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Grand Prix: A Trainer's Guide to Show Ring Success

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Grand Prix: A Trainer's Guide to Show Ring Success

by

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Abstract

This is a memoir of my experiences as a horse lover and professional horse trainer, and the startling parallels I discovered in the Los Angeles equestrian and entertainment industries. Both worlds revolve around commodifying something that is rooted in beauty but somehow gets bruised in the process of spinning art into business. I found that my taste for romance and adventure spurred me to new heights and simultaneously crashed against reality. In pursuit of the big prizes, I was willing to slowly sell off the things I cared about most to get what I wanted, until I woke up to what I really needed. This is a trainer's guide to the Grand Prix, including lessons on how to ride, mistakes to avoid, and a reminder that the innocence and generosity at the heart of a horse is the best prize of all.

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Chapter 1: Green

In the horse world, inexperienced horses and riders are referred to as green. Green horses and green riders do not mix well, since novice riders generally lack the skills and confidence to handle a horse who has not previously been taught to yield to training cues. A rider must learn to keep their weight deep in their heels and their hands soft and still, he or she must develop an elastic and supple connection with their partner but also must use their stirrups and spine to leverage their body against the horse when necessary. Riders must learn to control their emotions and to be consistent in their actions so that the horse can ascertain and trust their authority. A skilled rider must exercise control not only over the horse, but also over the self. Horses are mirrors; they reflect their rider's inner truths. "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man," is an old saying. But horses especially appeal to girls and women, maybe because they so gracefully embody their dichotomies: strong and yet gentle, inspiring fear and yet fearful, powerful but fragile. Horses and girls seem to recognize an innate compatibility. We know what it is to be both vulnerable and brave.

The doll posed proudly in the middle of the cake, her tan plastic arms bent like they were holding reins, but her cascading hair and her hot pink strapless bustier indicated she wasn't a girl with horses on the brain. She was wearing a pair of oversized sunglasses and the icing was decorated to look like her skirt, with "Good Luck, Lauren" spelled out around the edge. I clapped and laughed, "Oh my God, where did you find a red-headed Barbie!"

Caroline smiled, "She's Movie Star Make-A-Wish Barbie."

"Good, I'm going to need a Barbie Fairy Godmother." I hugged my sister and her eyes reddened and filled with tears. Mine immediately followed. "Stop it. Just stop it, I don't even leave until tomorrow."

Caroline laughed and swabbed at her face with a napkin. I looked around the table. My Mom was trying to catch the waiter's attention to get a refill on her half sweet/half unsweetened tea and Dad was smiling and wiping his glasses. My grandmother was crying.

"Oh, Monue, don't be sad. I'll come home and visit." (My sister had started calling my Grandmother Monue when she was little and it had stuck so completely that now the whole family called her that.) I had never seen my grandmother cry. I hugged her, and asked if she was okay but she just shook her head and patted my shoulder. It was starting to become real that I was saying the first permanent goodbye in my life. Not goodbye, I'll see you again in a few weeks, but goodbye, I won't be living here anymore and next time I see you I will only be visiting.

When I bolted from home on the weekend of July 4th I thought I was leaving for good. Independence Day seemed like the perfect choice for my blastoff from the expectations and limitations of the small town slowpoke south. It wasn't that I didn't love my family it was just that I thought my education was finally over and my real life was about to begin. I had my credit card and some spare change scraped together and I was ready to hit the road.

The morning after my goodbye dinner I finished packing the last few things into my car and my Dad came out of the house and examined the Oldsmobile Achieva that I had bought with the money I made from selling my horse.

I still couldn't believe how fast that had happened. I had decided to sell him since I knew I wouldn't be able to ride him anymore. He was too young and too nice a horse to retire, unlike my mare who would have been impossible to sell. I don't know how Mr. Chastain heard about him but he called the house and asked us to bring the horse over to his stable. I had never met the Chastains and I was excited to go see their place—even though it wasn't far from home I had never been, and I knew it was probably fancier than any farm I had ever seen. I walked out to the pasture to catch the tall Thoroughbred that had been donated to me off the racetrack through the 4H horse club. It wasn't unusual for racehorse owners to get rid of horses that weren't winners, they didn't get any money but they could unload the horse fast and get a tax deduction for the horse's "value." Will trotted over to the fence when he saw me coming. He was stunning, a rare true black. But what really made him special was his personality. My mare wasn't mean, she was just sort of a hellbitch—she didn't ever do anything the easy way. But Will was the opposite—even that first time when Dad took me out to see him and I rode in a field carpeted with

purple Sweet William flowers, he bucked a few times but I could feel that he was kicking up his heels out of joy and not trying to throw me. The owner said that he couldn't race because he had developed a sinus infection over the summer when the person who was supposed to be looking after the horses killed himself and wasn't discovered until weeks later. I ignored the grisly backstory and begged to have him. Mom wasn't on board, she said we didn't need another horse, but Dad helped talk her into it.

So a couple of years later, I loaded Will up to go to the Chastain's farm and Mom drove us in Dad's truck with the horse trailer. I thought Mr. Chastain would look the horse over and maybe arrange a time for his client to try him. But then he wrote out a personal check for twenty thousand dollars and just like that my horse wasn't mine anymore. I had more money than I had ever imagined. I felt terrible, and I was sure that my horse was confused, too. "That's the horse business, kid," Mr. Chastain said, clapping me on the shoulder.

Mom and I had cried all the way home as the empty trailer rattled behind us.

But now Dad looked at all of the things I had piled into my car and then he looked at me over the tops of his transition lens glasses.

"Lauren, don't you think if you're going to drive across the country it might help to be able to see out of your rearview mirror?"

"I know, but I don't want to leave any of this stuff." I laughed but then I almost slipped right over the edge into crying. Its amazing really, how little you can fit in a car.

"Why are you bringing all of these books?"

“Well, they’re my favorites, and anyway they can be stacked up and make a table.”

Dad leaned in and started reorganizing. Within minutes the entire pile topped off well below the rear windshield. I ran back into the house and grabbed a couple of pillows and a few more books and Dad slipped me a stack of folded green cash and hugged me tight. “You be careful out there,” he said, sounding sandpapery.

“I will,” I said, squeezing him back and swallowing hard.

Mom came out of the house, the screen door spanking shut behind her. “Is it time?” she asked. “Almost,” I said. “I have to say goodbye to Cindy.”

She looked hard at me, hesitated and then said, “I can’t believe you’re really doing it. Lauren, you know, if things don’t work out you can always come back home.”

“I know, Mom.” I twisted away from her and headed for the paddock. I knew Mom was trying to be supportive but I couldn’t help but think that she always expected me to fail. Whatever. My horse had taught me I could do anything.

Cindy looked at me with her big wet eyes and chewed her hay, deliberating for a minute before ambling over to the gate. I ducked between the boards and climbed into the paddock and hugged her, resting my face against the smooth crook of her shoulder. She curled around me and pressed me tight for a second and then snorted softly like a trumpet player clearing the valves. I swiped at a tear with the back of my hand.

“I love you, Cinderella. Thank you for everything.”

She stomped a foot that narrowly missed my toes and switched her tail and then turned back toward her hay. Horses don’t do momentous goodbyes.

I couldn't even say goodbye to my dog. Mom and Dad had agreed to keep her for me until I could get settled and take her back. Mom had been furious when I got her, telling me I was irresponsible, and I guess now her point was proven. "I love you, Jackson," was all I could manage before starting to cry. She pressed against me, her black spots swimming in my watery eyes.

The dust blew up behind me as I drove out of our red dirt road, powdering everything in the rearview with sepia tones, while the windshield framed the Technicolor future. I drove past the riding arena where I had ridden countless circles. The woods we trail rode through. The pond we used to swim in. The spot where I sat on my very first horse.

My earliest memory was the first time I felt the sleek warmth of a horse's back, when I was lifted onto the pinto pony my mother had just bought for two hundred and fifty dollars to fulfill her own childhood fantasy. I begged to hold Patches as she snorted and shook her black and white mane at the new universe she had been transported to by a rickety stock trailer. She turned circles around my father, who held the lead rope and centered her orbit as effortlessly as the sun keeps the planets in check.

We were the type of new owners who cause experienced horse people to despair. We didn't know a thing about horses—we didn't even have a saddle. But we had books. *The Book of the Horse* and *The Horse Owners Veterinary Guide* answered every question we could think of. My father cleared trees and fenced in a paddock, and our new barn was an old corrugated tin building Dad salvaged after it was torn down to make way for a freeway interchange in Columbia.

So after lifting my arms up and whining louder and louder, I was finally picked up and deposited on top of the pony. Suddenly I went from being too little to even see over the pony to being able to see the tops of my parents' heads. I could see the whole world. The black pond sparkled and the frogs and crickets hit a new high note. And the next instant, when Patches put her head down to graze, I fell off for the first time. I landed in the scratchy grass that the pony was busy ripping out of the sand, already begging to be put back up.

After that, if I wasn't bouncing on Patches, I was trotting on my own two hooves or galloping a broomstick my mom had attached to a stuffed sock she had sewn ears on to look like a horse's head. I read every horse story the library had, and pored through the glossy photos in horse magazines, picking breeds and colors of horse to pretend to become with my sister. My model horses needed constant veterinary care from forcing their fragile legs to canter until they broke. Dad carefully superglued them back together, but just like real horses, catastrophic injuries rarely healed soundly.

Mom and Dad had a storybook marriage. I was one of the only people I knew whose parents still weren't divorced, and I grew up on the story of how my parents met on a train: my Dad borrowed his friend's blazer so he would look nice before he went and talked to her but they didn't exchange numbers even though they thought about each other afterwards. Then they met on the train again a few weeks later and that clinched it and then they got married. But Mom's choice of horse showed that she was still susceptible to making the mistake that women have made since the beginning of time: she fell for the least appropriate but best looking horse around, in this case the Arabian. Arabs are like the Marilyn Monroes of the horse world: gorgeous to look at but hot-

blooded, high maintenance and a little crazy. But like most little kids don't really know the difference between playing with cornhusk dolls or Madame Alexander's porcelain figurines, we were just happy to have a horse of any color. Mom signed my little sister Leigh and me up for the local 4H club where we learned the parts of the horse, performed reluctant community service and went on hot, dusty weekend camping trips where we rode English, Western, bareback and barrel raced until our poor horses, even with the legendary stamina of the Arabian, were probably just glad to lie down at night.

I learned a lot more than just the parts of the horse. I learned how to take a fall, get back on and then take another. The horses taught me what they liked and also what they would not tolerate. I learned how to assume a bravado that I hoped would cover my ignorance. The boys slouched and swore, slapping their heavy saddles onto their horses backs and jerking the girth tight, while the older girls with their narrowed sparkling green and blue lined eyes seemed so jaded and bored with it all.

Once when I was about ten years old I rode Mom's horse in a pole bending class. I had outgrown Patches and was eager to prove that I was ready to move up in the horse world. I smoothed his carrot colored mane and whispered to him that he could win. One of the older boys named Jerry overheard me and laughed. "You ain't going to win on that little A-rab."

"He's faster than that overweight pig you're sitting on." I fired back.

"You stuck up little—Jerry's horse blew his nose and danced a few steps. The words were lost on me anyway, I didn't know what they meant.

I rolled my eyes, "You're such a slut." I responded, experimenting with a term I wasn't sure of.

“You don’t even know what a slut is. A guy can’t be a slut.” Jerry said.

I made a mental note to reconsider this later as I nudged my horse into the gate to start the pattern. The game classes were always dominated by the boys with their muscular quarter horses, but I wasn’t going to miss a chance to win, even if I was a girl on an Arab, riding in an English saddle. In pole bending you gallop as fast as you can from the entrance of the arena to the end of a line of poles set up in a single file row, like cones for a driver’s test, and then weave in and out of the flag poles- PVC pipes set in paint cans full of cement- all the way down and back up without missing any or knocking any down before finally galloping back to the timer. The key to winning is not to let the horse’s speed carry you too far out in the turns, and to change leads between the poles so your horse stays as tight and balanced as possible. That day we were fast, and as we rounded the last pole to race back through the timers I knew I could beat all the boys who talked tough with their jingly rowel spurs, and as we raced back to the gate I took my crop and whipped the horse hard, just like they did. The startled horse planted his feet and bucked like a catapult and in the blink of an eye I was face down in the dirt.

