles through his teeth. “That’s her.”

“That’s me,” Derek says. “She’s not just my sister; I’m her brother.”

Something goes soft in Stiles’ face; he nods twice, quietly, and doesn’t press the subject.

***

The filly at the end of the lead shank looks like she’s closer to one than three: she barely tops fifteen hands and her legs are each a mile long. She has a short neck and spine, similar to Schizo, but lacks her heavy musculature, and this makes her seem even more juvenile. Her coat is a dark, dark bay or brown that verges on black, marked only by a snip on her nose and a star on her forehead. She wuffles pleasantly at Isaac’s shirt while he leads her into the stall next to Skater.

Laura pats the filly’s rump as she passes. “It’s good you came,” she says. “I have news. McKearn called: he wants to get his money’s worth out of Stoner this stud season. He’ll be shipped out next week, as soon as it’s reasonable for him to travel.”

Clinical Sanity prances around the perimeter of her stall; she’s a bundle of limbs: a skinny black flea. Across the aisle, Sass is working on tearing out a second bar between her and Stoner’s stall while the stallion observes, his nose jammed through the pre-existing gap as Sass gnaws at the wood beneath it. Isaac keeps his mouth shut.

***

He goes out in the name of occupying himself, because anything is better than waiting for a call saying sure, we’ll give you this role, or that one, or none at all, sorry, sucks to be you. The small figure at the end of the bar catches his ear first: a rapped order of cranberry juice, sharply confident. They’re small enough to be a jockey – or to play one – but the strained features and lightweight quality of them, coupled with the swaggeringly confident demeanor, points to the former. That would explain the juice; the first rule of alcohol is that it’s empty calories. Jockeys and unemployed actors who have been pigeonholed into a certain ‘look’ can’t afford that.
He slides onto the stool next to the jockey with a small smile and a cautious maintenance of the distance between them. “Want me to pick that up for you?”

***

The guy is pretty in a sort of fine-cut way, all skinny, lean muscle and dark-tanned skin that could pass for Latino if you’re white and an idiot. A faint Australian hitch permeates his tone. He’s dressed as casually as she is in jeans and a t-shirt and doesn’t even look like he’s trying that hard.

Jackie taps the rim of her glass. “Knock yourself out.” The bartender looks from her to him, then smiles and slips away.

“My name’s Wade,” says the Australian.

“Cute. Jacqueline.” Wade’s eyebrows go up. “Not as masculine as you expected?” because she knows what to expect by now.

Wade shrugs. “I can work with it.”

Jackie rolls her lips away from her teeth. “Cute,” she repeats. “What sort of equipment do you think is under the hood here, kid?”

Wade shrugs again. “Doesn’t necessarily matter to me.” He sits back, all the strung-out miles of him, and he is pretty, even if he looks like those hipsters that have started overrunning college campuses all across California.

Jackie makes sure her smile carries a threat. “How old are you anyway, kid?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Christ, I’m a creaky ancient.” She swigs down the cranberry juice. “You sure you don’t wanna go find yourself a younger playmate?”

Wade’s eyes tighten around the edges with his smile as he leans in again to brace his arms on the bar. “Isn’t it in your job description to wrangle with half-ton toddlers?”

“Doesn’t mean I want to do that in my free time, clever boy. A-plus on the racial-body-type profiling, by the way.” She spins the glass in a circle on the countertop.

“Is it still profiling if it’s accurate?”

“’Fraid so, Aussie boy. Lemme guess – actor? Out of work? Looking for someone to occupy you for a couple hours? Not that you aren’t paid to lie, anyway.”

Wade inclines his head. “And what would a jockey be doing sitting at a bar drinking cranberry juice on a Tuesday night for, if she wasn’t out in search of the same?”

Jackie runs her tongue over her teeth. “What, indeed?” She studies the arms he has folded on the bartop, the tendons running from his wrists down into his fingers. He hasn’t been drinking, either, hadn’t ordered a thing the entire time she was watching him. “You got a car, Aussie?”

“Indeed.”

“What’s my name?”

“Jacqueline.”
“Excellent.” She slaps the bar and hops off her stool. “You’re coming with me.”

***

“You’re late,” Lydia notes when Jackie swaggers into the barn at a quarter to eight. “Since when does that happen?”

Jackie waves her off. “Late night, and you guys didn’t need me any earlier anyway. Who’m I getting on?”

“Dub.”

Jackie’s expression doesn’t alter, but her tone is careful when she says, “Alright then,” and then that all breaks when Isaac sticks his head out of the tack room and she scowls. “What’re you smirking at, Lahey?”

“You,” he retorts. “What was their name?”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Stiles pauses midway through clipping Spitz into the cross-ties and almost loses a finger for it. “Were you out with somebody?” he asks between grumbling insults. “Is that it?”

“Because that’s suddenly your fucking business?”

“He or she?” Lydia asks. “Or somewhere in the middle?”

“How about we talk horses now and harass one another about our personal lives after workouts are finished?” Laura says. “Because I greatly prefer that idea.”

“But-”

“You don’t get a pass because of Der, Stiles, so don’t even think about it.” Laura pauses, then turns to Jackie. “Everything’s alright, though? I’m not calling the cops on anyone?”

Jackie rolls her eyes. “Yes, because the CIA-style background checks of everyone I’ve dated since sophomore year clearly weren’t enough, and I can now sleep easy knowing that some woman with less paranoid friends was raped in my stead. This is why Derek stopped telling you anything once he hit high school.” When a stiffness closes over Laura’s face, Jackie sighs and takes a softer tone. “His name is Wade and he’s Australian and one of the million unemployed actors in this city and he was very, very sweet and chances are we’ll never run into each other ever again.”

Laura closes her eyes, expression shifting towards a forced amusement. “You fucked an Australian?”


***

The fall isn’t a fall so much as a toss, an impact, a launch. Yogi’s just beginning to truly stretch his muscles while Stiles posts along, and nothing happens – no crack, no explosion, nothing outside of them changes at all, but in the space of an instant Yogi goes from being pinned to the ground by the earth’s gravitational force to not, to surging up. That’s all Stiles remembers: going up. Well,
that and a flash-frozen moment of having his face pressed into Yogi’s neck and his right arm thrown across his withers, half-hanging on and thinking No, no, let go with the desperation of someone who knows they are doing the exact wrong thing in a dangerous scenario.

He blinks – it seems – and is curled in the dirt with tears streaked down his face and a throbbing in the base of his skull. He spits out a mouthful of track. “Yogi.”

Somehow the gelding is almost a hundred yards away, wheeling around an outrider, but he turns his head and charges towards Stiles in another moment. Derek intercepts him halfway and Yogi skids to a halt, snorting, shaking his head, dancing away again as soon as Derek pulls the reins over his head. They both look to Stiles as he clambers to his feet with hands shaking and knees turned to jello. “You alright?” Derek calls.

“Fine, yeah.” Stiles pulls off his helmet, bends over for a moment to brace against his knees. He takes a deep breath before straightening up. “I’m fine.”

Derek is coming towards him now. “Go sit down.”

“But-”

“You’re not getting back on.”

“I…” His head pounds. “Are you?”

“Yes.” Derek has to look up into Stiles’ face now. His jaw is a stiff line. “Go sit down.”

Stiles’ mouth has gone dry and nodding makes the pressure on his skull fluctuate, but he totters off to the side of the track to sink down atop the rail. He closes his eyes.

“Stiles?”

“Mmmmmh.”

“Stiles, get up.” Stiff fingers dig into his shoulder, rattling him. “You alright?”

He tilts his chin back to peer into Erica’s eyes. (Hadh’t he sat down on the rail, not in front of it?) “I’m fine.”

“What happened?” Isaac’s standing behind Erica with Skater, the filly idly trying to duck her head down to snap at the thin grass lining the path. “Stiles?”

“Got thrown. Hit my head. Derek’s…” He glances across the track. Derek is sitting stiff in the saddle while Yogi canters along, reins short, heels down, forcing him to keep his head high and move uphill. Yogi is chomping at the bit and shaking his head and switching his lead every couple of strides, but he can’t get his head down to gain leverage over Derek. That isn’t stopping him from putting up a fight. Stiles licks his lips. “I’m gonna go back to the barn. Just give me a minute – I’ll be alright.”

***

“Why are you asking me? I’m not a doctor.”

“I refuse to go to a doctor,” Stiles says. “You’re the best alternative who I can trust. You really think I’m okay?”

“I don’t know,” Scott whines. “You don’t sound that much weirder than usual.”
“Define ‘that much’.”

He can hear Scott shrug over the phone. “You sound stressed, not muddled or confused.”

“But I am confused,” Stiles protests. “I am so confused. Everything is weird. I mean, this was all pre-possible-concussion, but still, it’s weird. Like, Erica went and had a seizure and came back and no one is talking about it even though they all think about it – you can see it on their faces when she walks in. How is she even riding if she has seizures? There has to be some legal shit going on there. And, uh, Lydia’s skewed now too – I feel like I talk to Isaac more than her, even though he’s way down at the other end of the barn; shit, I talk to Jackie more than I do Lydia. I think I talked to Lydia more when she was a jockey than I do now, I don’t… she’s in the background all the time, probably calculating our respective rates of respiration or something. I don’t get it And Boyd barely seems to be around anymore and, like… I speak with Derek more than anyone else right now. Derek. Sourwolf. I can’t… where has my life gone?” He stops. “That got ramble-y. Sorry.”

Scott sighs. “Have you noticed that this is the first conversation we’ve had in two weeks, and you only called me because you wanted me to figure out if you have a concussion?”

“You haven’t called me either,” Stiles protests, but it’s accusatory and weak. He gnaws on his lower lip. “Sorry. Again.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Scott mumbles. “I gotta go take a shower.”

“Alright. Talk to you later?”

“Sure thing.” Scott clears his throat. “Bye.”

***

On March ninth, the morning of the San Felipe Stakes, Scottie Maxwell asks Jorge to come in early, in time for the workouts. He walks into the barn shortly before six to find a black filly on cross-ties in the aisle, standing at attention. She has a blaze wide enough to make her wall-eyed and smears of white up all of her legs: stockings in the back, high socks in the front. “Since when are Thoroughbreds piebald?” he asks.

Maxwell doesn’t laugh. “This is Disparitated,” she says. “She needs gate approval, so break her and take her three furlongs with whoever they send you out with.”

“That’ll be Hale horses, then. Probably those twin fillies.”

Maxwell nods. “See if she’ll stay with that big filly – the one with the bloody shoulder. If she can stick it to that one, we may have another stakes winner with us.”

Jorge extends a hand for the filly to sniff. “We’ll see.”

***

That white colt, Spitz, is staring down the gate when Jorge and Disparitated trot up. Jackie is letting the big gray one pace to keep herself occupied while they wait, and Eddie sits quietly aboard a dark chestnut colt who has even more white on him than Disparitated.

Jorge inclines his head to Jackie. “Donde está su hermana?”

“Already got approval. This bitch is still slow out of the gate and Hale doesn’t like it.” Rodriguez manages to urge Spitz into the gate, and Disparitated loads without complaint. Jackie and the gray
fill the slot next to them; she leans over to speak through the bars. “Guess what her name is.”

“No sé.”


“Quien lo diseñ-” The doors slam shut behind Eddie’s colt and Jackie waves him silent. They hunch over their horses’ necks, twining fingers into manes and hanging on tight, waiting for the bell. When it comes, Disparitated gets off seamlessly. Jackie and Nerve vanish from Jorge’s peripheral vision, late out of the gate as they are, but Spitz is ahead on the inside, already pulling away – Disparitated’s sluggish to build up speed, and within a couple jumps Nerve is flashing by, all show and splash. Scottie said to run with her, so Jorge snaps his crop against Disparitated’s flank, only once, and relishes in the effort she makes to go after the huge filly. It gets her past Spitz and matches her with Eddie’s colt, has her shoving her nose at Nerve’s hip, trying – and failing – to close the rest of the space between them, and she’s fallen away again by the three-eighths pole.

Jorge stands up in the stirrups. Maxwell’s watching, he knows, and both colts are still behind them.

***

Stoner ships out late in the afternoon on the thirteenth, three days after Pig misses winning the Las Flores by a nose courtesy of Hath Fury, one of the six horses who ran all over Slaw in the San Vicente. (The dark gray filly rallied late in the San Felipe on March ninth, coming home fourth, but Jackie claims that she felt more like herself, and has repeatedly pointed out that they were up against a field of Kentucky Derby/Triple Crown contenders that included Ghostchant and Red N Raw.) Lydia is currying Bury in the aisle when Isaac leads the stallion out to the waiting trailer, and she watches Sass poke her head from her stall, her ears pricked with interest. She whickers. Stoner pauses at the base of the ramp to neigh a reply, then plods up it. In the time it takes Isaac to reemerge, Lydia works her way around to Bury’s other side, and she pretends not to notice his red eyes while the trailer is closed up.

Sass snorts a question, then freezes when the gate rattles.

The engine rumbles to life.

The filly’s eyes go wide, rings of white in the pale brown of her face; she squeals as the wheels begin to turn. Isaac goes to her, murmuring, “Easy, girl. Easy, easy.”

The trailer hits the road leading out of the backside with a bayed farewell buried in its rumble, and Sass’ shriek touches a human nerve as the gleaming metal slides out of her sight. Isaac has a hand on her neck, petting restlessly, eyes fixed open and staring blankly towards the tire treads left in the dirt, not even blinking when she squeals again.

The filly’s heaving bellow-force breaths are pitifully insufficient to fill the silence that follows her cries. Stiles clears his throat; Derek scuffs his feet against the floor. Laura stands by the entrance, chin up, spine straight, shoulders back, hands clasped at the base of her spine, inhales and exhales stringently measured. Lydia sets down her curry comb, stares into the tack box for the space of three breaths, then straightens up again with a stiff-bristled brush in her grip and gets back to work.

***

Laura was hundreds of miles away when the Hale barns and house burned to ash in the middle of the night. She never heard the screams, horse or human. For her, the flames lick at rafters and walls and cross-beams and flesh in a decadent and glorified silence. And she never saw her mother
die – this feels like the height of criminality.

Derek makes a drug store run to get antihistamines for his pollen allergy twenty minutes after they get home; by the time he returns she’s made a significant dent in the bottle of tequila that she bought and hid once hype started building up between Stoner and Hand And A Half – she hadn’t *drunk* it, so it hadn’t broken the ‘no booze’ rule. She’s working under an exemption right now. Extenuating circumstances. Seriously. *Seriously.*

“Der,” she says when she looks up to see him standing there. “Der, Der, Derek.”

“Laura, what are you…” His eyes catch on the bottle. “Laura.”

“Chill the fuck out, Derek.” She scowls at the shot glass as she refills it. “You need to relax a bit. I need to relax… a bit. More than a bit.” She wrinkles her nose. “It’s been a long meet – a long year. Long, long, *long.*” Downing the shot. “I can’t feel my chest at all nowadays, Der. I gotta loosen up; gotta breath.” The glass topples itself over when she sets it down. “Shitfuck.”

“Laura.”

“Get out of my face, Derek Hale.” She caps the bottle. “Go fuck yourself.”

Derek doesn’t move when she swaggers past him into her bedroom. And fuck daylight savings, seriously – why is it still light outside?

She sinks onto the bed, groans and curls into a ball at the foot of it. She feels stupidly tired. She yawns. “You piece of shit,” she tells the wall. “Who gave you the right to be here? No one. *No one.*” She yawns again. “Shoulda paid attention. Fuckin’ worthless, Hale. They’re all right. You knew they were.” And she goes to sleep.

***

Isaac is juggling three full feed buckets and his phone, trying to text Allison that sure, he’ll go for a run tonight, when Derek walks in alone. “Where’s Laura?”

“Asleep.”

Stiles shoves Slaw’s face away so he can hook her bucket into the wall of her stall. “Laura? Sleep? On a race day? Bush is running-“

“She needs it,” Derek says.

Isaac sets down his buckets. “Shit, did she…?” Derek’s expression silences him. “Okay.”

“Get Schizo and her sister ready. We need to see if they share more than a dam.”

The handlers all glance at one another, then nod. Derek glares at them until they force themselves into gear once more, and when Laura does arrive a few minutes before six nobody dares to let their gaze linger on her, or on the empty stall by the door, and when Sass barely touches her morning feed Isaac hands Derek the bucket of grain before the first set of workouts goes out, and he does it without saying a word.

***

Lydia ignores the pang in her spine when Isaac boosts her into the saddle of the skinny, long-limbed black filly they’ve taken to calling *Flea.* Erica, already sitting on Schizo, gives her a small
smile. “We’re the broken girls on the beautiful horses, aren’t we?”

Lydia doesn’t smile back. “Depends on your definition of ‘broken’.”

The filly snorts as they trot out, and the extra jolt from her disproportioned legs snaps Lydia’s breath from her lungs with every stride. She has to remind herself not to let her hands bounce on the reins. She can’t sit the canter – but no one could on this horse, there’s so much movement. Knotting her fingers in the black strands of the filly’s mane, she clucks for a gallop. Schizo, without hesitation, fires up her engine in response to thunder after them, passes by easily, stretching out between the dirt and the spotlights.

Lydia carves the sight a place in her memory, then shuts her eyes, takes a deep breath, and falls.
A young man is crunched up in the chair next to the bed, fast asleep, with his head resting against the wall, when Patrick ventures into the room to check on Ms. Lydia Martin. She studies him coolly from where she’s propped up on her pillow with an IV in her arm while he lingers in the doorway.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine. When can I leave?”

“As soon as the docs clear you.” He gestures at the man in the chair. “Boyfriend?”

Her expression stiffens even further. “Of course.” Her gaze narrows. “He stays.”

Patrick nods, gets an eyeful of sharp-angled cheekbones and pale brown curls, a thin cut of a mouth. “Nice catch,” he says.

Martin smiles.

***

Is there a reason you called me three times last night?

Heard about Lydia, Scott types. Wanted to check on you.

I was at the hospital with her. She’s... fine? I don’t know; something’s been off since they told her she couldn’t ride. The fall yesterday wasn’t the horse’s fault at all – I was watching. She just went limp, like she’d fainted, and came right off.

Scott makes a curious noise in his throat. What happens now?

She’ll come back to grooming, probably? I don’t know; she worries me.

Its Lydia, Scott taps out. Lydia Martin. If shes got a problem shes not gonna want help.

Isaac takes a minute to respond. She’s not Allison. Nothing’s ever that simple.

***

Stiles sits with his elbows on his knees on the bench of a picnic table somebody decided to leave sitting in the middle of the backside, watching Yogi graze with the sunlight gleaming off his damp coat. Heavy footsteps precede Derek’s weight settling onto the plank next to him. Stiles scrubs a hand through his hair before speaking: “How’s Lydia?”

“Alright, it seems.” Derek shrugs. “She’ll be back tomorrow."

“Oh... kay.” Stiles waits, but there’s nothing else. He rolls the lead rope between his palms and glances up when Yogi snorts at a passing horse, lets himself breathe a little of the sun and heat that herald the oncoming summer. When he sneaks a peek at Derek, his eyes are closed and his arms are folded across his chest, and he’s leaning back against the table, doing an excellent job of pretending to doze off. Stiles hesitates, then scoots closer.

Derek cracks one eye open.
Stiles lets his head touch Derek’s shoulder, hears him sigh. “This not okay?”

Derek shifts; the lead line is pried from Stiles’ fingers. “Go to sleep,” he says.

Stiles doesn’t, but he sits there with his eyes shut and the sun on his head, listening to Derek’s regular breathing, to Yogi tearing at the grass, to the faint cheers from the grandstand that get carried on the wind alongside the smell of fresh hay. It’s a full twenty minutes before he moves again.

***

“So how are you?”

“Fine.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.”

“Erica said-”

“Is Erica me?”

“No.” Allison shuffles the salad around its bowl, spreading the dressing more evenly, buying more time to organize her thoughts. “But she isn’t blind, and neither are any of the other people who saw you fall and said it looked intentional. And Erica said you made a weird comment just before you guys went out, so I’m curious. We don’t have the girls’ nights anymore; this is the next best thing.”

“I’m fine.” When Allison turns around, Lydia is scanning the kitchen with chilly removal. “Isaac came to the hospital with me. He spent the night.”

“I know; he texted me.” Allison blinks. “This isn’t about him, is it? You guys have been done for years, you… you said…”

Lydia sits and watches her.

“You’re better than this,” Allison hears herself say. “Or whatever you’re thinking about doing: you’re better than that.”

“Better than what?” Lydia’s smile curves over her face. “I’m invincible,” she says. “Everybody knows that. Everybody. And it’s been a long time since I’ve met someone who knew better. Seven years: a long, long time.”

“So you fell to prove a point or…?”

“I fell,” Lydia says. “Because making yourself fall hurts less than getting thrown.”

Allison frowns. “That sounds like it wants to make more sense than it does.”

Lydia shrugs and turns her gaze away. “The water’s boiling.”

***

When Isaac takes Sass out of her stall an hour before the San Luis Rey, her first response is to bite him. She gets him on the forearm once, just below the joint of his elbow, as he’s leading her out, then again on the shoulder while he’s clipping her into the cross-ties. She keeps her ears pinned the
entire time he’s grooming her, and actively lashes out with a hind foot when Laura passes by.

Laura is less than pleased. “Get a twitch,” she orders. “This is ridiculous; Stoner is gone.”

The twitch helps somewhat – Isaac avoids getting his skull caved in while picking out her feet, anyway – but Sass’ teeth come within millimeters of closing on Lydia’s wrist after she removes it. Lydia yanks her arm away in time for the filly to scrape off no more than a few layers of skin, but the delivered slap prompts no result beyond re-pinned ears and bared teeth.

Isaac cracks his gum and pretends the nausea coiled in his gut is food poisoning. “Be careful,” he wants Jackie in the paddock. “She’s in a nasty mood.”

Jackie shrugs. “She misses her dumb idiot. Shouldn’t stop her from running her race.”

***

One of the things Holly likes about Wade is that he freely acknowledges knowing nothing about horses, but when she tells him to come waste an afternoon at the racetrack with her because she doesn’t want to go alone, he shrugs and says “alright” and does an excellent job of appearing as a wary boyfriend when men on their third and fourth and fifth beers start studying her too closely. “My pretty pansexual Pacifican bodyguard,” she calls him.

He rolls his eyes and tosses an arm over the back of her seat as the post parade for the eighth race begins. “Which one’s this?”


Wade shuffles himself around and leans forward. “What’s weird about Vaca?”

“That’s ‘cow’ in Spanish. Literally. Also ‘vacant’ if you’re describing a feminine location, such as the beach. *La playa vaca:* the vacant beach.” She shrugs. “It’s an interesting name, that’s all.”

“Interesting person.”

Holly frowns. “What?”

“Interesting person, I said.” Wade glances at them. “There aren’t many non-binary jockeys, are there?”

“Point for the Australian,” they say. “I think Emilia knows her. She introduce you?”

Wade blinks. “I didn’t know that.”

“I think she does. Or it’s a friend-of-a-friend thing, but… you betting on her? Ten bucks if she wins?”

Wade smiles. “Sure.”
“Cool. I’ve got Powerful Mars - she’s a speed demon.”

The seven-horse field breaks from high on the hillside turf course and will run the first three furlongs downhill – the San Luis Rey is twelve furlongs, a mile and a half, about as long as horse races get these days. Every Cali-bred in the field is known for matched speed and stamina; Shalt and Ingando, from Florida and Kentucky, respectively, are more mysterious. Eastern horses have been known to be surprised by the fast California tracks and burn themselves out well before the stretch in long races, but both mares have been at the track for multiple weeks, and Clark Mack is a California homebred himself.

*So it goes,* Holly thinks, and clicks her tongue as the gates open.

Shalt gets away ahead on the inside, though Powerful Mars flashes by in a matter of moments and promptly glues herself to the rail as soon as she’s clear of the other mare. Born Soldier, the field’s only colt, is forced out alongside Voz de Paz when Raunchesstra starts to shove between him and Shalt. They pass the wire for the first time with Sticky Stones and Ingando pinned behind a solid wall of horseflesh. Jorge Gustam keeps Powerful Mars in the lead with a blazing clip that runs the first quarter in :21 3/5 and the second in :23 2/5 and has them roaring through the clubhouse turn in excellent time.

In the middle of the backstretch the clock hits 1:34 4/5 for the mile and Raunchesstra begins to fall off the pace. Sticky Stones nudges further out to let her pass. Ben Sull isn’t done, though: the chestnut filly stays stuck against Shalt’s side, leaving Sticky Stones nowhere to go with Ingando on her outside and two horses in front. Born Soldier swings inside to save ground by taking up the space left by Raunchesstra, and Voz de Paz goes with him. Their movement leaves Ingando with a clear track ahead, but she too is beginning to tire, and appears incapable of moving up further.

Holly turns her head to watch them curve into the last turn and registers that Wade is leaning forward again and has his hands gripping one another under his chin, tendons standing out and bleaching his skin.

Raunchesstra continues to slow and lose another few inches of ground with every stride even as Powerful Mars begins to extend her lead. Born Soldier is slackening his pace as well, while Voz de Paz pulls away and Sticky Stones follows in her footsteps to move up. As she passes Raunchesstra, the chestnut filly lowers her head and drives after her once more. Ingando has given up completely and Born Soldier has run himself off his feet straining to maintain the pace, but Voz de Paz is still accelerating and Powerful Mars has led a long, weary race. Sticky Stones has Raunchesstra shoving at her hip for their second pass of the grandstand when Powerful Mars lurches out, almost in front of her, not bumping – it’s a move into open space, she’s got no one near her, but Voz de Paz thrusts out her nose and Holly is hanging over the railing and Sticky Stones pins her ears and the wire flashes by as she twists her head down and heaves her rear into the air to buck, buck, buck, has Jacqueline Vaca slamming her seat down into the saddle and hauling up on the reins.

The filly tosses her head, then collapses from a gallop to a trot in a move that closely resembles a stumble, but she bounces right up again, sweat-slick, gleaming, safe. The photo of the finish pups up on the board: it’s Voz de Paz by a head, officially, though Powerful Mars still had almost two lengths’ lead over Sticky Stones. Official time is 2:22.72.

Scanning her program, Holly inhales with surprise. “That’s… that’s a stakes record right there. Two-twenty-two point eight, before.”

“For Voz de Paz.” Wade sits up again. “Neither of us wins, then.”

Holly sighs. “I’ll get you on the next race.” She fingers her phone, contemplating snapping a
picture to draw later, then sets it down. “There’s Emilia.” She’s cantering across the turf on Toby to take up position beside Ingando. “I told her we three should grab dinner sometime this week. Maybe after you hear if you got a job?”

“Sure,” Wade says. “I don’t see a problem with that.”

***

Eddie offers to buy her and Jorge dinner on Monday night in good sport over his win, and somehow they magically end up eating at the same restaurant as Emilia the outrider. (Jackie and Jorge test out their deadpans against the blinding obviousness of Eddie’s crush, and swap raised eyebrows while he spends half the meal craning his neck to peer across the room.) Jackie’s facing a wall, so she never sees Emilia’s little group enter or sit down, but Jorge grunts “flacos y jovenes y blancos” at one point and that tell her all she needs to know. And she thinks that’s it, that they’re done, but no sooner have they paid the bill and stood up than Eddie is hauling them over to a table with three people sitting around it.

“Hey, Em,” he says.

Emilia smiles; a tiny, pale white girl beams at them; and Wade the Australian glances up from a plate-sized garden salad and freezes when his gaze lands on Jackie. Meanwhile, Emilia waves a hand over the jockeys. “This is Eddie, Jorge, and Jackie,” she says, pointing at them in turn. “These two are Holly and Wade.”

Wade blinks. “I… hello.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Holly says. When Eddie bows and Jorge inclines his head, she adds, “Would you care to join us? I’m a big racing fan.”

Jackie glances at Wade, then away, catching Jorge’s eye. “I need to go.”

He nods. “As do I.”

“I can stay.” Eddie parks himself in the empty chair beside Emilia. “I drove myself here.”

“Knock yourself out, kiddo. Have a nice night.” Jackie forces a smile, then jerks her chin at Jorge. “Vamanos?”

“Vamanos. Adios.” He lets her lead as they wend their way through the maze of tables to the exit. It’s a chilly night for March, temperature down into the fifties, and she shivers once they walk outside.

The restaurant door swings open when they’re a step from the curve. “Jacqueline?”

“Oh, fuck,” she mumbles. “Necesito un momento – grab my truck?” She tosses Jorge her keys, then pivots on her heel while he strides off into the dark. Wade lingers a few feet away. “What do you want, Aussie?”

His head tilts sideways. “I bet Holly ten bucks you’d win the San Luis.” He smiles. “She put her money on Powerful Mars.”

“So you both lost.” Jackie clasps her hands behind her back. “Is that supposed to endear you to me? ‘Hey, check me out, I know something about horse racing; I’m special, I –’”

“I know nothing,” Wade says. “She asked me to come because she gets nervous being alone in
crowds.”

“She your girlfriend?”

“Just a friend.”

“Uh huh.” Jackie rocks up onto the balls of her feet. “So you just… followed me out here… because we’ve been transported into a terrible romantic comedy?”

“I hope not?” Wade grimaces. “I wasn’t expecting to see you again, until – I wasn’t sure it was you when your name turned up in the program, but then Holly said… she cleared it up.”

Jackie waves him silent. “Transgender jockey, I know, it gets around. But you not being a racing buff, I’d figured we were both set to drop off the other’s radar for a couple years at least.” She licks her lips. “That studio ever get back to you?”

“Yeah – I mean, they said no, but… yeah.”

“That blows.”

“I’ll live – find something else.”

“Cute,” she murmurs, then: “They teach you optimism in acting school?”

“They tried.” Wade shrugs. “I’d like to see you again – if that’s okay? If I’m bearable?”

Jackie snorts and half-raises her arms. “You’re seeing me now.” When he sighs, she rolls her eyes and digs out her phone. “Give me your number, kid. And no stupid shit for the contact name.”

His grin lights up the parking lot, and when he hands it back she fires off a text reading “Aussie” that makes it grow even wider. “You were really great out there on Saturday,” he says. “Not that I can even pretend to be knowledgeable, but that was -”

“Shut up.” Jackie twists up the hem of her shirt in her fists. Who gave you the right?

“I think I’ve kept Jorge waiting long enough.”

Wade’s smile softens, and he nods. “They’re probably wondering if I’ve been kidnapped, inside.”

“Probably.”

They stand and stare at each other.

“I’ll see you around,” Jackie says. “So long as you don’t mind horses and horse people and the smell of leather and hay and horse shit.”

Wade grins again. “For you, I can manage.” He ducks his head and starts to back towards the restaurant once more. “I’ll see you later?”

“Yeah, later.”

Jorge is sitting in shotgun with the engine running and the radio playing at a low volume when she climbs in. “Estás bien?”

“Estoy bien.” She shifts into gear.

“Vas a llamarlo?”
“Cierra su boca.” She pauses at the entrance of the parking lot, checking left, then right. “Pero sí.”

He stares out the windshield. Deadpanning. “Bueno.”

“Tu boca. Cierrala.”

Jorge smirks.

***

The Hale barn is quiet when Allison walks in on Wednesday afternoon. Not quiet as in peaceful – quiet as in somebody’s died. Lydia is oiling a saddle, and Stiles has a dark bay, wall-eyed colt grazing on a lead line outside. Isaac is currying a black filly on cross-ties. When he sees Allison, he manages a weary smile. “Hey.”

Sticky Stones snorts and lashes out at the wall with a hind foot. Allison stands in from of the filly on cross-ties for a moment, then picks up a hard brush to follow in the wake of Isaac’s curry comb. “Who is this?”

“Allison walks in on Wednesday afternoon. Not quiet as in peaceful – quiet as in somebody’s died. Lydia is oiling a saddle, and Stiles has a dark bay, wall-eyed colt grazing on a lead line outside. Isaac is currying a black filly on cross-ties. When he sees Allison, he manages a weary smile. “Hey.”

“Clinical Sanity – Schizo’s half-sister.”

“Skinny thing.”

“We’ve been calling her Flea. Because of the legs.”

“I see.” She sweeps the brush down the filly’s neck. “How you holding up?”

“I’m fine.”


“She’s fine,” Isaac says.

Allison stops brushing. Lydia, she realizes, is close enough to eavesdrop without strain, but neither Hale is in sight. “Where are the Hales?”

He jerks his chin at the rear tack room’s doors. “Talking.”

“Allright. You wanna hang out tonight?” And stop being a dumbass just because you don’t want people worrying?

Isaac steps around behind Flea to pick shavings from her tail. His mouth quirks. “Sure.”

***

He falls asleep with his head in Allison’s lap, the two of them sprawled on his bed in a sluggish tangle. She’s carding fingers through his hair when he passes out, the fan humming overhead, and it’s been a long week. They Skyped Scott earlier, when they first returned from their run, and he was sleepy and worn down and had seemed very far away through the screen. And then, afterwards, they’re already been on the bed and she’d started playing idly with Isaac’s hair while she sat there, and he’d… closed his eyes and fallen asleep.

When he wakes up, there’s a pillow under his head, Allison is tucked in against his chest, and Randy Blythe is howling the chorus of ‘Redneck’ from his phone’s speakers. He rolls over to turn off the noise, then switches on the light.
“That is a song that wannabe-goth middle schoolers set as the sound track to their lives.”

“That is a song that wakes you up when you’re wasted and going to bed at three in the morning when you need to be up at four-thirty.” He peers over his shoulder at her. “Does sort of kill the mood, though, I’ll give you that.”

Allison raises her eyebrows and sits up. “Yeah, alright, Casanova. I’m stealing your shower.” She climbs over him and hops to the floor, bends down to kiss him when he props himself up on his elbows.

“There’s no free coffee service here.”

“I know.” She grins, ruffles his hair, and steals one of his shirts on her way across the room.

***

The blanket gets ripped off Stiles in a single jerk, and he yelps when the overhead light stabs into his eyes. “What the fuck – Isaaaaaaaaaaac.”

“Rise and shine!” Isaac grabs his foot and hauls him off the bed entirely. “We’ve got horses to feed.”

Stiles whines: “We always have horses to feed; get off me.”

“What are you gonna do, set Yogi on me?”

“You are like everyone’s worst-nightmare vision of a frat brother, except you’re a twenty-five-year-old man working at a racetrack.”

Stiles flails amidst his tangle of blankets. “Allison?”

She waves at him from the doorway. “Hi.” Her grin is evil.

Isaac snatches at Stiles’ waving arm and yanks him to his feet, almost dislocating his shoulder in the process. “The two-year-olds are having an early work today, all of them at six sharp, and Laura wants to start prepping Nye for a race. Also, Dub’s getting worked, so Lydia’s gonna be in a lovely mood, and if you’re not in the barn in twenty minutes I’m telling Derek you pick your nose in your sleep.”

“I hate you.”

“Good.” Isaac raps his knuckles on Stiles’ forehead. “See you in nineteen minutes, Stilinski.” And then he just walks out with Allison, digging a pack of gum out of his pocket as he saunters along a step behind her.

***

Laura stares at the entrance form for the Tokyo City Cup that is sitting on her desk. “I need a favor of you, Der.” When she lifts her eyes, he’s watching her, gaze firm. She isn’t going to get a response. “I want you to sell Yogi.”

“Why.” Not a question.

She barks a laugh. “Because he’s a piece of shit? A waste of time? A lunatic? Worthless? An abomination?”
Derek’s shoulders bow inwards.

“He’s a four-year-old who has won one maiden and one allowance race that had ‘optional claiming’ in the title. I’m not sure if you’ve looked around our barn recently, Der, but we have the winners of the Miss America Stakes, the Crystal Waters, the Hollywood Prevue, and the San Pasqual Stakes. We have Schizophrenia, winner of The Matriarch – until a few days ago we had the stallion who took home the Citation Handicap and the Hollywood Turf Cup. Even Ernest and Booze can be entered in stakes race, and Howard and Booze can win allowances with some regularity even though they’re both on their way out.”

“Yogi’s mine,” Derek says.

“Yogi is a piece of shit you bought for fifteen hundred dollars at an auction when you were supposed to be talking to a potential client.”

“Yogi is my horse,” Derek says.

Laura takes a deep breath. “He’s in my barn.”

All emotion vanishes from Derek’s face. “No.”

Laura folds her arms across her chest. “Your horse. My barn. No longer.” She glances up, at the doorway. “Stiles.”

Stiles has a death grip on the doorframe, eyes locked on Laura’s, and there doesn’t appear to be a single drop of blood left in his face. A muscle in his jaw works as he swallows and Derek’s eyes pinch closed in the moment before he speaks. “You’re selling Yogi?”

Derek opens his mouth, then locks it shut.

Laura frames a smile on her face when she meets Stiles’ eyes. “Yes,” she says. “As soon as possible.”

“I see.” Stiles blinks. “The fillies are ready to go.”

“Alright.” Laura shoves her chair back from her desk. “I’m on my way.”

Derek doesn’t move until she’s walking past him, until she’s almost through the doors. “I’m not selling him.”

“Drop the dream, Der,” she calls. “It’s not going to live much longer.”

***

Stiles spends the day hyperaware of two things: Yogi’s presence, and the empty stall next to Sass. He doesn’t tell Lydia about what he overheard, because she won’t care, and he doesn’t tell Isaac, because even though he might care, to what end would it be? It hurt Stiles to watch Stoner leave, and Isaac’s known Yogi a hell of a lot longer, even though he dislikes him. Stiles wasn’t exactly fond of Stoner.

After lunch, when everything goes quiet around the backside – it’s a dark day, no races – he brings Yogi out of his stall, clips a lead line onto his halter, and takes him out the rear of the stable. From there they start walking.

Yogi ambles peaceably beside him, nostrils flared to absorb the fresh scents of spring, pulling at
Stiles every now and again when he spies a particularly delectable-looking patch of grass. Stiles keeps him walking with a cluck and a tug on the lead, and they continue onwards, passing countless barns, dozens of shedrows, hundreds of stalls.

Pim Byrns is grazing Ghostchant when they get to his stable – he inclines his head to them, and Ghostchant gives them a flick of his ears. Matt Daehler is facing the entrance of his barn with a camera in hand, snapping pictures. He doesn’t turn around. Kevin Duarte is chain-smoking cigarettes and talking to Jorge, who raises a hand at their passage. Emilia Roberts clip-clops past on Toby Blue with another young woman beside them, who ducks her head and smiles shyly at Stiles. Victoria and Gerard Argent are strolling along the path at an intersection – at their barn, Chris Argent is unloading a familiar fleabitten gray filly from a trailer with Allison’s assistance.

Stiles lets Yogi drag him to a halt. “Is that Phoenix?” he calls.

Allison beams at him. “Sure is!” Her brow furrows. “What are you doing over here?”

He gestures at where Yogi is cropping grass with gusto. “Out for a walk.”

Allison finishes leading Phoenix Flight down the ramp – her father takes ahold of the filly’s halter and leads her indoors, and Allison walks over to Stiles. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes… yeah.” Stiles pats Yogi’s side. “They’re selling this dude.”

“Yogi? Oh.” Allison looks over the crazy long line of Yogi’s neck and spine, running through her roster of expressions as she tries to find something acceptable. “He may be happier off the track, if they find someone who will train him up properly.” She touches the bulge of muscle in his neck. “If they can get him to keep his head up, he could be a schooling hunter or something. He could still be happy.”

“He’s happy running,” Stiles says. “If you’ve ever seen him after a race, or a workout, any time he’s been allowed to go and burn out his energy and run…” He scuffs his feet in the dirt. “Do you think Derek would let me buy him?”

“Oh, Stiles,” Allison says. “You don’t want to go down that road. It’s expensive and it wouldn’t be worth it and… no, Stiles, no. Let him go to some jumper barn and learn something new and be happy there. It’s not worth it.”

Stiles looks at Yogi. “Yeah, alright.”

***

“How much would you charge me for board if I bought Yogi from Derek?”

Laura doesn’t glance up. “No.”

“That’s not an answer.” Stiles sits down on the other side of her desk. “How much per month to keep Yogi here?”

“I said no because I don’t work like that.” Laura closes her notebook. “It’s very cute that you’re trying to be noble for Derek, but I want that horse out of my barn. I don’t want money for dealing with him; I want him gone.”

“There has to be something that would convince you to let him stay.”

“Stiles,” Laura snaps. “If the horse were worth keeping, I wouldn’t mind having him here. As it is?
He’s exactly the sort of animal I’ve been avoiding training, because he’s dangerous and a liability and doesn’t get me nearly enough money to cover his keep.”