I graduated to a sweet grey mare named Zobbie for a while before I learned another important lesson about how the universe can shuffle the cards right out of the clear blue. One morning the horses were playing in the pasture, enjoying the green grass and the breeze that twirled their tails. My sister and I felt it too, that surge of mania that spring can release. We took turns sparking the horses up, encouraging them to run and buck. They galloped across the pasture, spinning in the corners, arching their necks and blowing excitedly. They sprinted to another corner, rearing and sliding to a stop just before the fence line. They took off again, and then suddenly Zobbie slipped on the damp

grass. She fell, hard. My sister and I froze mid-step. I held my breath, waiting for her to get up and shake it off. The other horses snorted and tossed their heads.

Zobbie stayed down. We walked to her, time clicking frame by frame. I squatted down and stroked Zobbie's neck. "Get up, girl. You're okay."

The mare's eyes were innocent and surprised. She took a deep breath and heaved herself up but she held her left front leg off the ground.

"Leigh, go in and tell Mom to call the vet. I'll stay with her."

Leigh was starting to cry. "We'll get in trouble!"

"She just slipped, it wasn't our fault. She'll be okay," I promised.

But it was our fault. It was my fault. Leigh wouldn't have been chasing the horses if it weren't for me, and they would have been grazing by now if we hadn't been razzing them on.

The vet came and x-rayed Zobbie's leg. She had fractured multiple bones in her knee. He explained to us what we already knew, that horses with broken legs are very hard to heal, because horses are designed for movement. The hoof and leg structure pump blood back up to the body largely through concussion, the fragile digestive system falters without exercise, and the mental health of the horse suffers from the boredom and isolation of being kept still. But we had to try. We bandaged and iced and medicated Zobbie in her stall, praying that she would heal at least enough to bear weight on the leg. But soon she lost interest in eating, her hair grew dull and her eyes lost their luster. Finally we all acknowledged it was hopeless. We needed to let her go. The backhoe came and dug a hole in the pasture that looked big enough for a swimming pool. The vet came to euthanize Zobbie and I led her out of the stall for the first time in weeks. She pranced

on three legs to be out in the world again, and between tossing her head and staring in every direction, freezing wide eyed to take in the beauty of it all, she snatched mouthfuls of grass. I led her to the edge of the hole and then my Dad sent me inside.

He didn't want me to see her fall.

After that a half-broke six-year-old bay mare named Cinderella became mine. Cindy was unmanageable to the point of being unsafe, but as a kid all I saw when I looked at her was stars. No matter if my hands were bleeding in my leather gloves from resisting her relentless pulling, no matter how many times or how hard I fell off. She had a ferocious power and energy—if I dropped the reins she would shift up through the gaits until she found another gear entirely in full gallop, dropping like a cheetah closer to the ground, reaching for more and more speed until the wind slapped at my face and squeezed tears out of the slits of my eyes. I learned to only let her have her head if we were going uphill and away from home. My little sister and I started taking lessons from a new trainer just down the road at a stable called Windfall Farm.

By high school I was making money riding and showing horses for other people at my trainer's farm. The little chrome horses prancing on all the trophy platforms with their marble bases were like miniature versions of those statues in parks that commemorate important people. At night I snuck out of my window, not to meet up with boys or go to parties like other girls, but to ride my horse in the moonlight. We cantered fearlessly through the silver iodide negative of the world, escaping the rigid clarity of daylight. Horses made sense in a way that people didn't. When Kenny Jones mashed his face against the window in the bus parked next to the one I rode home from school and

flickered his tongue on the glass as he stared at me, I was embarrassed. I didn't know what any of it meant.

Riding had taught me to be tough—I knew I was strong as baling twine, I could carry a fifty-pound bag of feed, stack a ton of hay, and handle a thousand pounds of muscle and heart. Horses may step on you, bite, kick, and throw you but they almost never hurt you on purpose. But riding horses was just something I loved doing, it wasn't something I wanted to do for a living. I had bigger plans.

I probably read too many books. Too many stories about heroes who always succeed, love which always finds a way, endings that are always happy—or if not happy then at least meaningful. When I went to college I was convinced that I would become a (famous, obviously) broadcast journalist but an internship with the local ABC affiliate quickly cured me of that. Too many stupid puns and too much ambulance chasing. I swapped my major to English but wasn't sure what to do after my original career plan imploded. I took an acting class because the idea both fascinated and terrified me. My friend Nate and I chose a scene from Sam Shepherd's *Fool For Love*. It was a violent, angry, chaotic scene and we practiced it loosely a few times but when we performed it in front of the class, something new happened. It escaped the page and took us with it. Nate held my wrists while I tried to hit him, screaming and spitting with total abandon, and when the scene was over there was a breathless silence in the auditorium. No one moved for a long moment. Then the spell broke and finally the class applauded.

That moment changed everything. All the sudden the dots connected and I knew I would go. I hadn't been planning to go anywhere, I had even recently gotten a puppy—a

dalmation I named Jackson Pollock. But in that instant my focus shifted and a plan emerged, a wild, stupid, impossible dream.

That flight into an alternate reality was mysterious and intoxicating, almost like another universe was hidden inside me, a verdant new frontier to explore. I found an agent, and persuaded him to represent me by working in his office several times a week, sending out headshots of other actors for various casting calls. He handled local and regional commercials and even occasionally some film work might spill over from a movie shooting in the area. I booked my first commercial in a local Weight Watchers spot. My agent said it was for holiday weight gains and people who wanted to lose five pounds, so I wore my heaviest cable knit sweater and forced my dry mouth into a smile for the Casting Director. He stared down at the resume stapled to the back of my brand new black and white headshot. I had listed a lot of “special skills” since I didn’t have any real acting experience to fill up the page.

He lifted his eyes from the paper and raised one eyebrow. “So. You ride horses.”

The smile was cracking my lips. “Yes?”

He smirked. “Do you have those tall boots?”

I saw where this was going. I took a breath, imagining myself as a sequined Mae West. She would have been great for Weight Watchers. “Yes,” I said. I tried on a wink, “I have spurs and a whip, too.”

And just like that, I got the job. After the commercial aired, occasionally someone would recognize me and inevitably they would say, “But you’re not at all fat!”

Sometimes I would tell them about how we stuffed a drop cloth underneath my puffy

sweater and sometimes I just said that Weight Watchers really worked. At least it wasn't a tampon commercial.

I booked another commercial for Burger King and became eligible to join the Screen Actors Guild, which only made me more convinced that Hollywood was calling. Naturally I planned my move from South Carolina to Southern California to be an actress, relishing the chance to reinvent myself and live the exciting life I pictured based on all my favorite stories. The fact that Los Angeles and I shared our initials proved that it was destiny.

I cried for a few miles after saying goodbye to my family but the radio was playing the soundtrack to my adventure and I was finally mashing the accelerator toward my future. I put the South behind me and picked up Interstate 10 to get the rest of the way across the country. I drove for days—Texas is huge. I stopped somewhere to buy some audiobooks, after listening to the same songs on the radio a thousand times too many. So with Louis Lamour to keep me company I chased the horizon quivering in front of me. Eventually I was speeding so spectacularly that when I passed a cop who had just pulled another driver, he turned and pointed at me but the angry expression on his face blurred as I stepped even harder on the gas to make sure he wouldn't catch up. I was Thelma AND Louise.

It took me four and a half days to get to California—I must have been driving through Los Angeles for hours but I didn't know it until the freeway dead-ended into the Pacific Coast Highway at the edge of Santa Monica. The 10 had high cement walls on

either side and I had fallen into a trance watching concrete unroll endlessly, a boring yellow brick road under the blindingly blue sky.

Chapter 2: Circles

As modern equestrian pursuits have become divorced from their origins in travel, hunting, and the military, training has become a more theoretical and artistic exercise devoted to performance in the arena and not the field; the spatial limitations of the riding ring produce the circle rather than the line. It is the horse's submission to lateral flexion—their willingness to turn in a circle—that is the most fundamental element of the rider's control, and provides the basis for longitudinal cooperation. Riding circles is a test of balance and control for both horse and rider, with the objective that both horse and rider stay 'straight' on the track, neither leaning in nor falling out of the curve. In order to ride a perfect circle the rider must attend to the balance of the horse's body: the head and neck should bend but not over-bend, the shoulder has to respect the restriction of the outside rein, the ribcage must flex and the hindquarters must step under and push the horse forward through the turn. Each circle is a test as well as a constantly unfolding opportunity to improve connection.

I saw the For Rent sign in a sun-bleached stucco building in Venice Beach. The apartment looked like a beige shoebox and smelled like old people but it was cheap and less than a block off of the ocean. My tiny bedroom, even smaller kitchen and bathroom would have been perfect for one of the seven dwarves' children. My guess was that the building was a hotel during the early 1900's when Venice Beach was built into the "Coney Island of the West." People must have been really little back then.

The faded remnants of an eccentric American's recreation of the Italian city made a charming crazy quilt of canals and colonnades overflowing with spectacularly fit, beautiful people. Artists, musicians and actors all played outside in the perfect weather, bicycling the bike paths, jogging the boardwalk, or rollerblading in and out of the ubiquitous coffee shops, bars and restaurants. I loved the guy on roller skates who wore a turban, and the man who dressed up every single day as Detective Columbo and took pictures with tourists. The sound of the waves at night was like the peaceful breathing of the earth. The labyrinth of canals behind my building stunk at low tide but it was a magical place that felt like everything could change in an instant and anything was possible.

If I was going to go on auditions I needed a job with steady income and flexible hours. So, I did what almost every actor who moves to Hollywood does: I went looking for a job waiting tables. The perpetual acting joke is "Oh, you're an actor? What restaurant do you work in?" I applied for hundreds of positions and finally got one I wasn't proud of.

Yankee Doodle's was a cavernous sports bar where all the girls wore a uniform of short shorts and tank tops that reminded me of my high school PE outfit except way

skimpier. Most of the girls looked like Malibu Barbie—blonde and tan with unnaturally big boobs, and then there was me, with red hair and freckles. When I told my parents that I had found a job, I talked about managing the pool tables but didn't mention the clothes, or lack thereof. Yankee Doodles was like a glassed in airport hangar but it still somehow managed to feel claustrophobic. The stale air circulated with saccharine top-forty songs in constant competition with the televised sports commentary. The menu was fried chicken fingers and fries or salad with chopped up fried chicken fingers. The pool tables were big and perfectly flat and boring. I preferred dark little dive bars with a good jukebox and the kind of old, unbalanced tables where pool was more a game of chance than skill.

The Townhouse Bar smelled like kitty litter but it was in an old part of Venice that still retained some of the original arcaded art deco architecture. It was one of my favorite places: it had a terrible pool table and a great jukebox and a Russian bartender who probably moonlighted as action movie Bad Guy #3 or Mobster #4.

I was with a surfer named Matt who waited tables at the C&O Trattoria down the street from Yankee Doodles and had asked me to go for a drink after work. I had a drink first so I wouldn't feel too nervous and somehow the alcohol worked its magic and my hand ended up in his as we walked the beach next to the thundering ocean on the way to The Townhouse. We played some songs on the jukebox and a game of pool, and I blathered on about what the bar owner had told me about tunnels underneath the bar that led to the pier and had kept the place in business as a speakeasy all the way through Prohibition.

“You can just feel the residue from uninterrupted decades of people partying,” I said, staring down the pool stick. I was trying to line up the pocked cue ball with the eight ball and the corner pocket while I swayed to Chris Isaack moaning “Wicked Game.” The eight ball hit the edge of the pocket and rolled across the table. I handed Matt the cue.

He took it and leaned it against the table, and pulled me up against his chest. “Let’s go hang out in a hot tub.”

I wondered if he could feel my heart beating like a scared bunny. “Do you have one? My place doesn’t have one.” Why did I have to ask so many stupid questions? Yes. Hot.

“I know one we can use.”

“I’d have to get a bathing suit,” I said.

He ran a hand around my waist and leaned in and breathed into my neck, “You don’t need one,” he said, the tickle of the warm air and the touch of his lips making me shiver.

He led me down the street and gave me a leg up over a wooden privacy fence and we stripped down to our underwear. I felt desirable and dangerous sinking into the hot water. I felt alive.

A few days later I was getting ready to go to work, squeezing into my hideous Yankee Doodle uniform, and making empty conversation with Matt who was still asleep in my bed. I needed coffee. I hoped if I could get him up and out of my apartment and pedal my bike fast enough that I would have time to stop and pick up a smoothie and an espresso at the Cow’s End coffee shop. Matt wasn’t moving.

“So, what are you going to do today?” I nudged him.

He grunted and yawned, stretching his arms over his head. He had lovely muscular arms. I bent down to kiss him and grab a flip-flop off of the floor. He kissed me back. He had nice lips, too. Maybe this was love.

“I think I’m going to go look at apartments,” he mumbled noncommittally.

“Oh, huh. I didn’t know you were moving.”

“Yeah.”

I hadn’t been to his place but I knew his roommates because they worked at the same restaurant, one that I refused to apply for a job with because the staff was forced to frequently and enthusiastically sing happy birthday to customers. I had to draw the line somewhere. “Are you moving with your roommates or are you moving out on your own?” I asked, while I tried to find my other flip-flop.

He sat up, finally. He was facing away but I thought I heard him say, “Actually, I’m moving in with my girlfriend.”

“What-” I laughed. He didn’t mean me, did he? I put on my shoe. Still, maybe that would be fun. The rent would be a lot easier. Maybe we would have blonde surfer babies.

He still wasn’t looking at me. I stopped laughing.

Apparently he did not mean me.

I quit Yankee Doodles and graduated to wearing actual clothes: black pants and a white shirt, when I got hired at Frangi’s. But I got fired after my first day. I had been warned by the owner when he hired me, a man named Chet who stood a little too close

and stared a little too long, that there was a strict ‘no fraternization’ policy. Then he invited me to his house in the Marina to see if any of his ex-wife’s clothes would fit. Apparently he was cleaning out her closet. I knew better than to say yes, but since I wanted the job I also knew better than to say no, so I stuttered something incoherent about busy, sorry, maybe, thanks, later, etc.

I had actually already gone on a date (before I got the job) with my coworker that night. Ryan was yet another blonde, good-looking actor/bartender, but it had turned out he was really into Disney movies. Turned out that was a deal breaker. So when we finished work at around two o’clock in the morning, I unlocked my bike to go but Ryan insisted on driving me because he said Venice was dangerous that late at night. I told him that I rode my bike home every night because beach parking was impossible—too many tourists during the day and even worse once all the residents were home for the night, but he was adamant. So I threw my bike in the back of his truck and let him drive me the four blocks to my apartment and then he went home. In the morning we were both fired.

I felt terrible for Ryan, who had worked there for over a year, so I called the owner and explained that he had only driven me home. He told me that I could have my job back because I was new and didn’t know better but Ryan was still fired. I told him to go “fraternize” himself.

When I got a job cocktail waitressing at the legendary Santa Monica blues club Harvelle’s, I thought going to work would be like going out every night. Cocktail waitressing had to be better than serving whole meals to horrible people. After the first week I never again wanted to go anywhere that I might have to listen to another rendition

of Mustang Sally while being groped as I tried to push through a crowd of drunks. I was learning that the key to success was to seem flirty but to be slippery.

Making the rent in Los Angeles meant that I usually worked more than one job at a time. I got hired by a caterer and bought a cheap tuxedo from Aardvark's thrift store, serving drinks and hors d'oeuvres to people in the most precarious hillside houses in the most impossibly hidden canyons. I nannied briefly for a wealthy United States Senator's wife, just after he announced to the media that he was gay and publicly dropped a bomb on their marriage. The chauffeur drove me around with the children to their beach club and back to their Tudor Style home in Beverly Hills where the chef made after school snacks and served fancy bottled water. I worked at Crossroads School and marveled at the children of the rich and famous, adolescents who already looked more grown up and seemed more world-wise than me. But my job assisting the drama teacher disappeared after he was fired for sleeping with one of the twelve year olds. In her famous parent's bed.

I missed the simple honesty of horses.

My sister Caroline came out to visit me and we did all the tourist things you have to do: after we took in the boardwalk we checked out Hollywood and the disappointing walk of fame stars. *Pretty Woman* just doesn't prepare you for the smell of urine and the sight of real prostitutes on Hollywood Boulevard. The throngs of random strangers herding around the garish transvestite *Seven Year Itch* Marilyn Monroe and the mime dressed in a mouthless Spiderman costume. We watched a movie at the Chinese Theater and stepped right into the past in the ladies' bathroom with its rococo sitting room. It was

easy to imagine early movie stars powdering their noses and lining their lips with the same dragon red color of the theater seats.

We drove back to the beach through the manicured lawns and ubiquitous orange origami Bird of Paradise flowers of Beverly Hills. We were almost home when the blue lights flashed in my rearview. I glanced back, confident for once that they weren't for me. I was much more mindful of the speed limit with Caroline in the car than I normally would have been. I waited for the police car to pass but it didn't, and the siren shrilled once and then stopped. I looked at Caroline, "Why are they pulling me? I wasn't speeding!"

She looked as surprised as I was. I pulled the car over and turned off the engine, cranking down the window as the officer approached. Another police officer went to the other side of the car.

"Turn off your engine." The cop had those mirrored sunglasses, like the guys on CHIPS always wore. That was one of the earliest TV shows I could remember watching—Caroline had a big crush on John, but I liked Ponch better.

"Turn off your engine," he growled again. He didn't sound like he was kidding around.

"It's already off," I said, "What's the problem?"

"Turn off your engine!" the cop said, and this time he pulled his gun and pointed it at my head.

I didn't move. "It's already off. The engine is off." I said, looking straight ahead. I noticed the little winking colon on the clock, and the dust under the windshield and a dessicated bug stuck in a crack in the vent in the grey plastic dashboard. The gun felt

heavy somehow and it tickled my hair slightly. The sun was shining, it didn't seem possible that I was going to get shot in the head for no reason in broad daylight, and yet this was apparently actually happening. Finally, after what seemed like a long wait, the police officer on the other side of the car called out to her partner that the engine was in fact already off. The Lone Ranger holstered his gun and asked me for my license and registration. I gave it to him wordlessly. Caroline's face was pale and her mouth was open. The cops went back to their car while we waited. "What the hell?" I exhaled, giggling slightly.

In a few minutes he was back, two mirrored circles glaring at me as he handed back my license and registration. "You were changing lanes too often. And driving in the bicycle lane." He said. Then he walked back to his car and they drove away.

I wasn't aware that it was against the law to change lanes and the bike lane isn't big enough to drive in, but I wasn't about to argue with a guy who just held a gun to my head. He wasn't giving me a ticket, so I was just glad he was going away. "Crazy. I wonder if they thought the car was stolen?"

Caroline laughed nervously, "Who would steal this car?"

"I know, right? Two redheaded bandits?" Maybe the other person on earth who drives an Oldsmobile Achieva just robbed a bank or something... We don't need to tell Mom and Dad about this, okay?"

The next day, Caroline and I drove up the coast. The ocean churned against the cliffs as we took the Pacific Coast Highway up through the Pacific Palisades, Malibu and Oxnard where it met with the 101. We walked around the Old Mission at Santa Barbara,

one of the graceful Spanish churches dedicated to the Christianization of the local Chumash Indians scattered along the coastline, each one set a day's horseback ride from the next. Then it was back to the big glowsticks and the alien restaurant at LAX airport for Caroline to return home.

Somewhere in all the chaos of trying to pay rent and become a movie star, I got a phone call from my parents. My grandmother was sick; her uncharacteristic behavior at my going away dinner had been the first sign. There had been a few more hints, like the day she walked across the hill from her weekend cabin to my parent's house without her shoes. But then suddenly she completely lost the ability to speak. A brain scan revealed an inoperable brain tumor and there was no telling how long she had to live. Mom offered to buy me a ticket home if I would help to take care of Monue while she interviewed hospice nurses.

The pine trees looked dark and green from the sky but the Indian summer humidity was red hot and suffocating. Dad was waiting for me as I walked off the airplane, wearing his Indiana Jones hat and holding a book about Nietzsche. He gave me a big hug, the kind that squeezes all the air out of your lungs and really makes you feel loved.

"Where's Mom?" I asked, feeling a little hurt that she hadn't come to greet me.

"She's waiting outside." Dad said. We walked out through the sliding glass doors and into the air so humid and heavy it seemed to blur the edges of things. Across the lanes of airport traffic was a grey haired woman holding a Dalmatian.

“Jackson!” The dog started pulling and lunging at the leash, Mom had to wrestle her back from running into the traffic. I ran across the street and dropped to my knees, as the soft ermine blur whined and climbed all over me and licked the tears off my face. “I can’t believe you guys brought her to the airport!” My parents weren’t the type to let a dog ride in the car for no reason. Growing up, our dogs were outdoor pets, they slept in the dirt under the porch and the only time they went anywhere was when they were carted into town on their annual visit to the vet.

Dad smiled, “It was your Mom’s idea.” We piled into the car and turned up the air conditioning full blast while they filled me in on Monue’s health as we took the back roads home.

When we got there the house was exactly the same, only I had never really noticed how the unpainted wood blended with the environment and the sunken patio and the rock wall surrounding it looked as organic as a Frank Lloyd Wright masterpiece. A mosquito wailed in my ear and I slapped at the sting.

I didn’t waste any time getting ready to walk over to my grandmother’s cabin. I changed into a pair of shorts and washed the travel grime off of my face.

Mom paused at the door, “Is that what you’re wearing?”

“What? I’m just going to go see Monue. We’re not going out in public or anything.” My mother pressed her lips together as if it was physically painful to refrain from further comment.

We walked over the hill in silence. It was safer that way.

Mom knocked and poked her head in the door. My mom's sister was sitting with my grandmother who slumped in her recliner looking thin and fragile and didn't even turn her head to see who had come in the door.

I walked in and leaned down to give her a hug. "Hi Monue, It's Lauren" I said.

Suddenly she came alive with recognition. She lifted her arms to hug me and kissed me weakly on the cheek. My face crinkled up like burning paper and I fought hard to make it stay put and to keep from crying, not wanting her to feel confused or alarmed by my reaction. I had to turn away for a minute, pretending to fix one of her fussy little calico curtains that looked straight out of *Little House on the Prairie*, but by the time I turned back she had slipped on a withdrawn, vacant mask that I had never seen on her before.

The week was hard. I washed my grandmother and fed her like a baby and helped brush her teeth. She could hold the toothbrush and move it back and forth but she could no longer remember how to spit. She would make an expectant movement, like the expression someone makes when they are about to say something, but are interrupted before they can get the words out. But she couldn't spit out the toothpaste. My grandmother who spoiled all of her grandkids, who always enthusiastically cooked our favorite foods, even the kind that no one made anymore because they were too difficult, the woman who always had a Little Debbie Star Crunch to offer, and loved us so strong we felt like heroes, had disappeared in plain sight.

The best part of my visit was when I got to ride Cinderella again. I went out early to try to escape the throbbing heat. I zipped on a pair of old brown suede chaps ordered

from the Dover catalogue, customized with a green stripe down the leg, and folded a Navajo pad over her back before settling the saddle and swinging up, allowing the eager forward movement that the mare offered. The wind riffled the leaves of the trees and tousled my hair as the endless chirr of insects swelled around us. I felt myself expand, becoming the shadow and the sunlight. The iridescent red embers of Cindy's coat rippled as she strutted beneath me, her ears swiveling alertly, each coming to the sharp point of a single black hair. The frizzled brown weeds had a delicate beauty if you looked closely—the tiny little mustard colored flowers of Goldenrod and the muted creams of Sandlace quietly decorated the scrub Oak forest. I rode on the white sand trails carpeted in places with pine straw until I felt like I had better take Cindy home since she wasn't as fit as she used to be. She felt like she could go forever—she always did—but I didn't want her muscles to cramp if I worked her harder than she was prepared for.