“What’s the differential, the-”

“Stilinski.”

Stiles shuts his mouth.

Laura clasps her hands together and leans forward, loosening her grip on her self-control. “I am done with that horse. I am done tolerating his antics. I am done wasting money on him. I am done letting Derek play at being heroic. And I am done explaining myself to a boy who makes his money shoveling shit and brushing dirt off of horses who were worth more than his yearly salary when they had just been foaled. Bush is getting shipped out before the end of the month because he’s an old piece of shit and his owner wants to convert him into a hunter. And you don’t care. You know why you don’t care? Because Derek doesn’t care about Bush, no more than he has to. Because Derek doesn’t own him. And you only care about Yogi because you want Derek to like you, because Derek has put time and money and blood into that horse and doesn’t recognize a lost cause when it kicks a kid in the chest and puts him in the hospital for three days. If Yogi weren’t Derek’s, you’d wave goodbye as they loaded him into the trailer and laugh and say ‘good riddance’ while doing it.”

Stiles sits and stares at her. His eyes shine in sunlight pouring through the window. “Are you done?”

Laura reopens her notebook. “Only if you are.”
I would like to note that I'm not replying to comments anywhere near as much as I usually do, and that isn't because you guys have become less wonderful - it's because senior year is nowhere near as easy as people told me it was going to be, and I'm taking three APs and averaging twelve hours a week at my barn, and I don't want to give everyone stupid little meaningless "Thanks for commenting" notes instead of actual replies. So, I'll try to get back to you, but if I don't, it's not because I don't adore you for taking the time to read this - the comments are what keep me writing, after all. Happy spring!

“How much time do we have?”

“Until June first,” Derek says. “That’s her limit, and she’s serious. This isn’t going to go away on its own.”

“What if he won a stakes race?” Stiles asks.

Derek gives him a would-you-please-be-realistic glare. “Yogi’s never going to qualify to enter a stakes, much less win one.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Okay then.” Stiles swirls his Coke around with his straw. “But if he started winning allowances consistently-”

“Unlikely.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s Yogi? We have less than ten weeks and he’s two for twelve on wins already. How do you propose to turn that around?”

“Hey, nobody thought Dan Patch was gonna be any good because he had a screwy leg, and then he went and was like the best harness racer the world had ever seen. And Yogi’s… Yogi can be hella competitive, when it really comes down to it.”

Derek leans against the wall of the booth, studying Stiles. “That’s optimistic, coming from you.”

“Hey, I’m trying to help you out here.” Stiles pauses. “You sure there’s no way we could convince Laura to keep him that doesn’t involve an overnight transformation into a superstar?”

Derek shrugs. “I showed her his pedigree when she first tried to make me sell him; it didn’t change anything. He’s a gelding, after all.”

“Pedigree?” Stiles sits up. “What pedigree? Who is he, Petrone’s great-great-half-nephew? A direct
descendant of Man O’ War? Rags to Riches’ cousin? What secrets have you been keeping from me-?”

“He’s Bury’s half-brother,” Derek says. “And Nerve’s and Guapa’s. He’s out of Yogic Bear – they’re all sired by Bury the Corpses.”

“How does that-”

“I bought him from a woman named Kate Argent.”

Stiles’ mouth falls open. “Oh my god.”

Derek stares down at the table.

“Oh my god, Yogi’s one of – oh my god. And Laura said no?”

“He’s a gelding.”

“So’s Bury.”

“Bury is a different case,” Derek says. “She’s not doing this to hurt me; she’s trying to do what’s best for us, and she makes a valid point.”

“Valid point my ass,” Stiles mutters. “He’s your horse.”

Derek bites at the inside of his cheek. He doesn’t know how to keep Stiles from painting Laura the wrong way, not without telling him hours’ worth of stories about Laura dropping out of college at the end of her junior year to sort out the mess of the Hale estate, about the insurance money that vanished into compensation to other families who had mother and fathers grilled and crisped and burned to dust, about the expression on Laura’s face when she realized you couldn’t keep four horses on an open field of ash. He doesn’t want to mention the drinking that never turned into full-fledged alcoholism because of rent and groceries and Derek’s tuition and the price of gas that climbed steadily higher and the insurance on the Camaro that had been hers, her glory, her pride, the car she drove from San Francisco to Seattle over the week before her freshman orientation; after a certain point, Derek was picking up graveyard shifts at convenience stores while pretending to be out partying so that she wouldn’t have to pack it off to a new owner alongside all the horses. He doesn’t have the words to explain how a Camaro is a pittance in comparison to a broodmare who has produced a dozen stakes winners, or how money disappears so quickly at San Francisco rent prices. And Derek knows they weren’t ever poor – they never got near the poverty line, because Laura taught lessons and mucked out stalls and worked berserk hunter-jumpers who were terrifying their twelve-year-old owners and taught herself to jump when she’d never gone over a fence on horseback during the first twenty years of her life. And he can’t tell Stiles about the way that she sat down and cried for almost an hour after talking to Chris Argent on a bleak April day in 2006, after hearing that a spindly black colt with white stockings on his hind legs had been born last night, and he was a big one, a lively one, he was something to have hope about. And he knows that she took their name and ran with it, never compromised, never dealt with claimers, ran off pride and arrogance to force the world to treat her with respect, and Derek will never know how she made it work and only that she did, she did, and Yogi is everything she hates and everything that scares her and everything that could be, should be her life, and Derek knows that her pain is his fault, that this whole wreck is, and he’s know from the moment she asked that, yes, Yogi will go.

Stiles shuffles in his seat. “I know it’s not ideal or anything, but if you want, once we’re back in
San Fran, I can ask for a couple days off to poke around Beacon Hills and maybe find a good place for him to go? If he still has to leave? There are a lot of farms and stables around there; I could probably find something decent. Someone who will take care of him.”


Stiles takes a deep breath and smiles, cocky. “No – no problem.”

***

How a horse like Leocardian ends up in a low-grade stakes like the Tokyo City Cup is a mystery to anyone besides Pim Byrns and possibly the colt’s owner. Maybe it’s because sixty thousand dollars and a win here is more likely than the sprint necessitated by the $150,000 Potrero Grande Stakes on April sixth (Bury will run), or the fourteen-furlong San Juan Capistrano Handicap that will close the meet on the twenty-first, and the Tokyo City is the only other stakes a four-year-old colt with more stamina than speed can enter that doesn’t demand too much too soon, being set exactly three weeks after his fourth-place performance in the Santa Anita Handicap. Not that Lydia’s been paying attention.

Isaac materializes at her side a few seconds before the gates open, declaring “Gatsby was my horse, too” when she frowns. She lets him be.

For a twelve-furlong race, there isn’t much to see. The field breaks from the far side of the dirt track at the beginning of the turn into the stretch, so they get thirty or forty seconds of nine varying shades of brown jostling for initial positions, then about a minute of fading blurs as they swing through the clubhouse turn and into the backstretch, with only the announcer’s calls to interpret proceedings. And then they’re in the final turn, with the starting gate having been rolled off the track, and there are two dark chestnuts in the field: one trails the pack and one is in the midst of it, the latter ugly and square and without markings, the former a belligerent bundle of wires with a large, irregular star on his forehead, and they’re not the only horses there – there’s Sevas Tra; there’s MexicanJumpingBean… but Scotch Fitzgerald knows his enemies, as does Leocardian, and one’s a long, long way off the pace while the other’s a few feet from the lead. And they burn down the stretch with engines aflame while the grandstand howls and the sun beams on, uncaring, Dina Fasano chasing down Benjamin Sull, and the vast majority of the world rolls by without taking notice. But the horses charge on.

And Scotch Fitzgerald, McGatsby, Mick – he doesn’t do it. He’s short by a nose plus a head plus a neck plus the length of Leocardian’s body when they hit the finish line, a mile and a half covered in a hundred and forty-eight seconds, and Leocardian will take home his sixty thousand dollars as Pim Byrns planned. Scotch Fitzgerald will collect twenty thousand: two thousand for Dina, two thousand for the Hales – out of which will come two hundred for Lydia – and sixteen thousand for Ashley Valentine, his owner. Rough estimates.

When she hugs Isaac, he lets her, smooths a hand over her hair and doesn’t make her say anything. It only lasts a minute – less than that – enough time for Dina to bring Mick down to a trot, for outriders to swarm the track, for Leocardian to start posing for pictures even as he prances his way to the winner’s circle. Long enough for a decently-trained horse to run five-eighths of a mile.

***

“When in,” Laura says when she registers Isaac loitering in the doorway of her improvised office. “Have a seat.”

He stays put. “You know Derek left without you, right?”
“I told him to go; I can walk. The exercise will be good for me.”

“I see.” Isaac knocks his knuckles against the doorframe, then treads over to her desk, sinking into the chair in front of it. “This about Yogi?”

She begins fussing with some folders on her desk to keep her eyes busy. “What isn’t, these days?” She pauses, flexing one hand into a fist, then releasing. The knuckles crack obligingly. “Do you think Stiles has any true attachment to the horse, or is it all through Derek?”

Isaac humphs. “I think that Stiles wasn’t looking twice at Derek when he almost got his thumb bitten off. And I think a horse like Yogi knows exactly which humans give a shit about him and which don’t, and he’s placed Stiles firmly in the first category. So, to answer the question: you’re shit out of luck, boss.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.” She sighs and tilts her chin up, looking him in the eye. “Why are you the only person in this barn who has a scrap of decent judgment left in them?”

Isaac ducks his head, grinning like it pains him. “Careful – you’re referring to a guy who abandoned his hometown and everyone he knew the day he turned eighteen as someone with ‘decent judgment’. I thought you were saner than that.”

Laura shrugs. “Everyone has their demons. How much forethought did you put into leaving?”

“Between when the idea first occurred to me and when I got on the bus there were about… two hours. Maybe closer to three.” The grin stiffens into a smirk. “I was running.”

“From?”

“So how ‘bout that fire that killed your entire family, huh?”

“Your favorite diversion tactic,” Laura says dryly. “Alright, dropping the subject.”

“Excellent.” Isaac leans back, kicking his left ankle up onto the opposite knee. “On a tangential note, though, there is some weird shit going on with the twin fillies. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Boss has almost no stamina – maybe because she’s a tank – but… She could probably do three furlongs in thirty seconds if you asked her to, but then the time for the half-mile would be forty-six, forty-eight – she falls apart. And Guapa’s a lot better, but she has zero will to win unless it’s against her sister, and then it’s Sibling Rivalry: The Ultimate Showdown.”

“I’ve noticed,” Laura says. “I’m aware.” She smiles. “Maybe you should be assistant trainer instead of Derek.”

“Yeah right. You’re thirty years old, boss, and you’re going gray. Thanks but no thanks.”

Laura touches her temple – she saw the first strands of silver last summer, around the Fourth of July. They’re not glaringly obvious, but they are very much there. “You already work the same hours – longer ones, actually. And some could argue that you’ve got a better head on your shoulders than a certain man who answers to Sourwolf.”

“That’s really flattering,” Isaac says. “But I know what you’re really looking for a is way to get leverage over Derek – which you don’t even need because you’re his big sister and he’s going to do what you say eventually anyway – but thanks for the offer. I’ll stick with grooming.”

Laura looks at her hands. “I sent McKearn an email. He said Stoner arrived in fine condition, but it’s good that he’s done with racing because he tries to pick a fight with everything that comes
within reach.” She doesn’t miss the return of Isaac’s smile. “He’s going to have a long, fornication-filled life.”

“I’ll bet.” Isaac leans forward in his seat, wringing his hands. “Remember those two geldings from the hunter-jump barn? Onyx and Henry – the ones who were always going after each other?”

“I remember them regularly trying to bite each other’s faces off. What about them?”

“I don’t know, I just… thought of Stoner and Sass. Thought of them.”

Laura arches her eyebrows. “Why not the gay pony couple? Who was that? Hohum and Maestro?”

“The tubs of lard, yeah. They were cute.” Isaac cracks his gum. “You know who Boss reminds me of, just with the size and attitude?”

“Johnson,” Laura says automatically. “God, I remember that freak – two thousand pounds, half-draft, whatever he was, it was like driving a cement mixer. But he wasn’t so bad once you got ahold of his face and made him listen.”

“He hated Derek. And me slightly less.”

Laura hmmms in her throat. “This is true. He didn’t like tall guys. Was he the one who bit you on your first day?”

Isaac holds up his right hand; stretched over the jut of the inner wristbone is a pale pink blotch of scar tissue. “And somebody’s idea of first aid was to tell me that if I bled on anything leather it would be my job to clean it off.”

“You were a new grunt. I was doing quality control – weeding out potential weakness.”

“Jackie’s recommendation of the dumbshit kid she met in a bar wasn’t good enough?”

“Considering how she’s now going and picking up random Australian actors in… stop laughing, Lahey.”

Isaac keeps on snickering. “Have you even met the guy? ‘Cause Jorge and Eddie say he ain’t bad.”

“Why are you talking to Jorge and Eddie about – how do they know the guy, anyway?”

Shrugging, Isaac finally schools his expression into something more serious. “He’s a friend of one of the outriders, apparently. Better than some random dude picked off the street.”

“What, like you?”

“Oh, yay, back to me again.” Isaac rolls his eyes, pulls a gum wrapper out of his pocket, spits his gum into it, balls it up, tosses it into the trashcan under Laura’s desk, then sits up and folds his arms over his chest. “Jackie’s got a decent people-reader. Remember when she dragged Eddie in and told you to put the little shit on a horse, so help her god, or she’d haul your brain out of your ass herself?”

“You just summed up ninety percent of the conversations that Jackie has with anyone.”

Isaac snorts. “And what about the way she browbeat Jorge into taking mounts from you when she got herself suspended? I don’t know if you’ve ever fought with Jorge over what to order for takeout, but the guy is stubborn as fuck.” He waits for Laura to meet his eyes. “Jackie can take care of herself. She’s probably tying Australian-dude to a headboard as we speak.”
Laura looks down at her hands, fighting for a straight face. “You have a point.”

“Exactly. It’s like our creationism: life sucked, and then there was Jackie, and then life was better. Much better, eventually. The hours still suck and you still don’t control everything, but we’re rolling in stakes winners, and you guys are getting your name back.”

Her knuckles have gone white. “That’s why I can’t let him keep Yogi, you know.”

Isaac’s tone sharpens into a question. “What?”

“I can’t have Yogi in my barn,” Laura says, “because I spent years living in a bleak, bleached-out pit of mourning and despair, and even after Bury was born I spent months waking up in the middle of the night, convinced I was never going to get beyond training claimers, that I would let down everyone – their memories, their ghosts, their spirits, whatever you want to call it. Because I am a perfectionist and therefore I can’t be average, and I certainly can’t be sub-standard, and Yogi is… Yogi is the sort of horse I have nightmares about, Isaac, and every day he’s in this barn I can feel him leaching onto the other horses and feeding like a dumb superstition. And I can’t take it.” She keeps her head bowed for the whole monologue, addressing the floorboards, and she continues staring at them afterwards, listening to her heartbeat pound in her throat.

“You’re a control freak,” Isaac says, eventually. He doesn’t sound surprised.

“Congratulations, you’ve solved the mystery. You win a million dollars.”

His voice gets tired, weary. “That doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”

“If I don’t consider it a bad thing, I don’t fight it, and I get even worse.” Laura sighs. “My mother has been dead for ten years, and she’s still listed as my emergency contact because I don’t want anyone else to claim responsibility for me.” She picks at a hangnail until it tears loose. “If you – you specifically – get into a car crash, if they pick you up off the ground, bloody and still bleeding, and they take you to the hospital, who is the first person they’re going to call?”

“You know I don’t own a car, right?” Isaac says. He pauses. “You.”

When she lifts her head to check, he isn’t smiling, isn’t joking. She shuts her eyes. “I need a drink.”

His laugh, hollow and bitter, rings against her skull.

***

Somewhere between her fourth and fifth horses, a hole gets worn in Erica’s right glove along the outer edge of her ring finger. At lunch, she pokes at it every few seconds in between downing a turkey sandwich and twenty ounces of iced tea. “Is there anything to stick around for this afternoon, or are we heading out?”

Boyd shrugs. “Not unless we want to watch the Hales get their asses handed to them.”

“Yogimeister running?”

He smiles. “Eighth race. Thirty-K allowance.”

“I heard Laura finally ran out of patience and is badgering her brother to sell him.” She takes a bite out of her sandwich, chews and swallows in a single motion. “Did you see Flea run yesterday?”

“Yeah; she got second to Daehler’s gelding – Tell Me Your Tales. Ran a good race.”
“Who was riding?”

“Her? Eddie. Ben was on Tattler.”

Erica finishes off the last of the tea and starts prodding at the ice with her straw. “Well, the eighth won’t go off until four-thirty. We could head over to the apartment, shower, pay a few bills, hang out.”

Boyd takes away the cup when she tries to fill the silence by chewing on the remaining ice. “I’m game if you are,” he says, and doesn’t give it back even after she kicks him.

***

Six races in three days, and Laura is pushing past the boundary of ‘exhausted’ into a new realm, but at least they finally have some money to show for it. Sunday evening finds her sitting at her desk, staring at a page upon which dates, horse names, races, earnings, and deductions have been scribbled, and when she blinks she realizes that she’s spent the last few minutes rereading the name ‘Thirteen Shots’ dozens of times over.

The total comes out to something less than ‘amazing’ but better than ‘average’.

The Hales’ portion of the winnings after the grooms’ bonuses and before taxes is as follows: $1,044 for Flea’s second in her allowance, $1,602 for Yogi’s fourth in his, $1,008 for Skater’s second in her maiden special, $540 for Ernest’s fifth in the Echo Eddie Stakes (against a field that included Ghostchant, Jack’s on Trial, and the same Hath Fury who stole the Las Flores out from under Pig at the beginning of the month), and the grand prize of $3,780 for Booze’s victory in the Santana Mile, where he missed breaking the track record of 1:33.4 by less than half a second. Nye ran earlier that afternoon in an allowance but placed sixth, collecting no prize money. Therefore they come to a total of $7,974, which is, to be fair, not a small sum of money, though a portion of it will be siphoned off to pay for the care of the four horses owned by the Hales. The other fourteen horses’ owners pay a daily rate of roughly a hundred dollars to cover their feed, exercise riders, tack, insurance, and other whatnots, and they pick up the vet and farrier bills, but for Bury, Guapa, Boss, and Yogi, that burden falls entirely onto the Hales in exchange for the largest chunk of each purse.

If she postulates that each horse will cost exactly a hundred dollars per day to look after, and factors in that the next batch of races won’t be until April sixth, that lump sum gets cut down to $5,574 - and they can live on that easily – but she also has to figure in the previous days of little racing. They only had thirteen races in March (fourteen, counting Stoner’s final, catastrophic performance) and showed in ten of them, most of them small allowances. And there’s rent to consider – Los Angeles county rent – and car insurance, and gas, and groceries, and taxes, and the antibiotics from when Yogi tore his neck open, and the shoes and bridles that got fitted to Boss and Guapa earlier in the month, and Laura only stops herself from going after the tequila because Derek walks in.

“Your horse made us more money than anyone except Booze, these past couple days,” she tells him. “Congratulations.”

***

Scott sounds exceedingly distressed when he says, “So you’re trying to keep Yogi just to piss off Laura Hale? Seriously, Stiles?”

Stiles sighs as he ambles down the hallway. “I’m not trying to piss her off, per se; I’m pretty sure
this has more to do with the fact that I vaguely reject most authority figures because my father is a sheriff and didn’t allow me to run free and crack my head open on enough brick walls as a child. Or something. But that’s not it! I mean, he’s not even her horse, and Derek really doesn’t want to sell him, and I kind of like the dumb asshole, so—"

“Yogi or Derek?”

“Yogi, dumbass. And, I mean, and Derek too. But Laura’s not trying to sell her brother, last I checked, although if she were then we could totally get her arrested for violating the Thirteenth Amendment and then she’d have to call off selling Yogi, too. But, um, no, I don’t think that’s happening. She’s kind of fond of Derek, for some reason.” Where is his room; how does he always manage to walk past it – oh. There.

“And you aren’t?”

Stiles digs around for his key. “I don’t live with him, though. I think after you spend almost thirty years living with someone you’re allowed to not be fond of them anymore, especially if they’re your brother. Isn’t that the stereotype?”

“I don’t think they’ve lived together for thirty straight years,” Scott says, and, “Do you want to live with Derek?”

The door is unlocked; he must have forgotten again. “What are you, the Spanish Inquisition – what – Isaac, what are you doing – is that my laptop?”

Isaac smirks. “And your beer, which, for the record, was in the minifridge you stole from me.” He takes a sip. “There a reason you’ve been checking out farms and equestrian centers around Beacon Hills?”

“Yeah, it’s called ‘Laura Hale doesn’t get to completely rule the world and ruin everybody else’s lives’. Gimme a second, Scott, I have—”

“And you wanna explain the multiple Google searches for ‘little red riding hood fanfiction’?”

Stiles’ hand spasms and he drops his phone. He snatches it off the ground, mumbling invented curses, and offers only a clipped “I’ll call you later” before cutting the line. “Hi, my name is Stiles and we need to establish a concept of personal boundaries, please and thank you and put down the computer.”

Isaac does nothing except look extremely amused. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell Derek. You can show him… whenever.” He makes a vague waving motion. “Or I’ll blackmail you about it at your wedding.”

“You assume you’ll be invited.”

“I assume there’ll even be a wedding. Derek’s more the drive-thru-in-Vegas type.”

“First we’d have to have time to get to Vegas.”

“This is true.”

Stiles goes to the minifridge and pulls out a beer of his own, then sits down on the bed next to Isaac. “Cheers.” He taps their cans together, then peers at the laptop screen. “Now, I know I wasn’t googling the driving time from Beacon Hills to Golden Gate Fields.”
“Go fuck yourself,” Isaac says. He closes the laptop.

“Why are you even in here?”

“You weren’t answering your phone, which you tend to do when you know it’s me and you’re playing video games.” Isaac downs the rest of his beer and leans his head against the wall. “We’ve got a new horse coming in soon: Plague, a big five-year-old gelding. He goes to either me or you.”

“Not Lydia?”

“Lydia’s got six horses, same as us, and she’s going to start getting back into riding in the mornings. And hopefully not, you know, intentionally launching herself off the horses this time.” He sighs. “I can take him, if you’re still doing your little romps with Yogi.”

“Those are generally once a week, you know. But if you want him, knock yourself out.”

“Alright,” Isaac says. “He can go in by Flea and Skater.”

“Not next to Booze, surely.”

“Nah, nah, I’ll stick him across from Stoner – from his old stall.” Isaac swallows. “It’s been a long meet.”

Stiles huffs and drains his beer. “You’re telling me. When we getting out of here?”

“I know Schizo’s in Las Cienegas on the thirteenth, and I think that may be it. Then back to San Francisco.”

“That’ll be nice.” Stiles shuts his eyes. “You gonna tell me why you were googling that? Beacon Hills to San Fran?”

“Because I’m dumb,” Isaac says. “I forget that a hundred miles is still a hundred miles seven years later. It seems shorter.” The mattress creaks when he stands up. “I’ll see you in the morning, Stiles.”

Stiles waves at his shadow. “Nighty-night.”
When Isaac glances up from unwrapping a fresh piece of gum, beyond where Boss cropping at the spring grass on the other end of the lead there’s a man loitering, watching them with a hopeful expression. The stranger is as tall as Isaac and he’s white, though tanned enough to be a LA native: he makes a complete package with tousled brown hair and a Hollywood-favored prettiness to his face. Isaac gives him a moment of study, then declares: “You’re Jackie’s Australian.”

The guy seems amused. “And you must be her snotnosed idiot.”

“Her love for me shines through once more.” He jams the gum back into his pocket and steps around Boss to stick out his hand. “Isaac Lahey.”

“Wade Bridges.” They shake. “Is she around?”

Isaac checks his watch: 11:57. “Workouts end at noon – she’ll be here in a couple minutes. No races today. She know you’re here?”

“Not… not exactly. She told me to come by and gave me the barn number a few days ago. I came in with Emilia.”

That explains how he got into the backside in the first place. “She’s telling you to come around here, she wants you to meet Laura.” Isaac grins. “Brace yourself.”

Wade stares at him like he’s trying to decipher whether he’s supposed to laugh. “I… will?”

Isaac sighs and looks to Boss, who is still busy with the grass and pointedly ignoring them. “You’ll see what I mean.” The filly’s nose bumps his sneaker; she grunts, lifting her head. “What do you want?” he asks her. “What’s your deal?”

She blows mucus at him, snaps at the rope connecting them, then drops her head again.

“What’s wrong with her shoulder?”

“Nothing – that’s just her color scheme. It’s always been like that.”

Wade nods, unassuming. “Can I…?”

Isaac hesitates. “Go ahead, but be ready to move if she comes after you.”

Boss’ head snaps up at the first careful brush of Wade’s knuckles against her shoulder, but he doesn’t move until she’s taken a solid twenty seconds of study to decide he isn’t a threat. She returns to devouring grass while he pets her with short, careful strokes, over and over the rusty-red spill across her coat.

Isaac almost doesn’t hear the clip-clop of hooves until Bury and Dub round the corner of the barn next door with Laura and Jackie perched atop them and Derek and Lydia on foot.

Jackie makes a show of squinting as they approach. “That who I think it is, Aussie?”

Wade’s face lights up. “I fear it is. ‘Ello.”

“Oh dear god.” Laura swings off Bury in front of the stable. “I don’t have the energy for this right now. What do you want?”
“Steady employment, some cash in the bank, and to eat whatever I want without risking my job security.” Wade takes his hand off of Boss and lets it drop to his side. “Right now, I have none of the above.”

Laura blinks. “Then why are you here”

“Because someone told me to be.”

Jackie vaults out of Dub’s saddle and holds out her hand. Lydia slaps an unknown bill into it, then leads Bury around the barn towards the hotwalkers while Derek takes Dub.

Laura glances over her shoulder. “You exist to give me migraines.”

“Of course I do.” Jackie holds up Lydia’s bill as if checking to see if it’s counterfeit before stuffing it into the pocket of her jodhpurs. “C’mon, Aussie; I’m buying lunch.”

Wade inclines his head to Laura, then ambles past her to follow a half-step behind Jackie as she heads for the track kitchen.

***

Lydia hears Sass cry out before she sees the trailer rolling towards the barn. The filly rushes to the front of her stall and calls a greeting, shuffling her feet and bobbing her head while she waits for a response. There is none.

She neighs again.

When the gate comes down and the gelding inside the trailer is led out, all her strings are cut and her muscles go slack. She makes a tiny, dissatisfied sound, then withdraws into her stall as everyone else is poking their heads out to investigate the excitement.

Big and easy, Plague follows his groom through the handoff to Isaac and goes amicably into his new home. He’s pushing seventeen hands – has an official measurement of 16.3 – and is a fine-looking fellow with a light bay coat and a crooked line down his face that’s in the midrange between a stripe and a blaze. He sniffs at Flea through the bars between their stalls, then walks a lap to poke his head into all the corners. When Lydia stands in front of his door he comes over to greet her, lipping gently at her palm and examining her hair with some interest.

“He’s probably never seen a redhead before,” Isaac points out.

“Strawberry blonde. Maybe.” She touches Plague’s chin and he leans into it, encouraging her to scratch. “Horse knows what he wants. I like him.”

***

Boyd plunks himself down at Derek and Stiles’ table with a deli sandwich and a Diet Coke. Stiles glances at him in surprise. “Where’s Erica?”

“Lunch date with Lydia.” He tears a bite out of his sandwich. “What’s the word on the twins and racing?”

Derek pokes around his cup of soup with his spoon. “They won’t race until we’re in San Francisco again – none of the two-year-olds will. Spitz needs more discipline, Guapa needs a will to win against someone besides her sister, Boss has to be taught to regulate her speed, and Dub just isn’t ready.”
“Isabel says Dub’s a pain in the ass to get anything out of,” Stiles offers.

“Yeah, I heard. To Laura’s face.” Boyd smiles. “I don’t think she appreciated that.”

“She didn’t.” Derek gulps down a mouthful of soup. “Will you stay until the end of the meet or come up with us?”

“We may be a day or two behind, but we’ll be up soon anyways. Rides start drying up during the last two weeks. You’re leaving after Las Cienegas?”

“Yes. The fourteenth or fifteenth, probably.”

“We’ll be following you up, then.”

Across from Derek, Stiles sits up straighter. “Driving?”

“No,” Derek says. “Riding.”

Stiles sticks out his tongue. Derek smiles. Boyd rolls his eyes.

***

“We have three horses in stakes tomorrow,” Lydia says.

“Only?” Erica smirks when Lydia glares at her. “Any of them yours?”

“No – none of them. Slaw is in the Oaks, Plague’s in the Potrero Grande, and Sass is in the Derby. If Stiles doesn’t have a mental breakdown by the end of the day, Isaac will.”

“Men,” Erica snorts. “They aren’t even the ones riding.”

“They worry more than if they were.”

“That’s why you gotta find one who can differentiate between his brain and his balls.”

“I presume you mean Boyd?” Lydia asks, tone dry.

“Of course I mean Boyd. Who did you think I was referencing? Isaac? Derek?” She cackles.

***

On Saturday in begins to rain as Stiles leads Spitz onto the track for his workout. The colt snorts and balks and finds all sort of ways to express his dissatisfaction, but Isabel sets the line of her crop against his shoulder until he arches his neck and steps into it. The rainfall isn’t heavy, merely constant, incessant, and by the end of workouts the track has been churned into something heavier than dry dirt but lighter than mud, and the turf course is defined as ‘soft’ officially and ‘soggy’ amongst the riders. A few moments before the first race, somebody up high turns off the spout and the temperature drops further as a cold wind whistles in, bowing the palm trees that stand guard over the track.

“It’s April,” Stiles mutters to himself as he picks out Slaw’s feet. “This isn’t fair.”

***

“I’m sorry – the Hales got a horse shipped to them and then signed him up for a stakes later that same week?”
“What do you care?” Dina snaps. “He’s not even in this race – you wanna take pot-shots at Cold Slough? Be my fucking guest.”


“Just watch the damn race,” Dina says as the field bursts from the gate.

***

“I told you.”

“Shut up.”

“I fucking told you.”

“You said ‘my money’s on the Argents,’ you prick, you did not tell me anything. Also – hey, hey, hey, check out the photo.”

“What – shit.”

“Eat shit.”

“What the fuck, isn’t Hotfast…?”

“She’s one of Daehler’s. The Argents got beat by a turd who spends more time taking pictures with his fancy-ass camera than training his horses. They got beat by a kid.”

“…So did the Hales.”

“I ain’t standing on a pedestal preaching about The Hale Gospel – they both just lost, and they got beat by a weirdo little hipster dickface. Shit, boy, Gerard Argent’s probably having a heart attack right about now, right as we speak.”


Dina spits. “He’s got an hour to get his ego down. Good luck to you.”

***

Matt Daehler is still riding a blatant adrenaline high over his victory in the Oaks; as the horses are getting saddled for the Potrero Grande Stakes, he’s swaggering about giving ever-more-inventive soundbytes to anyone with a microphone who can’t escape in time, and if it’s not about Hotfast then it’s Clain, his other semi-superstar, who will be breaking from the #3 slot in a field of seven horses.

Isaac keeps himself busy with Plague’s bridle after Laura catches him eyeing Daehler and reminds him: “Focus on the horses, not the people. Bullshit can’t run forty miles an hour.”

There’s certainly enough to focus on. Clain isn’t the only familiar name on the roster: they haven’t faced Silverbled since the winter, nor Mirror on the Wall, but this is the third time they’ve seen Raunchesstra since the beginning of March, and TickyTackyHouse has turned in some menacing sprint times since finishing third in the Frank E. Kilroe Mile, to say nothing of the first impression left by Hell Come Handily when she ran down Schizo and Silveritis in the Santa Monica at the end of January.
Plague may be intelligent and clever and the only male in the race besides Silverbled, but it’s hard to imagine him winning against a field like this.

And Isaac hates the paddock. He’s always hated it. There are too many eyes and too much attention focused on a handful of horses, on the humans around them, and you never know who could be watching. Moving around the ring with Plague prancing at his shoulder, he’s stuck between paranoia at the current moment and anxiety over how much greater this pressure will be in an hour for the Derby. He fiddles nervously with the lead shank; Plague stops of his own accord, head up, ears pricked, posing for a camera.

“Get moving, you pretentious lug,” Jackie says, nudging him with her heels.

Plague grunts and moves forward again, and the track looms before them: a soggy sea of muck that darkens as a fresh curtain of rain starts to fall, pinging off of horses and humans alike and making owners in fine suits and dresses scramble for umbrellas.

Isaac thumbs at the clasp of the lead, waiting for his moment to let go.

***

Stiles smuggles himself over to the track to park himself on the rail alongside Derek and Isaac, not announcing himself, just squeezing in shoulder-to-shoulder between them as the field breaks onto the churned-up pathway of mud that is the dirt chute.

Within a couple strides Jackie has wiggled Plague a spot on the rail less than a length off Silverbled’s lead with Clain pinned between him and TickyTackyHouse on the outside and open ground in front of him. The gelding seems to be running well, streaking along, head up and eager, and there are only six and a half furlongs in the race – they’re most of the way down the backstretch within a smattering of heartbeats. Stiles is already leaning over the rail in anticipation, heart beating up into his throat as they approach the turn. It’s okay, he tells himself, everyone’s waiting; everyone’s waiting on the end; everyone’s waiting for-

Still caught between Plague and TickyTackyHouse, Clain bobbles. Positioned directly behind her, Raunchesstra clips her heels when she doesn’t get herself together in time, and Clain lurches in, banging Plague off his stride and into the rail, and Raunchesstra runs up her again – not intentionally; her jockey’s straight up in the stirrups, hauling back – but with one more stumbling, imploding stride taken, Clain goes down.

“Shit,” somebody murmurs.

The race doesn’t stop.

Ben Sull is a one-hundred-and-fifteen-pound ball that hits the dirt and vanishes into the tides of water and muck and horseflesh, and Stiles is vaguely aware of Plague and Raunchesstra both straining to recover lost ground, of TickyTackyHouse and Silverbled giving each other hell down the stretch, but heads aren’t being twisted nor necks craned to follow their progress; everyone’s got eyes on the mare struggling to rise from the middle of the turn. She’ll get halfway up, muscles bulging from her shoulders visible all the way across the track, then slip down, thrash at the mud with her hooves for a few moments, then try again.

The announcer goes silent.

Clain tosses her mane back and forth, mouth working at the bit, and heaves, scrubbling like a newborn foal, stirrups flapping loose from the saddle, before collapsing once more. The gray of her
coat is buried under the wet gleam of mud. There’s something wrong with her hind legs; they seem to be folded up underneath her. Stuck. Caught. Busted.

A shape emerges from the muck – Ben, apparently unhurt, though he holds one arm curled against his chest, gets to Clain’s side well in advance of the ambulance. He touches her face with his good hand when she thrusts it at him, then withdraws after a few moments with her bridle in his grip. As he’s drawing the reins over her head, she tries for her feet once again and, at the pinnacle of her efforts, bellows a cry across the track. Ben scrambles away when she flails on her way down.

“Go get Plague,” Isaac says. “Take him back to the barn for me.”

Stiles blinks. The race is over – Plague is plodding towards them, dirt thoroughly plastered over him and Jackie, but the grandstand is silent and as Stiles watches the gelding comes to a halt, staring at the crowd he knows is meant to be cheering.

Attendants begin rolling a black screen onto the track as the ambulance grinds to a halt, blocking Clain’s most recent upward surge from view. The last Stiles sees of her, she has her head pointed towards the sky, jaws gaping open, forelegs splayed apart as she tries to drag herself up without using her hind end.

“They’re gonna kill her,” he says weakly.

“She’s down on the track,” Derek murmurs. And Stiles knows, okay, this isn’t a novelty: if a horse goes down on the track and can’t get itself up again, there’s no hope for it. They can’t treat an animal who can’t be transported to a hospital, who can’t be lifted into an ambulance, who can’t stand and lie down and get back up again while they heal. And he knows – horses have been put down since he’s been with the Hales, like the mare in the #1 slot for the Cat’s Cradle in November, euthanized directly in front of ten thousand people. Stiles still has no idea what her name was.

Clain was in that race. Clain won that race, and the Santa Maria, running against Pig in February, and she’s a good horse, a fantastic horse, was the star of Daehler’s stable until Hotfast stole the spotlight, and Stiles thinks about all the times he’s wished injury on other barn’s horses with a shock of horror.

“Go get Plague,” Derek orders. “Stiles.”

“Okay, okay.” He climbs over the rail, limbs shaking. Trudging towards Plague, he keeps one eye on the far side of the track where Matt Daehler stands, shoulders slumped, beside Clain’s owner: a pale, thin, severe-looking woman with gray hair, she doesn’t even appear to register the rain soaking her pantsuit. Painted in mud, Ben is a few steps closer to the screens, but he turns his face away as Stiles sets a hand on Plague’s reins.

“I didn’t see it,” Jackie murmurs. “She was next to us and then she was gone. What happened?”

She tripped, Stiles thinks. That’s it – all she did was trip. He swallows around the lump in his throat. “She went down on the track.”

***

The crowd is quiet through the post parade for the Santa Anita Derby, the atmosphere dampened by the rain and the torn-up pattern on the track where Clain broke down. Her body has been hauled away by the time ESPN starts revving up about how important this is for potential participants in the Derby – the Kentucky Derby, the only Derby anyone cares about, to hear them tell it – but you can’t erase an image from people’s minds so easily.
Whoever wins this Derby will bring home $450,000 and a hundred points towards their nomination for the Derby, so Stiles should care. He should care a lot. Sass is going to be running against Thy Claymore and Ghostchant – he should care so much that he can’t think straight.

Well, he can’t think straight. But it’s not because of any Derby.

She tripped, he wants to scream. It wasn’t her fault; she didn’t do anything wrong; it’s not fair. And he thinks of how Clain probably knew at the end, knew what was coming; she was trying so hard to get on her feet again as they surrounded her with the ambulance and the screens, like a person dying in a hospital bed, their heart monitor going wild, all the doctors rushing in and the – the –

Stiles can’t think. He sits in Laura’s office and stares at the TV in the corner, at the post parade, and he can. Not. Think.

***

Straight out of the gate, Victoria gets after Clay, urging him to give her all the speed he can manage. It’s a long race, but Clay has an impressive reserve, and if she can make one or two of the major contenders run themselves off their feet early on her job will be a lot easier when they reach the stretch.

It seems to work. Ghostchant goes pedal-to-the-metal to keep pace with Clay, and he lingers at the edge of Victoria’s vision while she levers Clay against the rail to save ground and hunches over his neck to protect her face from the drizzle that their speed has turned into stinging pellets. She hears the first quarter called in :22.7 and eases off the gas, tightening her grip on the reins and restricting the flexing of her elbows, curbing Clay’s speed into the clubhouse turn, letting Ghostchant gain ground and flash by, burning himself out while Gustam struggles to reel him in.

Under the rain and wind, she hears hoofsteps closing from further behind. A glance under her elbow gives her an eyeful of Sticky Stones, the filly tucked in neatly behind Clay, using him as a windbreak but pushing hard enough that he can only slack off the pace so much before she’s clipping his heels. Jackie Vaca beams from the saddle.

I can play your game, Victoria thinks, letting the reins slip through her fingers until Clay is bounding past Ghostchant… who cuts in behind them to do the exact same thing. They’re a train strung out along the track: Clay forging head-on into the rain and wind, Ghostchant and Sticky Stones riding his tail with the pack a fair ways behind, bunched up and jockeying amongst themselves. If she pulls Clay up, they’ll get run over. If she takes him wide, Vaca and Gustam will either follow her or stay glued to the rail and leave her to fight with the pack for third place. Already in the middle of the backstretch, there isn’t much she can do.

They call the time for six furlongs at 1:10.4. Too fast. Victoria hunkers down lower against Clay’s neck. Having grossly overplayed her hand, all that’s left is to minimize the damages.

Gustam and Vaca make excellent use of the turn so that as Clay levels into the stretch he has both of them already wide and clear of one another, bearing down with ferocity. Victoria cracks her whip against his flank and he strains valiantly, plunging forwards as Sticky Stones tears by, but all his reserves – formidable or no – have been drained. Her goading comes to nothing. The pack is far enough behind that she needn’t fret about them, but it causes a vicious sting to watch Sticky Stones and Ghostchant draw off five, six, seven lengths down the stretch, battling it out to the bitter end while Victoria sits on her brazen young champion without a hope of catching up.