When we got back to the barn I untacked and groomed Cindy, neatening her mane and trimming her tail so she still looked like the fancy horse she was. But as I led her back to the paddock, just before we got to the gate, she whirled uncharacteristically and kicked me, hard.

I dropped the rope and bent over, stunned for a minute by the impact, like being hit by a baseball bat. Luckily she had hit me right in the muscle below my hip so nothing was broken or anything. Dad came running up, he had seen it happen.

“Do you want me to kill her?” He asked, breathless and worried.

I laughed, “No, she's okay, I think she was just mad at me for leaving her.” Cindy stood quietly a few feet away. I took her rope and limped with her into the paddock.

“Okay, now we’re even. I’m sorry I left you.” I gave her a pat and hobbled inside to put some ice on my leg, which would have a permanent horseshoe shaped dent.

A number of hospice nurses came to interview, but the clear winner was a smiling woman that reminded me of Oprah Winfrey. I showed her the routine we had developed with Monue and when Mabel found out that I rode horses, she asked me if I knew the Chastains. She said that she had been the nanny for the Chastain children. I told her that the Chastains had bought my horse from me before I left town. We agreed it was a small world.

But flying back into Los Angeles, for the first time I saw how inconceivably huge the city was. The plane trailed its cutout shadow over an intricate pattern of paisley neighborhoods sprawled over the mountains and valleys of the coast, beaded with the turquoise glint of backyard pools and edged with the glittering ocean. This was my home now.

It looked like a great big world.

Chapter 3: Show Business

Hunter/Jumper horse shows combine two very different disciplines of the forward seat riding style that emerged from the mounted cavalry. Showjumping is all about speed and scope, or athleticism. The fastest horse around the course that jumps clean, (without knocking anything down) wins. Jumper classes are objective, like ice hockey, with clear rules and penalties, whereas the prestigious hunter divisions are subjectively judged against an ideal of perfection, like figure skating. Hunter classes were originally developed to assess a horse's suitability as a foxhunter, so the judges reward a pleasant horse with a ground covering stride and a bold but careful and athletic jump. Each over fences class consists of a course of approximately eight jumps designed to mimic the obstacles hunters encountered in the field, like farm gates, stone walls, or picket fences. The evolution of equestrian sport away from strictly military and aristocratic circles led to an explosion of amateur interest in horses as a hobby, and a corresponding boom in the horse show industry caters to weekend-warrior riders. Most trainers derive a large part of their income not from the day-to-day training of horses or riders, but from show per-diems and from commissions earned assisting clients with the buying and selling of their horses.

I went out to work as an extra whenever I had a free day. The pay was crappy but at least you were on a set. The houses and hospitals and schools I had seen on TV revealed themselves to actually be cramped little corners in labyrinthine warehouses, opened up like dollhouses for the cameras and sound and lighting technicians. I helped populate the background of high schools and cafes, pretending to be deep in conversation with other extras, miming speech and laughter without making a sound as the real actors said their lines. For party scenes I danced soundlessly to imaginary music that would be looped in later, with groups of other attractive young actors (each of us wearing an approved ensemble from the six different outfits we were asked to bring.) I picked up the inside tricks, like where to buy the designer clothes that were used on camera and then sold off in the Valley for a fraction of their price. And I learned all about making a meal out of the Craft Service table and how to sneak another one home in my purse.

An unbelievable amount of time was spent waiting as crew set up lights and cameras for each different shot. I barely recognized famous people when I saw them on the streets, and then when I saw them on set I couldn't get over how fake they seemed, loaded up with the pancake makeup that looked flawless on camera. They spent a lot of time hidden in their Star Wagon trailers, or in makeup having their hair sprayed into place (again) and more makeup spackled on and powdered. They wore little white paper collars until the very last minute to keep the tan colored paint from getting on their clothes. Typically sets were as segregated as the Old South, with hired talent carefully protected from the hungry and sometimes delusional approaches of the desperate masses of Extras, all actors looking for a leg up with an agent so they could get real auditions and be a star too.

Getting an agent was harder than finding a bartending job, harder than finding the perfect guy, even harder than picking the winning lottery numbers. You couldn't get work without an agent, and you couldn't get in to see an agent if they didn't want to see you, and the only way an agent wanted to see you was if you were getting work and they thought they could make money, so you basically had to find a way to be a star in order to find an agent, in order to get auditions, in order to be a star.

I auditioned for an acting class at The Larry Moss Studio in Santa Monica and was given a spot. The class was serious, full of real New York style actors who talked about finding their motivation in a scene and read Stanislavski.

I wanted new headshots: I needed a photo that promised I was interesting, attractive, different, special. First I needed a new haircut. I went to an insanely expensive hairstylist who examined me critically and told me I might need a browlift. She said I looked like the next Renee Zellweger and then she gave me Jennifer Aniston's haircut.

I needed new clothes for my headshots. Black was too stark on film, white threw off the white balance, I needed something with a little texture but that didn't compete too much with my face. Denim looked too working class and too dated. I was going to need more money.

I got called in on a music video that was shot on an all white set with a mixed cast of actors and dancers. We were dressed in hip outfits with lots of bright colors and told to walk around the stage looking like dreamy New Yorkers. (Los Angeles thinks New York is very cerebral. I guess maybe it is, compared to LA.) There was a rotating platform at

the front of the stage that some of us were assigned to walk onto and spin around on. I prayed I wouldn't get picked, since stumbling and falling were an embarrassingly high probability even without the turntable, but of course I did. So now I was wandering around the stage and wobbling onto the moving record player and struggling not to giggle hysterically while the Director talked about becoming a "living, moving Magritte painting." Most of the other actors were deadly serious but one girl appeared to recognize how ridiculous the whole thing was, which sort of surprised me because she was gorgeous and I don't generally expect girls that pretty to have any idea what's going on. She and I shared a look. I mean, New Yorkers would never walk around so slowly, or wear such bright colors, and probably no one there even knew who the hell Magritte was or what his paintings looked like. It was fun, though.

I finally mastered the walking, looking dreamy, and stepping onto a circular escalator: I just had to think about puppies while I anticipated and accounted for the movement of the platform. During lunch I stood around flirting with a super hot guy named Mark while the crew worked on the lighting, until the blonde girl joined our conversation. She and I discovered that our birthdays were only a few days apart in February, which led to an immediate zodiac bond about our Piscean shoe obsessions. Her name was Zoe. She looked like a cookie-cutter version of a Hollywood starlet—blond, blue-eyed and tan, skinny but somehow voluptuous, she was almost too perfect to believe. After that, Mark flirted mostly in her direction. At the end of the day we all exchanged numbers although it was obvious that Mark was not planning to call me.

One night my parents called me to tell me my grandmother had died. I hung up the phone and sat in my tiny compartment and looked vacantly at the way the light fell flat on the beige wall. It was warm outside and people were laughing on the boardwalk. I wanted friends who knew what had happened without my having to say it. I wanted someone who loved me to make me feel better. I wanted to not feel alone in the middle of millions of people. I decided to go out, but I came back home lonelier than ever.

When I went home for the funeral, my mom treated me to a visit to the family dentist. The first time I ever heard of the Los Angeles Equestrian Center, the dental hygienist had both of her latex gloved fists in my mouth. She asked me if I still rode horses. I gargled something that sounded vaguely like “GOh, I mish it, oh” which, probably since she was in the habit of asking questions while making conversation totally impossible, she correctly interpreted as “No, I miss it though.” She told me that her daughter had lived in Burbank and ridden horses there. She said there was a huge riding facility, right next to Griffith Park.

When I drove into the Los Angeles Equestrian Center the acres of parking lots were all packed. I turned under the big arch, expecting to find impeccable green grass and white fencing, and determined to find a way to get back on a horse. As my car bounced and clunked over the succession of speed bumps, I got a dirty look from a thin-lipped rider whose boots dangled in her stirrups as she walked her horse along the fence to my right. Everything that wasn’t covered in asphalt was a reddish-dirt brown.

I parked in an empty spot and slung open the Oldsmobile's door. The scent hit me like an aromatherapy candle. The smell of horse mingled with clean leather, hay, and sweat—as primordially comforting as the smell of a campfire, hot coffee or caramel. I immediately recognized the sound of a horse show going on, an announcer droning the names and numbers of riders over a loudspeaker as they entered the ring. I walked in the direction of the competition.

Low stone walls surrounded several arenas which were filled with perfectly raked footing of damp beach sand and jumps built to look like the split rail fences, hay bales, hedges, and picket gates of a utopian aristocratic estate. The rails were painted in hunter greens, tree bark browns and crisp whites. Each jump was draped with flowers and surrounded by potted plants. But the horses were staggering.

Each gorgeous animal was bigger and more magnificent than any I had ever seen. Glistening mahogany bays, blood orange chestnuts, snow-white greys cantered and trotted in concentric circles. Each muscular neck was accented by perfect, tiny button braids and each horse seemed to be ridden by a tall blonde girl, every one of which was wearing a navy riding coat and breeches a weird shade of greenish beige. Underneath every navy hunt coat was a white shirt with a navy monogram on the collar. I stared at the girls with their black velvet helmets perched over their hair, ponytailed and hair-netted and artfully swooped over their ears and tucked neatly up into their helmet.

Golf carts and Hispanic men surrounded the arena, holding lead ropes attached to horses that stood quietly napping with hind legs cocked. They carried grooming boxes filled with brushes and spray bottles, wore martingales swung over their shoulders like bandoliers, and fussed over their charges, painting dark polish on their hooves and

running brushes through their thick tails. Trainers stood in the middle of the warm up area next to a series of plain looking jumps, screaming orders at the riders.

“Halt! HALT! Come on! RIDE! You have to hold him together. Again.”

“Francesca, hand-gallop the oxer, then roll back and trot the crossrail.”

“That is EMBARRASSING, Christina, horrible, put your spur on and come again.”

Each rider eventually trotted into the ring and jumped the course, then the trainer clapped and whistled loudly for their client and the horse was returned, sweating and dirty, to the groom who walked the horse back to the show barn.

There were four or five long wooden shed row barns and there were a half dozen more barns made out of canvas tents. I knew that you could rent a stall for your horse at multiple day shows, but I had never seen anything like this. Row after row of stalls were filled with shining horses, and then there were other stalls set up with cross ties and rubber mats lining the floor to serve as grooming stalls, or feed stalls full of hay bales and horse food. There were temporary tack rooms with orderly rows of saddle racks and acrylic trunks and matching bridle racks emblazoned with the barn colors, and bandage racks stacked full of white cotton quilts and color coordinated stable wraps. There were even stalls that had zip up curtains for clients to use as dressing rooms. Each different trainer had colorful fabric banners and drapes and directors chairs, trunks, some even had the flowers customized in their barn’s colors. There were even little patio sets of whicker furniture with framed pictures and a cable knit blanket (in the barn’s color) slung over the back of a seat, like home away from home. All the farm names were idyllic adjectives crossed with a landscape feature: Rainbow Valley, Walden Brook, Golden Crest. Ribbons were hung across the front of each display: blue, red, yellow, white, pink and green,

universal horseshow code for first through sixth place. The biggest displays consistently boasted the most blues.

I had never seen this sort of production for a weekend of showing. This must be an 'A' show. A pilot light inside me sparked to life and a tiny blue flame caught and quivered, waiting to burn higher.