And the crowd goes wild.
“So tell me: will we be seeing you at Churchill downs a month from now?”

Jacqueline Vaca cackles into the microphone. “Hale isn’t getting her filly anywhere near that madhouse. Pim Byrns can take Jorge and Ghostchant and his hundred points and show them that there’s something to fear from Southern California… but you won’t see me there. Not a chance. I just made myself fifteen thousand bucks in – what’s the time? – a minute and forty-eight seconds. I’m good.”

“If Hale were to take Sticky Stones, though – or if, say, Bob Bafferts offered you a mount, would you go?”

Vaca shakes her head. “Not a snowball’s chance in hell.”

“Even though you’d be making history just by showing up? First transgender jockey in the Derby’s a big title.”

Something tightens in Vaca’s face; her cheerful demeanor cracks. “Yeah, and then it’s a count of how long it takes for me to start getting death threats. This game’s dangerous enough without people trying to kill each other as well as the horses.” She nods at the track, at the palm trees, the grandiose spread of the infield, the churned dirt. “Ben Sull broke his wrist out there today when Clain went down. Kid’s twenty-two, sidelined for a month. He was lucky. Now, I’m thirty, so I don’t heal so fast or so well, and the best luck out there can’t save you from everything. This business has a lot of old money and old ideas in it, and if I go charging out to Kentucky to stand in their crosshairs, I’m wagering a hundred and twenty-four grand – if I win – against the rest of my career, possibly my life.”

“That’s a rather… pessimistic view of the matter.”

Vaca shrugs. “You want your cheery optimism? Go talk to Gary Stevens. Go talk to Bob Bafferts. Or just go get soundbytes from Pim and Jorge over there.” She waves in the direction of the winner’s circle. “If you want good times and high hopes, build a time machine and go talk to Matt Daehler earlier today, between the Oaks and the Potrero Grande.”

***

Erin is pacing the apartment when Boyd walks in – she brandishes the paper at him like a weapon. “Want something witty?” she asks, and throws it at him. “Sports section. Front page.”

It’s today’s New York Times, so they can’t have anything about Clain yet; the leading sports article is… “This is about the Grand National – that race from National Velvet.”

She waves a hand at him. “Read.”

He reads. The article discusses the famous steeplechase’s recent gruesome history – four horses died in the last two runnings – and goes on to list all the modifications that have been made to the course for this year. When Boyd flips to the next page, it’s more of the same: Grand National vs. animal rights groups plus a bare-bones description of the death of the previous year’s favorite, Synchronised, with just enough detail to make it sting. “What am I supposed to be getting mad about?”

“Katie Walsh,” Erica says. “At the end.”

Boyd looks. “Ah.”
The jockey Katie Walsh, who rode Battlefront and will race the small-odds favorite Seabass on Saturday, was quoted in The Daily Mail as saying that too much could be made of racehorses’ deaths.

“These horses are so well looked after, better than some children, to be honest with you,” said Walsh, 28, a candidate to emulate Taylor’s cinematic triumph and become the first female jockey to win the National. “I don’t read the criticism because it’s not worth it. At the end of the day, it would be a lot worse if it had been two jockeys that lost their lives. These things happen, and they’re horses at the end of the day.”

He puts down the paper. “This is what you’re mad about?”

“They’re horses,” Erica mimes. “They’re just horses; they’re just big, smart, stupid animals who didn’t ask for this and don’t know anything else.” She throws her hands into the air. “Oh, I get that it’s a good thing no jockeys died; I get that human lives are valued more; I’d rather have Schizo die than you or I, but how do you brush that off? These things happen? They’re horses? They’re broken, so let’s just kill them?”

Boyd sits down to pull off his boots. “And life goes on.” He pauses, glances up. “Nobody’s gonna kill you for being broken.”

“Yeah, because I’m human and white and live in America and… I hate people.” It takes a minute, but she comes over and sits next to him, arms folded across her chest, staring straight ahead, muscles of her back knotted tight. “I really, really hate people.”

Boyd tucks the laces inside his boots. “I do too.”
The tack room door creaks open when Derek nudges it. “Time for feedings, Big Red.” He stops, twin coffee cups in hand.

Stiles is asleep on his stomach, arms curled under his head, laptop open in front of him. When Derek taps the space bar the screen flickers and hums to life to display the website of a farm listed as being ninety miles outside San Francisco. Derek’s throat closes up.

Under him, Stiles murmurs in his sleep, eyes cracking open. He slurs Derek’s name.

“Time to get up,” Derek tells him, resting a hand on the shaggy hair that Stiles hasn’t cut in months. “Big Red.”

“In da house,” Stiles mumbles. “I’m coming; I’m coming.”

Derek pats his shoulder, then leaves before Stiles wakes up enough to spot the coffee cup in front of his face with Big Red needs to get on his horse written on the side.

***

“I found this place a couple miles from Beacon Hills. They’ll take him for four hundred a month. The facility’s mostly retired horses, but the owner said she wouldn’t be against training him to jump and maybe buying him someday if he’s any good. So we’d… we’d know where he was, how he was.” Stiles knuckles Yogi’s neck and chews on his bottom lip.

Derek stares across the track. “Okay,” he says. “Thank you.” He touches the reins, then Stiles’ hand, the barest brush of fingertips. “Six furlongs. Hold the crop so he knows it’s there, but don’t touch him with it. I’d prefer you alive.”

Stiles tucks his chin in against his chest and smiles. “I’d prefer that too.”

They do the six in 1:13.8.

***

“So, how does it feel to be twenty-four?”

“Exactly the same as twenty-three. Where’s Boyd?”

Erica parks herself across from Stiles and bares her teeth to smile. “Where’s Derek?”

“Getting food,” Stiles pokes at his laptop. “You need something?”

She plucks a sugar packet from its holder and turns it over speculatively to read the fine print. “How you doing on Laura’s deadline?”

“We’re working around it – found a place he might be able to go. If you’re spying for her, you’re doing a terrible job. We’re telling her as soon as we have a concrete plan, anyway.”

“Not spying: satisfying personal yearning for knowledge. And cute with the “we”, there.”
“Great. What’s your opinion on Clain?”

“A horrible tragedy that was horribly horrible. She deserved better.” She spots Derek forging his way towards them with a food-laden tray heavy in his hands. “And good luck,” she tells Stiles. “Because he doesn’t deserve you.”

He finally glances away from the screen, brow wrinkled. “What?”

“You heard me.” She gets up and leaves, satisfied with her play at being cryptic. Both of them, she thinks, scanning the crowd for Boyd. Neither.

***

After the fifth bats-out-of-hell mile, Allison makes Isaac stop and drink some of her Gatorade, and when he tries to take off again she grabs his wrist and reels him back in. “Is it Clain?” she asks. “Or seeing Scott again?”

“Neither.” He studies her face and must register her disbelief, because he lifts their hands and kisses her knuckles, then her forehead. “Okay, maybe Scott. Only a bit, though.”

Allison sighs, then drops her hand and wraps that arm around his waist, turning them to finish off their loop. “Are you gonna tell me what the rest is?”

Isaac snorts. “Tension at work that has nothing to do with me: Stiles and Derek are launching a rebellion plot to keep Yogi on their radar, while in the meantime Laura’s itching to get him out of her barn. It’s dumb.”

“And Clain?”

He shrugs, arm falling loose over her shoulders. “She’s dead. It sucks for Daehler. I’ve seen worse.”

“What about Stoner?”

“Far and away, fucking mares and getting fat and happy. Not like we get updated on his status.”

“And that bugs you.”

“It’s expected.”

She pinches his side. “So what can I do to stop you from running yourself into the ground?”

“Allison…” Isaac stops walking, and when she stops with him he touches her neck and sets his lips against hers, less a kiss than a gesture of reassurance. “Quit worrying about me,” he murmurs against her mouth.

“Fuck you.” She nips at his bottom lip, then backs away. “Let’s get some food and Skype Scott. Sound good?”

“Yeah, sounds good.” He follows her home.

***

“Whatever happened to Bush shipping out?” Stiles asks as they’re packing up on Thursday night. He’s been moving along the aisle with a wheelbarrow, dishing out everyone’s dinner a few flakes of hay at a time, following Lydia’s progress with the grain buckets.
Laura leans against Bury’s door and scratches his ears when he butts his head at her. “Owner decided to give him a second chance; we think he may just have trouble with this track. If he doesn’t improve at Golden Gate he’ll be retired after that meet.”

“Ah.” Stiles goes back to tossing hay. Laura watches him.

“June first,” she says.

“And nothing’s gonna change your mind?”

“Nothing realistic.”

She thinks she hears Stiles mumble “You’re not realistic,” but he’s wheeling away down the aisle to pick up more hay, so she can’t be sure. Bury shoes his neck against the doorframe and bobs his head, itching up and down, up and down.

***

“So, we’re driving up to San Francisco on Sunday.”

“What time do you get in?”

“Early afternoon, probably.”

“That’s good,” his dad says. “Are you coming to visit?”

“Maybe. We’ll see. I may come up to check out some farms in the area.”

“Why? You buying one?” His dad sounds amused.

“Nah – it’s a favor for one of the trainers. He’s got a horse he wants to get off the racetrack, but we – he doesn’t want to lose him completely.”


“Um, Stiles says. “Fine? Alive? A cool dude when he isn’t hauling me out of bed well before the crack of dawn? Why?”

“His father worries about him.”

“Oh… kay? Why are you talking to Isaac’s dad?”

He can hear the shrug over the line. “Small world: two men from the same town with their sons working in the same barn… and parents worry. He doesn’t understand why his son won’t talk to him – he calls, you know. Every day.”

“I probably wouldn’t talk to you if you called every day,” Stiles snarks. “I’m sure Isaac has a good reason for avoiding him.”

His dad sighs. “I guess the matter looks different from where you’re standing.”

Something goes tight in Stiles’ chest. “I guess it does.”

***
“We’re coming up tomorrow, but once Isaac’s back we three can get together, have dinner, talk this over. Sound good?”


“Didn’t see it on TV?”

“No – I had work.”

“Good. Good for you. It was… tragic. The sort of thing you see if you hang around tracks long enough, but – no, it was ugly. Stiles got incredibly shaken up by it.”

“I talked to him on his birthday,” Scott says. “He did seem weird.”

“If you see him in person he looks like he’s committed a murder or is doing drugs: talking too fast, avoiding eye contact, fidgeting like he’s on something, always saying he’s fine. I think the whole Yogi situation’s bugging him too – he really likes that horse. Lydia’s losing patience with him. I imagine Laura must be, too.”

“You’re closer to him than I am, now.” Scott shakes his head. “Everything got screwed up when you guys went down there.”

“Blame Hollywood.”

“Yeah… how’s Isaac?”

Allison hesitates. “He’s alright. I think he’s nervous.”

“I’m nervous,” Scott remarks.

Allison’s smile touches her voice: “He’s quieter around the track than anywhere else, now, which is the reverse of how he used to be. I think he’s got a lot on his plate, but we’ll be fine. All of us: we’ll be fine.”

Scott pokes at the papers on his desk. “I hope so.”

***

“Go to bed early tonight,” Lydia tells Stiles as they’re dishing out the evening meal. “And be here by three-thirty tomorrow – Laura wants to be on the highway by five.”

“What time do you think we’ll get there?”

“Depends on how early we get out of here and where we hit rush hour. Could be as early as one or two and as late as eight.” She watches Ernest plunge his face into his feed bucket. “The sooner we leave, the better.”

***

The sky is predawn-black when Isaac walks past Greenberg to flip on the overheads and start down the aisle. Guapa pokes her head from her stall to whicker a greeting; further down the line Schizo, Pig, and Ernest all do the same. He heads for the feed room, where nineteen plastic buckets with masking-tape-and-sharpie labels are lined up in three rows on the bare floor. The tack rooms have also been stripped – all that’s left are shipping wraps for the horses legs – Laura’s desk emptied, all her files packed away.
Isaac starts with his horses, stall after stall from the feed room to the entrance, then back up the opposite side: Booze, Skater, Flea, and Plague; Sass, Schizo, and Nerve; then Lydia’s horses: Guapa, Mick, Bury, Dub; Bush and Howard nipping at each other until he startles them apart; Stiles’: Nye and Spitz already fighting, Nye half-rearing; Ernest quiet in his stall until he registers Isaac’s presence, and then he nearly bowls him over trying to cram his head into the bucket; Pig; Slaw down in her stall, head up, ears up, whickering, pleased to see him. When he gets to Yogi the gelding is just waking up, stretching out his neck and shaking his head to dislodge the bits of sawdust stuck in his fur. He grunts.

“Eat up, psycho.” Isaac hooks the feed bucket into the wall and pats his shoulder; Yogi snuffles, lips at the ragged hem of his shirt, then jams his head into the bucket.

Lydia arrived as he’s relatching Yogi’s door. “Trailers are on their way,” she tells him. “Hales’ll be here in a few minutes.” She yawns.

He checks his watch: 3:27 “Stiles?”

“No idea.”

“Of course.”

“Good to know you think so highly of me,” comes from behind him. Stiles enters balancing a tray of five coffees. “I love the people running the kitchen, but I pity them their hours,” he sidebars.

“Agreed.” Lydia snatches the cup bearing her name from the tray and takes a sip. “Alright, boys. Let’s get to wrapping.”

***

They load the horses into three trailers: two eight-horse hauls with occupants split along the basis of gender, plus a three-horse van for the twins and Bury. Lydia goes with that one, Stiles and Isaac each take one of the big haulers, and Laura goes with Isaac because he’s in the one with all the colts and stallions (plus Plague and Howard to round out the count). Derek is assigned to drive the Camaro up, his objections that Erica brought it down in the first place and has expressed no qualms about driving it back notwithstanding.

The Grey twins drive the larger trailers, old friends and experienced hands that they are, but there’s also a new guy sent over with the smaller one. And this is no problem – nothing is directly his fault – but somewhere around Avenal they have one of their pauses to stretch the horses’ legs and Boss decides that she would much rather not return to her stall in the trailer. Freakishly huge as she is, this causes problems.

Lydia calls Laura when they do get on the road again, fifty minutes later. “We’re about an hour behind you,” she says. “But we’re moving and we have everyone and they’re intact.”

“That’s all that matters,” Laura says. “Barn #54. See you there.”

***

They rumble into Golden Gate’s backside at half-past three with all the horses still in one piece (and Lydia still an hour behind). Their barn is a few rows down from the one they had last time, in a less-central location but still well clear of the freeway. Technically it’s the same size as their Santa Anita stable, but there are only twenty stalls – the extra space is taken up by an increased number of tack rooms. (They have four: two large, two small.) The bigger ones both have bathrooms and cots. Laura claims one for her office and Isaac gets the other by rights of seniority,
number of horses, and calling dibs.

There’s some reorientation as a result of the new layout and lineup of horses: Sass takes up residence in the end stall that would previously have been Stoner’s; Booze gets relocated across the aisle to the spot between Schizo and the empty stall they use as their feed room; Pig is moved down to bookend Yogi while Nye takes “her” stall so that he can’t fight with Spitz and kick any more holes in the wall. He ends up with Slaw on one side and the wall of Lydia’s tack room on the other while Spitz has a similar situation with Stiles’ tack room and Ernest. They leave two stalls open between Laura’s office and Skater for the twins and one between Isaac’s tack room and McGatsby for Bury.

Lydia shoots Laura a text in the midst of it: *In what world does rush hour start at 4 pm?*

*San Francisco,* Laura texts back. *The barn’s not going anywhere without you.*

She steps out to see the Greys on their way and watches after as a rapidly-aging man in a beige sweater approaches through the cloud of dust kicked up by the departing trailers. There are deep wrinkles carved into his white face, and his eyes are wide and earnest behind his glasses.

“Ms. Hale?”

She scowls. “What?”

The man stops a few yards away, posture erect but not imposing. “Do you have an Isaac Lahey working here?”

She studies him, the curve of his shoulders, the hollows of his face, how they ring familiar. “Yes.”

“I’m his father,” the man says. “I… he probably hasn’t mentioned me – we didn’t part on the best terms. But I – I was in town on business and heard you had arrived…” Laura waits while he scans her face for some trace of emotion. “I had hoped to take him out for dinner, a late lunch, to repair some of the damage, but if it’s too much trouble – you did just get here…”

Laura bites at the inside of her cheek. “We’re pretty settled already, actually.” She sets her back to him to pivot and call out “Isaac!”

He sticks his head out of the barn, blinking in the sunlight. “‘Sup, boss?”

She jerks her chin over her shoulder. “Got a date for you.”

He raises his eyebrows, looks past her, blinks again, freezes.

“Hey, son,” his father says.

A muscle trembles in Isaac’s jaw.

Laura walks past him to return indoors, pats his shoulder as she passes and whispers “He’s the only family I’ve heard of you having, and he came a long way. Humor him for an hour and win some karma – everybody goes home happy.” She waits until he swallows and nods before sauntering back under the shedrow; she hears him stammer a “Hi, Dad” as she goes.

***

The Fat Apple Diner prides itself on good food and a friendly atmosphere, but Nilla has seen some truly tragic encounters in her thirteen years here. Her favorite of this year was the classic guy who
tried to propose to his girlfriend as she attempted to dump him, but the all-time champion was the nonagenarian identical twins who got into a screaming match over the 2008 election and had to be asked to leave. She thinks tonight may provide another gem: there’s a father-son pair who seem not to have talked in a while and they’re fumbling, stiff, the son avoiding eye contact at all costs while the father’s tone tries to reel itself in from sharp-edged pins and needles. But they get better – slowly. The son starts picking at his food fifteen minutes after it arrives, and as her shift trickles past he sits straighter in his seat, expression sliding towards a different kind of alert.

“I thought I did okay with that – with you liking boys,” she hears when she swoops in to refill the water glasses.

“How’s everything taste, gents?”

“Great, thank you,” the son says, forcing a smile.

The father mirrors his expression. “Tell me, young lady, have you got parents?”

Nilla glances at the son, whose gaze has shifted back to his father, locked-on, wary. “Dead ones,” she says.

The father goes still. “I’m sorry for your-”

“Don’t be; they were assholes.” She pops her gum and smiles at the son. “You want another Coke, honey?”

“I’m good.” His leg is shaking underneath the table.

She walks away before she does something stupid, pulls out her phone, checks the date. April 14th – still three weeks to figure out what she’s buying her mother for her birthday.

Twenty minutes later she comes by to collect their disses and the son is talking, voice soft – something about horses – has been for several minutes. They get people from the track all the time during the meets, strangers who smell of horses and hay and leather. The father listens with enough inattention that he can’t be one of them, more interested in watching his son get lost in the words than taking in what he’s saying. Nilla hears “stakes” and “tendon” and “turf” and knows she’s out of her depth, so she clears their plates in silence and smiles at the son until the stiffness of his shoulders loosens.

***

“That only took far longer than it should have,” Lydia declares, leading Guapa down the ramp. She glances around. “Where’s Isaac?”

“At a late lunch with his dad.” Laura takes the lead shank from her. “What’s the look for?”

“What?” Lydia demands.

“Isaac’s dad is here?” Stiles asks.

“I wasn’t aware this was a problem,” Laura says.

“They’re estranged; it won’t kill him,” Derek offers.

“Shows what you know, Hale. I dated the shit-spouting asshole for two years – he is terrified of his father.” She looks around the semicircle of frozen humans, Guapa in their midst, head up and
nostrils flared, her muscles tensing and ready to flee.

Laura’s jaw tightens. She hands Guapa’s lead rope to Derek. “Get her inside.” She waits until they’ve gone, glances at Stiles, then Lydia, bites her lip. She pulls out her phone and dials.

***

Isaac’s knee bounces when he feels his phone start to vibrate. “You just missed the turn.”

“Oops,” his dad says. “We’ll catch it on the next one.”

“Okay.” He starts to pull out his phone.

“You talk to them all day; I haven’t seen you in seven years.”

He stills. “I work with them.”

“And you can’t give your dear old dad a call? The Stilinski kid talks to his all the time.”

“I’m not Stiles.” His phone stops buzzing. “How do you know that, anyway?”

His dad smiles. “It’s a small world. How did you think I found you? Magic?”

Isaac shrugs and mumbles some half-formed response, looking out the window again.

“I can’t hear you when you mutter.”

“Sorry.” He clears his throat. “You’ve missed about three more turnoffs to the track.”

“Oops,” his dad says again. “My mistake – here we go.” They get to the next intersection, the car slowing, but they don’t switch into the left lane – they roll through it, then take a right onto the on-ramp of the highway. His father smiles. “That was really cute, you know: dropping off the face of the planet for seven years. Really cute. Like a baby wanting to prove that he can shit on the big-boy toilet.”

Isaac takes a deep breath, stays calm. “It’s a hundred miles to Beacon Hills – I should already be back at the –”

“Keep your mouth shut.”

Isaac swallows, closes his eyes, thinks of Stoner rearing and willed, ears pinned, staking out his territory. A hundred miles to Beacon Hills – a hundred miles to the basement. His phone vibrates again.

***

“He’s not going to pick up,” Laura says. “In four years, he’s never ignored a call from me.”

“Well, maybe now would be a good time to-”

“*This is Isaac; you’ve obviously missed me, so leave a note.*”

Lydia swallows. “If you’re being an ass and playing games, I’m going to kill you. If you aren’t, you need to tell us where you are ASAP.” She hangs up and stares at her phone. “Jesus, Hale, why’d you tell him to go?”
“It was his father,” Laura protests. “He’d never mentioned anything…”

“Guys,” Stiles interjects. “What’s the worst that happens? They have a fight, maybe Isaac gets shaken up a bit, but then we’ve all learned our lesson and don’t let his dad anywhere near him ever again. He may be fine, for all we know.”

“You stupid boy,” Lydia says, and doesn’t even feel guilty when he flinches. She pulls up her contact list. “Call Scott. I’ll get Allison.”

From the background, Derek scowls at her. “What are they going to do?”

“No, she has a point,” Laura says. “They should know. Call them.”

***

The engine hums as the needle of the speedometer ticks up higher with each passing mile. “Seven years,” his father says. “You go running off, and what’s a man supposed to tell his neighbors?”

“You could have filed a Missing Persons report,” Isaac says carefully.

“No I couldn’t, you little shit – they might have found you, but they couldn’t drag you back where you belonged.”

“Like you’re doing now?”

The steering wheel jerks – the entire car spins before his father rights it and pounds his foot down on the accelerator once more. “Next time you do that, I’ll send this car off the road.”

*Do what?* Isaac bites his tongue and sinks lower in his seat.

“You have terrible posture.”

“Sorry.” He straightens up.

“And you shouldn’t mutter like that. It’s rude.”

“Sorry… sir.”

His father’s face tightens. “Are you mocking me?”

“No.” Isaac stares out the window, imagines Schizo running through the fields beside them, abreast – but they’re more than twice as fast as anyone could ever sprint, pushing ninety – past it, when he next checks. “You’re going to get pulled over.”

His father sneers. “You wish.”

***


“Well clearly being eighteen and on your own and fresh out of a personalized hell is an exemption from ‘ever’,” Lydia folds her arms over her chest. “I didn’t ever get much out of him, but even so, I think we can all agree that they’re now past the reasonable amount of time for a lunch, especially for he-who-inhales-food-like-a-starving-man.”

“Should we call the police?” Scott asks.
“We can, but they aren’t liable to respond with any great speed if Isaac’s life isn’t in danger,” Stiles says. He stares down at his hands. “This is my fault anyway – I told my dad we were coming up. I didn’t think he’d go and tell Isaac’s… we talked about it once, kind of, and he didn’t seem to like the memory of Beacon Hills, but he wasn’t… freaked out or anything…” He shuts up, rubbing his hands over his forearms.

“Go feed the horses,” Laura tells him. “You and Derek. I… go.”

Stiles and Derek share a glance, then exit without a word.

Allison takes the chair that Derek vacates, pulling it closer to Laura’s desk. “Should I call him?” she asks helplessly.

Laura swallows, shrugs. “If it makes you feel better.”

Allison dials and sits silent for a long moment. “Isaac,” she says, then stops. “Please be playing a trick, Jesus, God…” She hangs up and buries her face in her hands. “He’s probably fine, oh my god, why am I…” She lifts her head, face dry. “Christ.”

“He’s been dead for two thousand years – give up on him.” Laura stares up at the ceiling. “If anything happens, they’ll call me,” she reminds them, reminds herself, voice distant to her own ears. “I’m his emergency contact.”

***

“The next time that makes a sound, I’m throwing it out the window.”

“I can’t help if they’re worried about where I am.” Isaac swallows. “They’re not psychic.”

“Got a taste of your own medicine, didn’t you, then? Do you know how many times I called…?”

“Twice an hour, the first day. The day after, maybe once an hour during the day. Then less. And less. You dropped off pretty significantly after a week; I stopped keeping track.”

“I called more than you deserved, that’s for sure,” his father says. “I don’t know why I wasted my time.”

***

“He’s probably okay, right?” Stiles lets a scoop of feed clatter into Ernest’s bucket. “They might have just gotten caught up talking. My dad and I talked for three hours the first night I was back over Christmas.”

“I don’t know,” Derek says. He’s scooping supplements into the various buckets. The charts have already been pinned over the big grain containers.

“He’s Isaac,” Stiles says. “He’s too much of a cynical asshat to not find his way out of any situation. Am I right?” He glances eagerly at Derek, who stands there, quiet.

***

“I’m not afraid of you,” Isaac says into the silence. “The horses I work with all day could beat you to shit.”

“Don’t curse at me,” his father warns. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”
“I know exactly what I’m talking about,” Isaac says. “I’m twenty-five and I’ve gone seven years without shitting myself over what you were gonna do to me when I got home at night, and there is no way you’re jailing me—”

“I’m your father; I do what I want.”

Isaac forces a sneer onto his face. “You wish.” His phone buzzes, and his father lunges across the car at it – Isaac gets an elbow up, knocks him back, snaps a glance out the windshield at an impending curve – “Dad!”

The brakes squeal and the wheel wrenches to the side, but they skid on into the guardrail, everything slamming to the left – Isaac feels stars pop behind his eyes, supernovas, and air punches out of his lungs when he tries to draw breath. Boss’ full weight slams onto his collarbone and he gags, chokes, drowns in the fog.

***

“It’s okay; it’s okay – he’s breathing; we’ve got a pulse!”

He lurches away from the hands on his throat, but they shift to hold him down. At some point he must have bitten his tongue – it aches and he can taste blood.

“It’s alright, sir, we’ve got you now.”

“Where -” He gags on his own words, head lolling to the side. Rust and crimson and deep, dark scarlet gleam – and blue veins, still, under the skin. His mouth tastes like blistered rubber.

“No side airbags,” someone is saying. “Old car. Kid’s lucky to be alive.”

Someone else shushes them. “Let’s get you to the hospital, make sure everything still works.”

“Is he dead?” Isaac asks. The flashing lights sear into his eyes: an ambulance at the side of the road, police cruisers, red white blue and more red – someone reaches across his body and he flinches, lashes out at them –

“It’s alright, sir, we’re going to get you out of here.”

His body turns; the sky is still bright, the light fading, lit from below, cars streaming by in an unceasing roar with their headlights blazing. He can smell smoke and burned rubber and the products of relaxation of the bowel muscles. “Is he dead?” Some of the tightness in his chest comes loose; he’s being lifted, choking white picking at the edges of his vision – there’s red all over his father’s sweater, beige comfort, Schizo’s fur, he wants to hide his face in it. “Is he dead?”

“You’re going to be alright, sir. Everything is going to be alright.”

***

Derek makes a dinner run for the sake of something to do, returns to find the office exactly as he left it: Laura glowering at her phone, Stiles pacing, Scott and Allison in chairs facing one another, Scott’s knee bouncing, Allison chewing on her top lip. He brings deli sandwiches and chips, simple things no one touches. “Has anyone called Jackie?”

“She’d kill me,” Laura answers as she shreds a piece of lettuce between her fingertips and watches the scraps patter onto the paper wrapping. “She’ll kill me when I tell her, anyway, but I’d rather not have that headache on my plate right now.” Her phone rings; everyone jumps, then halts what
they’re doing to stare at her, at it. Her hand is steady when she brings it to her ear. “Hale speaking. Yes, I… yes.” She stands, moves to pace, stops with one hand wrapped over the back of her chair. “What? Where?” Her throat clicks. Under her skin, her tendons bulge. “Is he… oh thank god.”

A rush of air leaves the lungs of everyone in the room.

“No, I… I don’t have that information. I’m sorry.” She squeezes her eyes shut. “Am I… May I send someone in my place to collect Isaac?” Eyes open: Stiles buries his head in his hands; Lydia shakes her head, neck stiff.

Laura looks to Scott and Allison – they nod as one.

“Scott McCall,” she says. “M-C-call. Thank you.” She hangs up. They’ve all got eyes on her. She takes a minute, staring at her phone, shutting it off, clearing her throat. “That was the hospital in Davis. There was a car accident about an hour ago – plowed into the guardrail. They said it’s a miracle Isaac’s alive and whole.” She stares directly at Lydia. “His father’s dead.”

For the second time in five minutes, Derek loses all the air in his chest.

Laura turns her gaze to the ground. “I’m not going to be able to look him in the eye for a week.” She rubs one hand over her face and points at the door with the other. “Sutter Davis Hospital: Exit 29 off 113-North, from I-80. Less than an hour if you drive fast. Go.” Scott and Allison share a glance before they rise in unison, strides long and rapid as they exit. “Lydia, go home. Stiles, go home. Derek-”

“It’s not your fault,” he says.

Lydia stands and leaves; Stiles lingers at the edge of Derek’s vision, and Laura lifts her head to utter a harsh cackle.

“Oh, oh, not my fault at all; I only handed him over to the man, only told him to humor him, only assumed there was no reason for him not to.”

“You didn’t know.”

“It’s my job to know, you little shit.” She sounds ragged. “You know what else I didn’t know about? The fucking psycho who burned our family down.”

Derek feels the blood drain out of his face, but Laura is white too, breathing shallow, a choked rage wrought on her face. Footsteps: Stiles backing out. Good.

“Don’t tell me what I should or shouldn’t have known, little brother, unless you’ve-”

“My dad was the one who told Isaac’s dad where he was. You want to blame someone, blame me.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion,” Laura informs Stiles. “Get out of here, Stilinski. Get out of here, go get dinner, go to bed, come back in the morning when this has all been reduced to a grim nightmare.” She holds still, staring at them. “Stilinski.”

“You don’t always have to be on top of everything – my dad-”

“I didn’t ask for your input, Stilinski, and I didn’t ask about your father, and I didn’t ask you to do more than feed Yogi and scoop up his shit, and I certainly didn’t ask you to start taking orders from my brother over me. I told you to get. Out.”
“You’re breaking down,” Stiles says.

Laura spits. “Cute. I am functional and I am functioning and I am in charge of this barn and the people in it, and if you aren’t very careful about the next words out of your mouth, Stilinski, you won’t have a job come morning.”

Derek bites down on his tongue, doesn’t immediately turn around, doesn’t tell Stiles to go home. Instead he says “I left something in the car – I’ll see you at the apartment” and then turns and grabs Stiles’ shoulder on the way out, dragging him along while the horses poke their heads out to watch and knicker farewells.

“What the hell,” Stiles hisses at him. “She’s losing her mind.”

Derek keeps going. “You antagonizing her didn’t help.”

“I… Jesus, okay, you can let go of me.” Derek does and Stiles stumbles, gets his feet under him, hurries after Derek towards the parking lot. “You know, for someone whose sister just flipped out in a not-at-all-mentally-stable fashion, you seem remarkably unperturbed.”

“It scares her to feel weak,” Derek hears himself say. “She was trying to reassert her control of the situation; you challenging her made it worse.”

“And you didn’t?”

“I’m her brother; I’m traditionally subordinate; I’m far less of a threat.”

“And none of this worries you in the slightest. You have heard of power complexes before, right?”

Derek sighs. “Here’s what’s going to happen now: I’m going to go sit in the car for an hour, and she’ll walk over to the apartment, drink either tea or booze until she feels sufficiently levelheaded or exhausted, and then she’ll go to bed and wake up at three and go punch sandbags at the gym until it’s reasonable for her to be at the barn.”

“You’re already unpacked?” Stiles asks, followed by, “And you just let her do that?”

“We own the apartment we have here. And yes, I do – she’s her own person.” He pulls out his keys and taps a button; the Camaro – one of the last cars left in the lot – beeps. It’s barely past seven.

“I can’t believe you,” Stiles is saying. “How are you two still alive?”

“Because Laura never stops.” Derek sets a hand on the door of the Camaro, turns around, and is knocked back against the car when Stiles kisses him.

It’s a frantic mash of mouths, anxious and uncoordinated, and Derek’s never been kissed by someone taller than himself – but when he pushes Stiles away he goes, stuttering and fumbling. “Shit, shit, I’m sorry – ”

Derek holds Stiles at arm’s length, palms against his shoulders. “It’s fine,” he says.

“No, it’s not, I’m sorry – ”

“Shut up.” He touches Stiles’ cheek. “Go home. Get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Stiles says. “I’m-”

“And the next time Laura tells you to do something, do it.”
“Okay.” Stiles backs away with the light gone out of his eyes.

Derek gets into the Camaro, turns the radio on low, and watches him pad across the asphalt, shoulders hunched up inside his t-shirt, the stars overhead blotted out by the lights from the city that’s just waking up for the evening.

***

Allison parks in front of the hospital and cuts the engine. “You get him,” she says. “I don’t… I need to think over some things.”

“All right.” Scott kisses her cheek before sliding out. “Be right back.”

“Alright.” She slides the seat backwards so she can get her legs up in front of the wheel and fold in on herself as she pulls out her phone and opens a new hand of solitaire. She can beat a game on the hardest setting in under a minute. Now, though, she only pokes at it for round after round, brain busy inside her skull.

Whatever conversation they were going to have with Isaac needs to be postponed in the face of current circumstances, because they know only the barest details about what’s happened during the last six hours and Isaac may very well be in a place where he flat-out rejects all human contact. The mission now is to see him safely to San Francisco – everything else is on hold. Trauma of any sort doesn’t get swept under the rug in the blink of an eye.

Allison rests her head against the window and stares at the screen and tries to process the knot in her belly: fear and anger and stress tied up together with bitterness that nobody knew anything earlier, but that isn’t Isaac’s fault, nor Laura Hale’s – aren’t there rules about thinking ill of the dead? “Jefferson Davis is dead,” she reminds herself, nudging the last King into place. She starts another hand and her brain turns to logistics: what to do with Isaac tonight if he’s functional and capable of looking after himself, if he isn’t, worst-case, best-case scenarios. Every few minutes she glances up at the hospital’s entrance, and when she spies two familiar silhouettes walking towards her she turns off her phone and opens her door. “Isaac.”

He’s still Isaac, albeit moving more stiffly than usual, skin taking on a jaundiced cast under the yellow glow of the streetlamps in the parking lot. His eyes are empty in their sockets, fading in and out, his smile grim when he reels himself in to focus on her. “Hey, Al.” Scott’s shoulder brushes his; he startles, then leans into it. “Sorry to make you guys come all the way out here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous” she says at the same time Scott shakes his head and murmurs “Don’t even worry about it.”

Isaac hesitates, looking between them.

Allison meets Scott’s worried gaze, then says “Let’s get you home, yeah?”

Isaac’s smile goes distant. “I still need to unpack.”

“Did you want…” Scott stops before he’s finished the thought, then resumes. “…to be alone tonight?”

“I don’t know.” Isaac blinks.

Allison clears her throat. “I think that’s… not such a good idea.”

“Really,” Isaac says.
“On the principle of ‘I’ve been panicking for several hours straight and I want to compensate for it by not letting you out of my sight until morning,’ yeah.”

Isaac licks his lips and nods. “Alright.”

He pulls Scott into the backseat with him, just a loose grip around Scott’s wrist, and he stays shoulder-to-shoulder with him, his head bowed, not looking at either of them. Allison starts the engine and rolls them out of the parking lot, pokes at the GPS until it concedes to direct them back towards San Francisco. The engine whines once they hit the freeway and she hears Isaac’s sharp inhale.

“Easy,” Scott murmurs.

When she sneaks a peek in the rearview mirror, Scott is watching Isaac, who has his eyes locked on his lap, the tendons standing out in his neck. He’s still got Scott’s hand in his; he’s tracing shapes on it, chewing on the inside of his cheek. She reaches back to touch his knee – he sees her coming, doesn’t flinch. “Hey,” she says. “You alright?”

“Nope.” He sinks down in his seat, his head dropping against Scott’s shoulder. “You two are in for a long night if you’re not planning on leaving me alone.”

“I remember another long night,” Allison says. “Months ago, in January, when some ridiculous fool spent four hours walking laps around the barn with me and a dying Thoroughbred.”

“She lived.” Isaac sounds confused.

“She wouldn’t have if we’d stopped walking.”

“Not if they’d taken her straight to the hospital.” Now he’s exasperated – a step up from apathy.

“Maybe,” Allison says. “Maybe not.”

Isaac snorts, then lapses into silence.

***

Isaac doesn’t let go of Scott’s hand. If he weren’t still tracing shapes on it, following the folds and crevices with his nails, Scott would think him asleep – his head’s down on Scott’s shoulder, his breathing soft. All he can see of Allison is her profile, her grip on the wheel. Nobody has spoken for many minutes when Allison flicks on her turn signal and guides them from the highway.

Isaac sits up. “How many people know? About my dad?”


Isaac makes a soft, noncommittal noise. “Alright.”

“Good or bad?” Allison asks.

“Better than I expected. Lydia and Stiles already knew already knew. To a degree.”

Scott turns his head. “Stiles?”

“I think he guessed at least part of it. Don’t know if he figured out the whole story.”

“Does anyone know the whole story?”
“Me,” Isaac says. “And I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“Okay.” He watches Isaac turn his hand over, studying the bulge of the veins along the underside of Scott’s wrist. “I think we should go to my place,” he offers. “Stiles’ bed is still there – it may be easier to work out sleeping arrangements.”

“Sure,” Allison says. “We’re almost there.”

“You say that like I’m actually going to sleep,” Isaac murmurs.

“We’ll figure something out.” Allison lets the car roll to a halt at a stoplight, then turns left into the parking lot of Scott’s building.

Inside the apartment, Isaac looks a hell of a lot better than he did in the hospital, when his eyes were snapping around and he was flinching anytime someone moved too suddenly. He’s still shaky inside his skin, but sounder, calmer. When he says “I need a shower” and steals a pair of Scott’s sweatpants and comes back in one piece with damp hair, everyone starts breathing a little easier.

They haul Scott’s and Stiles’ mattresses off their frames and use them as a base for a nest of blankets and pillows on the floor, and Allison makes her own raid on Scott’s dresser before they drag Isaac down and turn off the lights. He goes with much sighing and dramatic eye rolling, but once he’s down he goes quiet. Worryingly quiet.

Scott lies on his side and brushes his knuckles against Isaac’s ribs under the blankets. “You all good?”

“Yeah,” Isaac says. “Yeah.” He takes Scott’s hand again and pulls it over his body, rolls so that he’s facing away with Scott pulled tight against his back. Allison touches their entwined hands, then slides her palm up Scott’s arm and tucks herself into Isaac’s chest. Isaac inhales, holds it, then lets everything out in a shaky exhale. His grip on Scott loosens.

***

Lying on her back, Jackie watches the whirring fan on the ceiling, counting turns per heartbeat. Wade’s on his side, pads of his fingertips skating over the inside of her forearm as he traces imaginary paths there. The room is warm; his skin is warmer. Jackie stares at the fan. “Do you ever realize there’s a time limit on your life?”

Wade stops moving. “Something I try to avoid thinking about, but I’m aware of it.”

“It used to freak me out,” she says. “Scared me for years, actually, until I realized how long a tenth of a second is.” Wade is quiet when she sits up and rolls him onto his back, when she climbs on top of him, her knees pinching in on his sides. “There’s a time limit,” she murmurs, “But it’s a long fucking time.”

He touches her waist, the weight of his palm barely anything at all.

A car slams on its brakes outside the window. Metal crunches.

***

Stiles sets two alarms, sleeps through the first one, and wakes up to the World War Two air raid siren that is his backup. “Fuck, fuck, fuck – I’d take Isaac over you any day Jesus Christ.” He turns it off and hauls himself out of bed, ears ringing. “Never doing that again, holy Jesus god, why do I do the things I do – shit, who texted me?”
He has four messages.


Derek: Get here early. It’s you and Lydia today.

Erica (Group MMS): We’re coming up Tuesday – get there early afternoon. Drinks on us once we’re in town.

Laura: You’re not fired if you get here before 5.

He checks the time. 4:40. “Shit, shit, shit – I hate you, Hales, I hate you I hate you I hate-” His head cracks against the doorframe. “Ah, shit.”

***

Scott’s phone goes off buzzing at five. Allison opens her eyes, blinks, then squeezes them shut again. Isaac groans when Scott rolls over to answer – he nestles in closer to Allison and hunches his shoulders into the empty space.

Scott’s voice is scratchy with sleep. “’Ello? Hi. Yeah, he’s here. He’s okay… okay. I can – alright.” He stops. Allison picks her head up, sees the silhouette of him holding his phone in front of his face. “You have a nice day,” he tells it, then sets it down.

Isaac opens his eyes. “Laura.”

“You’re not allowed to go in today. Her words, not mine.” Scott lies down once more, wrapping an arm around Isaac and pressing his face into the back of his neck.

Isaac sighs. He touches Allison’s side, her shoulder – she kisses his knuckles when they brush her lips. He huffs.

“You alright?”


“Sleep now,” Scott mutters. “Talk later.”

Isaac grins and Allison giggles, and she hisses “mortal” before huddling in against Isaac and quieting down.

***

“Hi,” Stiles says.

Derek looks at him. “Hi.”

Stiles stands in front of him, fidgeting with the cup in his hands. “I bought you coffee,” he says.

“I figured you would.” He nods towards the tack box in front of Yogi’s stall. “Yours is over there.”

“Okay.” Stiles stares at him for another minute, then hands him the cup, executes an about-face, and marches down to his end of the barn. He gets to the tack box, picks up the cup, reads the two words written on it, and lets out a peal of laughter.

Lydia gives Derek a pointed look. “What’s it say?”
“Don’t be’.” He then shows her the cup in his hands, where *SORRY* has been printed in tall, blocky letters with the biggest Sharpie model sold in stores.

***

Erica finished drying her hands on her jeans as she walks out of the bathroom into the track kitchen proper. Everyone’s gone silent, heads craned to see the TV on the wall, which isn’t providing live coverage of the track for the first time in Erica’s memory. “Holy shit,” someone is saying. “Holy shit.”

“Holy shit what?” Erica slips into the seat across from Boyd. “What’s up?”

He clears his throat. “Someone just blew up the Boston Marathon.”

“Oh,” she says. Stops. Thinks it over. Looks at the screen, with its screaming people and its cloud of billowing smoke, the blood spattered across the pavement. “I see.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’re still alive and don’t hate me and want me to write you, specifically, a story and also donate money to a good cause, check out ao3auction.tumblr.com - they have me and 300+ other authors up for bidding, and all the money goes to support the OTW - AKA the people who run the Archive!
Simply Human

“Rule Number One,” Allison says. “Scott doesn’t get to cook without supervision.” She cracks another egg into the frying pan for effect.

Scott sticks out his tongue at her and flips the lever on the toaster. It creaks, then goes silent – ominously so. He pokes at it, unplugs it from its socket, plugs it back in, and beams when it hisses to life.

Allison smiles. “Rule Two: Something we do bothers you, you tell us and we see what we can do about it. Exhibit A: Rule One.” Isaac cracks a grin at that. He wraps his hands around the mug of coffee – the blue one with the chip in the glaze of the handle – that Allison coaxed out of Scott’s decrepit coffeemaker as she continues: “Number Three: We talk about stuff. We talk about a lot of stuff. We cope by talking stuff out, and this is the only time I’m going to say that you have to be okay with something, because this relationship isn’t going to survive without a serious amount of communication.”

Scott slides into the chair next to Isaac and bumps their shoulders together. Isaac leans into it, eyes on Allison as he nods, grin vanished.

“Allison, I’m good. You?”

The toaster groans as its timer ticks along. Scott drinks his own coffee (green mug, dandelion pattern) and tries not to think beyond the simple pleasure of the moment: Allison and Isaac both here, everyone safe, everyone whole. The people at the hospital were using the word ‘miracle’. Isaac has very minor whiplash, a small degree of shock, and bruises across his torso from the seatbelt, but no concussion, no broken anything, no organ damage – and brakes or no, the car was still going at least fifty miles per hour when it plowed into the guardrail. They were talking up something about bracing for impact, maybe the curvature of the headrest, fatalism, adrenaline-fueled super-strength, survival instincts… he doesn’t know. Nobody knows.

“I should go over to the track,” Isaac is saying. “Unpack my stuff at least.”

“You gonna stay over there tonight?”

“Less of a haul in the morning.”

The toaster dings; Scott slips out of his chair to grab plates. They’re simple plastic things fluorescent in coloration. He picks three orange ones. “When do you guys start racing again?”

“Eighteenth for the Hales.” Isaac takes his load of eggs and bacon and toast from Scott, then pauses, thinking. “Pretty sure the eighteenth’s the first one. Skater, I think, trying to break her maiden. Las Cienegas was our last stakes for a while – we’re giving all the stakes horses a break. Schizo still hasn’t won this year.”

Allison touches Scott’s shoulder, then sits beside him. “Well, do what you want,” she says. “You’re always welcome with either of us.” Scott hums his agreement, and Allison pecks his cheek and then his mouth. “Missed you,” she murmurs.

Isaac slings an arm across Scott’s shoulders to brush Allison’s cheek as he buries his face in Scott’s
“Me too,” he mumbles.

Scott feels a happy little sigh escape him and he gets a hand up, touches Isaac’s chin until he picks his head up and presses their mouths together, steady and sweet, their breakfasts going cold in front of them.

***

Stiles avoids her for the better part of the day, Laura notices, and he keeps away from Lydia as well, with his eyes downcast and his tone careful and respectful whenever he addresses either of them. She minimizes thinking about it – she has races to prepare for and seven horses without their handler. The workload is manageable since they don’t have anyone run workouts, but they’re trying to avoid having the animals stand still for twenty-four hours per day, so there’s still plenty to do.

For her part, Lydia is quiet. Whether that’s intentional on her part or a product of Stiles avoiding her is up for debate – she’s not speaking to anyone. Since Laura told her Isaac wouldn’t be coming in, she’s resided in a bubble of cold silence, and with most of the jockeys and exercise riders still in Santa Anita, there isn’t much talking being done by anyone else.

Eddie stops by for a few minutes after workouts end. He asks where Isaac is.


“That is sad.” Eddie gives her a small shake of his head and then sits quietly on a tack box while Lydia grooms McGatsby.

As the day crawls by, Laura finds herself fading in and out, and at one point she blinks and realizes that she’s been staring at the sunbeams creeping across the floor for more than half an hour. Derek is standing in the doorway, watching her. He turns around and exits the moment her eyes flick in his direction.

***

Running his thumbs over the calluses on his palms, Isaac sits on the edge of his bed and scans the room as if that will increase the number of humans in it. It’s the first time he’s been alone since Sunday morning, unless you want to count sitting unconscious in the car with his father’s corpse, or in the hospital after they confirmed that he wasn’t going to drop dead at any moment, hooked up to an IV, his roommate snoring in his sleep.

He fiddles with his phone – how it came through the crash intact, he’ll never know – and wonders if it’s weak to call, already, to say no, I don’t want to spend tonight alone; I don’t want to be a functioning adult. Not yet.

Jackie would punch him if she could see him.

He dials Laura.

***

She’s been doing an excellent job of not drinking anything stronger than tea, but she reconsiders that when her phone starts buzzing and she catches sight of the Caller ID. She lets it ring once, twice, thrice, quadrice, then taps ‘Answer’ and lifts it to her ear.

“Took you long enough,” Isaac says. Laura bites her tongue. “I’ll be in tomorrow,” he continues.
“Did nothing all day except fidget and unpack and think of reasons to come over anyway. Everyone’s settling in fine, yeah?”

“Yes,” Laura whispers.

“I figured. I mean, Stiles and Lydia know what they’re doing – was just worrying for no reason, but it was – paranoia, you know. Figured you guys would get along alright if you told me to stay out. One day won’t end the world.”

Laura clears her throat. “I owe you an apology.”

“No,” Isaac says. “You don’t, and Stiles doesn’t and Derek doesn’t and Lydia doesn’t, either. The only person who does cracked his skull open on a window and bled out next to the interstate.” He stops. “I’ll be there tomorrow, boss. Bright and early.”

“Good.” Laura’s voice breaks mid-word. She hangs up and stares at her phone, at the blank TV screen, at the walls of the apartment, then hunches in on herself in her corner of the couch and starts to cry. The sobs are ugly, throat-tearing ones that claw up from the bottom of her chest, and she doesn’t notice Derek coming in, only hears him saying “Laura? Laura” and coming down on the couch next to her, wrapping his arms around her (“Laura what is it?”) like he hasn’t ever – that’s her job: she’s the older sister; she’s the parent; she’s in charge. And Derek holds her steady against him while she pours rivers of salt into the gray of his shirt, until he stops asking what and why and how, until he stops trying to tell her it’s okay, until he simply sits and holds her while those rivers trickle themselves dry over the course of several minutes, having ripped apart the flesh of her throat, and she sniffs her last. And then he pets her hair and kisses her forehead and says “I guess life’s kind of a wreck, Laur.”

Her eyes are itchy and her head hurts, so she slumps against him a little bit and says “You have no goddamn idea.”

***

Oil spits and sizzles in the pan in complement to the first red smears bleeding across the eastern sky. Jackie sits at her kitchen table with a cup of coffee in front of her, watching the muscles of Wade’s back under his tank top, the lights glinting off sharp angles and flat countertops. The room smells of bacon.

She picks at the whole-grain toast on her plate, observing without comment while Wade turns around with pan and tongs in hand. “Bacon?”

“One piece.” She snags it off the pan herself with bare fingertips.

Wade laughs and takes two for himself, then sits down across from her to tuck into his own breakfast. It’s 5:30 – the track is fifteen minutes away. She’s already dressed.

Jackie inhales her toast and first cup of coffee, then nibbles on the bacon while nursing her second. When Wade stands to load their plates into the dishwasher, she grabs the last piece and downs it in two bites, and as he starts running water in the sink for the frying pan she says, “I’m leaving on the eighteenth. I’m going back to San Francisco.”

Wade stops in the middle of picking up the dishsoap. “Today’s the seventeenth.”

“I know.”

He seems to consider this. “Are you coming back?”
“When that meet’s done, yeah. Middle of June.”

Wade sets down the bottle. “You staying long?”

“A few weeks. Then I’m gone until September – late September.”

“You going to delete my number from your phone?”

“What do you think?”

His back is still to her; he’s staring out the window over her sink. “Most people I’d say ‘no’ just from laziness. You I think ‘yes’.”

“You think you know me that well.”

“I wish.” He looks down. “I know you’re a hundred and seventeen pounds when standing on a scale with silks and a racing saddle and I know your best friend is Laura Hale and I know you’ll be thirty-two later this year, and I know I’m some wayward unemployed Aussie you started having regular casual sex with a few weeks ago. And I know none of these things because you’ve told me directly.” He turns around and leans against the sink, facing her. “So you want try giving me a straight answer for once?”

“I’d prefer not to,” she says. She sits straighter. “I’ll probably rename your contact something abusive and offensive. Just for pettiness’ sake.”

Wade’s eyes crinkle, but when she stands and says “I gotta get to work” he lets her go, and he’s long gone by the time she returns home that night. The dishes are clean. Nothing’s missing. There’s no note. He locked the door behind him.

***

The overheads are already on when Isaac walks into the barn. Finstock greets him with a “Lahey! Good to see ya!” and a couple horses whicker hellos. He makes his way down the aisle to the feed stall – inside, Stiles glances up from where he’s elbow-deep in feed tubs.

“Hi,” Isaac says.

Stiles straightens up. “Isaac-”

“Shut it.” He pulls open the door as Stiles attempts to stammer out another apology. “No, seriously, shut it.”

Stiles flails. “Can I hug you?”

“No.”

Stiles’ face falls.

Isaac nudges a bucket with his foot. “I have a lot of bruises. But if you wanna go get me coffee that’d be nice.”

“Oh my god, you asshole.” Stiles stops, stares at him. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Six sugars.” Isaac grins. “No milk.”

Stiles flails for another minute, then says “I’m hugging you anyway” and does – carefully, arms
around the neck, just for a second, because Stiles is irrational and never does what he’s told – and then scoots out of the feed stall and out of the barn in the direction of the track kitchen.

When Lydia arrives she doesn’t even ask for permission; she marches up to Isaac and throws her arms around his waist and presses her face into his chest. “I can’t believe you,” she declares, then lets go to poke him right in one of his worst bruises. “Don’t ever do that again; I don’t care what Hale tells you.”

“It’s not happening again,” Isaac says. “He’s dead.” He ruffles her hair until she slaps his hand away. “Don’t worry about me; I’m still kicking for a while yet.”

Once Laura and Derek appear around five, they stand side-by-side in the aisle and watch him, and no one does or says anything for a long moment. Then Stiles calls “I have the best timing” and butts in between them with a whole tray of coffee cups, and the one for Isaac has fifteen different sharpie hearts and “We wuv u” printed on it, and when Isaac asks if he’s sure he gave it to the right person, Derek holds up his, which has a crudely-constructed and unidentifiable four-legged animal with a tail drawn on it under Commander Sourwolf of Operation Yogimeister and says, “Yeah, he did.”

***

The group that turns out to drink with Erica and Boyd is small but familiar: Stiles comes and manages to drag Derek along with him, and Lydia makes an appearance as well. None of the jockeys show their faces – those who aren’t down south have to make weight for races on Thursday – and the Scott-Allison-Isaac triad is apparently otherwise engaged. It’s a tired gathering. Erica is conscious of how drained she is after six hours of driving, and they all need an early night, anyway, since they’ll be up before sunrise. But Erica gets what she wants for the time being, which is good company and a bit of trackside gossip: Ghostchant has shipped east to Churchill Downs, as has Red N Raw; Isaac got food poisoning but it back on his feet; the Hales are gearing up their two-year-olds for races in the middle of May; et cetera, et cetera.

Derek is letting Stiles nod off on his shoulder in one of the most adorable sights Erica has ever seen from them. It’s also the quietest Stiles has been since she’s known him, with two beers in his system and his red sweatshirt hanging loose off of his frame. Derek sits very still, talking quietly with Boyd while Erica and Lydia have their own tacit discussion of horses and races. None of it really sticks.

The peace is temporal and geographical. In Boston people are lying in hospital beds, fighting for their lives, and some sicko is gleefully watching the shock waves spread west and south, north, and east across the sea.

When the clock strikes ten, Derek nudges Stiles and says “We need to go.”

“Mmm,” Stiles groans. “Yes. This is true.” He opens his eyes and immediately closes them again when he yawns. “Wanna give me a ride?”

Derek scowls, but he doesn’t say no. Instead he grunts “freeloader” and nudges Stiles out of the booth ahead of him. They say their goodbyes and saunter into the parking lot.

Erica watches them through the window behind Lydia’s head: Derek unlocking the Camaro, Stiles leaning against it, sweatshirt open, smile bare. Derek touches his hand, his arm, knuckles brushing the base of his throat. Stiles stands up taller.

***
“You’re insufferable,” Derek grumbles.

“You got me drunk,” Stiles reminds him. “Your fault.”

“Two beers is not drunk, Stiles. And you’re the one who dragged me out here tonight.” Derek pulls the door open. “Did you want a ride to the track or not?”

“Mmm, yes. Yes please.” Stiles pushes himself off the Camaro and slinks around to the passenger side. He sprawls in shotgun, propping one knee against the door and letting the other knock against the gearshift.

Derek’s hand curves over his kneecap and shoves it away. “I do still need to drive.”

Stiles whines, but he keeps his leg straight until they’re out of the parking lot, then drops it again.

Derek clears his throat. “I’m going to objectively refuse to consider the implications of you sitting in my car with your legs spread.”

Stiles yawns. “Boo you.”

“I am technically your workplace superior, you know.”

“Not according to Laura.” Stiles rubs at his face and closes his eyes. When he wakes up, the car is parked and his door is open, and Derek is reaching across his body to unbuckle his seatbelt. “Kinky,” he mumbles.

“No.” Derek takes him by the wrists and pulls him from the Camaro. “You alright to get back to your room?”

Stiles shrugs, yawns, scratches his head. “May just go to the barn and pass out.”

Derek studies him and says nothing.

“What?” Stiles stifles a giggle. “You gonna kiss me goodnight?”

Derek looks away.

“Hey no wait – I am totally down for goodnight kisses. And good-morning kisses. And middle-of-the-day kisses. And kisses for no reason at all. I am a pro-kissing person, okay?”


“Shut up and kiss me,” Stiles says.

Derek rolls his eyes, and for a second Stiles thinks he’s going to be smacked upside the head and sent on his way, but Derek’s hand tips his chin down and seals their mouths together, and he stands very still until Stiles shudders and pulls away.

“That was anticlimactic,” he snipes. “I expected a few more teeth and claws.”

Derek’s eyes narrow, and he jerks Stiles’ chin to the side before biting hard at the hinge of his jaw.

Stiles flails and smacks his hands against the Camaro for balance. “Okay,” he says. “We have teeth. To everyone watching, we have-”

“You talk too much.” Derek brings him forward again. His eyebrows don’t know if they want to be
irritated or smug, but Stiles doesn’t care so much because they’re Derek’s eyebrows.

“I make up for you,” he retorts. “You don’t speak half as much as –” Derek bares his teeth. “Okay, now you just look ridiculous.” He lifts his hands to Derek’s shoulders, then leans in and bumps their foreheads together.

Derek’s eyebrows twitch.

Stiles waits. And waits.

“What are you doing?” Derek asks.

Stiles shrugs. “Experimenting.” He kisses the tip of Derek’s nose, and this time when Derek rolls his eyes and shoves him away into the side of the Camaro and Stiles goes to whine about it, Derek steps into his space and catches Stiles’ bottom lip between his teeth, tugging slightly before he lets go.

“Go to bed,” he says. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“You aspire to give me blue balls, don’t you?” Stiles grumbles, but he pats Derek’s shoulder and steps around him and heads for the bunkhouse like he’s been told to – and if he thumbs at his jaw a dozen times before reaching his door, searching for the sting, then, well, that’s his business.

***

Jackie hooks her thumbnail against her front tooth, then pulls it free, listening to the click. “You got something to tell me, Laur?”

Laura hefts her mug of tea and picks at where the enamel is starting to crack along the handle. “You seem to think so.”

Jackie humphs. “Tell me something,” she says. “Something happens and you have to walk away long-term. Who do you want running the barn?”

“Derek’s title is assistant trainer.”

“I know that, Hale. Not what I asked.”

Laura scowls. She drains her mug in silence before breaking to admit it: “Isaac.”

Jackie kicks her legs over the side of the armchair. “You got a reason?”

Laura sighs. “He’s better with the horses, cares more about all of them, and knows them better in general.” She pauses. “He’s only got a vague knowledge and comprehension of the numbers of it, but he and Lydia could do well working as partners.” Jackie keeps watching her until she shifts uncomfortably. “What?”

“Why the hell is Derek assistant trainer instead of Lydia?”

“He’s my brother.”

“You know who else was somebody’s brother? Viserys Targaryen. I understand that this is a revolutionary idea, but the “family first” ideology is actually one of the most destructive.”

“Don’t make pop culture references at me during a discussion of business.”
Jackie sits up, eyes sparking. “Don’t act so fucking noble if you’re giving yourself a job that you would expect two people to do. Because the fun fucking fact here, Hale, is that humans can’t operate at maximum capacity forever, no more than the goddamn horses can.”

Laura spins her mug between her palms, then sets it down. “You liked your Australian, didn’t you?”

“I’d like it more if there were somebody else who could be playing Magical Brown Shaman to your Tragic White Hero right now.”

“Get fucked, Vaca.” She doesn’t know why she says it.

“Excellent advice. See if you can buy a spine first, though.” Jackie swings her legs down and stands, stretches. “Now if you’ll excuse me, Your Highness, I need to make weight for tomorrow, and I told Jorge I’d meet him at seven.”

“Great,” Laura says as she passes. “Bye.”

Jackie doesn’t even permit her the guise of rage – she doesn’t slam the door, but instead closes it quietly. The lock clicks.

***

“Are you going to let them get away with it?”

“Get away with what?”

“Their little power trick.” Lydia folds her arms over her chest. “You have to see it. On the track, Yogi makes you money. Off it, he costs you.”

“Costs less. He barely pays his keep – if we didn’t own him, he wouldn’t. Not by a mile.”

“But does he cover it?”

Laura hesitates. “Technically.”

“You’re smart,” Lydia says. “But you’re completely ignorant about people. Don’t drive wedges where you don’t need them. In fact, if you pull out this one now, you’ve got more leverage than before. They’ll be in your debt.”

“I didn’t ask for your advice, Martin.”

“Just like you didn’t ask for Jackie’s? Ever?” Lydia’s smile is closed-mouthed, superior, a touch arrogant. “You’re as bad as Stiles, and you don’t need to be.”

“I could fire you right now.”

“Go ahead, then.” Lydia turns on her heel and walks out of the office with her shoulders swinging more than her hips.

***

Boyd takes the first shower when they get home and, after, calls out “Did you have any ideas about dinner?” as he’s pulling on clean clothes. “I was thinking sushi.”

Erica doesn’t respond.
He sticks his head out of the bathroom. “Babe?”

“They caught him.” She’s standing behind the couch, remote held in one hand, staring at the television. “He was hiding in a boat, and they caught him, and everyone’s going off about Muslims and jihad, because there’s no reason anyone would ever hate us.” She drops the remote. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

He nudges the door the rest of the way open and treads carefully into the living room. “But they caught him.”

“Yeah, they did.” Erica makes as if to turn off the TV, then stops. “I want to go somewhere that I can do shots.”

“Best place for that is here. Takeout?”

She picks up the remote and pokes at it to change the channel. “A shot every time Fox News doesn’t know what they’re talking about.” She looks over at him. “I love you.”

“…there are a lot of people out there who hate us for no reason, folks…”

Boyd nods at the screen. “That’s one right there.”

Erica tosses the remote down, walks around the couch, and kisses him, curling her arms around his neck and pressing her face into his shoulder after. He lets her hold him tight and sinks a little into the feel of her against him, steady and solid, doesn’t look at the screen, at the crowds, at the ambulance, at the pool of blood in the bottom of the boat, and he does his level best to block out the cheers.

***

Scott stops by as they’re closing up on Saturday evening. He slaps Stiles on the back after a bro-hug and spends a couple minutes shooting the shit, but it doesn’t take long to figure out who he’s really there for. “Allison’s all unpacked,” he tells Isaac. “She said you should come over.” When they leave (not exactly hand-in-hand but certainly shoulder-to-shoulder) he doesn’t give more than a casual wave of farewell.

Stiles looks at Derek. “You wanna buy me dinner and talk about when I’m getting the day off to go look at barns?”

Derek glances around; Laura’s already gone home for the night and Lydia is on her way out. Skater missed breaking her maiden by a length and a half; Nye is their next race, on the twenty-first. “Let me print out the schedule of when we have horses racing. And we’re getting Italian.”
Finding the Bomb

Chapter Notes

I plead AP exams and an internship at my barn as the cause of the massive delay between chapters, but I'm essentially into summer vacation now, so cross your fingers that I'll be able to stay on-track.

Boyd keeps a tight hold on Boss’ face when she comes out of the gate. She starts slow as ever while Yogi opens yard after yard of dirt between them, and Boyd does his level best to keep her that way as she struggles to pour on more speed. At the quarter pole Yogi is still well clear – Stiles glances under his arm at them.

Five furlongs, Laura said. Hold her together for five furlongs.

Boyd tightens his grip when Boss makes to extend and reduces the swing of his elbows to curtail her power. She shortens her stride, neck arching, chin tucking in, trying to get the bit in her teeth as her legs snap out faster, faster as they slow, slow, slow and Yogi draws away.

With half a furlong left, he lets her go, and she explodes. He’s only going to let her run for that last sixteenth – the dumbest thing you can do is burn out a two-year-old whose first race is less than a month away – but to watch the open ground in front of them snap away saps the strength from his limbs with awe. It takes Yogi breaking to a trot to jump-start his brain into motion again.

He sits down in the saddle, using all the power of his back and shoulders to halt Boss’ momentum. She pins her ears and puts up the best fight she can, dragging her head down and insisting on cantering on past Yogi before she, too, drops to a trot.

Stiles slackens his grip on Yogi so he can catch up to the filly, both riders sitting deep in their saddles as they turn towards the outside rail. “That went well,” he says. “Right up until the end, anyway.”

“She’s getting better.” Boss lets him drag her to a walk. “Better too much attitude than none.”


***

When Pig returns from a short breeze with white rings around her eyes and her nostrils flared wide as she stumbles along, Laura calls Deaton. He takes X-rays and delivers a small dose of Bute, and within an hour they have a verdict: a splint in her left foreleg. It’s not as bad as it could have been, but it knocks Pig out of training for a month and puts Laura in a foul mood that isn’t remotely alleviated when Bush barely makes it four furlongs in fifty-four seconds – not even a thirteen-second clip. The stallion appears fine physically, but Laura vanishes for twenty minutes after workouts and comes back wearing a different shirt and with something stale and smoky in the air around her.

***

“So I heard you got food poisoning on the trip up.”
“Yeah,” Isaac says. He tugs his shirt the rest of the way down.

Jackie leans against the fence and clasps her hands in front of her. “Somehow, on a nine-hour trip where the only food available was so heavily processed and sanitized that fungi wouldn’t eat it, you ingested something with enough e. coli or salmonella or whatever to sideline you for a day and a half.”

“You don’t believe me,” Isaac says.

“Well, directly, I don’t believe Laura, because she’s the one who first fed me that line. But as a point of note: the sheer fact that you are not surprised by my disbelief gives me further reason to believe that I was lied to. If you’d flown cross-country and eaten, I don’t know, bad Chinese in O’Hare, okay, that I believe. Driving, I know you guys pig out on chips and beef jerky and shit.” She pauses. “Also, neither food poisoning nor horses give you bruises like the ones I just saw.”

Isaac sighs. Giving Boss a bath is a full-body bathing experience, so he’d stepped off to the side after to swap out shirts, cuing Jackie’s arrival. The bruises set in a diagonal line across his chest are yellowing down from blue and purple, but they’re still clearly visible. Cue the interrogation.

“Serious question,” Jackie says. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“Not overwhelmingly.”

“Alright. Don’t.” She studies him. “Are you alright?”

He tries for optimism: “Good as new.”

“Liar.” She sounds sad to say it.

***

“You have a gift for pissing off jockeys,” Lydia says.

“They have a gift for pissing off me,” Laura retorts. She drags on a cigarette and blows the smoke out almost immediately. “I never did work very well with women.”

“Not their fault.” She kicks her feet out, studying the worn tips of her paddock boots. “An author could easily describe you as domineering and a control freak.”

“Good thing I’m not being written about by any authors then.” Another drag. “I left Dina alone after the disaster with Booze.”

_Hardly a disaster_ is what Lydia thinks, but what she says is “Prime example: how did you deal with that?”

“By not pursuing retribution over her inability to follow orders.”

She stares at Laura. “I’ve seen dead rodents less ignorant than you.”

“How politically correct of you.”

Lydia squeezes her eyes shut, then opens them again. “Why did you… not pursue retribution?”

“Because I needed her to ride, and she wasn’t going to keep working for me if I dealt out any real consequences, so it was either exercise restraint or find someone else who would ride Yogi for Derek. I should have left that to him, thinking of it now.” And here Lydia is supposed to be the
chilly one.

“You have a Napoleon complex,” she says. “Or a combination Napoleon-god complex, which sounds more accurate.”

“Napoleon lost three hundred and fifty thousand men when he invaded Russia and had another three hundred and fifty thousand in his army after the winter. With that comparison, I scarcely mind at all.” Laura blows smoke at the sky.

Lydia chews on the inside of her cheek before she speaks again. “Jackie deserves better than you. And so do Dina and Isaac and all the rest of us.” She meets Laura’s eyes. “Dictatorial bitch.”

“Walk away,” is the immediate ordered response.

Lydia considers it, then hooks her feet into the bottom rail of the fence they’re sitting on. “I’m good, actually.” She keeps her eyes on Laura’s when she smiles and says, “Self-analysis is a virtue.”

Laura stares at her with flagrant disbelief written all over her face.

***

They’re all busy in the barn or standing trackside when Orb wins the Kentucky Derby with Red N Raw blazing out of the pack behind him and Ghostchant far off the pace with the rest of the cluster who burned themselves out early in that first radioactive half-mile. Laura doesn’t watch; she catches it on the news after. It’s a well-run race for those who came home in front. They deserve their celebrations. Orb just won his owner one-point-two million dollars, after all.

Since coming to San Francisco three weeks ago, the Hale barn has collected a fourth in one small allowance (Bury netted them a total prize of $2,040 before paying Jorge and Lydia their share); a fifth in another, even smaller one (Nye – forty-six dollars for the Hales); a second in Skater’s maiden special ($540); Flea’s last-minute bolt in the San Francisco Mile to carry home six percent of the hundred-grand purse (another $540 for the Hales; $60 for Isaac). And Yogi. Yogi the Yogimeister comes plowing down the stretch of a baked-hard track after a five-week layoff to prance into the winner’s circle of a sad little three-and-up sprint of an allowance at the same time as multi-million-dollar colts are making the grandest run of their lives two thousand miles away. He brings them $17,226.

The summer is always slow; they’re careful with the horses in the heat. That’s why they keep their winters so race-heavy. And they do have more races coming: the two-year-olds will all make their maiden debuts during the third week of May, which is sure to give her hell and a headache, but it’s better than having them eat their faces off with no money being earned. After that, their stakes horses will get some runs in, and then it will be back down to Hollywood in the middle of June.

And onwards they will stumble.

***

Derek stands at Yogi’s shoulder with his hand scrubbing under the gelding’s mane while Yogi twists his neck into the sensation and rolls his lips away from his teeth.

“You are so weird,” Stiles says. “So weird. Why are you only nice outside of the barn?”

Yogi grunts.
“Territorial,” Derek says. “All the horses are like that.”

“That is an offense to non-grouchy horses.” Stiles runs his hand over the boney bulge that is Yogi’s withers. “You’re just a freak all around, boy.”

Derek stops scratching.

Yogi sighs, pulling his head in to nose at Derek’s chest. When that doesn’t prompt him to resume his ministrations, Yogi gives him a shove.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Stiles tugs on the lead. “Don’t get greedy for your itchies.” Derek smiles.

Yogi grunts again, but there’s alarm in it this time. He makes a single hop away from them, ears swiveling, nostrils flared.

“Yogi.”

His head goes up – and up, and up – with all the ridiculous length of his neck. Nothing has changed, not the wind, not the background noise, not the sky overhead, but Yogi is prancing and wheeling on the end of the lead, Derek retreating. “Get him inside.”

As soon as Stiles takes a step towards the barn Yogi is trotting there, trying to drag him along, and Stiles lengthens his stride to keep from being hauled off his feet.

Lydia looks up when they enter at a rapid march. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, he just started – ”

Sass pokes her head out of her stall and Yogi snorts and swings his rump away from her until he’s perpendicular to the walls and his head is up again, above Stiles’. No sooner does Stiles get him semi-front-facing again than he’s trying to charge Dub, who is on cross-ties in the aisle, now both of them snorting, edging towards wild.

Laura pushes up against Yogi’s far side and gets a hand on his halter to pull his head down. “Hey there, Yogimeister.” She sets her hip against his shoulder and shoves, forcing him over until he’s straight between her and Stiles, closer to Skater than Sass. “You’re alright.”

Lydia gets Dub unclipped from the ties and pushes him over to the side.

Laura releases her grip. “Quickly.”

Yogi surges past Dub down the aisle; he almost misses his stall, would have if not for Stiles planting his feet and forcing him to slow. Nevertheless, he charges into the stall to wheel a circle around Stiles with his eyes bulging out of his head.

“What’s wrong, Yog?” He unhooks the shank. “What are you freaking out about, boy?”

Further up the aisle there is a frantic clip-clopping of hooves and Isaac saying “Easy, Boss; easy, easy,” and Dub shrilling a high note.

Stiles makes extra-sure to slide home the deadbolt when he leaves Yogi’s stall. “What’s going on? Someone – Booze – hops up onto his hind legs and bays.

“I have no idea.” Laura pulls open Dub’s stall door so Lydia can wheel him around into it. “I’ve never seen them do this.” Mick drives a foot into the wall and they all flinch. “Someone’s going to
get hurt if they keep hyping each other up.”

Schizo’s bellow drowns out the swelling calls of Bush and Ernest and Spitz as she snakes her head out of her stall to snap at Sass. Sass trills; Schizo pulls a sound out of her chest that sounds more like an angry sperm whale than a Thoroughbred mare. Sass pins her ears and retreats.

All the humans stand silent.

Schizo’s ears flick forwards. She stretches her neck towards Isaac, pulling a flehmen like he’s got something she wants. Down by Yogi, Ernest hangs his head over his door and wuffles.

“I have never seen anything like that before.” Lydia takes a deep breath. “Alright. Feeding time.”

Laura looks at Derek, at Stiles, at the long twin rows of horses between them. “Of course,” she says, voice distant.

***

When Allison wakes up, she thinks she hears Isaac crying because he keeps making these tiny, strangled gasps that he chokes off halfway through. She rolls over, sees the bowed line of his spine curving away from her, and then she hears Scott murmuring encouragement, the soft rasp of skin over skin. She touches Isaac’s shoulder, the back of his neck, kisses him there, and he groans. “Started the party without me, huh?” she whispers.

Scott’s teeth glow gray in the black. “Sorry?” He presses in to kiss Isaac, then her, while she runs a hand down Isaac’s chest and he spits a curse into the pillows.

“You two were supposed to be the ones who didn’t understand non-missionary sex,” he whines, and that’s the last coherent statement he utters for a while, because Allison drags her teeth over the knobby top of his spine and Scott starts kissing him again, everything under a blanket of shadows.

When Scott does back off of Isaac’s mouth it’s only to slither out of sight down the length of his body, and Isaac keens as Allison locks her fingers with his. She nips at the side of his throat, and he does it again.

“Goddamn lost causes,” he hisses, deteriorating into a whine when Scott hums a possible agreement, and then he goes dead as all the breath punches out of his lungs in one harsh exhale, free hand tight in Scott’s hair.

Allison kisses him under his ear while Scott slides back up the bed, then lets go of his hand wriggles out of her sweatpants and underwear and climbs over him, shoves Scott down onto his back, yanks a condom out of the packet in the bedside table and takes a minute to imagine the expression she can’t see on his face before settling atop him, pinning him between her thighs. She breathes and he breathes and his fingers span her hips; it’s his turn to choke off the noises he makes.

In less than a minute there’s another hand on her. Isaac traces shapes on her spine under her shirt, leaning between them, sucking a bruise onto Scott’s collarbone, then coming up to set his mouth against hers, cautious in the dark, all lips and no tongue, moving with her, with the pressure, catalyzed, sparking at the base of her spine. When she throws her head back and a gasp staggers its ways out of Scott’s lungs as all the muscles of her belly clench tight, her alarm shrills, splitting open the curtaining black.

She drops, one hand on Scott’s chest, one freshly re-entangled with Isaac’s, and tries to will her muscles into a state more solid than jelly. “Dammit.”
Scott grunts agreement.

Isaac is smiling when he turns Allison’s hand to the side to kiss the veins along the inside of her wrist, and then he says “Dibs on first shower” and bounds out of the bed, leaves the light off as he prowls into the bathroom.

Allison pokes at the mark he left on Scott’s collarbone, then kisses it. “We should talk about you two moving in here.”

He drapes both arms across her waist. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. You can pay part of the rent and everything. And also sleep over. All the time.”

“I sense an ulterior motive.” He noses at her hairline. “But I’d like that.”

***

“It’s almost the third week of May,” Erica says. “I swear to god it was January yesterday.”

“You’re getting old,” Boyd tells her, and doesn’t duck away when she punches his arm. “This month’s going fast; I’ll give you that.”

“Last week was three seconds long. April was maybe two minutes. March was ninety seconds, February was thirty, January was… what even happened in January?”

“A couple stakes, a lot of allowances, a lot more claimers… when did Hollywood’s meet end? Middle of December? So we switched tracks before January.” He shrugs. “Why you wondering now?’

“Because I feel old.” Erica crosses her legs and leans back into the couch, pinching her eyes shut. “I don’t want to be old.”

Boyd pats her knee and she leans sideways towards him until she’s sliding down, coming to rest with her head pillowed in his lap and her feet up on the opposite arm of the couch. Her strokes her hair back from her face and sits quietly, letting the golden spread of it fan out across his legs and the couch. When she sighs, he rubs a thumb across her cheekbone and waits, but she doesn’t say anything. Her arm comes up to fold behind her head; her eyes don’t open. The shadow of the couch stretches across the floorboards, and there are dust motes filling in the edges of the empty space around it.

***

The new Game of Thrones episode has just reached the half-hour mark when Jackie’s doorbell rings. She pauses the stream, checks the time, considers the list of possible suspects, then gets up to answer it.

Number one on the list is Jorge, because he borrowed her three-inch orange stilettos on Friday and still hasn’t given them back, and those shoes are ugly as all hell and she only bought them because she lost a bet to him, but they’re still her shoes. Number two is Erica, because Erica is the sort of person who randomly calls on acquaintances at nine-thirty on Sunday night. Number three is Eddie, come to beg for her car keys or her driving so he can get someplace to do something that makes complete logical sense in his mind. Number four is Laura, come to glower and do everything except grovel. Wade is not on the list.

Number four is the winner.
Apart from Laura, the hallway is empty, the light off to the left flickering and buzzing, the floor the same varnished black it’s always been. She’s wearing jeans and a lightweight jacket, hair loose and lank, hanging around her face. She doesn’t ask to come in. She doesn’t ask anything, actually. She says “I’m letting them keep Yogi” and lets the sentence drop at Jackie’s feet like a dead rat.

The expected train-load of shock misses its stop at the station and screeches right on by.
“Congratulations. Want an award?”

“Yes.” Laura stares at the ground like she’s ashamed. “And I need you to ride Boss on Thursday.”

“Ah, yes, the twins’ first race: the motivation for the visit is revealed,” Jackie narrates, and just like the surprise, any vindictive pleasure she might get from watching Laura flinch never arrives. Instead, she feels sick. “Come on in.” She steps away from the door. Laura’s footsteps follow her in as she walks over to her coffee table, picks up the thin black box sitting on it, and tosses it over her shoulder. It rattles when Laura catches it.


“Spare your lungs and your clothes and all the rest of us. That’ll last for the equivalent of two packs, then you’ll need to buy a new cartridge for the end. Costs a couple bucks.” Jackie turns around. “It’s the second race on Thursday, right?”

Laura stands with her shoulders hunched, her fingers curled around the cigarette case, chin tucked in against her chest. She is white on brown on the dull green of Jackie’s walls. It’s the weakest Jackie has seen her look in the last decade.

“Hey,” she says.

Laura sinks to her knees in the middle of the living room. She swallows audibly once, then again, and opens her mouth to say nothing.

Jackie goes to sit beside her, draping an arm over her shoulders. “What do you need?” She curls her free hand around Laura’s wrist. “C’mon, Hale.”

“I need you,” Laura says. “I don’t know how I’ve ever done anything without you.”

“I don’t either, but somehow the rest of the planet does it on a regular basis.” She squeezes Laura’s shoulder. “But you need to apologize for telling me to get fucked, or else I’m not riding your bitch on Thursday.”

Laura grunts.

“It’s not that hard, Hale. Open the mouth, inhale some air, vibrate those vocal folds. I’ll even say it with you: I’m-”

“- sorry; I’m sorry; I’m sorry.” Laura rubs at her face with the back of one hand. “I’m sorry I don’t know how to ask for anything.”

“Oh I gave up on expecting that from you a long time ago.” Jackie picks the cigarette case out of Laura’s lap and taps her on the forehead with it. “You told your brother you’re done trying to wreck his delusions?”

“Not yet – I, I only decided on the way over. It seemed pointless, in the end. Petty. I’ll tell him… when I have time to.” Laura doesn’t smile, and her hands shake when she pulls the case from Jackie’s grip.
Jackie huffs. “Well, at least you’re analyzing your own decisions now. Somewhat.” Not at all. It may be a week before Derek and Stiles get the news. “Did you have more revelations for me, or can I go back to watching my show in peace now?”

Laura doesn’t look at her or the screen. “I’ll go.” And she does: she gets up and leaves, turning the case over and over in her hands as she goes, and she doesn’t look back at all.