Chapter 4: In and Outs

In show jumping, an in-and-out is two fences that are set in close proximity: usually an oxer (a parallel spread jump with a front and back rail) and a vertical, set either one or two strides apart. A horse stride on a jumping course is twelve feet long, with an additional twelve feet allotted for take off and landing. So a one stride in-and-out is set with a distance between the jumps of roughly 24 feet, while a two stride is generally set somewhere around 36 feet. An in-and-out can be especially tricky to ride as opposed to a single fence or a longer line, because the shorter the distance between jumps the less time there is to adjust the horse's pace. In an in-and-out, if the jump "in" isn't perfect, the jump "out" is much more difficult. So, if a horse jumps in too close and loses energy fitting in the deep takeoff distance, the rider needs to move the horse up quickly in order to jump out with the correct number of strides. Conversely, if the horse jumps in fast and big, the rider needs to sit up and intervene immediately in order to fit in the steps or they risk a dangerous distance at the second fence. This requires riders to be able to not only stay in control of the horse but it is also crucial that they stay in control of their body position to, over and after the jumps so they don't unbalance the horse and get in the way which could cause them to pull a rail.

I had to remind myself I was at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center to get a job not to sit around and watch with my mouth open like I was flipping through a Dover catalogue. I walked across the parking lot farther away from the show. All the way at the back of the property was a set of barns with stalls made out of metal pipes. Some had plywood walls and there was a mishmash of different configurations that looked like a low rent district compared to the orderly temporary quarters of the horse show. The horses looked scraggly, with long manes and dirty coats. A variety of equipment was scattered around, tooled western saddles with the big saddle horn that beginners think is a handhold but is really supposed to be for securing a roped cow, black leather dressage saddles with their long straight flaps for the rider's long stirrups, and tan hunter/jumper saddles with their shorter flaps and flat seats for riders to crouch in jumping position. I walked back toward the barns on the other side of the driveway.

The stalls in Barns A, B and C were like rows of jail cells, with wooden walls and grilled windows with heavy sliding doors. The horses stood quietly, dozing behind the brown bars. The first barn had a corner office filled with silver trophies and dark polished wood and leather furniture. There wasn't anyone inside, but there was a whole collection of wool coolers, the fancy ones they only give away in the very top classes with the competition name and "Champion" embroidered on the side. Each horse blanket was folded and displayed under a series of framed eight by ten photos of horses jumping huge fences—each shot looked perfect enough to be a magazine cover.

At the other end of the barn was another fancy office with pictures of poised navy coated girls in mid jump, and the barn aisles were filled with sparkling white trunks parked in front of each horse's stall. A gaunt woman who might have been beautiful but was a shade too severe was talking on the phone, so I hung back and waited for her to finish. She did not sound happy.

"—told her it was twenty percent, but there is a commission on both ends, so... yes. That's right. Dr. Bradley. Ok." She hung up the phone and looked up sharply.

I stepped forward. "Hi, I was wondering if anyone around might need any riding done? I just—"

"We aren't looking." She closed the door.

There were three arenas in front, and in one a good-looking man was riding a big silvery grey. I always had better luck with men. I recognized his long legs and blond hair from the pictures in the first office, and watched appreciatively as he schooled the horse through some tight turns over some very big jumps. After a few minutes he rode over and acknowledged me and I told him I was looking for some riding work.

"Try Rosey, she's at Griffith Park Farms in Barn B and she's usually looking for someone." He grinned and clucked his horse back to work. "Good luck," he said over his shoulder.

Barn B was identical to the first barn, but the horses weren't as handsome. I stopped a girl with long blond hair and asked where I could find Rosey. She said Rosey was at the show but she was headed that way and could take me to her.

We found Rosey sitting in a golf cart at the pony ring. She had a loud, nasal voice and she looked at the little girl she was instructing the whole time we talked. She looked like she could have been my mother. We had the exact same complexion- blue eyes, red hair and freckles. “Chelsea, put your heels down and shorten your reins!” she screamed. “So where did you say you are from?” The drop in volume indicated that she must be speaking to me, but before I could answer she was shouting again, “Kick her! Harder!” She made threatening kissing sounds and waved the whip at the pony as the kid rode by at a slow trot.

“I’m from Camden, South Carolina.” No need to explain that I grew up near Camden. Nobody has ever heard of my actual hometown, but, just like the name Rockefeller suggests wealth, to horse people Camden still has a residual association with steeplechase racing, foxhunting and horse showing.

“Oh, did you know Max Bonham?” she asked, still following the pony’s progress around the arena. Max was a legendary horseman who was old enough to have seen some of Camden’s heyday. I had taken a few lessons from an instructor that worked for him when I was little, and I’d seen him at some of the schooling shows.

“Sure! He’s wonderful!” I said, and before she could ask anything specific I added, “and Pete Chastain- do you know him? He bought my horse before I left home.” I could see she was impressed, even if she still hadn’t looked at me. The small girl she was coaching had somehow ended up in a corner of the warm up ring and was kicking and tugging helplessly at the impervious pony.

“Kick her, Chelsea! Use your whip!” She clucked loudly at the horse and then she lurched off in the golf cart toward the poor little ragdoll, shouting over her shoulder, “Jessica, have her ride Noon and Karat. I can’t talk now.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Okay, I have to go to the show office and deal with these entries, so go back to the barn and get Jesus to show you where Noon is. He’s a paint.” She pronounced the groom’s name Hey-Zeus. She was already turning in the other direction.

I headed back to the barn to find Noon.

High Noon’s name was on a small brass plaque on his stall, which was in the dark center of the barn. Like a great movie star, High Noon wasn’t simply beautiful, he was memorable. He was a true war bonnet medicine horse paint: almost all white, except for a black patch cocked over his head like a beret. When I opened his stall door he was standing facing the back corner. He cut his eyes at me and watched me approach with the cold stare of a deep-sea animal. The skin around his eyes and nose was pink, and when I walked around to his left side to slip the halter over his head I saw that his other eye was blue.

There were two crossties in the middle of the barn and a slim Latino was grooming a horse in one. A radio blared Mexican music, with loud horns and syrupy melodies punctuated by bizarre yips that sounded like a wild coyote or maybe a drunk cowboy. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to tack up the horse myself or wait for Jesus to do it but he seemed busy so I picked up a rubber mitt and started currying, enjoying the familiar storm of hair and dust. There was a crate of dingy polo wraps and I picked out

four that looked like they used to be white. Now they were dirt colored and their elasticity was gone but I wrapped each leg, careful to keep an even, light pressure to provide support and protection for the tendons and ligaments. The school horse tack room was full of bridles and there was a whole wall of saddles in different sizes along with a sloppy stack of big, square red and black checkered western saddle pads. I picked a saddle that looked a lot like the Prix des Nations saddle I had at home, a flat little scrap of leather. All of the bridles had labels with horse's names on them but I couldn't find one for High Noon. I asked Jesus and he pointed to another tack room across the aisle.

This private tack room was much more organized and the equipment was nicer. There were a couple of matching green acrylic trunks that had Griffith Park Farms written on them in white. Jesus walked in and grabbed a bridle with a twisted wire snaffle bit and handed it to me. I didn't ask why High Noon needed such a strong bridle.

After I got all tacked up, I led the horse out to the mounting block in front of the barn. I was excited to get in the saddle again, so I tightened the girth one last hole and led the horse next to the step. He danced away a little and snorted but I just reached my left foot out further, put my toes into the stirrup and swung up and over. Immediately, he bolted. I didn't have my right foot in the stirrup yet but I wasn't about to fall off my first horse here and embarrass myself. I jammed my right heel into his side, more to stay on than anything, but also to push him over to the left. I also cranked the right rein back and forced him onto his left shoulder, which ran him slam into one of the barn posts. I had to kick my left leg back a little so it didn't get squished, and then turned him hard to the right so that he went from galloping one way to facing the other direction in just a couple of steps. He was surprised.

“Alright Mr. Noon, good to meet you. I’m Lauren.” I patted him on the shoulder. He shook his head and snuffled grumpily, as if to say, “Well, ok, fine, I can just behave. Why didn’t you say so?” I gave him a squeeze and he walked off calmly. Now I knew why he wore a twisted wire.

Other than the initial test, High Noon didn’t give me any trouble. He was generally stiff and cranky but he wasn’t bad to ride. But Karat was a real treat. Maybe because of the fact that I didn’t wait for him to help me with High Noon, or perhaps just because I survived, Jesus had Karat ready for me when I returned. His bridle was labeled with the name Karat and I could see why. He was a bright golden chestnut with lots of chrome: four white socks, and a big blaze on his face. He was gorgeous and he knew it. When I got on him he swaggered off confidently, but it didn’t take long to see that his confidence wasn’t in his training. He didn’t understand my cues. When I put pressure on him with my left leg to ask him to move to the right, he tried for a moment to figure out what I wanted but he quickly got upset and began to wring his tail and threaten to buck. I could feel that he didn’t understand what to do and that he was irritated that he didn’t, like a grown up who doesn’t want to admit to illiteracy. So I just slowed it down and simplified a few basic cues for him, and rewarded him immediately for the slightest effort. Within thirty minutes he was much more cooperative and happy, not to mention supple. As long as I kept everything simple he was willing to try his best. He was a nice horse.

When I finished cooling him out and brought him back to the crosstie, no one was around but Jesus. He took Karat and tied him to one of the big octopus-like machines between the barns. I had never seen a hot walker—it looked like a dangerous merry go

round of live horses but the horses seemed accustomed to patiently shuffling in an endless circle. I wandered down the dusty aisle to the barn office, passing a picnic table and a few anemic looking ferns. Inside there was a big desk, an ugly old sofa and a dry erase board with a lesson chart of horse's names and times with spaces for various riders' names. There were photos on the wall: photos of Rosey when she was younger, riding western, a photo of her jumping a fairly big post-and-rail schooling jump. There were miscellaneous photos of students and horses in different black and brown frames. A few flies buzzed around a banana and a half eaten muffin abandoned on the desk. The phone rang every few minutes and sitting next to it was a spiral bound notebook with messages and notes written in it. I wrote down my name and number and said that I had enjoyed riding High Noon and Karat and would love to come back and do some more work.

It didn't take long for me to learn that Rosey was crazy. What I couldn't decide was if she was crazy smart or crazy stupid. She kept having me audition ride but she was always too busy to watch me. So she managed to get a whole week of work out of me before she actually hired me. I couldn't believe she would trust someone she hadn't seen ride to work with the horses. Karat was my favorite—every day he got better. Finally, Rosey drove out in her golf cart to watch him go. I showed her his progress and she asked me to jump him. I popped Karat over a crossrail and he massively overjumped the little x. Rosey set up another jump two strides away from the first one and asked me to jump through the in and out. I kept him straight and balanced and he jumped both jumps with ease. Rosey turned around and drove back to the barn to get her camera and a few minutes later she came back and raised the jumps. Each time Karat jumped the in and out,

the oxer 'out' got bigger, and he was soon jumping higher than I thought he was ready for. At two and half feet, then three feet, then three and half feet, his athleticism and willingness to do what I asked got him over the jumps but he was getting tired and I worried that I had used up all of my credit. I mentioned that he was pushing beyond his comfort zone but Rosey kept waving me back through. Finally, Rosey raised the second jump to a four-foot oxer with a big spread between the rails.

“Rosey, I don’t know. He hasn’t ever jumped anything like that has he? He’s getting tired, I would hate for him to be so good and have an accident right here at the end and get scared.”

“He won’t! He’s jumping great, I just want to get a good picture.” She raised her camera to get ready but I didn’t move.

“I know, but he’s given us everything we wanted, I don’t think we should ask for any more. If anything happens it’s going to undo all of his hard work.” I patted his bright, sweaty neck. He blew his nose.

She kept her camera focused on the second jump. “Just a few more, I want to get the picture.”

“I don’t think we should. I think he’s had enough. Lets do some more pictures in a day or two, and I can wear show clothes or something so it looks better.”

Rosey made a sound of disgust and dropped her camera onto the golf cart seat. I figured I had blown my interview. But Karat was hot and tired and he had been a very good pony, so much better than the horse I got on that first time. I wasn’t going to risk an accident over a big jump with him being green and tired—especially when I was the one who was probably going to get hurt if anything happened. I walked him back to the barn.