Jackie stays sitting on the floor. She glances at the television once, then sighs and pulls out her phone to stare at Wade’s contact. It’s been renamed “Puta de Ayer”. I’m so sick of white people, she thinks, and dials Jorge instead. “Where are my fucking shoes?”

“En mis pies. Los quieres?”

“Yes I want them, putamadre.” She knuckles the crease between her eyebrows. “Do you have any booze with you?”

“It’s Sunday.”

“Shut up. I just want a shot of something.”

“Tienes nada?”

“Tengo nada.”

“Perdedora.” He clears his throat. “Diez minutos.”

“Bueno. Door’s unlocked. Bring the shoes or suffer.” She hangs up on him, then grabs the remote and pushes play before climbing onto the couch, curling her knees up to her chest and dragging a blanket over herself to block out the draft from the open window. That’s how Jorge finds her when he arrives in a finely-tailored jacket and flip-flops with the grotesque orange heels in hand.

He sits down next to her. “Hale?”

“Sí.”

“Buena?”

She wrinkles her nose. “Más o menos.”

“Lo veo.”

“Mmph.”

Jorge sighs, then yawns with a great deal of exaggeration, then lets himself fall sideways on top of her. “Estoy cansado.”

“Not my fault.” She kicks him in the ribs, and he grunts. “Vete.”

“Sí, sí, si lo dices.” He rolls off the couch to kneel beside her. “Call if you need anything?”

“I’m tired, not sick or dying.” She tugs the blanket up higher.

Jorge rolls his eyes and leans in to kiss her forehead, then stands. “Hasta mañana, Jaquita.”

She doesn’t bother to protest the nickname. “Adios.”
He locks the door behind him.

***

“My mom wants me to fly out to Maryland for the Preakness,” Allison says as they’re tearing into
their yay-we’re-cohabitating burritos.

Scott glances at his phone. “It’s Tuesday. Preakness is Saturday.”

Allison shrugs. “She only brought it up this morning. Supposedly I’m going to fly out on Thursday;
I’ll be back by Sunday afternoon.”

Isaac picks a loose jalapeno off his plate. “Are you asking if we’re okay with this, or if we’re going
to trash the place while you’re gone? Because we’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

“You trash it, you talk to my landlord.” She smiles at him, cheeky, and he raises his eyebrows.
“Shed eat you alive.”

He smirks back. “She wouldn’t be the first to try.”

Scott chokes on his burrito.

***

At a quarter past one on Thursday, Stiles pulls up a chair next to Derek in Laura’s office to watch
the local trackside channel. Onscreen, Lydia is holding Guapa’s lead shank as Laura boosts Dina
into the saddle; Jackie is already seated atop Boss, the filly harrying at her pony as they wait for
the post parade to start. The twins are the biggest horses in the field by a long shot – most of the
other fillies barely touch the 15.2 mark. With Guapa clear of that measure by a full hand and Boss
pushing seventeen hands, they stand apart as freaks, and not necessarily in a good way.

The third-biggest filly is one of Pim Byrns’: her name is Click Snap Boom, and she’s a slender
black trigger, blind in one eye, measuring 15.3 hands. Reportedly, Byrns has high hopes for her,
half-blind or no – he flew east from Maryland two days before the Preakness to watch her, after all.
On the smaller end of the spectrum is the 15.1 Disparitated from Scottie Maxwell’s barn. She’s
also registered as black, but is pushing piebald: she’s wall-eyed with a wide blaze that drapes
across her face, rear stockings, and high-reaching front socks. Jorge’s riding her; Eddie is aboard
Click Snap Boom.

Stiles plants his chin on his fists as the post parade kicks into gear and the list of starting positions
pops up. He studies the names, then pauses, blinking. “Del Romana? That’s Guapa? Where’d you
get that from?”

“Their dam’s sire is named Romanesqueton,” Derek explains. “And their dam is Nero’s Nerve.”

“Hence Nerve, then, too. I see. And here I thought Laura was just being profound.”

Derek grunts. Affirmation or disagreement, Stiles can’t tell.

In the eight-filly field, Disparitated takes post position #1, Guapa #3, Click Snap Boom #4, and
Boss the way outside with #8. For two-year-olds they load fairly quickly, though Click Snap Boom
balks a little at the starting gate. It’s her left eye that’s bad; having horses on that side seems to
make her uneasy. Eddie will want to get her to the rail, then, and stay there.

The race is only four furlongs, breaking from about halfway down the backstretch, and as soon as
the horses come out of the gate the Hales get into trouble. Boss is slow off the bat, as she usually is, while Guapa breaks well, gets jostled a bit by the #2 filly, and then drops back off the pace. Eddie brings Click Snap Boom in to take her place, and Disparitated surges ahead on the rail.

They’re in the turn within seconds (:11 4/5 for the first furlong) and Boss is gathering herself to move up but is making a slow job of it, and Guapa’s running on half power – seems disoriented, almost, unsure of herself.

Stiles grabs Derek’s knee and squeezes.

Boss really starts to strain as they come into the stretch; still caught way outside, she creeps up on Guapa’s flank. Visible on the screen, Guapa’s ears flick back, then forward, and she digs into the dirt, her sister running strong beside her. They open up a wild spurt down the stretch, passing four horses in as many strides, Guapa ahead by a neck, a dozen lengths of dirt between them and Click Snap Boom, who never quite found her way to the rail – she’s running outside of Disparitated, running ahead, the black fillies hanging onto their lead as the Hales run them down.

And then it’s over. Quick. 4, 1, 3, 8. Byrns, Maxwell, Hale, Hale. Half a mile in forty-seven seconds flat. Derek has a fistful of Stiles’ shirt, and Stiles doesn’t have any recollection of him grabbing it.

“That could have been a hell of a lot worse,” he says, and Derek makes a strangled sound in the bottom of his chest before hauling Stiles over by that fistful of shirt and mashing their mouths together, kissing like he aims to suck the joy out of his lungs, or share it between them.
Assuring the Assured

Allison flies east with her mother after the Argents’ last race on Friday afternoon. Without her, the apartment feels outsized, oversized; Scott has been here countless times, but he spends an hour poking around it like a stranger. When Isaac gets home they go grocery shopping and fill up the pantry with Ramen and potato chips and boxed meals with instructions telling you how long to stick the platter in the microwave, and then Scott calls Stiles and the three of them cram onto the couch to play Halo for an undignified amount of time, and they don’t really talk at all. Sure, someone is calling someone else a motherfucker or complaining about “fucking bullshit” every twenty seconds, but Stiles doesn’t bring up how he and Scott haven’t hung out in ages and Isaac doesn’t talk about the barn and Scott doesn’t mention anything about Beacon Hills – he hasn’t told his mother about Isaac, not yet; he doesn’t want to know what their recent experiences looked like from the other end of the chain of events.

The lack of in-depth verbal communication doesn’t pick up after Stiles leaves (with a victory cheer of “And you can’t drag me out of bed anymore!” at Isaac). They toss their plates into the dishwasher and climb into bed, and Isaac shuffles in close against Scott as soon as he flicks off the light.

Scott rolls onto his back as Isaac’s head finds a place on his shoulder. He stays very still, Isaac’s breath drifting over his collarbone and a car grumbling past on the street outside. He’s waiting for the profound comment or the heartfelt declaration or whatever statement Isaac has brewing inside his head.

Isaac reaches between their bodies, threads his fingers between Scott’s, and brings their conjoined hands up to rest on Scott’s chest. Then he burrows deeper against Scott’s shoulder and drops off to sleep.

Scott spends a long time lying awake, staring at the ceiling, listening to Isaac breathe, and rubbing circles into the back of his hand.

***

“I’m thinking about leaving,” Lydia says.

Isaac watches Plague tear at the grass. He asks “Any particular reason?” and waits for her to step up to the plate.

“To escape from Hale’s ego.”

He makes no comment on the potential validity of the statement. “Where would you go?”

“Back to school, maybe.”

“You got the money for it?”

“For the time being, if I don’t spend it all on rent.”

“What would you study?”

“Mathematics, I think.” She ties a knot in Dub’s lead line, then unties it. “Or animal science. I’d miss the horses.”
“Become a trainer,” Isaac suggests. “You have to fill out a form and pass a test, and then you can give yourself a tumor by thinking about numbers all day long.”

Numbers, indeed. Spitz and Dub ran in a $27,000 maiden special yesterday, the second race on the program: two-year-olds carrying a hundred and eighteen pounds. In a six-horse field there were five colts and a filly – unusual, but the filly was one of Scottie Maxwell’s. Broken conventions were to be expected.

The filly’s name is Sandy Irene; she is 15.2, light brown with coronets on both hind feet and her left fore. She finished second under Ben. First was Naïve Violinist: also 15.2, light gray with a dark mane and tail, trained by Helen Rebdol and ridden by Eddie. Dina and Spitz beat out Jorge and Pim Byrns’ wiry chestnut Antes Patience for third by a neck; Victoria Argent snuck Spitting Ivory (a black colt with a white snip) in ahead of Jackie and Dub, edging them out of the money. Matt Daehler’s Ya Know Me staggered home last under Clark Mack, twelve lengths off the pace, five off of Dub.

She looks at Isaac. “With my spine, I’d need help if I wanted to get anywhere. You going to quit the Hales and come work for me?”

He smiles. “If it were anyone else…” The smile drops as he shakes his head. “I owe them a lot.”

“So you’ve said. Leaving me…”

“Stuck.”

“Inconvenienced.” She shortens her hold on Dub’s lead.

Isaac puts energy into not glancing in her direction. “Have you told Laura?”

“That I’m quitting? Of course not; I only said I was thinking about it.” She taps his arm so he looks at her. “I don’t need to ask you to keep your mouth shut, do I?”

“Course not.” Isaac turns his gaze back to Plague. “We’ll miss you, if you do leave.”

“I’ll be going to school, not dying.”

“Right.”

“Right,” she mimics, then stops. “I still need to think about it more.”

Isaac grunts.

Dub splays his front feet wider to get a better angle for tearing at the grass.

***

“I’m going out for dinner,” Derek says.

“With Stiles,” Laura says.

“Yeah.” He walks out of his room in jeans and a tank top. “We were going to take Monday off to drive up to Beacon Hills. We’d leave in the morning, come back at night. Looking at barns for Yogi.”

“You can keep Yogi,” Laura says.
“What?”

“You don’t have to send him away.”

“Okay,” Derek says.

They stare at each other across the living room.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Derek looks down. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He looks up again.

“I smoke,” she says. “And I need a cigarette right now. Are you still going out?”

He hesitates. “Yeah.”

“Don’t forget to lock the door.” She grabs her sweatshirt off the couch, pats the pocket to check for the thin black box therein, then walks out onto their little square yard of balcony and closes the sliding glass door behind her.

***

Oxbow takes the Preakness with Red N Raw once again planted firmly in second place. Ghostchant, the other Californian, gets in at the bottom of the money-earners with fifth, just behind Orb, the expected champion, nine lengths off the pace.

They watch the replays in their dank little diner that has three different television models mounted on three different walls, and Rosie collects the tips from Van’s tables as he chain-smokes his shift away in the alley between the dumpsters. Tonight is her turn to drive home; they’ll stay at her place and get stoned and have sex and maybe even enjoy it. It’s hit-or-miss all the time nowadays.

There’s a pair of track workers at the counter, well-tanned white guys with long legs and arms and dark hair with the stink of horses all up in the air around them. They’ve spent most of their meal with their eyes on the screens, and now they’re down to the end, bill sitting on the counter next to one of the apple pie milkshakes that Rosie pretends they’re famous for. They’re a quiet pair. She wonders if they’re brothers or lovers or friends.

The one with the big shoulders and the tight black jacket stares at the television and says something in a murmur. The one with the moles and the loose red hoodie freezes with his spoon in his mouth. “What?” he asks around it.

“You heard me,” says the Black Jacket.

The spoon clatters against the milkshake glass. “Are you serious? Is she serious?”

Black Jacket looks around as Van wanders back in through the side door, yawning and scratching at the mass of red curls curtaining his face; Black Jacket picks up Red Hoodie’s spoon and scoops a load of half-melted ice cream with a chunk of pie crust stuck in it from the glass. He grunts a “Seems so” as he pops it into his mouth, then hands back the spoon.

Van pecks her on the cheek. “’Sup, Ross?”

“Beast.” He taps the side of her glasses and saunters over to the family that’s just walked in. (A white couple with a little black girl. Weird.)

When she tunes back into the pair at the counter, Red Hoodie is saying “Nothing makes sense anymore” and Black Jacket is shrugging his agreement, and Rosie can’t help but feel that she agrees.

***

“What happened to Sunday?”

“My aunt.”

“Oh…kay.”

“It’ll only be a few more days; I’ll be home on Thursday at the latest, I promise.” Allison sounds stressed-out and stretched-thin.

“Hey,” Scott says. “It’s alright. We haven’t burned down the building yet – haven’t even come close.”

Allison makes a tiny, sad sound. “How’s Isaac?”

“Right now?” He grunts a laugh. “Asleep on top of me.” They’d been watching TV, Isaac’s head on Scott’s shoulder, body curled in under the arm Scott had thrown across his shoulders to fiddle with the string of his sweatshirt, and it wasn’t until the phone rang that Scott realized he was fast asleep. He lets his cheek rest against Isaac’s hair. “But he’s good. We’ve been good. I don’t think your landlord likes us, though.”

“She’s kind of racist and kind of homophobic,” Allison says. “But she’s not going to say anything to your face. You know Danny the farrier? He’s on the other side of the building. She’s the only person I know who actively despises him.”

“I don’t understand how that’s possible but, uh, okay. Are we sure she’s human?”

Allison giggles. “I’ve never seen her bleed.”

“There you go: she’s a robot constructed by the Westboro Baptists. Next time there’s a blackout we have to see if she’s still functioning, or if we can cart her to a dumpster and stop paying rent.”

“Yeah, okay,” Allison says. “Good luck with that.”

Scott smiles into the phone. “Still love me?”

“Only if you take the fall for the body in the dumpster.”

“Done.”

She laughs. “Then I guess I better get home quick, because I only have until the cops come to love you.” She pauses. “When he wakes up, tell Isaac I love him, too, okay?”

Scott runs his thumb over the notch in Isaac’s left ear. “Sure.”

They hang up shortly after – it’s after midnight on the East Coast – and Scott puts the phone down
to itch at his stubble. Still asleep, Isaac huddles in closer, mumbling contentment. His fingers close on Scott’s shirt.

“Allison says she loves you,” Scott tells him.

Isaac’s next inhale fits the same measure as his previous ones, but his exhale is shorter, and he rolls his head to the side as his eyes open. “What’d I miss?”

Scott slumps lower on the couch. “Allison’ll be back by Thursday. She says hi, and she loves you.”

Isaac grunts and tucks himself against Scott once more. “Love you too, Al,” he mumbles. A pause. “You goin’ to bed?”

“Eh.” Scott shrugs his unburdened shoulder. “I’m good here.”

Isaac produces a sort of incoherent jumble of syllables probably meant to express relief before he passes out again.

***

The news that Yogi’s tenancy with the Hales has been renewed gets around the barn like a bad flu bug. Jorge doesn’t have a discernible opinion; Lydia gets a smug little lift to her eyebrows; Erica’s have a more studious, menacing curve; Boyd pounds fists with Stiles; Isaac drops a bale of hay and demands details, of which there are none to give; Eddie braves Yogi’s pinned ears to pat his nose in congratulations; Dina says “oh dear god”; and Jackie absorbs the news in stiff silence, rolling her crop between her palms.

“Good for you,” is what she finally comes up with. “Where’s your sister?”

“She went to smoke,” Derek says. The words sound foreign on his tongue. “Are you the one who bought her the electronic cigarette?”

“Guilty as charged.” She smiles at him. “Try to think about her sometimes.”

***

Isaac goes running after work on Thursday; he comes back to the apartment to find the door unlocked and a suitcase sitting in the living room. Allison walks out of the kitchen in a dark skirt and suit jacket and pantyhose and two-inch heels, her crisp white shirt buttoned up around her throat and blush printed across her cheeks, hair loose around her face. “Hey,” she says. “Scott still at work?”

“Yeah, something came up with one of Rebdol’s horses. How was the flight?” He toes off his sneakers one at a time.

“Flights,” Allison corrects. “Fine. Long. Red’s going up to my aunt’s barn; Dad’s staying out there until they’re done with the Belmont. So it’ll be just me and mom and Gerard as the acting Argents here.” She smiles wide and fake. “It’ll be a great time.”

Isaac stops in the doorway of the kitchen. “What can I do?”

She looks him up and down as she considers the question. “If you wanted to fuck me on this counter, that might be a good place to start.”

Isaac has a response for that. He totally does. A coherent one – in English, even. It just takes a
minute to put it together. “Not going to go the quicker route and ask me to go down on you?”

“Not with that stubble,” she says, grinning truer by the second. “Some of us need the skin on our thighs to ride horses tomorrow.”

“Alright.” He saunters in closer. “And we’re not waiting for Scott?”

“I’m impatient and Scott isn’t the one with the vasectomy.” She hooks her fingers into the neckline of his shirt, tugging down.

“How did you know about that?”

“Lydia.” She sounds smug.

“Of course.” He backs her up against the counter and kisses her.

***

She’s been bound up and strapped down and posed and prettied over and picked to pieces for the last week, Allison has, and she’s had too many near-breakdowns to not find symbolic release in Isaac’s hands hitching up her skirt while his stubble scrapes her neck raw. She rucks up his shirt as he rolls down her pantyhose – he leans back enough to yank the shirt over his head, then runs his hands up her bare legs.

“You went commando.” His voice has already gone raw and she’s barely kissed him yet.

“Airplanes are stuffy and I had a two-hour layover.”

Isaac pulls her up against him. “Airplanes.”

“And the layover.” She beams. “I was thinking about you two.”

Isaac winds up snarling his reply against her lips somewhere in between shoving down his lacrosse shorts and sliding his hands into her hair to lay waste to all the effort her mother’s hairdresser put into it, and she feels the lacquer chip off her nails when she rakes them up his shoulder as he slides into her, his hips flush against the counter and her legs tight around his waist.

She bites his shoulder because she can, and yanks the hell out of his hair because she can, and doesn’t even think to worry about the suit jacket when he gets around to unbuttoning it, her blouse, running the strap of her bra between his fingers and kissing bellow the hollow of her throat with an open mouth because he can, she can, everything is legal, stubble burn flaring over her skin.

She doesn’t have the patience to slow him down – can’t be bothered to – and it’s easy to roll into his thrusts with her forehead set against his, mouths slip-sliding together and apart and across faces, sloppy and uneven. He holds his breath when he’s trying to rein himself in, she learns, and dragging her teeth against the bolt of his jaw shoots his control to shit.

“I’m trying to be polite,” he huffs, and hitches her left leg up like he’s trying to prove a point.

“I’m having fun,” she counters, then feels her own breath hiccup out of her lungs when he presses his face into her neck and clips his teeth over her bulging tendons. “Isaac,” she rasps, and he cradles her, bodies presses tight from hips to heads, and he kisses her until she’s breathless and gasping when he comes.

“Easy,” he croaks after. “That didn’t take ten minutes.”
Allison hums as she touches her nose to his; she doesn’t bother with time to catch her breath. “I’m going to go shower,” she says. “And you need to shave.”

“I was out running before; I need a shower too.” The words come out rasping and whining.

“Shave first,” Allison orders. “Enough of being a scruffmuffin.” She nudges him back and hops off the counter, collects the pantyhose off the floor and pads into the bathroom. She leaves her heels where they fell by the fridge.

In front of the mirror she checks herself over: her hair is a mess, jacket and blouse unbuttoned down to the curve of her breasts, red blotched across her chest and neck and cheeks. *I look like I got fucked,* she thinks, and starts stripping for her shower. She gets it hot, boiling, scalding in no time at all, steam curling around her as she lathers up her hair.

“You do know that shaving goes infinitely more smoothly if one showers beforehand, right?”

There’s still a door between them, but Isaac’s wry amusement carries through.

Allison’s had enough self-recrimination for the next six months. She peels open the shower curtain. “Get in here, then.”

She doesn’t think Isaac expects her to agree; there are a couple seconds of stunned silence before the door creaks open, and he’s quiet as he pulls off his clothes. When he climbs into the tub there is no trace of a smile on his face.

Allison steps back to let him get some of the spray. She feels something soften under her breastbone when his hair plasters down against his face, rivulets streaming over the marks she left on his neck, and she says “I love you” because she needs to be reminded that her family does not define the boundaries of the world, even though – especially because – Isaac and Scott built their lives well beyond the accepted border. It feels good to say it to his face.

“You’re not so bad yourself.” He tangles one set of their fingers together, sliding his free hand up her side and settling it on her spine, drawing her in under the blast of the shower. He strokes the suds from her hair and kisses her temple. “I love you too.”

Her mouth opens against his shoulder, dragging in hot, humid breaths – dragging them deep. She thinks the burning on her cheeks is from the shower, but it could be tears.

That uses up their quota of profound drama for the day. There’s a lot of pointless kissing and almost dropping the soap and bumping elbows into the walls because the shower was never meant to hold two grown adults, and then they’re finished and clean and pulling on clothes and Allison doesn’t have any room for emotions beyond contented exhaustion. She brushes the tangles from her hair and towels it to some semblance of dryness while Isaac shaves off his scruff, and then they both pull on sweatpants and loose t-shirts and flop themselves across the bed.

Even though it’s after eight, the sun won’t be setting for another twenty minutes, so what they can see of the sky is still orange and pink and purple. Allison lies on her stomach and Isaac on his back, his arm thrown across the blankets between them, tracing designs where her shirt’s ridden up. They’re senseless things, swirls and corners and waves, but they carry the heat of him. When his hand drops flat she says “Don’t stop,” but he sets his grip around her waist and rolls her over, pulls himself across the bed and goes back to drawing on her stomach. There’s a purpose to it this time.

“That was an ‘A’,” she says. “And… another one?”

“R.”
“Ah. G... and E. I get where you’re going with this.”

Isaac smiles and finishes off the ‘T’ with a flourish. He smooths his palm over her belly, then starts over again.

“M. C. C. McCall.” She wriggles at the tickle over her nerves. “You know, even when we were going to get married, I never thought about changing my name. Hyphenating maybe, but I could never get behind changing it.”

Isaac makes a noise in his throat and restarts once more. The word begins with an ‘M’ and a ‘C’ again, but then there’s an ‘A’ and the softer curve of an ‘R’ followed by the right angles of ‘H’ and ‘E’ and ‘Y’. He goes still afterwards.

“McArhey?”

“Stiles’ idea. Just a thought.” Isaac wipes the slate clean again, then leans over and huffs a warm breath onto her belly button, making her twitch. He kisses her just above the hem of her sweatpants before swinging back up to drop his head next to hers. “Scott should be home soon.”

The last rays of sunlight are fading from the ceiling. “Alright.”

***

“Oh god, not you too” are the first words Scott hears when he walks in the door from picking countless wood splinters out of Rob the Cook’s hock and having Stiles talk his ear off for the fourth straight day about *yeah we’re keeping Yogi – Stilinski in the house this is gonna be awesome*, so he’s, well, disoriented.

“I think he pulls it off,” Isaac is saying. “Looks better with it than I did.”

Scott blinks at the two of them standing in the kitchen doorway. “Looks better with what?”

Allison sighs. “Why is it that as soon as there’s no woman in the house, men stop shaving? Doesn’t it itch?”

“Let him keep it; it’s great.”

“Allison is nodding as she hugs him. She holds her arms tight around his neck and presses their cheeks together, then turns her face in to kiss him. “It’s scratchy,” she whispers into his mouth. “But you can keep it.”

“I heard that,” Isaac calls from the kitchen. “Favoritism!”

***

Over the course of the last eight months, Lydia has come to realize that Stiles’ two defining character traits are stubbornness and his tendency to let his mouth motor past all logical
boundaries. It’s no surprise to her, therefore, that she frequently ends up witness to running monologues conducted without any sort of outside encouragement. She is the sole audience to one such monologue the Friday before Memorial Day, when she and Stiles are sitting on the fence together while Guapa and Yogi graze.

“It just bugs me,” he starts off. “Did you know that nobody’s ever calculated the statistical probability of horses producing surviving twins, because that is an incidence so unbelievably rare that nobody bothers to keep track of it? And this isn’t like the government not tracking violence against Sikhs because they think it’s insignificant and are also possibly racially motivated. This is ninety-nine-point-eight out of a hundred times, twin fetuses – instances where there are twin fetuses to begin with – result in one dead foal and one live foal, two dead foals, or two dead foals and a dead mother. And the ones that do survive? They’re stunted. Scrawny. Weak. They’re not sixteen-two, seventeen hands at two years old. They’re not strong enough to be racing. And I Googled Nero’s Nerve, okay, and she isn’t that big. Tall and muscle-y and whatnot, but she’s sixteen-two, okay, and their father is smaller. Genetically, a filly Guapa’s size from that cross is possible, but really unlikely. A twin? A fraternal twin? A bigger fraternal twin? I’d never even heard of fraternal twin horses before these two turned up.”

“So you don’t think they’re who the Argents say they are?”

Stiles opens and closes his mouth, unused to being interrupted, then turns to look at her. He shakes his head. “No. I don’t. I think the real twins – if there were any to begin with – died, and Boss and Guapa are just big freaks from a lesser genetic background. Backgrounds. Plural.”

“They must have lived their whole lives together, then, to foster the appearance of sisterhood.”

“But that’s not that hard for a family like the Argents. Just stick them in the same paddock day after day – they’ll bond. They’ll be friends; inseperable. Look at Bush and Howard – I bet you they don’t even know that they’re brothers, they just got stuck in stalls next to each other and decided they liked each other. Horses get lonely; they want friends, too.”

“Bit of a conspiracy theory you’ve got going there,” Lydia says.

Stiles chews on his bottom lip. “Do you think I’m right?”

She shrugs. “Get proof. Find out yourself.”

“No, no, I mean do you-“ he gestures at her. “You, Lydia Martin, badass jockey, most likely to stage a coup with an army of horse-involved minions – do you think I’m right?”

Lydia smiles. “Flattery will get you nowhere.” She looks at the horses. “But, on a purely hypothetical level, I don’t think you’re wrong.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Stiles says.
Elective Amnesia

Chapter Notes

I present to you one of the shortest and least-sad chapters of Mud ever written, provided with the full knowledge that we will all be curled in the fetal position and sobbing our eyes out roughly twenty-four hours from now. Brace yourselves, my beloved readers, and good luck.

Bush steps into the starting gate for a race for the first time in eleven weeks on Monday. It’s a miniscule allowance under a bleak sky, and he has Dina on his back and his owner watching from the boxes. He loses. Not as badly as at Santa Anita, but the check his fifth place brings home barely covers what Guy McKearn has paid to shoe and vaccinate him since March.

“What do you think?” McKearn asks her as they watch Bush prance off the track.

“Your horse,” Laura says. “Your call.”

He nods. “Can you ship him out by the end of the week?”

“Of course.”

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“If Bush leaves, that puts us at nineteen horses – Lydia and Stiles with six, Isaac with seven.” Laura taps a string of keys on her laptop, then looks up at Lydia. “If you want to really get into riding in the mornings, we can-”

“Hire another groom?” Stiles interrupts.

“Mouth closed when I’m speaking, Stilinski.”

Stiles shuffles his feet. “Sorry.”

“I can take Skater if you want,” Isaac offers. “She’s already in my section.”

Lydia shrugs. “You’re welcome to her.”

Derek watches Laura pause and stiffen. “Was there something else?”

Stiles butts in again: “Another groom.”

Laura flicks her pen in his direction. “If you can find someone, go ahead and bring them to me. Right now, though, you can go check on Scotch Fitzgerald’s shoeing. Give Danny some company. Don’t hit on him.”

Stiles meets Derek’s eyes, chewing on his lips, then nods and steps out.

“You too, Isaac.”

“I’m good, actually.” He leans against the wall next to Derek and shoves his hands into his
Lydia pivots her torso to glare a warning at him, then faces Laura once more and ticks her fingernails against the desk. “Is this me talking to you or you talking to me?”

“I don’t know.” Laura leans back in her chair. “Your life; your call.”

“Sounds like a threat, for such an easygoing conversation about horse arrangements.”

Laura scowls and looks at Derek. He raises his eyebrows at her; a muscle in her jaw tics. “No one’s making you do anything.”

“No,” Lydia says. “You really aren’t.” She drums her hands on the desk for a few beats. “Are we done with your posturing? Danny’s surely sick of Stiles’ chatter already.”

“I’ll go rescue him,” Derek grunts, and is relieved to leave them to it, especially once Isaac follows him out.

Stiles glances at them from where he’s standing by Gatsby’s head, petting his nose. “Your sister is menacing,” he hisses.

“So we’ve all heard before.” Danny’s hammer rings against a nail as he drives it into Gatsby’s hoof. Gatsby tosses his head and snorts, but doesn’t try to move his foot off the stand. “Doesn’t Jackie smack sense into her anymore?”

“They’re having a lovers’ quarrel. It’s better than it was a few weeks ago, but they’re still…” Isaac shrugs. “They’re Jackie and Laura. They’re gonna do what they’re gonna do.”

Danny hums. “Jackie and Laura: the queens of steel.” He chortles to himself like he’s made some excellent joke, and cranes his neck further over Gatsby’s hoof.

Erica is unbuckling Schizophrenia’s girth when a cry of “Loose horse!” catches her attention. Over on the track by the quarter pole, a tall, dirt-covered figure is clambering to his feet, staring after the dark shape of a horse as it whips an elliptical curve that stretches past the finish line, then curves back, slowing to a canter, to a trot, skidding down to a halt in front of the human while the outriders circle closer.

“Five bucks says that’s exactly who I think it is.”

Isaac undoes the girth from the other side and drapes it over the saddle. “No. We already know.”

“You’re no fun,” she says, and watches Yogi butt his head into Stiles’ chest.


Isaac finished pulling the bit out of Schizo’s bridle and drops it into a steaming bucket of water. “Not particularly. This about Derek?”

“…Kinda.”

“Fine, then.” Isaac goes to work on the cheekpiece buckles. “Shoot.”
Stiles wrinkles his nose as he bends over his own tub to scrub at Slaw’s bit. “How does gay sex work?”

There’s a thud from Isaac’s end of the picnic table. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Shut up – that was a legitimate question.”

“Have you ever been near the internet?” Isaac’s voice is shaking with his laughter. “See, there’s generally a penis-”

“I take it back.”

“-a rectum –”

“I take it back; stop talking – I’ll just wing it. I’ll be fine.”

Isaac’s cackling is making the entire table move. “You’ll be doomed, then, Stilinski. I don’t think Derek’s been laid in the entire time I’ve known him.”

“Well that’s… I… shit. Really? You don’t know that. I bet you’re lying. And how do you even get someone to have sex with you anyway? Do you just… ask?”

“It’s an option.” Isaac stops sniggering as he soaks a sponge in neatsfoot oil. “Every relationship’s different.”

“You sure I can’t just ask the internet?”

“If you want to look like a Neanderthal, sure. Internet for learning the mechanics? Fine. Internet for doing anything well? In your dreams.”

Stiles scrubs very intensively at the bit. “So be my Yoda and be better than the internet.”

“Pay me,” Isaac retorts. But he spends the next few moments studiously intent on the leather in his hands before he opens his mouth again: “You do know there’s more than one way to get a guy off, right?”

“Oh my god-”

“I’m serious, Stiles.”


Isaac makes a noise like he doesn’t have a scrap of faith in Stiles’ attention span. “I’m just saying: everything’s not all dick-in-the-ass thrust-n-come – Stiles – and some, uh, some people actually prefer nor to do it that way-”

Stiles interrupts: “Is that you? The some people? Is that you?”

“Yes,” Isaac says patiently. “That’s me. I got fucked by a lot of dicks, once upon a time.” He pauses. “No pun intended.”

“Get out.”

“We’re already outside.” Isaac wipes his hands on a rag, digs a piece of gum out of his pocket, and pops it into his mouth. “You don’t even have to blow him, if that freaks you out. It’s Derek – he’ll
be amazed you want to have sex with him. Seriously. Handjobs are easy – you can mess around with them a little, and it’s a step away from jacking off yourself. Start there.”

“Why am I getting sex advice from you, again?” Stiles asks Slaw’s noseband.

“Because you asked and I’m better than the internet.”

“All you’ve done is tell me I don’t have to get anything inserted anywhere into my body, which misses the crucial point of “How do I get Derek Hale into my bed in the first place?” Any thoughts on that, Yoda?”

“I don’t know; let’s see what sort of lost cause you are.” Isaac folds his arms on the tabletop and stares across it at Stiles. “Pretend I’m Derek and you have a raging desire to have sex with me due to your irrational boner for angst and stress. How do you get things moving?”

“I can’t. You… your face, the cheekbones – yeah. Sorry. Not Derek. So not Derek. So sorry – so not working.”

“You didn’t even try,” Isaac accuses. “What are you, a gerbil?”

“No I’m… hold that scowl! Hold it!”

Isaac glowers.

“Yes, great, excellent. Hold that face for a minute.”

“This isn’t me cooperating; this is me actively glaring at you,” Isaac snaps.

“Just hold it; it’s working. I can feel a burgeoning attraction.” He can’t, actually, but he’s having too much fun to stop now.

“Stiles, I am going to break your face.”

And Stiles tries to think of something – he really does. So are you topping or do you want me to top ’cause I’m fine with either one and you’re kind of big oh wow, and, um, isn’t ‘topping’ is such a weird word for that – it’s like I’m talking about pizza and you’re the pepperoni but you’re more like anchovies? Or maybe jalapeños or something ’cause you’re like really intimidating but also really hot like yeah and um yeah whatever I’m cool with whatever or, okay, most whatever but I’m not gonna like wear a collar or anything but if you’re into that kind of thing maybe we should note that as a conversation that needs to happen – but wait Isaac said there didn’t have to be buttsex right away none of this is even a come-on ack. So what he comes out with is “Would you do it with your mouth?”

“That was horrible and no one would ever fall for that – who let you out in public?”

“Hey, hey, hey, Scott thinks I’m awesome. Scott would approve of that.”

“Scott isn’t someone you’re trying to bang,” Isaac says, “and even he wouldn’t use that line. Not to mention that Scott’s primary social skill is thinking everyone is awesome until proven otherwise.”

“Clearly, or else he wouldn’t be sleeping with you.”

Isaac’s face does a funny little twitch. He drops his gaze. “I’m well aware of that, thanks.” He squeezes his right hand into a fist until the knuckles pop, then lets it go.

Stiles chews on his bottom lip and scrubs at his hair. “I didn’t – didn’t mean it like that.”
“Yes you did. You’re allowed to: he was your friend first.” Isaac bows his spine and lets his head hang to stare into his lap. His voice still carries on the air.

“I didn’t – ” Stiles stops. “Well, okay, maybe I meant it a little, but not like... like... no, okay, this isn't cool; you can't be the most arrogant person in the barn one minute and then have a super-fragile ego. That's not fair. That's...no.”


Stiles blinks. “Are you trying to guilt-trip me?”

“Yep. Now c’mon – make like I’m Derek having an angst moment. I want genuine effort here, Stilinski.”

“Oh my god.” Stiles shoves his face into his hands. “Oh my god I can’t do this. I quit. I’m going home.”

***

Derek’s phone rings at ten-thirty in the morning on Friday as Booze is about to head onto the track for a breeze; Dina’s name flashes onto the screen.

“I need to curry a favor,” she says as soon as he picks up. “You got someone who can drive to the tail end of University Ave and back before the first race?”

“I’ll send Stiles.” He lets her hang up as he digs out the keys to the Camaro and tosses them at Stiles. “1950 University Avenue. Dina’s waiting.”

Stiles fumbles catching the keys and then looks back at Derek. “What’s there?”

“A jail.”

Stiles almost drops the keys a second time. “Oh.”

***

Being in the Camaro without Derek is weird enough without considering that Stiles is driving the Camaro, okay, wow, those are some very impressive brakes, and acceleration, and windshield wipers. Stiles would like to have sex with this car, or at least drive it somewhere more epic and promising than a jail, especially since that jail is only fifteen minutes from the track. And, you know, a jail.

It doesn’t look like a jail, at least, no more than the sheriff’s office in Beacon Hills does. It’s a plain-faced red building with glass windows, sandwiched between a coffee shop and some sort of lounge, and it has a crabby-faced Dina with wrinkled street clothes and bags under her eyes waiting in front of it.

“Dare I ask?” he wonders as she climbs in.

She slams the door. “I got drunk and clocked a perv for grabbing my ass. You got a breath mint?”

“That’s valid. Spearmint gum?”

“Good enough.” She grabs the piece and pops it into her mouth, then leans her head against the window and shuts her eyes. “Thanks for this – I’d never make the first race walking. I owe you
one, Stilinski.”

“You kidding? I got to run around in this freaking thing.” He makes a waving gesture at the dashboard. “Just keep on riding Yogi and we’re good.”

She humphs. “You’re really going to keep that son of a bitch?”

“Yeah. Why not?”

“’Cause he’s a fucker?”

“Who isn’t?”

“Lotta horses,” Dina says. “Whatever. So long as the Hales keep paying me, I’ll keep riding. Now shut up and let me get ten minutes of sleep so I don’t die during this fucking race.”

***

The morning fog that clogged up over the track is still burning away when Bush gets loaded onto a trailer and trucked off the grounds for the last time, bound for McKearn’s farm in the north-eastern corner of the state. The Hale crew gathers to see him off, and then disperses. Lydia appears stoic throughout: she walks Bush in, clips him onto the ties, walks out, and is done. But Laura sees Isaac drape an arm across her shoulders as the trailer rolls away, and it takes her a few seconds to nudge it off.

“Not the most charismatic of horses,” Isaac remarks. “But he was okay.”

“I think I’ve met rocks with more brain cells,” Boyd says, and Isaac laughs.

The grooms scatter back into the barn, the exercise riders to their next mounts, and Laura taps Derek’s arm. “Walk with me, brother.”

He follows her out of the backside to the trackside, where she picks a spot on the rail set well apart from the other trainers. Derek takes up position beside her, and they stand there, quiet, observing. A gaggle of gangly, strung-out two-year-olds bolts down the stretch, still training to run in a pack.

Laura pulls out the electronic cigarette Jackie gave her and twirls it between her fingers. “Do you want to be here, Der? Training? Or would you rather be doing something else with your life, maybe not following my orders all day?”

“Horses are all I know,” Derek says. “And I wouldn’t want to work for anyone else.”

Laura sighs, trying to get the words in the correct order in her brain. “But if you could do something else – metalwork sculptures or medical school or, I don’t know, something else – would you want to? Do you like this life?”

Derek grunts. “Be letting the family name down if I quit.” He looks down at his hands. “I… I don’t hate it, I’m just… not built for it like you and Jackie and Lydia are. Not the business. I like the horses.”

“That’s what I think, too,” She laughs a little. “Hate to break it to you, Der, but you kind of suck at management. And I suck too, god – I wish Ma were here, driving the boat. She and Dad made it look easy.”

“We were kids.”
“Yeah, but you were the stupid one.” She nudges him, then stops, leans her head on his shoulder and takes a deep breath. “The statute of limitations on prosecuting statutory rape kicks in after six years in California, but I don’t think there’s one on arson. Definitely not on mass murder. But then again, I don’t know how much fresh evidence we can produce for a case that’s been cold for eleven years” She feels him stiffen under her, his shoulders hunching, muscles in his back and arms tightening. “I told you: you were the stupid one.”

“You were at college; everyone else was busy.” Derek’s voice has gone tight, and Laura closes her eyes so she won’t look at his face.

She thinks about his statement for a minute. “Maybe it wasn’t so easy, how Mom made this look: training, breeding, running a family. Everything’s either easy or impossible when you’re a kid. Not much gray to be seen when you’re growing up.”

“When did you find out?”

“Oh, I always knew. Or, well – always suspected. We were keeping tabs on you, you know. I had plans to give you a whole boatload of shit about it at your graduation or something.” Laura picks her head off Derek’s shoulder. “You know why I let you keep Yogi?”

“Not out of the goodness of your heart, clearly.”

“Nope.” She leans over the rail again. “I’ve decided that want to rub Kate Argent’s face in the fact that he’s our horse, since I’m half-sure the twins aren’t, and Hales don’t roll over easily.”

“Really?”

“Yeah – overheard Stiles spouting some theories about it the other day. Makes sense, what I heard. He’s on the smarter end of the spectrum as far as stupid kids go.”