After I was done putting him away, Rosey called me into her office.

Chapter 5: Up Downs

The horse's legs move in diagonal pairs during the trot, a two-beat gait that can be very bouncy for the rider to sit. Hunter/jumper riders post the trot, alternately standing and sitting in the stirrups to accommodate the movement of the horse. Posting the trot makes horse and rider more comfortable and capable of covering ground on a long stride with ease, but learning to post in time to the rhythm of the horse's forward and backward movement is one of the first major challenges for the beginning rider to master. Riders must synchronize their up and down movement with the horse so as not to lose their balance, all while carrying their hands low and quiet and holding their legs still. Additionally, because the rider correctly posting the trot helps to balance the horse on a turn by rising simultaneously with the outside shoulder as it moves forward, riders must learn how to recognize their "diagonals." Every change of direction in the trot demands a rider to sit an extra beat and rise again with the new outside shoulder. Beginning riders are sometimes called "up downs" because a lot of time is spent chanting "up" and "down" to teach them when to stand and sit.

Rosey pulled the handle on the heavy door, sliding it closed. I hadn't realized until then that the office was just really just a converted stall with a brick tile floor instead of shavings. She sat down in the roller chair at the huge wooden desk and swiveled to face me. I sat down on the sofa and held my breath.

"Lauren, I owe you an apology." She rotated a quarter turn and picked up a pen and doodled on the notebook next to the phone. Her purple glitter fingernail polish was chipped and ragged. "I got carried away and I was pushing too hard. You were right to protect the horse, and I'm glad that you stood your ground."

I felt my face getting warm and I studied my shoes, wondering if this was for real or if I was dreaming that an adult was apologizing to me.

"Jessica is going into the Peace Corps and moving to Guatemala so I need a new barn manager." She started going on about how her dream was to build her business into an 'A' barn.

"So would you be willing to work full time? You can take Mondays off."

I took a deep breath. "Well, I would love to work here as long as I can go out on auditions if I need to. I don't have an agent yet, but I just want to be up front with you about that possibility."

Rosey grinned. "That's fine, in fact one of the working student's husband is an agent, we'll have to see if you can get a meeting with him! Maybe I can get her to bring him to my birthday party. And you can move into Jessica's apartment, it's just across the street from here and it's right next door to mine."

My first order of business as barn manager was to cue the movie makeover montage and give Griffith Park Farms a new look. Taking notes from my tour of the other barns at the LAEC, I insisted that we throw out all of the ugly, colorful (and those that had faded to colorless) polo wraps and buy new black ones. We tossed the ugly plaid western school horse saddle pads and replaced them with GPF monogrammed baby pads. I helped Jesus clean all of the bridles and then mandated that all of the tack be wiped down before being put away every day. I informed Rosey we would need a new groom, that there was too much work for Jesus to do alone and that the barn needed to look organized and immaculate if she wanted to attract A level clients.

We bought new matching black 8x10 matted frames for the pictures on the wall in the office and Rosey replaced the dirty green and white checked loveseat with a dark green leather sofa. We hung big leafy ferns along the barn aisle and Rosey brought in a green and white canopy tent to put over the picnic table that sat next to the office. Soon the only thing that didn't look the part was Rosey. She still showed up to teach fifteen minutes late, limping out to the arena wearing purple track shorts that showed off her ghostly white legs and the scar from a hip replacement surgery, with a hot pink sun visor and her face smeared with zinc oxide sunscreen.

The other problem was the horses. By my count there were only two nice horses in the whole barn. Karat, and a black gelding that belonged to a woman named Jeanina who was apparently married to a rock star. Scott Weiland came out and rode one day, and I was asked to give him a lesson but he didn't seem interested in learning to post so I took him for a dusty trail ride around the perimeter of the equestrian center. He wore black leather pants, which was absolutely the only indication that he was a rock star, but only

one of the many indications that he knew nothing about horses. I asked him how many pairs of leather pants he had and he said just the one. He was nice, actually, just a guy.

There were a few scraggly lesson horses, and then there was High Noon, the maniac paint, and a morbidly obese palomino that lived right on the front row and belonged to a certifiable pain-in-the ass man named Darryl who insisted that his horse be worked every morning before 9:00, and who called every single morning at 9:00 to verify that the yellow cow had been out. There were a handful of other random client horses, but none of them were show quality animals.

We needed to get the students to upgrade onto better mounts if we wanted to do well in the shows. All it would take would be one or two dominoes to fall and then everyone would want a better horse. Rosey worked on her students and their parents relentlessly, but persuading people to spend fifty to a hundred thousand dollars on a horse isn't easy, especially if they've gotten used to paying nothing but fifty dollars for a lesson. I focused on getting Karat ready to show. And then, one morning he was gone and an ugly bay was in his stall. Rosey told me that she had traded him for a new school horse. Jeanina told me that he had bucked Rosey off twice in a row the day before while she was trying to show the evening group lesson how to leg yield, and that Carleton Brooks had bought him off of the photos she took of him jumping the in-and-out with me. Carleton Brooks had one of the biggest set ups at the A show. I shook my head. Damn. If he wanted Karat, Rosey shouldn't have sold him, or she should have at least doubled the price and sold him to someone else.

I didn't even get to say goodbye.

Apparently, Rosey was sore from her fall, because later that day a padded folding table was spread under the tent next to the office and Rosey was lying face up making noises that sounded uncomfortably sexual. A giant man in overalls bent over her. He had that sort of blind look on his face, like he was listening to something internal as he stretched her legs.

“Oh Vince, that feels so good,” Rosey moaned.

He put his arms around her and gently lifted her into a sitting position. “That should help,” he said.

Rosey stood and tottered towards me, “Vince this is my barn manager, Lauren. She could ride the hair off a dog!”

She stood up and indicated her seat. “You have to get on the table, Lauren. Vince is a brilliant bodyworker.”

“No thanks, I’ve got to ride High Noon.” I shook my head and walked into the office to get my sun visor. I didn’t believe in hocus pocus chiropractors. And I was pissed about Karat. But when I walked back out of the office the Shrek blocked my path.

“I can use these hands for good or for evil” Vince said. He smiled and patted the table to offset the threat of physical force. “Lie down, face up.”

I put my hat down and frowned, afraid he would break my neck. I sat on the table and then stretched out and squinted up, not sure how to act in this prone position. He stood behind my head and slid his huge hands under my shoulder blades, easing his fingers deep into the muscles under my skin, letting the weight of my body assist as gravity pressed me into his hands. It felt like he had a secret code, the combination to the vault, because I could feel the knots and tension gently unlock under the warmth of his

touch. He went through my shoulder, my neck, down my spine—delicately and gently restructuring my whole body. While he worked he told me about the book he wanted to write, about coffee and how he wanted to have two characters who only spoke in movie lines.

I laughed and said, “Take your stinking paws off me, you damned dirty ape.”

He howled and immediately responded with “You don’t understand! I could have been a contender. I could’ve been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am.”

He even popped the wrist that I had landed on too many times. When he was done he scooped me up into a sitting position and cautioned me to wait before standing up. I did feel a little dizzy but I already felt four inches taller.

“Wow. That’s amazing,” I whispered.

“Every now and then I get it right.” He said, a mixture of pride and an ‘aw shucks’ shrug.

“Have you ever worked on a horse?” I asked. “Fasten your seatbelt. It’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

High Noon must have felt better after Vince worked on him, he would still turn his haunch to you and pin his ears when you opened his stall door, but he was jumping better than ever. Rosey wanted to show him in the jumpers and he proved to be pretty fast if he could be kept from knocking down every rail. Rosey insisted that I ride him while she and Jesus tried to pole him, a practice that is strictly illegal at the shows. That didn’t stop her from sneaking over to one of the back rings and hiding behind the standards of the jump, waiting until the horse was in the air before literally heaving the rail higher as

he was jumping it to force him to be more careful. High Noon was way too smart for her game and would overjump ridiculously if she or Jesus were standing anywhere nearby, and it seemed that he would almost purposefully drag his feet over the jumps afterwards. Once she jerked the heavy pole up so hard as he was jumping that he almost somersaulted, stumbling hard and nearly rolling us both on the ground. “Okay Rosey. That’s enough.” I said. “You’re going to make him start stopping. It doesn’t even work. Next time if you want him poled you sit on him.”

Besides riding horses and returning calls, I taught a couple of up-down lessons every week and occasionally filled in for Rosey with the more advanced students. I reread the English rider’s Bible, *Hunter Seat Equitation*, and a book on dressage that had been a Christmas present years ago.

Rosey was pushing hard for her best students to buy horses, and a couple of them started to look. But horses that belonged to Rosey had a way of disappearing in the night. Rosey picked up a cute mare from somewhere that I immediately fell in love with. A well-bred, pretty mover with a nice jump, she had all the makings of a fancy hunter, but Rosey didn’t get along with mares, so it wasn’t long before off she went. Rosey’s riding style certainly suited the geldings better, or maybe she had never heard the saying “tell a gelding, ask a stallion, discuss it with a mare.” Another copper penny chestnut showed up in the mare’s place, a tall, skinny thoroughbred named Coppertone.

Each day a list was made of who would ride each horse, in what order, and what lessons the lesson horses were doing. Rosey made the list and gave it to me to take to Jesus every morning. Her handwriting was almost illegible and frequently there were

fractions next to the horse's names, which were meaningless to me. But I was given the ride on Coppertone, so I tacked him up and took him to the arena. He was nervous, but most horses are when they are dropped into a whole new environment. I thought it must be hard to have so little control over what happens to you, not to even know where you are or how long you will be there. I gave Coppertone a nice walk around to get his bearings and then let him stretch his legs at the trot. He was tight and bouncy like a ping pong ball but as he worked he settled a little, until I asked him to trot over a pole. I might as well have asked him to jump the Grand Canyon based on his reaction: a hysterical, runaway, "I-am-not-willing-to-die-doing-that-but-I-am-willing-to-die-in-the-process-of-not-doing-it" response.

"Coppertone, its just a pole. On the ground." I said.

"NO NO NO NO NO NO NO," was apparently his answer.

"You can do it, its just a little, tiny pole."

He threw his head up and tried to run through the bridle. "Absolutely not. Poles are death. Death by pole. No no no no no."

"Coppertone." He tried to take off again. "Dude. Settle down." I arm wrestled him back under control and trotted a circle around the pole to get him to relax again into a thinking state of mind.

Finally, dripping wet, Coppertone stepped tentatively over the pole, flinging the rest of his legs over after the first leg made it across to the other side. I stroked his neck and told him what a brave boy he was. This one is a mess, I thought.

At the next horse show I was introduced to the chaos of coordinating multiple rings, with high maintenance riders of all different ages and levels who had no idea what was going on and horses that were nervous and cranky about the noise and the total departure from routine, all while dealing with helicopter parents, mutinous grooms, and Rosey herself who never failed to exacerbate whatever situation was spiraling into disaster.

Before the show had even started she summoned me on a walkie-talkie. A school horse was threatening to run away with one of her students. Rosey's nasal voice stabbed through the static "you get over to the short stirrup ring and ride Boy Scout—he's leaving out strides with Amelia...[static]...make him run until he's half dead."

I walked out and got on the nervous horse and galloped laps until he was blowing hard and sweating but finally felt a little more relaxed. Rosey and Jesus had already sped off in the golf cart to another ring, so I gave the kid a leg up back onto the horse and wiped the froth off of Boy Scout's mouth and chest. I glanced up at the poor girl's face.

"Amelia, is this your first show?"

She nodded.

"You'll be fine. OK, do you know your course?"

"Yes. It's the pink flowers to the brown line to the white line to the grey to the green."

Good, I thought. Smart kid. I had her jump a couple of small jumps, and I made suggestions, asking her to keep her reins shorter and to try to hold her position the same on the takeoff and the landing of the jumps so the horse didn't interpret her movement as a reason to go faster. "This is going to seem counterintuitive," I told her, "but horses like

Boy Scout are insecure, so they feel like they have to rush. The more you hold them back, the more they feel like they have to take over, so try to keep pushing him at a constant speed rather than just trying to slow him down the whole time and that way he won't feel like he has to always take over to go faster."

She did a nice job integrating the changes I suggested, and the horse settled down with the calm warm up. Just before it was time for her to go in the ring to show, Rosey returned, braying before she even finished parking the golf cart. "Amelia, jump that crossrail over there, and if he tries to go fast I want you to make him halt and back him up, hard. Rip his face off."

She left the cart blocking the warm up ring exit and limped over to where I was standing. "Lauren, take this to the office." She handed me a purple envelope. "And tell the office ladies to come to my birthday party/Cinco de Mayo celebration this afternoon!"

I started trudging toward the office on the other side of the center. It was going to be a long day. I had already discovered that it was always at least a half hour wait to get to the front of the line and that the office staff did not subscribe to the idea that the customer was always right. Or ever right. Those bitches were scary. I waited behind an irate trainer who was holding in one hand a huge basket full of hydrangeas and matching pastel cupcakes, all wrapped in cellophane and ribbon, and screaming into his cell phone in the other hand about some other trainer who stole his client. When he got to the front of the line he abruptly hung up the phone and smiled, presenting the basket with a flourish. "Good morning ladies," he lisped, "this is a little thank you from all of us at Crystal Creek Stables!"

The women all lit up like klieg lights, and one put the basket on a table where there were at least ten other gift baskets. They made all the class changes the trainer wanted, adding a kid into a medal class, scratching a kid from a warm up, moving one kid from the hunters to the jumpers, doing a late entry for an adult amateur which took forever, and then finally it was my turn. I stepped up to the counter and handed over Rosey's card. For a second, I wondered if Rosey had just cut to the chase and stuffed cash in the purple envelope, but the sour look on the woman's face as she opened the card told me otherwise, and I guessed I should have known better than to think Rosey would have coughed up the money. "Rosey wanted me to invite you guys to her birthday party/Cinco de Mayo celebration at Viva's after the show!" I said. Then I turned and ran.

By the time I got back to the barn there was a note from Rosey to look up Viva Fresh and call them to make reservations. They were going to love that, I thought, a registration for a crowd of people in just a few hours. I flipped through the battered rolodex on Rosey's desk and there weren't any listings under V. So I started flipping through the whole thing. I tried M for Mexican, R for restaurants, F for Fresh, (there were a few listings filed under food but Viva's wasn't one of them.) I finally found it under E for Eats. So that was the sort of organization I was going to be dealing with.

That night after we hung up all the show ribbons out in front of the barn, a tattered group of exhausted horsepeople drove the hundred feet of driveway and bounced over the four speedbumps to Viva's for Rosey's party. Rosey had also invited some of her many strange friends from the outside world and they had the look of smarmy old man anthropologists as they ogled the girls in their form fitting breeches and tall boots. Rosey

grabbed me and started talking to Hailey the working student who was standing next to an extremely good-looking man. I tried to get my arm free so I could go to the bathroom and see if there was food in my teeth but then I heard her say, “Lauren, here, is an actress!”

Oh shit. Hailey’s husband. The agent. I had dirt streaks on my neck and my hair was all sweaty and smushed by my helmet and I probably had food in my teeth, so of course now is when I get to meet the agent. Rosey released me and hobbled away.

I smiled at Hailey and her husband and he said, “Oh, Hailey told me about you. You should come in and read for us.”

The yellow smoke and sulfuric smell of burning protein billowed up into our faces as Chuck singed the bottom of the horse’s hoof with the hot metal horseshoe. The horse stood patiently in the crossties that stretched from both sides of the barn aisle and clipped to each side of his halter to keep him from moving. “This makes the hoof surface perfectly flat and level with the shoe,” he explained. Farriers like to talk as much as dentists, I thought. At least Chuck had something to say. He was a really good shoer, he did the farrier work for Richard Lindgren, and I had been nudging Rosey to start using him to shoe the client horses. The guy that Rosey hired for her own horses was a lecherous old man whose most outstanding characteristic besides perviness was that he was cheap. Rosey had apparently also never heard the saying you get what you pay for.

I was getting a lesson from Chuck on the benefits of hot shoeing versus cold shoeing, but I was trying to find out about the trainer Rosey had said she was bringing in for a private lesson. Chuck carefully bent a shiny silver nail and placed it at an angle so

that it would curl through the horse's hoof and emerge without penetrating the quick. He hammered it in a few deft strokes and the horse sighed, bored with his pedicure.

Chuck talked around the nails he held in his mouth. "So, anyway, Sylvie was married to Richard Lindgren- ugly divorce- they started Silver Linings Farm together. She's the one who found that big grey, the one that wins all the grand prix classes. Bought him from Ludger Beerbaum, he kept stopping, she put him together." He placed and drove home another nail and dropped the horse's foot, moving to pick up another. "She made Lindgren into the rider he is but I don't think he ever really was in love with her, and now he's a big shot grand prix rider and she's completely quit the business."

I asked if I could watch Rosey's lesson with Sylvie, and Rosey said that was fine as long as I got all my work done. Then she told me that she was going to ride Coppertone. I guess the fact that he was making progress with me and was proving himself to be a talented jumper was too tempting for her to resist. I couldn't decide if I was pissed that she was taking my project out from under me, or if I was secretly pleased, knowing that his nervous personality would only conflict with her overbearing style. Mostly, I decided, I was pissed.

Jesus was tacking up Coppertone when I walked down to the crosstie. He ducked behind the horse's bright red shoulder and then turned and hurried into the feed room. I figured maybe he was hiding from me, guessing that I wasn't particularly happy to see one of my projects get taken away by Rosey. Or maybe he was worried I would give him something else to do and he wanted to bolt early since today was a payday. I walked up to Coppertone and cupped his muzzle in my hand. He blew gently and blinked at me.

“Hey pretty boy. Don’t let Rosey scare you, okay?”

He had a tiny spot of blood on his neck. Must’ve been a bug bite. I wiped it off and gave him a resigned pat. “Good luck, Coppertone.”

Sylvie walked into the ring at exactly the stroke of the hour. Strangely, she had red hair and looked a lot like she could have been related to me (or to Rosey,). She was wearing leather gloves and a navy polo shirt with a popped collar and a white sun visor, and her boots were scrupulously polished. But it was her lesson that blew my mind. She saw right into Rosey’s rough habits, and corrected her gently and intelligently by telling her to practice underriding instead of overriding, and by asking for Rosey to pay attention to the horse’s reaction to her aids. She pushed for better flatwork and more engagement through the horse’s hind end. She seemed to be able to see into the mind of the horse, and in stark contrast to Rosey, she never seemed to raise her voice.

Coppertone was a different horse, nothing like the type A neurotic he was with me. When the lesson was over I took Coppertone back to the grooming stalls since Jesus was nowhere to be found. The big horse was tired and more relaxed than I had ever seen him. No way was this because of Rosey’s riding, even with Sylvie’s help. I untacked and sponged him off and then I went to pull a Nancy Drew. Something wasn’t adding up.

Jesus was in the feed room, sitting on the hay bales. I briefly wondered what his dreams were, what he hoped for the future. I wondered if he missed Mexico, if he had a family that he sent all of his money back to. But that was for a different day. I was on the case of the suspiciously relaxed chestnut horse.

“Que pasa, Jesus?” I asked. I was learning a little bit of Spanish but I had to be careful because all of the grooms tried to teach me swear words instead. They laughed hysterically every time I asked for the ‘pinche cabron’ until I figured out that it didn’t mean lead rope.

He focused glassy eyes on my chest. Then he reached out with both hands and cupped my breasts. I would have sworn up and down that I would punch any guy in the face for grabbing me like that, but I was so shocked that I completely failed to react. I just pushed his hands off and said, “Por que esta Coppertone mucho consado?”

Jesus laughed drunkenly and pointed at the little cabinet in the back of the feed room. I opened it and looked inside. Spiderwebs and expired medicine bottles sat in the dusty gloom, but in the very front corner was a small glass bottle and a syringe. Acepromazine. Rosey was drugging the horses.

Jesus rattled off slurred Spanish that I didn’t understand and then handed me a crumpled piece of paper. The list. He pointed at the little fractions next to the horses’ names and finally I understood.

The following Friday night I went out with Zoe and told her about my week, the interview with the agent and the crazy scripts they had me read before finally they signed me and told me I had to get new headshots. I told her about how awesome Sylvie was and the lesson and my conversation with Jesus, but I left out the part about him grabbing my boobs.

“So, I found out Rosey’s not just drugging the horses for her to ride, she’s drugging the lesson horses and even the private horses! And the clients don’t have any

idea! I don't know if I should say something to her or just shut up and deal with it or if I should try to find another job somewhere else. Anyway. Sorry. I'll stop talking now." I took a long sip of my drink. Zoe was being a good sport listening to my tirade but she was also looking around the room, scoping out the guys, I was sure, which was fine because I was doing it too—we both knew the hunt was about to begin. The bar was a little too Hollywood for my taste, the kind of place reality television stars might show up, where drinks cost way too much, and with a dance floor where people actually danced instead of sitting and drinking like civilized people and tables where posers paid a bajillion dollars for bottle service. Not my usual crowd but there was a great looking guy I had already made eye contact with in the corner booth and another lesser possibility at the bar. "So what ever happened with that guy Mark from the music video?"

Zoe sighed and flipped her expertly highlighted hair over her shoulder enticingly, a move aimed at someone behind me. "I think he's gay."

"Oh, bummer. What makes you say that?"

"Well, he drives a white Mercedes two-seater convertible, he wears Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses and we've gone out several times now and he hasn't even tried to get in my pants."

"Uh, yeah, queer as a flower," I laughed. "Oh well, the guy I went out with the other day smelled like the Sephora perfume counter. Gross. Why do men ever wear anything besides Old Spice?"

Zoe laughed, "Oh God I love that smell, too!" She smiled and shook her head, which made her hair catch the light. I followed her gaze and stole a glance over my shoulder to see who she was making eyes at. A guy I had dismissed as too obvious: an

actor, I was sure, with smoldering good looks but hair that indicated too much time in the mirror, possibly with a curling iron. At least we wouldn't step on each other's toes when it came to dating.

Before her hair had even stopped swinging, the actor was at the table leaning in for the kill. She turned all of her attention to him, leaving me to go buy myself another drink or to scrounge up a buyer while I waited for a chance to get near the guy in the corner booth.

A couple of drinks later I was in. His friends were funny and smart, the kind of people I wanted to be friends with, too. He introduced himself as David. He was tall for me, well over six feet, but he had dark curly hair like a Greek God and gorgeous eyes that crinkled in the corners when he smiled.

His friend turned to me, "Have you seen the movie *The Last Minute*?"

"No, I haven't, but my friend Zoe was just saying she saw it and she thought it wasn't that great. Edward Norton kind of scares me."

All the guys leered at David who laughed and looked at the ground.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

His friend pointed at him. "He wrote the book and the screenplay."

"Oh no, really? Oh God! That's awesome. I mean, even if it isn't that great that's awesome and I haven't even seen it, but that's huge! What an amazing accomplishment. How embarrassing. Congratulations. Seriously."

He shrugged, but I continued. "I've been thinking about trying to write something, a screenplay, maybe a western, you know, a way to Billy Bob Thornton my way into the business."

I wished I could time travel. I would go back an hour and start over. Now I had not only insulted this amazingly sexy and smart guy's work but I just revealed that I was a pathetic actress in a town full of pathetic actresses and that I was so deluded that I thought I could be a writer too. He must have been willing to overlook my idiocy because he asked for my number and gave me his.

I couldn't decide how I felt about the whole number thing. Why did guys ask and then not call? And if they gave you their phone number and didn't call, were you supposed to call them? That seemed overly forward and uncool, but then again, didn't they give it to you to potentially use? Were men who didn't call wussies or were they just not that interested, that was the question.