“He’s twenty-three. And I meant… keeping Yogi. He’s not going to change. He dumped Stiles off yesterday in the middle of a work for no reason.”

Laura lets her body fold over the rail, head hanging down, picks her feet up off the ground and holds herself with the strength of her arms, playing a child’s game, all the blood rushing into her face. “I don’t care if he finishes last in every single race he runs for the rest of his life; I don’t… we’ve lost enough already. I want the Hale name everywhere, even if it’s written with a stick in the mud, because we’ve got two of us with our hearts still beating under our name. Four of us. So we’re keeping Yogi.” She crooks her head to the side to meet Derek’s eyes. “Also, I may fire you at some point. Or demote you. You can have Lydia’s job. She can have yours.”

“That’s fine,” Derek says. “I’d like that.”

“I’d like that,” she mimics back at him. “Where have I been for the last six months, Der? What goddamned cliff did I drive myself off of, and when and how did I get back?”

He bends to pick something up off the ground and hands it to her: the e-cigarette. “I don’t know,” he says. “And I wish you’d drawn a map for the next time, but I think Jackie had something to do with it.”
Stiles takes one look at the lineup for the Campanile Stakes and groans. “Five-to-one says we’re going to die.”

“What?” Derek takes the program out of Stiles’ hands to study it. “What’s the issue?”

“Hath Fury?” Stiles asks weakly. “Seven Hates Nine? Hotfast? Any of those names sounding familiar? As in, names that have come in front of our horses before? Multiple times? Especially Hotfast?”

“Seven Hates Nine beat Slaw in the San Vicente on a fluke,” Isaac says. “And the same goes for Hotfast.”

“The Oaks wasn’t a fluke.”

“But it was close, that one.

“You know what else isn’t a fluke?” Derek asks, looking up. “None of those three horses has won a turf race except for Hath Fury, and that was on ground as dry as a desert.” He gestures at the soggy footing in front of them, soaked by late-spring rains. “I’d hesitate to call this ground.”

“I am made of mud,” Jackie tells the reporter, before spitting out a mouthful of the stuff. “Not even in the racist insult kind of way – I think I swallowed a couple pounds of it on that trip. Nobody be surprised if grass roots start poking out through my stomach in a couple days. But, uh, yeah, she, you know, she just went out and did her job. She’s not bothered by mud, this one.” She leans down to slap Cold Slough’s neck affectionately.

Wade’s knee jumps erratically until Emilia kicks it. “You’re not allowed to watch with me anymore if you keep pining.”

“I have restless leg syndrome.”

“Only when she’s onscreen, curiously enough.” She kicks him again. “Don’t you still have her number?”

“Yeah…”

“Call her.”

“I don’t think she’d appreciate that.” He yanks his knee away from Emilia and folds the leg up under himself.

Jackie spits again and licks over her teeth. “There was a second there, you know, when I saw Hotfast coming out of the corner of my eye and thought we were in trouble, but Slaw, yeah – we got a name for horses like Cold Slough. She’s a mud-runner. Doesn’t matter how sloppy the track is; she just grabs at it and goes. Great mare. Great mare. Her and Schizophrenia, you know, they’re my girls; they’ve brought me a long way, and against incredible horses. I keep having days, all the time, looking around, thinking ‘this is my job; this is my life’. I never thought I would get this high, growing up, getting started. Never.”
“It’s sort of rags to riches, isn’t it? The all-American underdog story.”

“I’m hardly all-stateswoman. And this…” Jackie gestures around them. “I’d call it rags to mud,” she says. “But I’ll take it.”

“You’re shaking the entire couch,” Emilia complains.

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Stiles settles the baby pad just behind Spitz’s withers and sets the thin foam pad on top of it, turns away to pick up the saddle, places it carefully atop the pads, and jumps back against Slaw’s door when Spitz bellows and throws his head in the air.

At sixteen and a half hands, Spitz is almost eleven hundred pounds, and when he rears onto his hind legs, it takes less than a second for the cross-tie attached to the right side of his halter to snap. It does so with a clanging boom, metal banging against wood and more metal as the ring secured into the wall rips free, flinging across Spitz’s withers like a striking whip and spooking him into rearing again, saddle and pads dumping off backwards, the second cross-tie straining, the ring of the halter snapping and sending the tie to smash back against the wall with another metal-on-wood boom.

Broken halter dangling, the noseband caught in his mouth, Spitz stares at Stiles with his chest heaving, then turns and scuttles around the saddle and pads on the ground, out the back door of the barn.

“Oh shit,” Stiles says. His heart is beating up into his throat, but he tries to stay calm and not run after – long strides, yes, but walking strides, voice shaking, calling “Spitz – it’s okay, Spitz; it’s okay.”

Clear-cut white against the brown and green of the backside, Spitz trots along the rear of the barn, pauses at the edge of the path, then steps onto it. There’s a wall around the track and backside that separates it from any actual roads or highways, but there’s also a network of paths that could take Spitz over to the grandstand or into several different parking lots if he got really adventurous.

Stiles could go his whole life without seeing any two-year-old racehorses in any parking lots that they’re not supposed to be in, so he stammers an “Easy there, Spitz,” and fumbles the carrot that he brought for Ernest out of his pocket. “Come here, boy. It’s okay.”

Spitz stares around for a few seconds, taking everything in, nostrils blowing wide, then refocuses on Stiles on the carrot.

Stiles makes his feet move slowly. “You’re alright, buddy. You’re just fine.”

Spitz snorts and prances in place, but he stretches out his nose to sniff at the carrot and doesn’t react when Stiles takes hold of the dangling cheekpiece of his halter. He’s docile walking back inside, but as soon as he spots the saddle and pads he plants his feet and blows a warning before hopping backwards, Stiles scrambling to brace against a wall or door, yelling “Lydia! Lydia, I need help!” while Spitz grunts and almost scoots out the door again before he lets himself be dragged to a halt.

Lydia pokes her head out of her tack room and assesses the situation in one smooth sweep of her head. She steps down into the aisle, pulls the lead rope off of Nye’s stall as she passes, and advances at a leisurely pace. The saddle and pads get nudged off to the side, and she puts her body between them and Spitz as she approaches at an angle, in full view of his right eye. “What
“Hell if I know,” Stiles says, and then breaks down crying as Spitz calms under Lydia’s touch. He doesn’t mean to, but the adrenaline dumped into his veins by the thought of a horse is about to get killed on my watch overpowers him and Spitz is okay, everybody’s safe, they’re all fine, and the relief shoves him into a wall and has him slump against it, tears streaming down his face and breath hoarse in his throat. “I don’t even know, oh my god.”

Lydia studies him with her brow furrowed. “Are you alright? Did he hurt you?”

His hand is throbbing, Stiles realizes – the back of his right hand, a red mark across the flesh between his thumb and wrist – but that’s nothing in the grand scheme of things. He drags his forearm across his face. “Oh my god, I’m fine, I just – he scared the shit out of me, oh my god.”


So Stiles does; he goes around to where the picnic table is, the one he and Isaac clean tack at, and he sits down and puts his face in his hands and shakes and sobs and doesn’t understand it, this gut-trigger, this release, bursting out from his sternum and rattling everything. “I’m fine,” he says when he hears footsteps. “I’m fine, I swear, I’m just having a stupid… emotional…”

“It’s alright,” goes Derek’s voice, and his hands curl themselves over Stiles’ shoulders, squeezing until he gives in and lets them slump, Derek’s thumbs pressing circles into Stiles’ deltoids, and he only hums a soft nothing as Stiles caves his body in on itself and goes limp in his grip. He busts up once more, hysterical, incoherent, and then dwindles down to sparse sniffles and tear-drops as he rests his weight against Derek’s chest, lets himself relish in how good it feels to sit there, drained, for a few moments.

“Spitz’s halter is busted, and the two cross ties,” is the first thing he says once he regains control of his vocal chords.

“Duct tape,” Derek says. “And I’m sure we can salvage the halter.”

Stiles nods and swipes at his nose, snot streaking across his forearm, licks the salt off his lips. “Alright.”

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Erica prods at her bowl of strawberry-rhubarb pie and vanilla ice cream and asks the question that’s been poking at her for the last few hours: “So what happened with Spitz today? Isabel said he had a meltdown.”

Lydia shrugs. “He freaked while he was getting tacked up, broke the cross-ties, and ran outside. Stiles got him back in no time – wasn’t a problem, just shook him up some.”

“Spitz? Or Stiles?” Jackie raises an eyebrow.

“Both, I’d say.” Dina scoops up a spoonful of pie. “Kid was shaking like a leaf when I saw him. And the horse didn’t go out today, did he?”

“We gave him the day off,” Lydia says. “I don’t know when he’s racing again, but one day won’t make a difference.” She shakes her head. “One thing you can say about Hale: she gets steady horses, for the most part.”
Erica snorts. “Stoner?”

Dina stabs her spoon in Erica’s direction. “Don’t hate on that fucking horse. There’s being an asshole, and then there’s being a spaz. Spitz is a spaz. Mirror on the Wall – Byrns’ filly? She’s a spaz. Booze is a spaz-a-tron. Stoner’s a solid fucking horse.”

“Oh shut up – you just feel bad because he broke down under you. An asshole horse is as bad as a spaz. I don’t hear you defending the big gray bitch.” Erica turns towards Allison, who has been comparatively quiet, squeezed onto the couch between Jackie and Lydia. “Tell us: who’re the freaks in the Argent barn? I remember Rapier being a shit.”

She smiles. “He is. But we retired him in January. I… we have a couple of bullies. Silveritis, definitely; her and Clay – Thy Claymore – they’re nasty. And a couple of our allowance runners and claimers are real spooky, but we’re, you know…” She shrugs. “We don’t have a Thirteen Shots or a Yogimeister.”

“Don’t talk about Yogi,” Dina says. “I can’t fucking believe they kept him.”

It’s Jackie’s turn to smile. “Hale always has a trick up her sleeve.”

“No,” Dina tells her. “You’re the one with the tricks, and you hand them to her. What’s the point?”

“Shits and giggles.”

“Right.” Dina says it like No fucking way.

“It was probably for the best that they kept him.” Lydia stands up with her bowl in her hands; Erica sees a piece of burned pie crust poking over the rim. “Yogi’s the sort of horse who would flip a trailer if they stuck him in by himself to ship him off.”

“One of those tiny ones?” Erica says. “Oh, totally. I’m amazed when he gets transported anywhere in one piece.”

Jackie sits up straighter, clapping her hands. “Oh, man, if you want to talk about trailer-flipping then have I got a story for you.”

Lydia pauses midway to the kitchen. “Does the horse die?”

“No.”

“Did I know you when this happened?”

Jackie scrubs at her hair as she collects her thoughts. “It’s not really my story – you know Emilia Roberts, the outrider from LA? She’s got Toby Blue? She ever told you about Simba?”

“Oh,” Lydia says. “I know this. Yeah, go ahead, I’ll be right back.” She slips off to the kitchen, collecting Allison’s empty bowl before she goes.

“A horse named Simba,” Dina muses. “Jesus shit. What was he, a tiny dun pony who threw an epic shittfit?”

Jackie grins. “He was an eighteen-hand ex-racer,” she says. “And he was owned by this girl who rode at UVA with Emilia, this girl from up north, New England, I don’t know. The thing is: over in the southeast they’ve got these double-wide trailers that have… I don’t even know how she explained it to me, I guess they get a horse into the stall, back it all the way up, then stick another
in front of it, chest to ass. Point is, this girl – I think her name was Jess? – has this mongo horse and they’re putting him in one of these trailers for some reason, and they go and get him in and start to back him up…”

“And the horse freaks.”

“Of course. Freaks-freaks – and Emilia’s standing here outside the trailer, watching it rock, and this Jess girl is there, and they’re watching the trailer go back and forth, back and forth, and this girl, like, starts crying hysterically because of course they’re sure the horse is going to kill himself and everyone in there, and she’s going “Get him out of there – just get him out of there.” And nobody fucking wants to go in because the horse is flipping, so Jess, this stupid kid, still crying, probably can’t even fucking see, says she’ll do whatever they need to get him out. Convinced he won’t hurt her, of course, eighteen hands, flipping – I mean, I don’t even think she gave a shit. They wound up… she went in there with this hose and, like, got it around his body somehow, broke three or four of her toes getting stepped on, but she got it around him and they yanked him out of there. And the horse –” Jackie taps under her right eye. “Horse caught his head on some deadbolt, ripped open the tear duct, blood all over the place, the girl’s still fucking sobbing – they, like, called the vet, who said to keep him walking and not let him roll and she’d be there in half an hour, and when she turned up she said she didn’t know which one of them to medicate first.” She snorts. “And then they all lived happily ever after.”

“It would have been a flip, if not for that girl,” Dina points out. “And you can’t say there are many people who would risk their life like that for a horse, not on the spot – most owners would probably go tell some piece of nothing groom to do it, if that.”

Erica spoons up more pie. “I think Hale’d go in and do that for Bury. I don’t know about any of the others.”

“Isaac,” Lydia says. She’d returned at some point to seat herself on the arm of Erica’s chair. “Isaac would go in for Schizo of his own free will, and probably Sass and Stoner, if he were still here. And Laura may go for the twins. If…” She darts a glance at Allison and bites her lip. “Maybe. Who knows?”

Allison smiles and returns Lydia’s gaze. “I like to think I’d go for Phoenix. You wouldn’t, for anyone?”

Lydia considers. “Gatsby. Maybe.”

Mick, Erica thinks. “And no one for Yogi.”

“No one for a lot of horses,” Lydia counters. “I think Derek and Stiles are more in love with the idea of Yogi than the actual horse. And you could say that about most owners, too. We treat them like humans, but they’re horses at the end of the day.”

Erica thinks of a Grand National jockey whose name she can’t remember, and bites the inside of her cheek so she doesn’t say anything controversial. I’d go for Yogi, she decides. I’d go for any of them, even an Argent horse, even a stranger’s.

***

“What was our bet?” Isaac asks. “Two minutes?”

“One: it wasn’t a bet. Two: that is in no way relevant to anything currently happening, and, wow, you have a one-track mind if you’re still thinking about last night. Three: no. Four: no. Five: I will
punch you if you keep smirking at me like that. In the kidney.”

“Okay,” Isaac says, and pulls off his shirt. He’s as long and skinny as ever, but the sunburn stretched across his shoulders is new, white strips from his tank top slicing through it, and the smirk turns into a grimace at the sting of friction over the irritated skin.

Scott leans against the doorframe and frowns. “How long were you outside today?”

“I don’t know, three hours? Four? We were folding blankets; it was cloudy; I thought I was fine.” Isaac winces as he drops his arms. “Clearly incorrect, but you should see Stiles. He’s a lobster.”

“And you’re a half-lobster, Mr. Pot-Kettle. Two-thirds, even.” Allison turns the tube of aloe over in her hands. “You have no idea if your family has a history of melanoma, do you?”

“Not a clue.”

“Great.” She tosses the tube at him. “And if Scott can last longer than two minutes, I’m pretty sure I can, too.”

“Which one of us is that meant to be insulting?” Scott asks, since Isaac quickly busies himself with slathering aloe across his shoulders and hissing in a combination of pain and relief.

“Both of you, actually.” She grins and blows a kiss in his direction, then walks into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Scott shakes his head. “Here, let me,” he says, tugging the aloe out of Isaac’s grip and spreading a line of it across the wing of his shoulderblade. “You finished whatever you were doing, at least, didn’t you?”

“Packing blankets to send to the cleaners. And yeah, we’re done. I’ll just… avoid sunlight for the next couple days.” Isaac goes very still when Scott sets his mouth against the knob at the top of his spine. “Oh, don’t fucking tease me.”

“Then don’t get sunburned,” Scott mumbles, and kisses the side of Isaac’s throat, pressing in against his spine, Isaac’s shoulders burning red-hot against his skin.

“Your chest is colder than my shoulders,” Isaac whines. “What the fuck.” But he tips his head back while Scott wraps both arms around his waist, and curls his hands over Scott’s wrists, and makes a soft, broken sound in his throat when Scott trails his mouth from his ear down the side of his neck and hooks his chin over Isaac’s shoulder, breathing deep, the aloe a swooping curve of chill between them. Scott wonders if his speeding heartbeat can be felt through his shirt.

***

When Stiles signed on to groom racehorses, he assumed that there would be more sitting around and standing on the sidelines of glory and picking up glory’s shit, and less scalding his knuckles in hot water from scrubbing feed tubs or getting his legs tangled in baling twine and falling on face or pulling off clothing to find random cuts and bruises that he can’t for the life of him remember getting.

Also: less sunburn. He expected way less sunburn. Especially on a cloudy day. While wearing a shirt (okay, okay, a white shirt – still a shirt).

“You’re driving me to CVS,” he tells Derek. “You’re the one who told me to go fold blankets outside with Isaac – you get to chauffeer me to buy aloe.”
“Don’t be ridiculous,” Derek says, and not only drives him but comes inside and pays for the aloe and then takes him back to the track, to the bunkhouse, and throws the Camaro into park in front of it. “Do you need help?”

“I’m sunburned, not crippled. And even then, there are a lot of ways in which I could be crippled that wouldn’t affect my ability to apply aloe vera.”

Derek shrugs and stares out the windshield. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure,” Stiles says. He grins. “Thanks for the ride. And the aloe. And the uh – yeah.” He pauses, muscles of his face twitching as the realization strikes him. “Oh my god, you just wanted to see me take my shirt off.”

Derek switches to glowering at the steering wheel. “I’ve seen you shirtless.”

“Yeah, you and half the track, for five seconds at a time, out in front of the barn – wow, I totally missed that, didn’t I? You want to see me shirtless and up close and personal, get your hands on me…” Stiles feels himself go pink at the same time Derek does and stops talking very rapidly. “Sorry.”

“You should probably get out of the car,” Derek says.

“I should, shouldn’t I?” Stiles swallows. “Is kissing off the table? And shirtlessness? And anything else that may happen when two people who have a romantic attraction one another are in close quarters and one of them is lacking a shirt?”

Derek sighs and reaches across the car. His hand curves around the back of Stiles’ skull, pulling him in to knock their foreheads together. “You are the most ridiculous person I have ever met,” he murmurs. “And I’ve known Laura my whole life.”

“Oh, god, you had to mention Laura.” Stiles makes a face and pulls away. “Okay, mood killed, going, going, just – ” He jacks his head to the side and pecks Derek on the lips. “Thanks again for everything. I lov- I’ll see you tomorrow.” He bolts from the car.

“Stiles!”

Oh god. He spins around, still stumbling backwards, flails, and barely gets his hands up in time to catch the CVS bag hurtling in his direction. The aloe bottle thuds against his chest. “Thanks!” he yells as Derek rolls up the window once more, and breathes a tiny sigh of relief to himself, standing there, watching the Camaro peel away from the curb.

***

“Hale.”

“Argent.” Hale leans against Silverbled’s stall, poking a fingertip through the bars to tickle the colt’s nose. “Had a question for you.”

Chris sets his hands on his hips. “Shoot,” he says.

Hale’s eyes flare with the tight draw of her smile. “What are the pedigrees of the two fillies you sent me?”

“Out of Nero’s Nerve, by Bury the Corpses,” Chris recites. “Did you lose their papers?”
Hale clicks her tongue and cocks her head to the side, folding her arms over her chest. “No, I simply started thinking. About the survival rates of twins, and the size statistics, and how a seventeen-hand fleabitten two-year-old is already an unlikely product of a sixteen-two bay mare and a sixteen-hand black stallion.” She pauses. “A few things to consider, really.”

Chris lifts one hand to offer Silverbled his palm to nose at. “Have you considered that two horses is better than none?”

“And three is also a fair ways shy of seven.” She looks around the barn at the nameplates affixed to stalls: Born Soldier, Hand And A Half, Thy Claymore, Spitting Ivory. “Don’t shit with me, Argent: how many of these horses should be mine?”

“I’m not going to justify that accusation with a response.”

“Nor should you,” Gerard declares, melodramatic as ever, bootheels thudding on the cement as he paces up beside Chris. “We’ve been doing you a favor all these years as it is, letting your paltry stock survive.”

“Paltry,” Hale repeats back dryly. “I wasn’t aware we had regressed to the Elizabethan Period. Am I still allowed out in public without an escort?”

“You’d be wiser to be accompanied, Laura,” Gerard says.

“Hale.”

Gerard smiles in the corner of Chris’ vision. “Laura.”

Chris schools his irritation into check and tries to convey his apology in his tone. “Was there something else you wanted – Hale – or are we done here?”

Hale taps at Silverbled’s bars and nods across the aisle at Spitting Ivory. “You running that black colt of yours on the fifteenth?”

Chris nods. June fifteenth is the Lost In The Fog stakes – a five-furlong, fifty-thousand-dollar-purse run for two-year-olds. He’s been planning to enter Spitting Ivory for a while, since he’s been regularly clocking breezes of that distance with times under 1:01, just shy of a twelve-second clip. “You got an entry?”

Hale has Gerard’s same flair for drama: she beams, says, “Two,” and pivots on the ball of her foot as she saunters out.

“Scheming bitch,” Gerard says.

_Do you quarrel, sir? Chris thinks. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir? “Isn’t that what you said about Victoria, the first time you met her?”_
“Chris Argent’s back already? It’s only Monday.”

Boyd shrugs. “He was in their barn this morning. If I had a filly who ran second in the Derby and Preakness and then bombed out to last place for the Belmont, I’d get my ass off the East Coast too.”

“Coming home won’t save him from Byrns’ bragging. And have you been near Scottie? Every conversation she has to insert a comment about NYC being the town to kick Argent’s ass.” Erica picks at her nails and snorts, kicking her feet up across Boyd’s lap. “I’m just glad it was a Cali horse that won, even if that horse had to be Ghostchant. Everyone loves the idea that we’re all fast tracks and shitty horses. Then Ghostchant comes home in front of a field that spans the world, and they’re kissing ass like Byrns is gonna shit them some gold for it. Another two weeks and all they’ll say is that it’s because he’s foreign, that it wasn’t Ghostchant, it was Byrns’ training; California can’t do shit. Watch for it.”


“Why the hell not,” Erica grunts, groping for the remote to change the channel.

***

Two months isn’t the world’s longest layoff, especially for a stakes filly, but Sticky Stones is nevertheless energized and in possession of an unusually-short attention span when Jackie pilots her into the gate. She isn’t alone: Thy Claymore’s liver-colored coat is already dark with sweat as he chews on his bit, and Rob The Cook is putting up a fuss with Ben about going into the gate. Seated aboard Golden Lining, Jorge takes a deep breath as he tangles his fingers in a handful of mane. He’s flown three thousand miles in the last twenty-four hours, and right now he’s just another jockey, not the pilot of the colt who won the Belmont Stakes. But his mount is calm, as is Dina’s – Jack’s On Trial – in the slot to their left.

Golden Lining is shorter than Ghostchant by two inches, fit and well-built without either Ghostchant’s fine-cut muscle or Leocardian’s distinctive bulkiness. He can’t measure up to either of those horses, who rate the best in Pim Byrns’ barn, but he’s better than the average low-grade stakes horse, even if he hasn’t exactly been a shining star on grass.

Rob The Cook finally gets shuttled into the gate and the steel doors slam shut behind him.

Jorge holds his breath.

The first jump out of the gate is always the worst, inertia wanting to bind the jocks’ bodies in
place, jerk them back off the horses to leave them sitting on their asses in the torn-up ground around the gate. Golden Lining bursts out with the typical power of a jet engine, and Jorge bends tight against his neck, strands of mane pulling loose between his fingers as the colt accelerates.

By the time they’ve exited the chute onto the main oval of the turf track Thy Claymore has commandeered the lead position, with Rob The Cook pressing at him from the rail and Sticky Stones on the outside, so Jorge lets Golden Lining tuck in behind the filly, level with Jack’s On Trial. Curving into the turn, Thy Claymore pins his ears and drives against the track, apparently uneasy with the turf underfoot. Rob The Cook edges up in response, hind legs churning, and takes over the lead as they straighten out into the backstretch, Thy Claymore falling wide in front of Sticky Stones.

Jorge sits tight and lets Jackie push her filly up into the open space. He keeps one eye on Jack’s on Trial as Golden Lining accelerates; the bulky chestnut colt is striking towards the outside intentionally, circling around the horses clustered into a pack against the rail. Heading for the clubhouse turn, Jorge steps deeper in his left stirrup, urging Golden Lining towards the outside until they’re a strung-out line across the track: Sticky Stones, Thy Claymore, Golden Lining, Jack’s On Trial – all pressing after Rob The Cook with Thy Claymore losing ground with his discomfort and Jack’s On Trial straining to maintain his pace on the far outside.

Jorge slackens his grip on the reins. “Va,” he murmurs.

Golden Lining stretches his neck out in compliance, leaning his whole body into the flex of Jorge’s arms, carrying them clear of Thy Claymore’s shadow. Jorge sees Sticky Stones tearing after them and Jack’s On Trial hurtling alongside in his peripheral vision, Rob The Cook straining to pull away down the stretch, catches the distant roar of strangers’ lungs somewhere in the back of his mind and stores it away, hears it surge, the cries sharpening, Rob The Cook’s gleaming brown hindquarters creeping closer, Ben’s whip cracking, Dina snarling curses, a whizz and a metallic flash, a crunch, horses snorting, the world rocking sideways.

Golden Lining misses Sticky Stones’ hindquarters by inches and Rob The Cook is still well clear when he gets plowed into by Jack’s On Trial, but what Byrns’ colt doesn’t miss is the rail, and Jorge doesn’t miss the curve of the horizon expanding across his vision: San Francisco’s hills, the hidden dips of the Bay, the lakes of the infield, the reporting stations with their cameras poised and prepped, the grass rushing up to him, into him, the reins still clenched in his fists, a horse grunting, trying to rear, chained down by his head, body golden in the sunlight.

***

“I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep in weeks,” Jackie grouses. “And I was at the hospital until they kicked me out, so I hope you’ve got a good reason for hauling me out of bed before six.”

Laura gazes down the aisle. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” Jackie rubs at her eyes with the heels of her hands. “How many you got for me?”

“Five: the twins, Schizo, Yogi, and McGatsby.”

Jackie yawns. “Right. Who’m I starting – did you say Yogi?”

Laura stares at the ceiling. “Dina is out for three weeks, minimum.”

“Great. I hope she’s better soon. Jorge almost got killed when his horse hit the rail, so I’m a little short on sympathy at the moment. And speaking of near-death and horses – ” she points down the
line at Yogi’s stall “- rearing in the starting gate? Thanks, no thanks, I like my brain inside my skull, right where it belongs.”

“That was one race. His first race.”

“And the dudes in Steubenville aren’t legally adults. So?” Jackie makes a ‘time-out’ motion with her hands. “Calling it right now: me out. I don’t get to pick and choose about many things in life, Laur: I have to eat what won’t push me over the weight limit and walk where I’m not gonna get spat on and take mounts from rich-ass white dudes who have a tendency to call me ‘Jack’ when they’re trying to be friendly. Don’t make me be a dick about this. I’ll ride Spitz if it makes you feel better; I’m not getting on a horse that rears in the gate.”

Laura studies her face and then nods. “Stiles.”

He materializes at Jackie’s elbow so suddenly she almost hits him in the face. “Yeah?”

“You’re working Yogi today. I’ll put a note out about a jockey.”

Stiles bobs his head. “Can do.” He scurries off as quickly as he appeared.

Laura’s eyes don’t leave Jackie’s face. “How’s your Australian?”


***

Stiles shuffles his feet and itches behind his ear. “What kind of asshole throws a beer can across a racetrack, anyway? I thought there were laws against that kind of thing.”

“I’m sure there are,” Lydia remarks. She doesn’t look up from her paper. It’s clearly Conspiracy Hour with Stiles Stilinski again, and she’s tired.

“That wasn’t even a casual ‘screw you’ toss, you know – that can went more than a hundred and fifty feet across two tracks, and it was either full or partly-full before Jack’s On Trial stepped on it and went flying and, you know, who does that?”

Lydia clears her throat and very explicitly brings the paper up to shield her face from Stiles’ obsession. “People are random and irrational,” she says, and thinks Give him five more minutes, then make him stop talking.

***

“My sunburn is peeling,” Stiles says when Isaac gets up to go to the bathroom.

Derek blinks.

“It doesn’t hurt or anything – that was just a forewarning, you know, if you had any interest in seeing me with my shirt off at any point in the near or immediate future of tonight, because it’s all kind of gross right now. And I get great satisfaction out of knowing that Isaac is probably equally gross and probably glaring at himself in the mirror right now because of it, but still: grossness. It is here.”

“I used to get sunburned all the time as a kid,” Derek says. “Laura liked to make fun of me for it.”

“No offense, but Laura is clearly evil. Making fun of sunburn is like making fun of freckles or
moles. It’s rude and crude and unfair.”

“I like your moles,” Derek says.

Stiles blushes up into the tips of his ears. “That’s… good to know.”

“I’m not ready,” Derek says. It comes out rushed, overly intense, and the situation suddenly feels a lot more drastic and important and intense than sitting together in a dive bar with weak American beers in front of them.

Stiles plays it off as easily as he can. He nudges Derek’s shoulder with his own and reiterates: “Like I said: peeling. It’d be gross and horrible. Worse than horrible. Permanently traumatizing, possibly. We’d have to go join a monastery to cleanse our minds from the experience, and then Laura would fire us for taking a vacation in the middle of a meet.”

“I’m pretty people have had sex with worse ailments than peeling sunburn,” Derek says dryly, but he relaxes a little and knocks his ankle into Stiles’, a thank-you gesture, and they’re full-on kicking each other under the bar by the time Isaac gets back.

***

Isaac walks into the apartment, pulls off his shoes, and looks around. “Allison home?”

“Not yet.” Scott spins his chair around and hides a yawn behind his hand. “’Sup?”

“I had a question,” Isaac says, and does an awful job of sounding casual. His eyes are scanning the apartment and his fingers are twitching even as he folds himself onto the couch next to Scott’s desk. “Can I… are you busy?”

Scott drops his pen. “No. No. Not at all. What’s up?”

Isaac sighs. “Is there such a thing as a paternity test for horses?”

Scott blinks and takes a couple seconds to process because, on the entire list of questions he expected, that was very much not one of them. “I take it the horse doesn’t have papers…?”

Isaac is staring at the wall behind Scott’s head. “You could say that.”

“Is it registered? Like with the NTRA? Is it a racehorse?”

“Kind of, in a weird way, but yes.” Isaac says. “I mean, suppose they’re registered, but they’re… is there any way to do it that’s not tracing paperwork? Like, could you just take blood and find out if they’re related to another horse that you also have blood from?” He bites on the inside of his cheek.

“If you have access to the right equipment, sure, or you could send it to the association along with a picture of the horse and find out their family tree. But if they’re a racer everything should already be on their file. Is this a Hale horse?”

“It’s a long story,” Isaac says. His face scrunches up. “But, uh, yeah, it’s a Hale horse.”

Scott folds his hands together in his lap. “Is it the twins?”

Isaac takes a shaky breath. “We don’t think they’re twins.”

Absorbing this idea, Scott nods, gets out of his chair, and moves onto the couch next to Isaac, then wraps his arms around Isaac’s chest and pulls him back so they’re pressed together. He hooks his
chin over Isaac’s shoulder and noses at the skin of his throat. “I’ll talk to Deaton about it; I’m sure he’s got something.”

“Okay.” Isaac’s hand comes up to cover both of Scott’s. “Thanks.”

“Breathe,” Scott says.

Isaac breathes.

***

“Are you still out?”

“What the fuck does that mean? ‘Are you still out?’ Yes, yes I am, as you obviously know because if I weren’t stuck with my arm in fucking sling I’d be at the track doing my goddamn job. This isn’t some cracked fucking rib, Hale, this is my goddamn elbow that’s broken. I can’t drive, Hale; how do you expect me to steer a horse?” Dina pauses. “There’s a reason people haven’t been talking to me.”

“I can, uh, hear that.” Hale clears her throat. “Will you go down to Hollywood?”

“I… I don’t know. I got bills to pay, so I gotta ride soon, but they may be done down there by the time I’m healed up. I’ll probably scoot my ass over to Santa Rosa once they get rolling, live off of Ramen and shoe leather in the meantime.” She fusses with the strap of her sling so it presses less on the tender part of her shoulder. “You got a rider for Yogimeister?”

Hale snorts derisively. “I’d like to give Stilinski cancer so he’d drop forty or fifty pounds and qualify to jockey.”

“That’s a no, then.”

“Indeed.”

Dina crosses her legs and scratches at a scar on her calf. “Call Ben.”

“Ben Sull?”

“Ja.” Dina smiles. “Say you aren’t entirely sure he can handle it, make him a little uncertain about his masculine whiteness, and he’ll be all for it. He ain’t Jackie, but he’ll ride. When’s the race?”

“The fifteenth.”

“Hang up on me and call him now.”

From the sound of it, that’s exactly what Hale does.

***

“Go fuck yourself, Hale.”

***

Isaac swipes away an extra smear of veterinary cream with this thumb, and Sass knickers when he pats her side, carefully avoiding the scrapes and scratches all along her ribcage. “It sucks, doesn’t it?”
She shoves her face into his shoulder and lips at his arm disinterestedly.

“Yeah, it really sucks. It’s okay. You’re allowed to be grumpy.” He scrubs his knuckles under her mane.

“I wish somebody had told me that when I was healing up from my devastating injury.” Lydia leans against the door and holds her hand out for the vet cream, which she tucks off into the tack box next to her once he gives it to her. “How is she?”

“Healing. Fine.” Isaac runs his hand down Sass’ dorsal stripe. “What’s up?”

“Not much, just debating whether I’m desperate enough to ride Yogi on the fifteenth.”


Lydia smiles as she ticks names off on her fingers. “Dina’s out; Jorge’s out; Jackie said no; Eddie’s already got a mount for the race; Ben considered it for about ten seconds before coming to his senses; Laura would shoot herself before asking Clark Mack for anything.” She drops her hand. “Either I do it or she finds someone new.”

“So why are you telling me?” Isaac watches her blink and then takes a breath. “It’s not like I’m in any position of authority over your life – not like I ever have been. You’re… your own person.” He studies her. “And you’ve never asked my opinion on anything like this before.”

Lydia bites on the inside of her cheek and goes very quiet. Then she says “I’m not going to answer that” so softly that he barely catches it.

“Okay,” he says; “Alright,” and scratches Sass’ withers until her ears flick forwards.

***

Stiles hands Derek his coffee and leans against the rail next to him. “You ever read anything about Ruffian, any of the books written about her?”

“No. Laura did.” Derek pulls the top off the cup to let it cool. “Why are you asking?”

Stiles fidgets with his cup, picking at a seam in the paper with blunt fingernails. “There’s one, Burning From The Start, that mentions how Jacinto Vasquez woke up early the morning of the match race, and, sitting there in bed, all he could think was something’s not gonna go my way. And that’s how I feel today, with the twins and Yogi.”

“I feel like that before every race,” Derek says. “And I bet you Laura does too, and Jackie and Lydia and all the rest. They played it up for the book. Everyone knows how that story ended. People play God and Fortune-Teller and Monday-Morning Quarterback all the time when they write about history.”

Stiles grunts. “Ya think?”

“I know.” And Derek sounds so solemn and profound when he says it that Stiles spits out a laugh and drops his coffee and loses half of it to the thirsty, dry grass sprouting below their feet.

“If you ever become a god, Sourwolf, let me know. I want to be there to film it.”
“I’ll make you a deal,” Lydia says. “I’ll ride you as well as I can, and you don’t dump me off or kill me, and we both go home happy.”

Yogi keeps eating his hay peacefully, but Laura’s voice comes from behind her in the aisle: “You don’t have to do this.”

Lydia smiles. “It’s too late to scratch, so, actually, I do.”

“Ride safe, then” Laura says.

“Always do.”

***

When Emilia calls Wade at ten in the morning and he doesn’t pick up, she passes it off as a late night – and a good sign – and doesn’t worry. When she calls him again at noon, he picks up amidst a high level of background chatter reminiscent of a university café.

“Where on earth are you?” she asks. “And please don’t say “At a bar,” because there’s celebration, and then there’s overdoing it. Did you get the part?”

“I got the part,” he says. “And I’m… not in a bar.”

“A gay club? At noon?”

“I’m at a track.”

“What?” She sandwiches her phone between her shoulder and ear and swings herself in Toby’s saddle. The post parade for the first race starts in ten minutes. “You’re here? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

Wade clears his throat. “I’m in San Francisco.”

San Francisco, Emilia thinks. God Almighty. “You get a part for the first time in months and your immediate reaction is to leave town? Jesus, Wade, how much was the ticket?”

“A hundred bucks. I bought it a couple weeks ago, flew out at eight-thirty this morning. I-”

“So you’re not gonna go out with that woman tonight, the one Holly wanted you to meet? Merry the librarian?” She says that instead of where’d you get the money why didn’t you tell me what on earth possessed you to fly three hundred miles for a woman who’s done exactly nothing for you and probably won’t even know that you did? And what happened to friendmates before bedmates?

“I’m really sorry,” Wade interrupts. “Tell her I’ll buy her a drink when I get back.”
“That was a dick move, Wade. You don’t do that to people. The guy I hang out with doesn’t do that to people.”

Wade goes silent. “Two drinks. And ones for you and Holly.”

“Save your money; you know Holly doesn’t drink. Spend it on rent – or your ticket home, if you’re ever coming back. I hope your jockey’s worth it.” She hangs up on him, sore deep under her breastbone, and nudges Toby onto the track with the other ponies. To herself, she recites an exceedingly witty joke about why all stallions should be gelded before people dare to trust them.

***

Jackie sits with Lydia in the jockey room, not because Lydia asks her to, but because she doesn’t seem to have anyone else to abuse into playing Castle with her, since Jorge’s out of commission and Eddie is pacing a hole in the floor over a call from home – his sister in the hospital, something, something, a heart attack, maybe, maybe not, jumbled English and Japanese that Lydia can’t pretend to understand, but she and Jackie both keep one ear on the conversation and then one eye Eddie while he rambles around and looks hopeless.

“Lydia?”

She blinks. “Yes?”

Jackie shuffles the deck. “Do me a favor? Don’t fall off today.”

“Not even intentionally?” She forces a smile.

Jackie doesn’t bother with the effort of a farce. “Please,” she says, and her face is grim.

***

Nine months in, Stiles can still only muck four stalls in the time it takes Isaac to do all seven of his. He is only okay with this because by the time Isaac is on his third stall, Lydia has finished her five and swept her part of the aisle to immaculate perfection, and she has Dub the poop-masher to clean up after. Stiles may have to muck his last two stalls knowing he’s the slow-poke in the crew, but Isaac never beats Lydia, and she pulls out her wet spots with such regularity it’s hard to even spot them at all.

After the stalls are done, he pulls Yogi out and starts grooming him, pulling knots out of his tail and combing through his mane and brushing his coat to a high shine. His race is the eighth one on the bill and won’t go off until four-thirty at the earliest, but it makes Stiles feel calmer to be doing this, to be doing anything with his hands. Yogi prances in place on the cross ties and makes Stiles work to pick his feet out – he makes one sideways swipe with his left hind leg that has Stiles dancing out of the way, and he paws at the floor while Stiles curries and brushes down his legs.

By the time Stiles has finished with him, the bird-catcher spots speckled along Yogi’s spine gleam against the shifting bay tones of his coat, and the white socks that stretch higher on the inside and dip almost to the coronet bands on the outside of his hind feet are clear of dirt and loose hair, and he holds his head still while Stiles cleans around the outline of his star with a soft brush. For his trouble, Stiles gives him a good scratching session along the underside of his mane, smiling when Yogi twists his neck into it.

***

Lydia feels **heavy** when she steps on the scale. Heavy like her skin is iron and her bones lead, and
the flexing layers of muscle and tissue in between are all so many ropes of marble and blocks of granite. The saddle in her arms seems weightless.

The needle takes its time bobbing across the numbers notched into the face of the scale, but when it hovers to a stop over 117 there is a faint crackle of applause amongst the gathered jockeys that covers her sigh of relief.

“Perfecto. Nailed it. Congrats,” Eddie says, faux-cheeriness as his version of stoicism, and then hops on the platform as soon as she steps off. His mount, colt-turned-stallion MexcianJumpingBean, is allowed to carry 121 pounds, but Eddie plus his saddle only total 118, so three pounds of lead weights get added to the saddle to make up the difference.

Ben is next, falling just shy of Tell Me Your Tales’ required 123 pounds and collecting his own set of small weights. He cracks a joke about too much time wasted in the sauna and everyone except Lydia smiles. She’s too busy shifting her saddle to brace it against her hip with one hand, the other twisted around behind her back, pressing at the pebbled line of her spine, keeping one eye on the clock while she calculates her ability to bend over a horse’s neck and hold on. She feels good. Airy.

***

“You’re doing both horses? And staying here? Really? Are you sure you don’t-”

“Casual reminder that I used to look after twelve horses almost completely by myself. I’ve got them. You can go watch your psycho run.” Isaac clips Guapa into the cross-ties and looks over his shoulder at Stiles. “It’s Lydia I’m doing a favor for, anyway, not you.”

“I was afraid to ask,” Stiles says. “Good to know.”

Isaac rolls his eyes. “Get your horse to the paddock before he misses his race. We’ll be fine here. I’ve got Laura’s TV.”

***

The last time Lydia fucked Isaac, she cornered him in her bedroom in the middle of the morning an hour before she had to get to the track, minutes after he’d woken up. It was good, in that way sex is when you know the end is coming, when you’re hours or minutes away from cutting the strings and dropping the deadweight. But Isaac had also always been good at paying attention, at knowing where she wanted his mouth – on hers, preferably – or his hands – on her thighs, her ass, thumbing over her ribs – and the unfettered and willing obedience of his actions almost made her reconsider.

But then she remembered, as ever, that Isaac traded orgasms for cash, and the glow fell away, and she sat up on the bed and said “I need to go.” And later that evening she said it again, differently: “You should leave. I have places to go and horses to ride, and you aren’t going anywhere besides a gutter anytime soon.”

And Isaac stood there in the middle of her living room with his throat scraped raw inside and out, and nodded like she’d just said the most sensible thing in the world.

He’d been halfway out the door when she said “If you ever feel like climbing out of that gutter, call me.” He’d stopped and smiled, white teeth in a white face, turning back towards her.

“I think we both know how unlikely that is” were the last words she had from him for three and a half years. But he’d kept her number, because he called her that one day, out of the blue, asking if she’d be will to ride BurymewhereIfall as a favor, you know, maybe they could work something out.
She’s still ashamed of how quickly she said yes.

Yogi isn’t Bury, doesn’t have half of his power, doesn’t match his color or size, or even the burden of dreams that he carried. He picks his feet up high and sets them down carefully as Stiles adjusts his grip on the lead and the call for “Riders up!” rings over the paddock.

Lydia grabs the reins in one hand and the pommel of the saddle in the other and jumps in unison with the boost of Derek’s grip on her left knee. Yogi keeps his prancing walk as she settles in the saddle and gathers up the reins; he turns his head and knickers when Stiles steps away from his head, coiling the lead into a series of loops.

“How gruesome,” she says, tone dry, and tips her head to Derek before nudging Yogi into the line of horses parading out to the track.

***

Eddie leaves his cell phone sitting on the table next to Jackie, and she keeps it in the periphery of her vision while she breaks the deck and folds out a new round of solitaire. On the television in the corner of the room, Tell Me Your Tales is all but shoved into the gate with the combined effort of three starting assistants.

A shadow falls over her as the gate opens. She looks up to see Clark Mack standing in front of her, hands clasped behind his back, sandy hair falling over his blue eyes, blonde stubble sprouting out of the round whiteness of his face and throat. He says nothing.

“Your intimidation tactics leave something to be desired.” The knuckles of Jackie’s left hand crack when she closes it into a fist. “Open your mouth if you want to worry me.”

“I hope you have faith in those twins.” Eight more words than she’s heard from him in months.

“Well, of the two of us, I’ve got a better lifetime record with long odds.” She makes herself breathe. “And you’ll notice that Scotch Fitzgerald’s been doing a hell of a lot better since you got booted off his back.”

Mack shrugs. “An inept trainer or two aside, I do suppose that he has.”

“I think having an uncorrupted jockey makes a bit of difference, too.”

Mack stares at her, and Jackie stares back, sweat crawling down her spine. Laura probably could have gone to court over the matter, but she didn’t have the money to spare and nobody had a scrap of proof to say why a colt known for closing with ferocious speed suddenly lost his edge when he should have been coming into his prime season – a season as one of the first horses entrusted to the newly-reinstated Hale barn.

It’s a dead matter. Nothing to be done about it now.

“I’ll see you in the paddock,” Mack says. He glances at the television. “If…” He stops. “Good luck.”

Jackie is planning on waiting for him to leave before she moves, but he isn’t going away, and then other jockeys are calling “Shit, man, check it out!” to one another, so she turns her gaze towards the screen as well, just to see what all the fuss is about.
In the rear of her mind, Lydia is aware that there isn’t a single horse in this race who would stand a chance against a Sass or a pre-injury Stoner, even on their best day and the stakes horse’s worst. This group might be a cut above the scrappy, breaking/broken-down claimers that constitute the majority of racehorses, but they’re nothing special. There’s no zing here, no overwhelming power or passion. These horses might be running as a herd in the wild, for all the competition they’re showing.

Maybe that’s an understatement. Yogi certainly knows what his job is, and his ears get pinned further against his skull with every inch that MexicanJumpingBean creeps up on the inside. And with six furlongs of turf to cover, there isn’t a whole lot of time to concentrate on the rest of the field.

They’re at the head of the pack, MexicanJumpingBean on one side, Tell Me Your Tales on the other, everyone else strung out behind them, exactly as they have been since they burst out of the gate at the top of the turf chute. They swing into the middle of the backstretch, and Tell Me Your Tales starts to lose ground in increments. Lydia doesn’t even pretend to take it for granted. She presses her knuckles into the bobbing strands of Yogi’s mane and clicks her tongue as he accelerates out of one turn and towards another.

The grass of the final turn is sparser in towards the rail, where it’s been torn up and beaten down by thousands of hooves, and Yogi adds a few more scars to it as Lydia bends over his neck to urge him in so they can save more ground. He drops his head as they go, his body stretching out behind them in an ungainly synergy of flesh and muscle and wind-whipped hair, and his outside shoulder bulges out even further as he hops onto his left lead, and there’s a snap like a deadbolt sliding home in one smooth motion.

His next step, he bobbles, then swaps back onto the right lead, skewed going into the corner, poised to swing out, striding disorganized.

Lydia stands up in her stirrups and drags on the reins. She doesn’t know exactly what just happened, but she doesn’t need to. This could have happened to any jock, at any time – hurt horses are a part of racing. She’ll pull him up and take him back to the barn and get him taken care of ASAP; there’s nothing to worry about; even a half-wild should-be claimer knows when to quit.

There are no Ruffians in this field.

Yogi’s teeth clamp down on the bit as he yanks his head towards the ground and MexicanJumpingBean surges up on the inside.


Every part of Derek’s body is shaking and he doesn’t know what to do with his hands; he can’t even feel the program that he’s twisting to shreds – he isn’t aware that he’s twisting it to shreds until he realizes that he’s being towed out of the owner’s box by his wrist and happens to look down and see the mangled paper. He trips down the stairs, bangs his knee on the railing and loses Stiles, fumbles his way back to his feet to look down the length of the grandstand towards the final turn, where Yogi is still running, where something is broken, something is wrong, something is beginning to pull loose in Yogi’s left foreleg.

“Stop,” he hears Stiles plead. “Stop him; stop him.”
There is something very much wrong with The Yogimeister, Ben realizes, watching the exaggerated dip of the horse’s head while Martin tries to wrestle him off his pace and Eddie Sull roars past on MexicanJumpingBean. He’s stuttering and stumbling and hanging onto his stride only by the dumbest of luck, and as his momentum drains and Tell Me Your Tales begins to gain ground against him once more, The Yogimeister rolls white-ringed eyes in his head and drives forth with renewed vigor.

Martin is leaning her full weight against him, yelling at him to stop, you dumb horse, you fool, you lunatic; you’ve lost; don’t do this, please don’t; this isn’t what I asked for.

Ben is aware, in some vague way, of thinking about how that horse doesn’t have sodium’s chance in a rainstorm of making it down the stretch, no more than Clain did of hauling herself out of the mud after she went down. So he makes an executive decision that is almost guaranteed to get him sidelined and possibly sued, and he doesn’t care, because when he starts pulling Tell Me Your Tales out and off of The Yogimeister’s flank, the Hale horse slows and wobbles and seems to finally be paying attention to the death grip Martin has on his face, to the blood that is being flung off of his leg with every stride. Ben takes a breath.

But The Yogimeister’s still going forwards, still giving chase to MexicanJumpingBean, who is far and away now, out of reach, the clear winner, and The Yogimeister’s left forefoot is staring to flop horribly with each stride he takes that sends a thousand pounds bearing down onto whatever weakened muscle or broken joint or edge of bone has given way, is being hammered apart.

Tell Me Your Tales is almost down to a canter when The Yogimeister tries to straighten himself as he levels into the stretch, overextends with his red ruin of a forefoot, twists off balance, and crashes to the ground, Martin’s body half-thrown out of the saddle, vanishing beneath him.

Scott barely has his door all the way shut when Deaton steps on the gas. Inertia slams him against his seat and he goes to fumble for the seatbelt, then stops and grabs the handle of the door instead as they jounce over the dirt and through the gap in the rail to the turf track. He hangs on while the shocks judder and the wheels bounce and locks his jaw to keep from biting his tongue.

He makes himself think clinically, use horse instead of Yogi and jockey instead of Lydia, hemorrhage and infection instead of there’s so much blood and dirt and muck-

Groom instead of Stiles. The groom is climbing over the rail onto the dirt track with Der- the owner at his shoulder, far down by the grandstand, both of them moving at a dead run.

Stiles has run down six different stretches (here, Hollywood, Santa Anita) made of three kinds of footing (grass, synthetic, natural dirt) aboard Yogi, and done so more than a hundred times, but there is no quarter of a mile in the world that is longer than the one he runs the wrong way down the dirt track at Golden Gate Fields with nine thousand sets of eyes watching him (mothers, fathers, strangers, cousins, friends, fans). He is painfully aware of them, of their screaming, and of the burning in his thighs and lungs as he tries to sprint like he’s back on the cross-country team in high school. He trips a step and a half from the rail separating turf and dirt, feels a hand (Derek’s) close on a fistful of shirt and hold him up.

Stiles doesn’t turn around; his hands smack onto the rail and he hauls himself over it, stumbles
twenty feet to climb over the second railing, onto the green grass of the turf.

***

Lying on her back, staring up at a cloud shaped like a rubber duck toy, Lydia takes her time coaxing air into returning to her lungs. She’s had the wind knocked out of her before; she’s fine; she needs to take a minute and breathe, and then she’ll stand up and figure out what the deal is with Yogi. She can hear the crowd, the grumble of an approaching engine, and the announcer trumpeting MexicanJumpingBean’s name. Yogi and the rest of the field must be too far away for her to hear their hoofbeats, or else he’s standing still somewhere close by, thank god. She can still hear him snorting.

The engine cuts out and hinges creak. Scott McCall scrambles to her side, leaning over her. “Lydia?”

“I’m fine.” She blinks. “Give me a minute to get my breath back.”

McCall’s face goes blank, and then he’s looking up, away from her. “Stiles, we need to get him—”

Someone goes skidding by them, slipping on the torn-up ground. “Shit,” Stiles says. “Oh god, his leg—I got—Yog—”

Another voice speaks up: Doctor Deaton. “Derek, you help me lift him up. Scott, you pull her legs out. They’ll have an ambulance coming.”

“I don’t need an ambulance,” Lydia says, but they ignore her amidst the flurry of movement at the lower rim of her vision, and she can feel McCall’s hands on her waist, then sliding lower before they vanish. Her field of view rotates ninety degrees, but she can’t feel McCall touching her, and she can’t feel the loosening pressure that should accompany the sound of him unzipping her boots, but she can hear Stiles still saying “oh god, oh god, oh god,” and turn her head to see him crouched beside a heaving mound of flesh on the ground, running his hands over it, undoing the girth, pulling loose the saddle that’s still half-trapped under Yogi’s body.

“Can you feel this?” McCall asks her.

She says “no” and sits up, head screaming, to see her pants rolled up to her knees and his hand on her ankle, pinching the skin.

Yogi grunts, and she looks back at him, sees, over the curve of his belly, the broken shape of his foreleg, bent awkwardly like an extra joint’s been inserted halfway and then taken out, blood bubbling from between torn muscle fibers and the jagged shards of bone. The leg twitches and drags through the dirt when Yogi flinches at the ambulance slamming to a stop a few yards away. He turns enough to stare at Lydia with one white-ringed eye. His coat is soaked through with sweat.

She puts her hand on the overly-boney arch of his withers where the hair has been rubbed away from countless trips under saddle, and pets her fingers over the white spots that start there and speckle their way down his spine.

“Easy, Yogimeister,” she tells him, and then the EMTs get their arms underneath her and lift her onto the stretcher they have folded out on the grass.

***

Standard procedure for a horse that’s broken down on the track with a catastrophic injury is to put
them out of their misery with maximum speed, but Yogi is still very much alive and in pain when Laura gets to the head of the stretch, and she soon sees why: Stiles.

Stiles Stilinski, Champion Defender of The Yogimeister, is kneeling at the horse’s side, rubbing shaking hands over Yogi’s shoulder and neck while he argues with Deaton, saying things like “This isn’t 1975!” and “This can’t – you’ve got – there’s gotta be a way to fix this.” And he’s crying – his face is a mess of tears and snot, and when Laura’s shadow falls across him he looks up at her and says “Please.”

Just that. Just “Please.”

Derek stands off to the side, a marbled statue of numb passivity. Laura touches his arm. “He’s your horse.”

“You can’t,” Stiles says. Begs. “You can’t, he’s – after everything? All that work and that time and that – you can’t just give up, Der.”

“Stiles, he’s-”

Louder, Stiles’ voice gets, impassioned, talking over Derek when he tries to open his mouth. “I don’t care if he’s a piece of shit; he’s still a Hale horse – if this were Bury she’d be cutting off her own legs to save him, you know that!” The finger he points at Laura trembles.

“Stiles.”

“You don’t get to fucking give up on him just because-”

“He’s already dead.” Derek’s mask cracks when he shouts the words, making the EMTs attending Lydia turn their heads as they load her into the ambulance; his whole body quivers and his hands curl into fists, and the blood rushes into his face with a vain fury, as if he could change anything now. His eyes are shining when he stalks away between the black screens set up around the scene.

Stiles stays crouched beside Yogi, crying harder now, eyes puffed up and streaming, and Yogi shifts restlessly as if trying to lurch his way back to his feet. His foreleg scrapes across the grass, driving more contamination into the wound, and he grunts in pain, then lets his head and neck fall back against the ground. If Stiles stays, he’s only going to work the horse up more and make euthanization exponentially more traumatic than it has to be.

“You should go,” she tells him. “You don’t want to see this.”

Stiles heaves a broken sob from his throat, and then he presses his face into Yogi’s neck and wraps his arms around all the bulging muscle that he and Derek worked so hard to put there and whispers “I’m so sorry, Yog.”

Yogi goes very still.

Stiles takes a ragged inhale and sits back on his heels. He sets one hand on Yogi’s shoulder, rubbing small circles with it, and tugs on Yogi’s left ear with the other. He opens his mouth, and a sob chokes out before he can form words again. “Say hi to my mom for me.” Then he gets up, staggers back a step, tries to turn around and walk away but ends up stumbling against the rail. “He’s just-”

“I’ve got him.” Laura goes to her knees in front of Yogi and pulls his head into her lap, fussing with the strap of his noseband to loosen it. When it comes free, she pulls the crownpiece over his ears and slips the well-chewed bit from between his teeth, coupling the reins together and handing the
entire thing to Stiles.

Stiles takes the bridle, looks at the nameplate emblazoned with Yogi’s name on the crowpiece, nods, opens and closes his mouth one last time as more tears fill his eyes, and then Scott McCall sets an arm around his shoulders and draws him away.

Laura looks Yogi up and down one last time: the whole strung-out length of him, from overly-long neck to overly-long back to knobby withers to stubby legs to destroyed cannon bone; every inch of him is a different sort of train wreck. Claimer material. Dog food. That’s what he could have been, should have been, almost was.

She nods to Deaton, then leans down and kisses the lopsided star on Yogi’s forehead and scratches the spot that she knows he likes, under his mane along the crest of his neck. His breath huffs against her hip, and she smooths her knuckles over the veins that bulge from under his skin and murmurs “Another Hale horse down” while Deaton slides the needle home.

Better down on the track than burned alive.

Yogi hiccups on his next inhale, and Laura runs her hand over his cheek and combs through his wisp of a forelock and whispers “I’ve got you, boy; I’ve got you; it’s okay” into his ear when he gulps for another breath and then suddenly, completely, calms.

He sighs, nudging his muzzle against her ribs.

Laura kisses his star again, and between his ears, and cups her hand over his nose to feel for an exhale. She waits ten seconds, and when none comes, brushes her hand down the length of his face. “Good boy.” She doesn’t think she’s ever said those words to him before.

A track worker hovers nearby. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but we need – we have another race…” He gulps and trails away when another worker punches his arm.

“Screw the race,” the second worker says. “Take all the time you need.”

Laura musters a smile for them. “It’s alright.” Her voice is a rasp. She clears her throat and curls her hand over the curve of Yogi’s muzzle. “I should go. I have two horses in the next race.” She slides back and stands up, setting Yogi’s head down carefully to rest atop the grass, spreads her palm over the brown hair dusting her jeans and sets her jaw against the thud of her heart. There are long digs in the turf where he was trying to keep himself upright, coming out of the corner. It’s improbable that he made it as far as he did. She walks around his body to pick Lydia’s saddle up off the ground, folding the girth across it and balancing it against her hip.

“Who do I have to talk to to get him cremated?” she asks. “I’d like to have his ashes.”

***

Jackie finds Isaac walking into the paddock with Boss and Guapa’s reins in his hands and a mask of clean emptiness hung on his face. His eyes find hers in the crowd of jockeys. He smiles wryly. The first words out of his mouth when she reaches him are “You alright?”

“Oh I’m fine, I’m fine; I’m just not sure how I’m going to ride this damn race right now.” She looks around, rubbing her arms. “What’s the word on Lydia?”

“At the hospital. Scott says she couldn’t feel anything below the waist, and she was going into shock when they got her in the ambulance, but she’s alive and her life doesn’t seem to be in danger. We’ll have to take it.” He glances around them, so Jackie does too.
There are no Hales in sight, but Eddie is forging towards them with an expression like he just finished a day trip to Auschwitz. When he reaches them, he stands forlornly in front of Isaac and stammers out “I am so sorry, if I had seen him break.”

“Silencio,” Jackie orders. “Wasn’t your fault. Horse was fucking doomed from the moment his daddy’s sperm hit an egg.” When Eddie continues to give Isaac the apologetic-puppy eyes she makes an exaggeratedly disgusted noise and grabs his face in her hands. “Lo. No. Fue. Tu. Culpa.”

“Si,” Eddie mumbles, unconvinced.

“Give it time,” Isaac says. “I’m still reeling.”

“You’re reeling,” Jackie grumbles, letting go of Eddie. “You didn’t have to watch the whole debacle while sitting next to Clark Mack. You know what he said to me when Yogi went down? “Good luck.””

Eddie flinches.

“Let’s discuss this later, when there isn’t a race about to be run.” Laura steps out of the crowd and gives their little gathering a critical once-over. “Nobody’s seen Derek?”

“No, where’d he go?” Isaac hands over Guapa’s reins when Laura beckons for them. “He okay, boss? You okay? Where’s Stiles?”

“I expect that everyone in our crew will all live to live to see tomorrow,” Laura says. “That’s more than can be said for some.” She looks at Eddie. “You good to ride?”

He bobs his entire body with his nod. “Of course, Ms. Hale.”

“Good. Stop kicking yourself. Let’s get these horses tacked.”

***

The Golden Gate Fields grandstand is only two-thirds full, but nevertheless noisy and chaotic. Wade does his best to stay out of people’s way. It’s easy enough during the races; once everyone realizes that there are horses running, they settle down – or at least stop moving and start cheering. He watches the Yogimeister breakdown in grim silence with the rest of the crowd, and in the hubbub afterwards thinks of calling Jackie.

But.

Her name is on the program for the next race, aboard one of two long-odds fillies from the Hale barn. She doesn’t need the distraction.

***

Eddie owes Laura Hale a good ride. A good ride and a good drink and all the condolences and apologies he could ever give her, because when he caught the replay in the jocks’ room it was clear that The Yogimeister was running wild trying to chase down the horses on either side of him, and Ben was the one who pulled out and back to help discourage him. Eddie had never noticed.

He owes Lydia Martin her legs, unless a miracle happens.

Down on the dirt track for the Lost in the Fog Stakes, there are no miracles to be found, only horseflesh and high tempers. This is not a field to have a bad day while running against. He tries to
remember that, and pay attention to the horses.

They’re all two-year-olds here, some on their first or second start, but there are a lot of familiar names with the trainers. The Argents have Spitting Ivory, their black colt, and there are two black fillies in the ranks: Disparitated and Click Snap Boom, from Maxwell and Byrns respectively. Click Snap Boom is blind in her left eye, and bulky with muscle; Disparitated is a slender trigger with a wide blaze and white splashed high up her legs. Their trainers each have two horses in the race: Maxwell has a second filly, the small and soft Sandy Irene whose brown coat blends in with the dirt; Byrns has a pale chestnut colt with a heart printed on his forehead named Antes Patience. Then there’s Helen Rebdol, who came out with her colt Naïve Violinist, a stocky fleabitten gray with a dark mane and tail, and Daehler’s dull chestnut Ya Know Me, with the Hale fillies rounding out the lineup.

Eddie feels sick, loading into the gate. He hopes for miracles.

The starting bell rings as he realizes that he hasn’t thought of his sister in too long.

***

Jackie calls herself lucky for finishing the Lost in the Fog Stakes in one piece, because she doesn’t remember most of the race, the break or the original shuffle of positions or rounding the turn, but she remembers knuckling Boss’ neck and dragging air into her lungs and watching the butts of three black horses vying for the lead down the stretch while Guapa and Naïve Violinist battled it out for fourth to her outside.

Guapa won that fight, at least. That’s something to be grateful for; somebody’s finally growing a spine. Jackie certainly doesn’t have one. She hands Boss’ reins over to Isaac and gets off the track as fast as she can to avoid Laura, who has had a shitty enough day already.

In the jockeys’ room she peels off her gear and stores it away, digs out her street clothes and pulls them on one item at a time: jeans, red t-shirt, socks, sneakers. She’ll take a shower first thing when she gets home, in her own damn bathroom under her own damn showerhead, with her soap on the ledge and nobody else around. The others who rode in the Lost in the Fog have just begun to filter back in when she ducks out with her backpack slung over her shoulder. There’s one more race today, an eight-thousand claimer, and then the second-to-last day of the meet is over, but she doesn’t have anything to stick around for.

There are still several thousand people in the stands, but with the main attraction of the day finished, the track is beginning to empty out. There are parents with strollers and young couples hand-in-hand at every turn and a chill sinking into the air, so she pauses at the edge of the parking lot to root around in her bag for the sweatshirt she brings every day. (Every day except today, apparently.)

“Shiftuck,” she growls and gets a scowl from a passing grandfather. “Of course today’s the day I don’t… really? Really Vaca? How could you-”

“Hey.”

She doesn’t look up. “Go away, whoever you are. I’m not in the mood.”

“Jacqueline.”

Her head snaps up. It’s hard to tell with the deep shadows cast by the grandstand and the fading light of evening, but she’s pretty sure there’s a familiar wayward Australian standing several yards
in front of her. Something goes out of her; something she’s sure she’ll need, later in life, when everything is bleached white and ugly in death.

“You’re a long way from home. Aussie,” she says, quiet.

Wade studies her. “You think so?”

“Yeah,” she says. “You and me both.”

He smiles, slightly pained, like he saw everything that happened today. He probably did. “Pretty sure your place is still closer.”

“It always is.” She closes her eyes and feels herself weaving on her feet. “I need a shower.”

“Okay.”

“And some kind of hot food.”

“Okay.”

“Nothing too dense. I gotta make weight tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

“And some hard alcohol would be nice.”

“Okay.”

“And if I still have the energy to fuck after that I’m gonna be really impressed with myself, because it ain’t likely.”

“Okay.”

“Stop,” she says. “Stop being okay. Nobody else here is.”

“I’m not from here,” Wade says. “Want me to make you pancakes?”

She hesitates. “When are you leaving?”

“When are you?”

“You’re a real fucking asshole, Aussie,” she says. “And I want blueberries in them.”

“Done.”

“Good.” She picks up her backpack again. “You drive here?”

“T ook a taxi.”

“Lazy ass.” She digs her keys out of her pocket. “I’m parked way over on the left.”

“Alright,” Wade says, and follows her lead.
The story of the Hale barn after The Yogimeister’s euthanization is a messy one. Between them, Erica and Boyd are witnesses to most of the moving parts, but even they lose track of some bits and get confused by others. Lying in bed that night, they sort through what they know.

Lydia is in the hospital. Erica followed the ambulance and browbeat an orderly into letting her into Lydia’s room, where she learned a bare minimum of facts. This they know: Lydia has seriously reinjured her spinal cord and can’t feel anything below the waist, but her life is not in danger. Also, her doctors seriously doubt that her spine will be able to repair itself enough for her to walk.

Boyd and a dozen or so others heaved Yogi’s body into a horse ambulance while the grandstand watched in dull horror.

Laura Hale asked for the gelding to be cremated. It is uncertain if she’s aware of the irony, considering what happened to all the Hale family’s other horses.

Danny the farrier climbed into the ambulance and rumbled off the track in it. When he ran into Boyd later that evening, he gave him a quartet of size 2 aluminum racing plates with fragments of dirt and grass impressed into the metal. “Pass them on for me,” he’d said.

Derek Hale disappeared from the track. No one knows where he’s gone.

Nerve and Del Romana took sixth and fourth in the Lost in the Fog Stakes. Few people around the Hale barn bother to keep up the pretense of calling them ‘twins’ anymore. Click Snap Boom – Pim Byrns’ half-blind black filly – won the day.

Stiles is a wreck. He went off with Scott McCall for a while, but came back to the barn after the Lost in the Fog. Boyd dropped by to see if they needed help, and gave him one of the plates. Stiles, whose face was dry for the first time in hours, tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans and said “I bet he regrets never actually kicking me in the ass” with a watery smile that crumpled in on itself within seconds.

Isaac’s been quiet. He watched the race, they know, but he hasn’t been speaking to anyone beyond getting Boyd’s secondhand account of Lydia’s status. He looks like he got dragged around the track behind the farrow.

The other Hale-affiliated jockeys have stayed clear of the barn – even Jackie. Erica expects they’ll reappear tomorrow morning.

Except Eddie. Eddie will be gone for a few days: he got news that his sister had died a few minutes before everyone cleared out from the jockey’s room. He collapsed in tears, and Jorge escorted him home.

Laura merged into the empty shock of the crisis with the ease of a cruise liner on a flat sea. She’s the only one who seems capable of tucking her mourning into a side compartment of her brain to focus on the bigger picture – and, to be honest, she seems more in control of things than she has in months. That, in and of itself, drives home the grim reality of the situation.

The Yogimeister is dead.
It takes Boyd a long time to fall asleep after they finish talking, but even once he does, Erica lies awake, facing into the dark. Her parents are Catholic, but it’s been a long time since she set foot in a church. Nevertheless, for Yogi and Stiles, for Isaac and Lydia, for Dina and Eddie, for Jackie, for the cursed lives of the Hales, and for every broken horse and battered groom and torn-apart rider, she begins to murmur a prayer.

***

Laura is a few minutes late to the barn the next morning, but she arrives in full Crisis Mode: she issues a brief report about several thousand dollars’ worth of damage to the Camaro and Derek being locked in his room, then pins the list of riders and horses to the door of her office and digs out Nye’s tack. She mucks three of Lydia’s stalls between workouts before Erica says “Give me a bonus” and takes the pitchfork away from her, shooing her in the direction of the track.

The last day of racing at Golden Gate Fields passes uneventfully, if only because no one brings up Yogi or Lydia or Derek, and if Slaw and Pig make sad little whickerings as they poke their noses through the bars into the empty stall separating them, the moments pass unremarked.

***

Dina is sitting beside Lydia’s bed again when Erica enters the hospital room in on Sunday afternoon with three aluminum horseshoes in her purse. They each get one plate, and then Erica stands in front of them, turning the final shoe over and over in her hands.

“Boyd gave Stiles the other one,” she says. “And Laura’s getting the ashes. Who does this go to?”

Dina balances the shoe on her knee and itches under her cast with a fingertip. “Not Derek.”

“I’m sick of Derek,” Lydia agrees. She flips a control that bends the bed to let her sit up straighter, since her spine is disinclined to cooperate. “Give it to Allison.”

“Argent’s kid?” Dina asks. “Why the hell would you do that?”

“Because the Hales bought Yogi from her aunt. And she’s a good kid. And I think she’d read pretty deeply into the gesture, and maybe not turn into her mother or aunt if she reads the right way. There’s hope for her yet.”

Erica hefts the shoe. “What is she supposed to get from this?”

Lydia blinks. “That her family is a pack of wolves.”

“Martin,” Dina says. “I rode the ass in every race he ran with the Hales, and I didn’t know he was originally an Argent horse. The shoe isn’t going to tell her that.”

“His sire was a Hale stallion who was bought by the Argents after the fire,” Lydia says. “She’s clever. She’ll be confused. She’ll ask around. Stiles knows the story; she’ll get to him eventually. He’s best friends with her fiancée, after all.”

Dina rubs at her temple with the hand not bound in plaster. “Manipulation through mourning. Jesus. Go ahead, then. Someone needs to learn something from this, and it sure as hell isn’t going to be Derek Hale the Tantrum-Thrower.”

Erica smiles. She flips the shoe into the air off of one finger and catches it in both hands. “I’ll make the delivery myself.”
Allison takes the shoe without comment, turns it over, studies it, and then goes to set it aside. Erica watches her do it, hands clasped behind her back, and when Allison tucks the shoe into her jacket pocket she hears the preparatory inhale and pauses. “Yes?”

Erica exhales. “Nothing.”

“Are you trying to point me somewhere?”

There’s a pause while Erica seems to consider how much she wants to hand over. “Go talk to Stiles,” she says.

“About?”

Erica is already halfway out the door. She tosses the name over her shoulder like it’s a wad of chewed-up gum: “Yogi.”

When Isaac walks into the bedroom, Allison is lying perpendicular to Scott across the top of the bed, her head resting on his ribcage. It’s half-past seven, and she’s asleep.

“Hey,” Scott says, voice scratchy – like he’s been crying.

“Hey,” Isaac says back. He walks across the room and fits himself into the sliver of space between Scott and the edge of the bed, resting his cheek against Scott’s hair and reaching between their bodies to cover Scott’s hand with his own, threading their fingers together and holding tight.

It takes Stiles three days to realize that Derek isn’t coming back. It takes him two more to work up the nerve to go over to the Hale apartment during lunch while Laura is busy shuffling papers, ten minutes of prep talk before he rings the doorbell three times in a row, because something tells him Derek isn’t getting out of bed if he thinks he can avoid it.

Derek opens the door and blinks at him for several seconds. There are bruises under his eyes, his skin and hair are laden with oil and grease, his shirt is stained with sweat and god knows what else, and his sweatpants look like he hasn’t taken them off in five days. His stubble is less stubble-y and more beard-y than ever.

“Hi,” Stiles says.

Derek’s hand comes up to touch Stiles’ face, brushing knuckles across his cheeks and mouth. Stiles stands very still, heart beating out of his chest, and lets him. Derek’s thumb traces the outline of Stiles’ lips, and then he stops, shuts his eyes, and sighs. He turns around and walks back into the apartment.

Stiles follows him.

He’s waiting for Derek to jump him, shove him into a wall, kiss him, jam a hand down his pants, beg Stiles to fuck him, to let Derek fuck him, try to tangle them into a mess of sweaty limbs and force them to have this conversation with their cocks hanging out and blood in all the wrong places – Derek never goes near any sort of bed or bedroom. He walks over to the television and sits cross-legged on the floor with his back to the screen, facing where Stiles is standing by the couch.
“You came here to say something,” Derek says. “Say it.”

Stiles sputters in his attempts to find some kind of footing, then plants himself on the couch and scrubs his hands through his hair and forces his thoughts into a disorganized line.

Derek waits.

“We’ve gotta be done,” he starts. “You and I, we gotta – this is – this was – ugh, shit, I like you, okay? I really like you. You’re a really cool dude and you’re hot and you bring me coffee and kiss well and these are all fantastic things, but we –” he gesticulates at the space between them. “We are not going to work. Not unless I go work for a different barn and you talk to someone – really talk to someone, someone who is paid to talk to people who have had traumatic experiences, because I am the wrong person for that and I am not ever going to be good for you in that regard.”

“You’ve been good to me,” Derek says, but it doesn’t sound like he’s arguing.

“To you, not for you. And, granted, we have not been a total train wreck. Excellent call on the no-sex, I’m-not-ready thing. Seriously A-plus-plus, keep it up, otherwise we’d be totally screwed, no pun intended.” Stiles puts his face in his hands and takes a deep breath while he thinks for a few seconds. “You need better help than I can give you. I can – if you want, I’ll vet therapists for you, make sure they aren’t skeevers or assholes who will insist nothing can be learned unless you’re sobbing and can’t stop shaking. We’ll find you a good one.”

When he looks up, Derek is nodding, expression peaceful. “Was it…” He hesitates. “Was it because I left when Yogi…?”

Stiles gets off the couch, walks around the coffee table, and crouches in front of Derek, clasping the hands that he has folded in his lap. “You were a third of an equation,” he murmurs. “I was another third, and Yogi made us into a functional puzzle. We were never going to work without him. There’s not enough of us that fits together.” He reaches around into his back pocket and pulls out the horseshoe that Boyd gave him, pressing it into Derek’s palms. “And he was your horse first, before I ever got involved, so. It wasn’t you. It was him.”

Derek swallows. His fingers close around the shoe.

“I have to get back to the track before Laura skins me,” Stiles says. “Come by sometime?” He smiles, and Derek huffs a laugh. “Hey.”

Derek lifts his chin enough for Stiles to lean in and peck him on the lips one last time. “I’ll find you a therapist. We’re gonna put you back together, Sourwolf.”

***

“Does that include riding?”

“Riding horses? I… for all intents and purposes, yes, Ms. Martin, it does. You will not be able to do anything that requires the use of your legs. I’m very sorry.”


The doctor bows her head and retreats. By the time the door has closed behind her, Lydia has her phone in her hand to speed-dial Isaac. “Bring me carbonara,” she orders when he answers. “The biggest dish you have: bring it.”

“That bad?”
“Isaac.”

“Give me an hour,” he says. “Hang tight.”

An hour later, he walks into her room with Scott and Dina flanking him, and the first thing he does after setting down a monstrous container of pasta is pull her halfway out of her bed to hug her.

***

Wade stays as long as he can, but Thursday night finds him folding the last of his clothes to put into his bag so he can catch his flight at 10:30 on Friday morning. Jackie is sitting on the kitchen counter picking at the remnants of her salad. Every so often he steals a crouton off her plate and she kicks his thigh.

“You’re coming down the fourteenth, right? Before the meet starts.”

“That’s the plan.” She looks around the apartment. “I have to pack some of this up. I’m only staying for three weeks when I come back in September – I’m thinking of selling the place. Between Del Mar, Santa Anita, and Hollywood Park, I’ll have mounts and races to ride them in until next November. Not much point to keeping this space if I’m never going to use it.”

“Want help?”

“Selling? Or packing?”

“The one that has me bending over for your viewing pleasure.”

She kicks him again, and makes a threatening gesture with her fork. “I never said anything about you, Aussie. Not a word.”

“Well I’m one for one on you not deleting my number, so…” He leans his elbows on the pile of folded clothes and turns his head to watch her eat. “I can be here by the tenth. With my car and an empty trunk.”

“Long drive.”

“I grew up in the backseat of a van, getting shuttled between Brisbane and Perth. LA to here is nothing.”

“Big damn hero, you are.” Jackie finishes off the last piece of salad. “What I’m taking, I can fit into the bed of my truck. I’ll save the heavy lifting for September.” She sets the plate in the sink and turns on the water. “Fly up and bring good music. It’s not cross-continent, but it’s still an eight-hour drive.”

“Deal,” Wade says. He starts to fold another shirt, then realizes Jackie is staring at him and stops. “Was I not supposed to agree that easily?”

Jackie shakes her head. One corner of her mouth twitches, and she hops off the counter to grab the soap from its holder. “You are just fine, Aussie. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worrying you, am I?”

She slaps him once, lightly on the arm, and says nothing on the topic.
A week after Yogi’s death, Derek showers and runs a comb through his hair and puts on clean clothes and goes to the track. It’s nine A.M.

The first words Laura says to him in six days are “You’re fired.” She scribbles something on her clipboard and then puts it down. “If-”

“Thanks.”

She stops. She smiles. “Grab that pitchfork, go muck Bury’s stall, and have your ass here by five tomorrow, little bro.” When Derek nods, she walks around her desk and wraps her arms around him. He hugs her back, pressing his face into her hair and wondering when she acquired their mother’s taste in shampoo. “Welcome back, Der.”

***

They all lose some time, after that. They stop paying so much attention to things like Ernest nipping at them for treats, or the colors of the sunset, or the state of the world’s affairs. It’s easier.

And then they miss things. And then it’s foolish. And they start paying attention again.

***

The verdict of the George Zimmerman trial comes out on a Saturday evening in July a few days before everyone packs up and moves south. Every paper, magazine, news station, and blog between Key West and Seattle covers it: one ‘Not Guilty’, and the world trembles on its axis.

The track hustles and bustles at a slower rhythm without races being run, but a plague of tension jumps from barn to barn as word of the verdict spreads. Whites natter on with their lives – those who don’t know or notice or care. Everyone else gets irritable and stiff, or quiet and watchful.

Boyd suits up in an armor of stoicism, but Erica gets jumpy on his behalf, and by midafternoon she’s saying “Do you want to go home? We can go home if you want; there’s nothing we have to stay for.” So they go, and breathe easier for it.

The jockeys who don’t have two-year-olds to train – they go, too. They pack into their sports cars and pickup trucks, Audis and Chevys and Porsches and Fords. The white ones were leaving anyway; they go to golf, to swim, to relax. Everybody else – well, they try. Some of them do better than others.

Jackie goes home (she says her Australian is back in town, helping her pack up, so she at least has a functional excuse). Jorge and Eddie stop by the Hale barn, sticking around just long enough for Laura to tell them that they’re coming home with her; she has booze in the apartment, all kinds. It needs to disappear before they go south. Derek goes with them. Stiles and Isaac close up. They don’t see Dina, but Danny tells them he’s going out; he’ll keep an eye out for her.

***

Wade doesn’t like to dwell on the key that’s been added to the small ring in his pocket, the one that unlocks Jackie’s apartment in San Francisco. It doesn’t matter. It shouldn’t bear the same significance it would coming from, say, a hairdresser or an office worker. Jackie’s out the door by six and sometimes doesn’t make it back until eight in the evening, and she sort of tossed the key at him on her way out the door the morning after he arrived and said “Don’t lose it; I’m not having another one made” and “If you take the metro rail, you’ll get to The Castro in about forty minutes” before leaving him to his own devices.
He sees the New York Times article about the verdict while poking through his phone on the bus on the way back to South Berkeley. It hurts somewhere inside his throat, even before the web starts bubbling with the cries of *Hoodies Up*. Jackie’s truck in the parking lot is a reassuring sight.

Jackie normally leaves the door unlocked when she beats him back to the apartment, but today it’s locked, and stays shut even after he twists the key. He hears footsteps and Jackie says “hang on a sec”, and the deadbolt that Wade has never seen engaged rasps through the wood. The door swings open, Jackie standing in front of it, grim lines on her face.

“Are you alright?” A silly thing to ask.

“Of course.” She scrubs at her hair with one hand, tugs at the hem of the black tank top she’s wearing under an unzipped gray sweatshirt with the other, says, “Yeah, no, I’m fine.” She starts to walk away, then stops, turns around. “You heard, right?”

“That Zimmerman got acquitted.”

“Officially.” She bares her teeth, cocks her head to one side. “Unofficially, nonwhites are all maggots and our lives aren’t worth jack shit. The open season starts any day now.”

Wade shuts the door behind him and feels very, very white when he looks back at Jackie. “I do still think that murder is illegal in this part of the world.”

Jackie throws her hands in the air. “Against who? For how long? Look at me.” She yanks the hood of her sweatshirt over her head, stuffs her hands into the pockets, and glowers at him from across the room. “I’m a brown man, like this. I’m – fuck.” She pulls down the hood and rakes a hand through her hair again. “I’m already CeCe McDonald 2.0 waiting to happen. Whatever. Fuck. Fine. Now it’s…” She makes a sweeping, helpless gesture. “How long until somebody decides Eddie’s “suspicious”? Jorge? Fuck it all, what about Boyd, the mountain of muscle that he is? What happens the next time Dina punches a guy who grabs her ass? What happens…?” She drops her hands.

The possibilities loom. Wade curls his left hand around his right forearm. “I can stick around San Diego, if you want.”

“No you can’t, you a- you’ve got your own damn job to worry about. Don’t do that.”

“Would it make you feel better?”

Jackie rubs at her eyes with one hand. “What are you gonna do, chaperone me everywhere? Fight off the big baddies?” She makes her laugh ugly, then opens her eyes. “Don’t try to be my White Savior, or I will give the racists something to be suspicious about.”

There’s anger there, a bit, but the rest of it feels acted as part of a routine. Wade drops his gaze to Jackie’s feet and half-sits on the spine of her couch. “You’re really scared, aren’t you?”

“Oh no, I’m not fucking afraid for my life or anything, I’m good; I’m fine.”

He looks up at her face again. “Something that makes you nervous would have me running for the hills.”

The bitter twist falls out of Jackie’s expression.

“And I’m probably a coward, you know, because of that, because I’ve never been truly scared a day in my life, born as I was, where I was, to the right set of parents, in the right skin, but if you…
"if it makes you feel better, safer – your choice of word – I’ll do it."

“Don’t say that,” Jackie says, blankness closing over her face.

“Why?”

“Because that alone makes me fucking terrified.” She steps up to him, the lines on her face thrown into sharp relief by late-afternoon light streaming through the windows, and her hands clench like vises at the junctions of his shoulders and neck. She kisses him without romance, without fanfare; she kisses like she’s standing at the entrance of death row; one thumb presses at his jugular, the other at his windpipe. He’s careful fitting his hands over her ribs, but she isn’t, not at all, and the looser he holds her, the tighter she grips him.

***

“…Everyone’s wrapped and in shipping halters?”

“Check.”

“Hay nets?”

“Check.”

“Grain teed up?”

“Check.”

“Waters?”

“Check.”

“Everyone who needs to be drugged is?”

“Check.”

“Tack?”

“Check.”

“Blankets?”

“Check.”

Laura pauses midway down the aisle, tapping her pen against her clipboard. “I’m forgetting something.”

Isaac looks around at the rows of empty stalls, the doors standing open to reveal stripped interiors. “You’ve got all your papers?”

“Of course.”

“The stalls are ready and waiting for us down there?”

She glares at him over her shoulder.

“Sorry, sorry. Uh, coggins are all done – we went through the binder yesterday. Vaccines are all up to date. Drivers are ready. What else is there?”
“I don’t know. I can’t remember.” She looks away. “Oh, good, there’s Stiles and the coffee. Put my cup in the bigger trailer, would you? I’m going to do one last walk-through.”

“You said that two walk-throughs ago,” Isaac tells her. He goes to touch her arm, then stops. “Anything we forgot, boss, it won’t end the world.”

She snorts. “For want of a nail…”

“I know: the shoe, the horse, the rider, the kingdom. All lost. But we haven’t got much of a kingdom to lose, so… I think we’ll be alright. Boss.”

“It’s me or the horse,” Laura says. “Pick one.”

Isaac beams white as the rising sun and offers his arm for her to take. “Bossy bossy, boss. Your chariot awaits.”

Laura rolls her eyes as she curls her free hand around Isaac’s elbow, allowing him to lead her towards the waiting trailers.

***

Unloading is exhausting, and keeps them at the barn until after sunset as they settle everyone in and unpack. Stiles volunteers to sleep in one of the tack rooms to keep an eye on things, so Isaac gets to go over to Allison’s apartment and fall asleep in her soft, soft bed. Scott will be down in a few days – his job and school are still in San Francisco, so they’ll have to get by on Skype chats and weekend and holiday visits until the racing circuit brings Isaac and Allison north again. Isaac’s pretty sure they can make it work.

In the morning, Allison beats him into the shower, so Isaac crawls out of bed to drop eggs on the skillet, sunny-side-up, and tosses the strawberries and bananas he bought from the little 24/7 grocery on the way home last night into the blender with milk and sugar and ice cubes. The fruit isn’t the freshest, but the smoothies still taste better than Scott’s coffee. They both forgot to get bacon.

Allison drives him to the track and kisses him goodbye in front of the Hale barn, arms around his neck, smile on her lips. “Be my lunch date?”

“If you’re buying.”

“No way.”

“No date then.” He’s grinning and she’s rolling her eyes, and then she rakes her hand through his hair, destroying the vague semblance of order he’d combed it into, and skips away like an eight-year-old demoness, smirking over her shoulder. “See you at noon!”

Isaac shakes his head and gives up on his hair, turning towards the barn, where the ruckus of Stiles pulling out feed tubs is well under way. They’re both elbow-deep in grain when the Hales walk in, so Isaac gets the subtle pleasure of shoving feed tub after feed tub at Derek as he shuttles them to the stalls.

Laura ambles by the feed room with her clipboard. “Derek, I need Gatsby out with the first set; Isaac: Sass; Stiles: Ernest. Bury, Schizo, and Spitz for the second; Guapa, Boss, and Ernest on the third, and moving fast. We’re getting out early today, boys.”

Isaac starts screwing the tops back onto supplement bottles. “Done, boss.”
Laura nods and shifts her attention towards the trio of Erica, Boyd, and Isabel that has just swaggered in.

Three and a half minutes later Sass is on cross-ties with clean feet, stretching her nose into the air and grunting while Isaac leans all his weight into currying the dip of her back just behind and to the side of her withers. He hears something scrape from the front of the barn and glances up.

“What’re you doing down here?”

“Being crippled.” Lydia rolls herself closer to Sass, who drops her head and snorts to get the smell of the wheelchair. Lydia is dressed in street clothes – a t-shirt and jeans and low-heeled boots – her hair pulled back the same as ever. A thin package of photos sits on her lap. Her thighs are still stocky with muscle. “You should have been at the gate – Bobbie’s face when she saw me was… well, it was the same as everyone else’s is, really. She couldn’t decide whether to look sad or horrified.” She extends her hand to Sass, who sniffs it and, recognizing Lydia’s scent, lips at her palm.

“That…” Phrases like I’m sorry or That blows or So what are you going to do now? flutter through Isaac’s brain. “I should have come to see you while we were still in San Francisco.”

“I didn’t want to see anyone able-bodied after I got out of the hospital,” she says. “I would probably have thrown something at you. Dina and I had a screaming match the same day they cleared her to ride again. Very cathartic. And then I took a trip.”

Isaac laughs. “A trip to where?”

Laura sticks her head out of her office to glower. “Who the hell is in – Lydia.”

“Hale.” Lydia studies the doorway of Laura’s office, which is raised about two inches off the main floor of the barn. “You need to build a ramp there.”

“What?”

She points. “That step. A little one. I’m not going to be carried over that every time I need to discuss something privately with you.”

“And why would we be discussing anything privately? You can’t ride, Martin; what are you even doing at a track?”

“What indeed?” Lydia asks. “Give me that clipboard and you’ll find out.”

Laura blinks.

Isaac smooths the felt pad over Sass’ back, then settles her saddle atop it and reaches under her belly to grab and buckle the girth. Footsteps circle around behind him, and Erica’s near-fluorescent braid swings in his peripheral vision.

“Hire her,” Erica says. “Or you’re going to lose half your riders.”

“As if the alternative was ever an option,” Laura says back, and Sass grunts when the papers on the clipboard rustle under Lydia’s grip. She turns her chair towards Isaac again. “I poked around the state a bit, played tourist at Death Valley, visited a few farms.” She reaches under the clipboard to pick up the package of photos and toss it to him. “I saw your king.” She pats Sass’ nose. “Lonely without his queen.”

“My king,” Isaac repeats. He opens the packet. The first picture is of a thin, angular stallion with a
stripe down his face and socks on his front feet glaring white against the mud-brown of his coat. He’s standing across the paddock from the camera, glowering into it, ears pinned against his skull. All around him is green.

“He tried to bite my chair,” Lydia tells him. “He didn’t like it at all.”

A smile tugs at Isaac’s mouth. In the second photo, Stoner has his head down to graze, ears up: in the third, he’s walking towards the camera, alert and engaged. In that one, it’s possible to see the black wraps covering his forelegs from knee to ergot. “How’s his leg?”

“Healing slowly. They gave him ten ccs of Ace before putting him out in a paddock for the first time, in the beginning of June, and he still blew up and reinjured himself. He goes out regularly now, but not without being drugged until he’s half-conscious.”

“Stoner’s a stoner for real now,” Stiles calls from down the aisle. “That’s why he tried to eat your chair.”

“Shut up, Stiles.”

He circles around Sass’ hind end, craning his neck to see over Isaac’s shoulder. “How’s he – wow, he hasn’t changed at all. I thought he’d be a fat old stud by now.”

“He’d been busy fucking his way through southern California,” Lydia says. “Give him a winter or two.”

Laura clears her throat. “Need I remind you all that we still have horses here who need to be worked?”

“No at all,” Lydia says. “Lahey.” She smacks his ass. “Get on it.”

“Sir, yes sir.”

“Excuse you.”

“Ma’am, yes ma’am?”

She smiles. “Better.”

***

Wade is shirtless when he opens the door – not in a ‘I was planning on impressing random passerby with my torso’ way, but not in a ‘I was in the shower when the doorbell rang’ way either. More in a ‘I hang around my apartment without a shirt on because I’m an underemployed actor living in LA who never runs the AC because it costs an arm and a leg and I’m Australian and therefore can tolerate heat better than a cockroach if it will save me money’ way. He’s wearing basketball shorts, at least.

“I rode seven horses today,” she says. “And I’m tired, and there are people waiting at my apartment to throw me a surprise three-quarters birthday party because they know I’ll find a way around them if they try to have one close to the actual date. And I don’t want to deal with them.”

Wade props his hip against the door to hold it open a little wider. “How do you know about it if it’s a surprise?”

She taps the pocket where her phone is. “Someone who wants me to continue speaking to him and
lending him my shoes tipped me off while I was at CVS. But they’re all still in my apartment. Because someone else had a key, even though he isn’t going to have it for very much longer because I’m going to take it back and then knock out a few teeth.”

“And you don’t have anywhere better to stay?” He’s grinning at her vexation, so she raises her eyebrows.

“Are you going to say no?”

Wade shrugs. “This place is a wreck, but I wasn’t planning on it.” He steps back and opens the door the rest of the way.

“Your ‘wreck’ is Eddie’s ‘spotless’,,” she tells him, and walks in to drop her bag by the television. The apartment is a tiny one-bedroom that doesn’t even total seven hundred square feet, with the kitchen in the corner of the living area and a bathroom the size of a postage stamp. There are books and papers all over the coffee table. It’s almost nine o’clock.

“I already ate,” Wade is saying. “But if you—”

“I had dinner,” she says. “And I showered at the track.” She taps a dog-eared copy of The Book Thief. “I didn’t think there were that many Aussies in Nazi Germany.”

Wade shuts the door and locks it. “I do read some things just because I like to, you know.”

“Like Footloose?” She picks up the script and starts flipping through it, then pauses, pulls out her glasses (narrow, frameless ones with titanium arms), sets them on her nose and goes back to skimming the pages. “You harboring a secret desire to be Ren? Going to Can’t Stand Still your way into the hearts of the Stateside public?”

“They cast me as Willard, actually, and I just revised my entire opinion of you. You know Footloose?”

Jackie stops reading to peer over her glasses at him. “I’m a jockey from California, not a lumberjack from Idaho. Who’d they cast for Rusty?”

“Probably not someone you will ever meet.”

“Fair enough.” She puts down the script. “She cute?”

Wade gives her a Look like he’s not sure if she’s messing with him and is debating messing with her right back. “Would you be jealous if I said she is?”

“I’m thirty-one,” Jackie says. “I’m too old and cynical for jealous.”

He smiles. “Is twenty-three too young? Or just right?”

“You tell me.”

Wade is still leaning against the door, still shirtless, chewing on the inside of his cheek. He shrugs. “I think that depends on the person.”

“I think that was a cop-out answer.”

“And I think you’re the master of cop-out answers so—” He tries to step back when she pulls off her glasses and comes around the sofa at him, but he just winds up laughing and flattened against the wall next to the door. “Honesty is a virtue; honesty is-”
She stops a foot away from him. “You are insufferable. I’m stealing your bed.” And she leaves him there, slumped against the wall and grinning like a fool.

The bedroom, bathroom, and walk-in closet together total about half the square footage of the apartment, but that doesn’t make any of them spacious or roomy. Jackie grabs her bag from beside the television and relocates it to the bedside, then washes her face and brushes her teeth in the bathroom and pulls off her shirt to sleep. The sheets are cool to the touch, the bed unmade on only one side, and if she passes out now she’s guaranteed at least seven solid hours – a rare luxury of slumber. She tucks herself in on the unrumpled side of the bed and sets her alarm for four forty-five.

She wakes up at one to find a warm body next to her and the AC humming in the window; she hisses “Unbelievable” between her teeth and yanks at the sheet until Wade heaves an exaggeratedly resigned sigh and rolls over to wrap himself around her.

“You’re going to wake me up when you leave,” he grumbles into her pillow. “I need beauty sleep.”

“Get used to it,” she says, running her toes up his leg.

She does wake him up, if only for five minutes as she’s disentangling herself from him, and tells him to make her a key if he’s going to whine about getting out of bed.

“Fine,” he mutters, and then hauls himself up to see her out.

“Or get a door that you can lock from the inside and then close, with a separate deadbolt as a precaution. You know. Whichever you prefer.”

“How do you talk so much so early without coffee,” he asks without intonation, blinking grit from his eyes. His hair is all pushed to one side and sticking up haphazardly – or it is until he runs his hand through it. Then it’s just a rumpled mess.

“Years of practice, really.” She stops in the doorway and turns around. “I owe you one.”

Wade closes his eyes and shakes his head – disbelief, disagreement, dislodging sleep-fog? “Buy me dinner tonight and call it even.”

“I’ll pick you up at eight.”

“PM.”

“PM.” She confirms, grinning. “Nighty-nighty, Aussie.”

Wade pries his eyes open and looks down at her. “I resent you.”

She shrugs, then taps the point of his chin twice. “Keep it PG with Rusty.”

“You are jealous,” he says, before she grabs one-handed him by the hinge of his jaw and pulls him down to kiss him, closed-mouthed but firm. Don’t fuck around on me.

“Tonight,” she says. “Eight PM.”

His nails dig into the off-white paint of the doorframe. “Yeah.”

Jackie smiles. “Go back to bed,” she says, and walks off down the hall.

***
Her apartment is spotless and untouched except for an empty can of Seduction beer which she definitely did not buy that is sitting on the counter with a Post-it reading You’re welcome – J&I in Isaac’s sharp-cornered penmanship stuck to it.

She pulls up Jorge’s “tip-off” text and taps out You’re dead as a reply, then does the same for Isaac. They both send smiley faces back to her, and then Isaac does one with the tongue sticking out.

The sunrise bleeds pink through her windows as she pitches the can into the recycling.

***

“So you’re done?” Stiles asks. “With riding? For good?”

“I’m done with walking for good,” Lydia says. She wheels herself closer to the rail and peers over it. “That’s a risk I took in exchange for riding racehorses. You’re lucky that the worst you’ve had is a kick to the chest.”

Stiles leans against the rail next to her. “Are life-altering injuries that frequent? You all just expect them, and shrug when they come to you?”

Lydia smiles wryly as she counts off on her fingers. “In ten years, I’ve had my spine wrecked twice, half a dozen ribs broken, dislocated both shoulders, broken my ankle, and had three or four concussions. I know Dina broke her wrist once, I think on the same arm she busted her elbow, and she’s been in the game less than three years. Jorge once lost four months of riding because he had a compound fracture in his leg. I don’t know of any other injuries for Eddie or Ben, but everyone’s had their skulls rattled and snapped or cracked multiple ribs.” She pauses. “A few months after I started jockeying, Jackie got caught between a horse and the wall of the starting gate when it started rearing in the middle of being loaded. Broke her collarbone and some ribs, and she had a compression fracture in her pelvis. It took her about ten months to get back in the saddle.”

Stiles is staring at her. “Why does anyone do it, then?”

“Because you get to be attached to an animal who wants nothing more than to run – with you on their back or free, past the edge of the earth, and it wants to go until a time when the simplest of equations doesn’t make sense, because running is what it was born for.” She stops in the middle of one dramatic spiel and, shaking her head, diverts onto another. “Do you know why I don’t believe in gods?”

“Because the world is a miserable place?”

She gives him a sad look and Stiles feels very, very shallow. “Because any greater being who knew what humans would do to horses would have kept us far away from them,” she says, with the profound weight of someone who’s been waiting for weeks to use a particular line.

“Maybe there is a higher being, then,” Stiles says back. “But maybe it’s malevolent, not kind, and that’s exactly why we’re here.”

***

Laura grips Jackie’s knee after boosting her into Gatsby’s saddle. “Ride safe.”

“Safe won’t win us this.” She looks to Derek, standing by Gatsby’s head, then beyond him, around the paddock. There are seven other horses in this race – the Eddie Read Stakes – and she knows all of them. Ghostchant. Scudder. Red N Raw. Hand And A Half. Jack’s On Trial. Shalt. Powerful
“Watch Ghostchant and both Argent horses,” Lydia says, wheelchair parked close to the paddock fence, hands folded over her fluttering floral-print skirt. “If there’s a surprise attack from the others, it’ll come from Powerful Mars – she can have a bottomless reserve at this distance. And whatever you do, don’t fall out of reach of the leaders.”

“We’ve got this,” Jackie says. “Let’s go.”

At the gap in the rail, Derek unclips the lead line and Emilia sidles up on Toby Blue, her piebald mutt, to escort them to the gate.

“I’m not supposed to tell you this,” Emilia says as they cross over to the turf track. “But the person in question is about as threatening as a week-old puppy, so I’m ignoring him. You have at least one fan in the audience.”

“You let him in?”

Emilia shrugs. “He paid admission; it wasn’t as though I could stop him.” She catches Jackie’s glare. “And he’s going to make me the peanut butter cookies I like. For not telling you. Oops.”

Gatsby snorts as he tries to hop into a canter. Jackie keeps the reins short and her elbows loose to thwart him until she’s ready. “Don’t let him onto the backside afterwards.”

“Why? Are you going to punch him?”

“Just don’t let him onto the backside.” Ghostchant thunders by, and Jackie cuts Emilia a sideways glance. “And here’s a tip: next time you pony for a graded stakes, don’t chitchat with the jockey about the guy they’re fucking.”

“So he’s just the guy you’re fucking, then?”

“Yeah,” Jackie says. “Yeah.” She slackens her grip on the reins and Gatsby hesitates, confused, then takes the bait and stretches out and away into a loping canter, leaving Toby Blue behind them as they progress up the length of the turf chute, backs facing the grandstand.

***

Erica finishes off the last bite of her corn dog and kicks her boots up into Boyd’s lap while he picks through a caesar salad. On the wall-mounted television, Shalt loads into the #7 slot of the gate.

“Ghostchant,” she says.

Boyd looks up. “Hand And A Half.”

“Loser cooks tonight.”

“The one who’s closers picks the takeout.”

“Done.” She leans in and kisses him, sealing it.

***

Ghostchant is without a doubt one of the finest animals Jorge has had the luck to ride. He’s not a Triple Crown champion, but he ran in all three and took home the last, most difficult jewel with
Jorge in the saddle. A fine achievement.

“¡Amiga! Ready to lose today?”

Jackie, the only female-identifying Latina in the lineup, stands straight up in Scotch Fitzgerald’s stirrups as she circles him in front of the gate. “I’m ready to do my fucking job, putador.”

With a snorting and stamping of hooves, Clark Mack prances between them aboard Red N Raw, sending the filly straight into the #5 slot. On Jorge’s other side, Powerful Mars whickers, wrings her tail, and walks into the gate, Ben tucked carefully over her shoulders.

“Check yourself, girl,” Dina calls from Jack’s On Trial’s saddle. “When’s the last time you looked at the odds?”

“Recently enough to know I’m gonna make a bucket of cash when I win.”

Dina laughs. “Whatever you say, Mz. Americana.”

Jackie flips her the bird and urges Scotch Fitzgerald into the gate. The Hale gelding isn’t even a contender, according to the bookkeepers. His late closing strategy won’t stand a chance against the long-term speed of Ghostchant, Powerful Mars, and Hand And A Half, and with Red N Raw’s trademark early burst, the frontrunners may open up so much ground behind them that he won’t even take home show money. At six years old, he’s the oldest horse in the field after seven-year-old Scudder, who will retire at the end of the year and still has a far superior win record.

“I will pray for you,” he tells Jackie through the bars of the gate. Clark Mack raises an eyebrow at him while Jackie looks straight ahead, then blinks and shakes her head, and then the gates open.

***

Red N Raw is first out of the gate, Clark’s face buried in her mane while she plunges clear of the pack. He hears the field string out behind him down the length of the turf chute, Hand And A Half settling in close on their tail, using them as a windbreak. Of the two Argent horses, Hand And A Half is the one with the best chance of winning over this distance on turf, so it’s Clark’s job to ensure none of the horses get their noses in front of hers. He’s to block and stall Ghostchant at every turn, even if it means burning out Red N Raw and taking her out of place money. Victoria has called Scotch Fitzgerald, Jack’s On Trial, and Shalt as lost causes, so Red N Raw should still show, and Clark will still get a decent cut of the $300,000 purse at the end of the day: 10% of Red N Raw’s prize, plus 5% of Hand And A Half’s. From a forced loss he will get a better deal than from most victories, especially if Hand And A Half wins.

He’s calculating the numbers (one thousand, five thousand, ten thousand dollars) when a second set of pounding hooves begins to close on his outside. Jack’s On Trial is inching by.

Clark steps in, nudging Red N Raw out, and she knocks into Jack’s On Trial harder than he anticipates – because they’re in the turn; shit; they’re in the clubhouse turn so she’s swinging out further to maintain her pace – and both horses get knocked off their stride. He sees Dina Fasano’s face twisted with panic and rage, and then he catapults onto Red N Raw’s neck when she stumbles.

She grunts and drops her head against the impact of his weight, and he scrabbles at her mane and the curve of her neck as she gathers herself for another stride, knocking his feet out of the stirrups. She lunges again, driving the air from his lungs, and he scrabbles for the loose, flapping reins. They slip through his fingers at first, but he grabs hold and yanks, gripping his legs around the filly’s barrel to stay aboard, hauling at her mouth until he feels her start to slow, then pulling
harder.

When she bumps down to a trot, it jostles him free, and he slides off her back to smack onto the turf. Red N Raw screams as he drags her down, neck twisting and bulging against the pull of the reins, trying to take off again, and then the leather bullwhip-cracks and breaks until there is no connection between him and the big red filly scrambling to keep her feet.

Looking around, the only other horse he can see is Scotch Fitzgerald, powering out of the turn into the backstretch, hanging tight to last place. In another second there is only the black and green of Vaca’s silks to be seen above the white line of the rail.

Clark pushes himself onto his hands and knees and feels the bruising already starting to swell across the shoulder he landed on. He looks at Red N Raw, lathered and panicked and frozen in confusion, blurry through the tears knocked from his eyes by the impact. “Stupid bitch,” he calls her.

***

Victoria is furious, but lacks the time to express it. Hand And A Half is fine, holding the lead, and Jack’s On Trial is two lengths back even if he isn’t out of the running entirely. Powerful Mars is pressing up on the rail now, Ghostchant lurking on the outside, the rest of the pack beginning to draw up on them through the backstretch. Hand And A Half is the windbreak now, a position she has never been fond of, but if she loses the lead at this point she may never win it back again. So Victoria inches her out a hair, enough to partially interfere with Ghostchant’s progress, and makes the gamble that Powerful Mars won’t have sufficient room to pour on speed through the turn.

She hears the announcer call that Scudder and Shalt are dueling for fourth, which means Jack’s On Trial has fallen behind them, out of the game. That leaves Scotch Fitzgerald unseen.

Victoria has had one section of her plan fall apart already, and she refuses to watch the rest disintegrate because she underestimated a known closer’s speed. She clucks to Hand And A Half, and the powerful chestnut mare responds by tacking another six inches onto her forty-foot strides, reaching at the open turf in front of her. This isn’t Schizophrenia or Shifting Wind behind them – it’s a horse twice the age of most of the field, a has-been a year older than her mare. But he has Vaca in his saddle, and that gives him teeth.

***

Hand And A Half hangs onto her lead through the final turn until they swing into the stretch – Mack and Red N Raw have been safely relocated to the dirt track and are being tended to by EMTs and veterinarians. As the field levels into the stretch, Jorge reaches behind him to strike Ghostchant’s flank with his crop, and the white-not-white colt opens up a fresh tank of gas that blows him by Powerful Mars and Hand And A Half as both mares kick their engines up a gear.

He gathers a three-length lead within half a furlong, and then Isaac shrills “yeah, Jackie” directly into Stiles’ right ear to make him realize that Gatsby is burning up the turf, wiry limbs a windmill of muscle, passing a drained Jack’s On Trial and still-dueling Scudder and Shalt to place himself at Powerful Mars’ tail, Hand And A Half’s throatlatch, all of them pushing back to close the ground between them and Pim Byrns’ star-shitting colt.

Hand And A Half starts to take back her lead over Gatsby, crawling up with hooves and limbs flying, and Jackie lets out the slack in her reins with half a furlong left and Gatsby stretches out his nose with his ears pricked forward and Jorge looks back under his arm and hits Ghostchant again and he digs in and goes and Gatsby goes and Hand And A Half goes and Powerful Mars falls apart.
It’s a three-horse race with Hand And A Half’s nose at the tip of Ghostchant’s tail while Lydia bellows “Go” across two tracks and Gatsby’s head is suddenly close enough to bite Jorge’s outside leg; Hand And A Half ducks in and stretches out like an oil painting of a foxhunt; air rasps with the brashness of three-day-old stubble against the walls of Stiles’ throat, and Gatsby shoves his head at Ghostchant’s lead, driving out, and they’re past the finish line, Gatsby and Hand And A Half both blowing by Ghostchant in the next stride, jockeys rising, pulling them off their pace, circling.

Stiles leans over the rail and tries to breathe. He counts seconds.

Sixty-five million years later, two photos flicker onto the screens: Hand And A Half ahead of Ghostchant; Gatsby ahead of her by an inch of flared nostril. They have him: a five-year-old mare and six-year-old gelding ahead of the colt who won the Belmont.

Stiles grabs Isaac and hugs him on reflex; Isaac hugs him back hard enough to make Stiles’ ribcage creak, and those are actual tears brimming in Isaac’s eyes, breaking free to spill down his cheek. He’s whooping at the top of his lungs, though, voice crackling and scraped raw, and when he lets go Stiles is half-deaf and senseless enough to collapse on his back next to Lydia’s wheelchair.

She is sitting quietly, smiling.

“Can I kiss you?” Stiles croaks.

She rolls her eyes and pulls him up, pecks him on the lips for a sweet, soft moment, then sets her palm against his forehead and shoves him down again. By that point Isaac has Laura by the waist and is whirling her around in circles, and endless roll of “Mick beat Ghostchant; we beat Ghostchant” bubbling forth in his riot of happiness.

Stiles looks to Derek, who is standing off to the side, quiet. “Help me up?”

Derek laughs like the emotion has been startled from his lungs; Stiles gets up on his own and hugs him. Derek’s face presses into his shoulder, his hands smoothing off the dirt coating Stiles’ back, and he breathes in and relaxes.

“Happy victory,” Stiles says.

Derek smiles against his shoulder. “You too.”

***

Jackie gets off of Gatsby’s back long enough to say “Fuck you; fuck you all very much; I want a goddamned motherfucking movie contract for that ride, you asswipes,” then climbs back aboard and dangles her feet free of the stirrups with a big, cheesy smile for the camera, a hand on the shoulder of each Hale where they bookend Gatsby’s head, and Gatsby stands prim and pretty and dignified, dripping sweat and foam off of his flanks and belly. He’s sleek, shining, the dark chestnut of his coat an ugly, dust-sprayed brown under the gleam; the big, irregular star on his forehead is all but hidden until Derek wipes it clean.

“You should have left it,” Jackie grits between her teeth as they plaster on fresh smiles for the camera. In the background, behind the wall of flashes, she can see Red N Raw circling on the end of her lead line, keeping her legs loose, Morell and the Argents watching closely for signs of injury. When she looks to the grandstand, she sees a tiny brown hand waving from the first few rows: a little black girl seated on a fair-haired white woman’s shoulders.

***
“Sorry,” Isaac says.

Allison balls up her napkin to throw at him. “Don’t,” she orders. “That was a good race. That was a great race. I don’t mind losing like that.”

He reaches across the table to cup her cheek, and she turns into the gesture, smiling, breathing him in.

On the corner of Isaac’s placemat, his phone buzzes with a message from Scott: *DNA tests came back.*

***

The snap-snap-snap of hard-heeled boots on cement tugs Chris’ attention from the red-faced Gerard and righteously dignified Victoria in front of him. Laura Hale doesn’t even knock before barging into the office, and she isn’t alone: she holds the door for Jacqueline Vaca, freshly showered and in street clothes, and a wheelchair-bound Lydia Martin.


Victoria plucks a blank piece of Argent Stables letterhead from the stack on Gerard’s desk and bends over it, writing quickly.

“We have an order of business to right, first.”

Gerard leans over to see what Victoria is doing. She tips the paper towards him and hands him a pen so he can sign the bottom, then takes it back to resume writing while he returns his attention to Hale and company. His expression remains disgusted.

Hale hefts a sheaf of papers. “I have a fistful of proof that the fillies you sent to me aren’t actually twins – and may, in fact, not even be two-year-olds. They certainly don’t have the genetics that they’re supposed to, which puts you in violation of our contract and a federal regulation or ten, in addition to cast a suspicious light on all the other claims you’ve made of my chosen mares being barren upon breeding.” She pushes past Chris and slaps the papers onto the desk hard enough to make Victoria’s sheet flutter under her pen. “You’re going to give me my stallion back, or I’m going to drag your geriatric ass to court and sue you out of your entire barn.”

“With the lawyers you can afford, we’ll eat you alive,” Gerard says pleasantly.

“Chris,” Victoria snaps. She slides her work across the desk and hands him her pen.

He skims the words. *We, the owners of Argent Stables, would like to address a complication in our relationship with Laura Hale.* The ink of this first sentence is smeared slightly, the rest cleaner. *This complication shall be rectified through the sale of Bury The Corpses (TB stallion, 15.1, black, papered) to Laura Hale for the price of $1.00.* Victoria’s signature is at the bottom of the page next to Gerard’s.

“You should have let me finish writing before you read,” he can hear her saying.

Chris signs his name after Victoria’s and hands Hale the page. “We’ll ship him to you in a few days.”

She looks at it and blinks. Martin wheels up next to her to read, then turns her gaze on Victoria. “I underestimated you.”
Victoria’s smile is Chris’ favorite: the one that shines like the blade of a knife. “I do enjoy a good fight,” she says. “Well run today, all of you.”

Vaca bares her teeth but says nothing.

“This is not legal,” Gerard protests.

“If you want to lawyer up, fine,” Hale snaps. “Good luck fighting your own signature.” She pulls a single dollar bill from her wallet to hand to Chris, then shakes his hand and leans over the desk to shake Victoria’s. “It’s been hellish dealing with you, Argents. Have a good one.”

When they walk out, Vaca lets the door slam shut behind her heel.

In his chair, Gerard twists his glare between Chris and Victoria, face even more contorted with fury than before. “That was-“

“Just.”

“You just gave away one of our prize stallions.”

“Considering the number of his foals we kept from them, I don’t have a problem with that,” Victoria snips.

Gerard stares at her, aghast.

“I baked cookies last night,” she adds. “Would either of you like one?”

***

“We don’t have a stud farm,” Derek says.

“We have until the spring to find one. That’s plenty of time.”

“Who will run it?”

“I’m sure there’s a stud farm somewhere in California with an empty stall,” Lydia says. “You don’t need to sit on top of everything.”

“But-”

“Shut it, Hale; I outrank you in your own barn. Your sister and I have this under control.”

Derek glares at her. Sitting at her desk, Laura sighs. “It’ll be fine Derek. We have room for him here until we find a better place. It won’t be ideal, but he’s coming home.”

***

Before Bury The Corpses ever sets foot on the property of the Del Mar racetrack, Laura takes a day off, leaves the barn in Lydia’s hands, and flies to San Francisco, then rents a car and drives two hours out of the city to a little house with a large, well-fenced field divided into half-acre portions, a sand-filled ring, a corral, and a small stable with a breeding shed tacked onto the back. She is met in the driveway by a thick-muscled, heavyset white woman with dirty-blond hair tangled in a braid behind her head. Her name is Johnna.

The stable originally had two stalls, but six more have been added on in the last few years; there is an well-built, angry, off-track gray Quarter Horse stallion, a pair of chestnut Quarter Horse mares, a
fat piebald gelding about thirteen hands in height, and a third mixed-breed bay mare of fifteen hands sharing a stall with her black daughter.

“They’re only in because of those rainclouds looming,” Johnna tells her. “Otherwise it’s all-day turnout, hay three times a day and grain twice unless you have a specific request otherwise, and we’ll pick his feet daily and brush the dirt off him a couple times a week.” She gives Laura a look out of the side of her eyes. “Not that I’m complaining, but shouldn’t you be shipping this guy to some big fancy stud barn?”

“Big fancy stud barns are for people with big fancy paychecks,” Laura says. “And I know someone who used to live here.”

“Over in the old house?”

“As a child, yes. They kept a pony in here.”

The woman nods. “They the ones where the momma died and they had to sell? Her ashes are still in one of the front stalls – the one we keep the grain in. I thought it was creepy strange at first, but I think she watches over the place.” She meets Laura’s disbelieving look and beckons. “C’mon over here.” She pulls open the door to the feed room and gestures to a back corner, where a small, solemn gray urn spiderwebbed with cracks is nestled into the dirt. “When trees come down on everybody else’s roofs and fences, they miss ours by inches, and we’ve never had a single flame on the property that we didn’t want. The pipes have never frozen, the hay and grain don’t rot, and we get one mouse a year, maybe two.”

“Huh,” Laura says.

“The jar’s too broken to move far, which is why they didn’t take it, probably, but if her son ever wants it back I’d happily wrap it up and send it to him. There ain’t a price on a momma’s love.” She smiles a little. “Mine died a couple years back – you’ll have to excuse me.”

“Mine did too,” Laura says. “But I’ve got friends whose mothers don’t love them at all.” She blinks. “I need to go. The horse will be here in a few days.” She starts to say goodbye, then stops. “What’s the filly’s name?”

Laura bows her head, acknowledging this, and leaves before she says something unwanted and inappropriate.

***

The stallion who walks off the trailer is not what Isaac expects. He had heard the words “broken” and “burned”, but they didn’t quite add up to the image of a stiff-jointed, undersized stallion with scar tissue blooming across his shoulders and ribs, shiny and gray against the dull brown of his coat. His mane is haphazard and ragged, his eyes perpetually ringed with white to match the stripe dribbled crookedly down the length of his face.

“God,” Stiles breathes.

Allison hands Laura the lead with a small smile before stepping off to the side to slide an arm around Isaac’s waist. He kisses her temple, then rests his cheek atop her hair while Laura brushes her palm over Bury The Corpses’ neck, mouth twisted a little over the irony of the name.

The stallion sniffs Laura’s palm, breathing in the smell of her sweat and calluses, then pricks his
oversized ears and looks around at the people watching him. When Lydia wheels herself up he
snuffles at her chair curiously and lets her run her fingertips over the prickly fuzz of his whiskers.
He lifts one naked forefoot, then sets it gently down again.

“He feels old,” Lydia says. “He’s got that air about him. Quiet. Calm.” She looks to Laura. “You
know.”

“He’s twelve. Not old by most standards.”

Lydia hmms to herself and wheels herself a few feet away to park herself next to Dina, in front of
Plague’s stall. Derek sets aside the coffee that Stiles brought him and steps up. He, too, runs his
hand down the stallion’s neck, then onto the spill of burned and healed-over flesh on his shoulder.
Isaac glances at Stiles to see him inching closer in spite of himself, hands twisting at his sides.
Behind him, Boyd and Erica are leaning against Booze’s stall door, trying to encourage him into
the light. Jorge is out of his direct line of sight, feeding Ernest an endless string of carrots at the
other end of the barn. And last Isaac saw him, Eddie was getting starry-eyed over the grandiose
sight of Slaw tearing into her lunchtime hay.

“He never raced, did he?” The question comes from Wade, Jackie’s Australian, rubbing a hand
carefully along Schizo’s neck while Jackie sprawls against the door with a lazy hand raised to
scratch under the mare’s thick red mane.

“Never,” Jackie says.

Laura shakes her head and repeats “Never.” She presses a kiss to the fattest part of Bury the
Corpses’ stripe, directly between his eyes, and the stallion sighs, letting his eyelids flutter closed.
His head droops, and he takes half a step forward, flattening the line of his forehead against
Laura’s stomach and resting it there. Her hand curves over his poll.

The nasally call of a tired voice through a loudspeaker crackles across the grounds: “Riders up.”

***

FIN.

Chapter End Notes

Eleven months, two hundred and seventy-three pages in Word, and a hundred and
fifty-eight thousand words later; ladies and gents and not-applicables, hes and shes and
zes and xirs and everyone in between: you came, you saw, you read, you waited, you
were probably horribly disappointed, you tolerated my abundance of OCs and phobia
of writing anything that could actually qualify as a sex scene, and many of you left
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chapter and never left, and to CallMeBombshell and ChaosDragon, who arrived soon
after and have hung on all throughout. Also KeriArentikai, who tolerated my
dissatisfaction with Sterek with much more grace and dignity than I could ever hope to
possess. I would like to apologize to everyone who left comments that I never replied
to, especially in recent weeks, when I told myself I wasn’t allowed to reply until I
finished this final chapter. And I would like everyone to share a stunned, amazed
moment of silence with me, in recognition of the handful of people who came forward
at various points to tell me of reading 80,000 or 100,000 or 140,000 words straight through. I'm an atheist, but holy jesus shit, you people deserve medals.

And while we're talking medals: thesearemydetectivesocks is the tumblr handle of Pip, my beta, and you should all go give her love because she read every word of this story (and then some) before it hit AO3 and I made her cry more times than I have fingers and toes to count on.

As for me, and Mud itself, we aren't done. Not at all. I think I'm obligated to give y'all the stories about Isaac finally going down on Allison and about Derek in therapy and post-therapy and everything ever involving Boyd and Erica being alive and gorgeous and kicking ass. I'll get around to writing all of those eventually, after I sit down and breathe for five seconds.

And if my OCs haven't made you want to claw your face off, come find me at thewinstonisin.tumblr.com. They (especially Jackie) have a tendency to turn up in snippets of things, and you'll be able to follow the progress of me turning this into an original novel. (If EL James and Cassandra Claire can do it with their piles of shit and make a gazillion bucks, why can't I?)

And for those of you who were hurt deep down inside by The Yogimeister's death, follow this link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aZu5KynG2ZE

(If you come find me on tumblr and dig around long enough or drop me an ask, you can learn the whole story about a couple years of bizarre love, a couple months of panic attacks and rancid fear, some very, very good people, and a fool of a girl who managed to buy the most important horse in her world for a dollar.)

Stay safe out there, everybody - you stuck around this long. The clock's still ticking.

**EDIT 3/22/2015**

JESUS CHRIST there are a ton of comments on this, most of which I haven't gotten around to responding to because college and work and pretending I'm capable of maintaining a social life and some of you haven't received responses in a year and a half. Holy shit. You're all amazing. I read every one of your comments, I promise, and they make the shitty days when I wonder if anyone will actually buy the novel version of this (when I finish writing it, goddamn, I'm barely a third of the way through 18 months later) significantly brighter.

For those who care: Yogi is alive and well and finally starting to mellow as he creeps closer to 20. (Shhh, don't tell him I said that.)

You're all fucking fantastic people. Ride tall.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!