Still, I forced myself to wait and a few days later David did call. Then, on the day of our date he called again and said that he couldn't meet at the restaurant because he was waiting on a call with notes for a screenplay he had written for a Brad Pitt movie that was already shooting. He asked if I wanted to just come by his house.

I balked but I was pretty sure he wasn't a serial killer and I didn't want to lose the chance to get some momentum going before the little flicker of attraction burned out. So I drove to the west side to meet him. His house was a gorgeous updated castle on Mulholland Drive with a black Mercedes in the driveway. Inside, it was modernism done right, all sleek glass and steel and stone but not too sterile. The house was well furnished but it didn't seem like a decorator had done it. David showed me around and opened a bottle of beer. I commented on a photograph of his smiling family and he said he had the best family in the world.

“No, I’m sorry, that’s impossible because I have the best family in the world,” I joked. Then I felt stupid for arguing over whose family was better, even as a joke. I became acutely self aware, like I was a director analyzing the footage of this scene as it was being recorded. Shaking my head, thinking this actress isn’t right for the role. Not tall enough or smart or pretty enough for the leading man.

David stood next to me and reached down like he was going to kiss me but there was too much sunlight and it felt tawdry and low budget so I dodged him and circled the room again, retreating to the bookshelf and scouring the rows, finding books I loved and books I hadn’t read in equal numbers. Cormac McCarthy. Hemingway. Joyce.

“Oh, you have *House of Sand and Fog*, did you love it? That’s one of my favorites.”

The phone rang and David answered his crucial call and an hour or two later I gave up and waved goodbye. I saw myself out. He mouthed that he was sorry, but I didn’t mind the fact that he had work to do. I understood work being more important than just about anything else.

I was hungry. I wanted to be who he wanted and I also wanted what he had. I wanted my own money and success and an intelligent, attractive, creative, successful person who truly loved me but I felt like an astronaut trapped in a heavy spacesuit and stuck on earth staring at the stars so many light years away and impossible to reach.

David didn’t call. I broke down and called him a few times, leaving increasingly embarrassing messages until finally I gave up.

Chapter 6: Change of Rein

Control over a horse rests on a rider's ability to set up and maintain an opposition: The rider is able to commandeer the horse's energy by gently pushing the horse with the inside leg and receiving them with the outside rein. A change of rein is a horseman's term for a change of direction, when the horse and rider switch from one hand and leg to the other. A change of rein can be executed in the walk, trot or canter but just like turning a car, the more speed the horse carries the more difficult it is to continue in balance and control. Changing rein in the trot requires a change of diagonal at precisely the moment of straightness before the horse's bend is changed to the new direction. Changing rein in the canter requires a lead change, because when a horse canters, he "leads" with one front leg in a three beat gait. (Technically, the lead is misleadingly named, as it is actually the final beat in the three beats of the canter- the leg that strikes into the canter first is the outside hind, followed by the simultaneous movement of the outside foreleg and inside hind, and then the inside front.) A properly balanced horse 'leads' with the inside foreleg in the direction he is travelling, and therefore in order to stay balanced in the new direction he must change to the new lead. This can be done by downward transitioning through the walk or trot, in what is called a simple change, or by executing a skip step within the canter called a flying change.

Hailey teased the new horse's mane up into a bird's nest of hair and wrapped a handful of the remaining strands around the pulling comb and gave a yank. Luckily the new horse didn't seem to mind. "Did you hear where she got all her money?" Hailey asked, as she backcombed another section and jerked the hair out by the roots.

"No, where?" I untangled a polo wrap from a Gordian knot of clean laundry and folded the Velcro back toward itself before rolling the wrap up backwards.

"Her father was a big game show producer, like a bazillionaire. And her husband's a higher up at one of the Studios."

I took a sip of my Starbucks and glanced at the horse. "Holy crap, Hailey, leave the poor horse a little mane—he's not a polo pony." She already had a small mountain of horsehair at her feet.

"I know, but I don't want to have to pull his mane again. Rosey always makes me pull manes."

"Well there's got to be enough left to braid." I extricated another polo and finished wrapping it, tucking a corner of the end into the roll so it wouldn't come undone and tossing it back into the basket. "So what's the deal, Gillian's going to Indio with Rosey to get a horse, just like that?"

"I guess. Can you believe it?" Hailey shook her head.

The horse in the cross tie suddenly pricked his ears and we both turned to see what he heard. Within seconds, Freja's pitbull came jingling around the corner and a few minutes behind him, Freja appeared smiling her megawatt smile. "Hey!" She boomed in a heavy Swedish accent, "What are you doing here on your day off?"

“Enjoying the peace and quiet,” I said. “Rosey’s at Indio. We’re waiting on Kate’s new horse to get here.” Freja’s dog nosed my hand so I gave him a pat and he plopped down next to me and scratched at his neck with a hind foot. “You better watch out, Ray’s around and if she sees Tiny off leash she’s going to kill you.”

Freja looked back up the barn aisle at the dressage trainer’s office. “Oh, that reminds me! I have a new joke for you: What do dressage riders use for birth control?”

I laughed and shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“Their personalities!” Freja laughed so loud the horse in the cross tie danced a little, unsure about these crazy women.

It was happening just like I had hoped. A couple of lesson kids had finally bought the kind of horses that had enough training and jumping ability to go in the big equitation classes like the Maclay and the Medal, and now clients were getting competitive with each other. Rosey was so busy teaching and horse shopping that she sent me to Indio to help Amelia and her parents find a horse. I had never before gone horse hunting for a client—I had never even shopped for a horse for myself—plus I had never been to Palm Springs, except for the time I drove through on my way into Los Angeles, and I had never been to the sprawling ten ring horseshow so I had no idea where I was, but I was determined not to look like I didn’t know what I was doing.

Thankfully, Amelia’s parents drove their Lexus SUV and their navigation system got us to the showgrounds. Her dad was a handsome, salt and pepper haired Sylvie winning television producer, and her Mom was bright-eyed and teensy, like a little bird. They told me how Amelia had wanted to ride since she was a baby. They didn’t know

where she got the obsession since no one they knew rode, but the first noises she made were the clopping sounds of hoof beats and little clucks like riders make to encourage their horses forward.

I explained that when we got to the showgrounds we would look at a range of horses to get an idea of what was available and also so they could see what the different horses cost and think about what they wanted to spend. I hinted that we wanted something that Amelia could step into the ring on and show, not a long-term project, since she was already in high school and didn't have much time before her junior equitation years were over. Amelia was quiet, but she was practically vibrating with excitement and/or nerves. Trying new horses is scary—everyone is looking at you, and you don't want to fall off or screw up and embarrass yourself. You don't know anything about the animals you are sitting on and yet you have to put them through their paces—it's a little like I think girls must have felt when it came time to meet potential husbands for an arranged marriage. Maybe crossed with speed dating, I guess, since at least these kids get to try out and weigh in on the horses before they're stuck with them.

The facility was eighty acres of what was most of the year just empty field, but for a six weeks each winter turned into a gypsy camp with fields full of people, horses and dogs, covered with horse trailers, RVs, canvas barns, rings full of colorful jumps and a few office buildings. I marched off in the direction of the office buildings and the Grand Prix ring, reasoning that the top trainers would be stabled in the best neighborhoods. I called the couple of phone numbers Rosey had given me and I also improvised, stopping by and speaking to trainers that I knew would have nice horses. Amelia sat on a mare from Hap Hansen's barn that had a lot of scope but was really too

much horse for her. Then she sat on a grey gelding from Karen Healey that was broke to death but older and kind of boring (and super expensive.) Word was spreading quickly that we were a hunting party, like blood was in the water and sharks were coming to feed. Every trainer had another horse we should look at, if the one we were sitting on didn't work. Of course, every trainer tacked on another commission fee, so a fifty thousand dollar price tag inflated another five thousand dollars for every trainer that got involved, even if all they did was basically point across the arena. We watched a few more horses work, and Amelia rode another gelding that was not particularly noteworthy but seemed steady, and then we found Matinee Idol. A dark bay from Canada, he was only six years old but he jumped three and a half feet easily. He was a good size—he fit Amelia nicely and seemed to be reasonably quiet without being dead. And I could totally see myself riding him in the big hunter classes at the show during the week to prepare him for her on the weekend.

I talked to her parents about the difference between the greener but cheaper horses and the more trained, expensive horses. We talked about age, athleticism, soundness and resale value. I mentioned that they were also expected to pay a standard ten percent commission to Rosey on top of the purchase price for helping to find the horse.

They decided to pony up seventy-five thousand dollars for Idol. A few phone calls later and a veterinarian was scheduled to do a pre-purchase exam and, if there were no red flags or deal breakers, a shipper was scheduled to deliver the horse the following Monday.

The week flew by, with the usual riding and teaching, especially since I took a day off to do an acting job. It was actually a horse-riding gig. I had introduced myself to Peter Sherayko, whose company had provided a lot of the horses and equipment for one of my all-time favorite movies *Tombstone*. I loved westerns, and thought maybe I could Matt Damon and Ben Affleck my way in—they wrote *Good Will Hunting* and basically shot straight to the head of the line. Meanwhile I figured maybe I could get my foot in the door by using my horse experience. So when I visited Peter at his place and looked at all of his western memorabilia, we hit it off. I was genuinely interested in what he had collected and he seemed happy to talk about what he knew. He asked me if I wanted to work in a Korean Credit Card commercial and I jumped at the chance, so a couple of days later I drove out early to meet the crew and help saddle up my steed, a big hairy cowpony that didn't look like the same species as the polished prima donnas I had been riding. The set was Melody Ranch, in Santa Clarita, which had been Main Street for movie star cowboys since 1915. John Wayne, Gene Autry, Gary Cooper, and Roy Roger's boots had all scuffed the dusty boardwalk. It was mostly unpainted wood and looked like a ghost town, which surprised me because all the actual boomtowns had been spank new at the time. Funny how we think of the old west as old.

The commercial featured a pretty Korean Movie Star, who had a whole team of Korean makeup artists and handlers. The story was that she was the leader of a scary gang of cowgirls, and as we galloped into town the terrified townspeople withdrew into their homes and businesses, slamming their doors and closing their curtains. But we pull up in front of the general store, she whips out a pink credit card, and the merchants breathe a huge sigh of relief and throw open the doors to invite the cowgirls in to shop.

Since we weren't very identifiable galloping through fog machines in our cowboy hats and fringe chaps, some of the cowgirl gang also played townspeople. Several nodding, smiling women applied makeup and pressed Kraft services on us, as the film crew set up the next shot. It was certainly a change of pace from the routine I had already become accustomed to at the LAEC.

On Saturday, Rosey told me to clear a stall in the front row because the vet said that the hundred thousand dollar four-year-old Dutch Warmblood that Gillian had just bought had to have six weeks of stall rest since he had popped a splint in his left front leg. Apparently they learned this during the pre-purchase but bought the horse anyway since it wasn't a longterm threat to his soundness. Gillian was still a novice rider, so it was obvious that Rosey planned to ride and show the horse herself. I couldn't believe Rosey had encouraged her to buy a half-broke baby for that much money. Well she had six weeks to figure out how to break it to her millionaire client that she couldn't ride her own fancy new horse. But on Tuesday, when Rosey saw Amelia's big new dappled dark bay with an off center white star on his face, she promptly decided she was going to show him, too. And then she gave me a hundred dollar bill in an envelope with 'Thanks!' written in purple magic marker.

I did the math and the following Monday instead of spending my day off rearranging the arena and setting a new course of jumps to practice on, I drove all the way out to Azusa. Morning Meadow was so far inland from Los Angeles that I wondered how they had any clients, or at least any with money, but they consistently had jaw-droppingly gorgeous hunters. I expected sparkling white four board fencing but the

facility wasn't as fancy as the string of blue ribbons hanging over their elaborate horse show drapes had led me to believe. The barn was mostly plywood and pipe corral but there were a lot of handsome old oak trees, draping their little golden tassels all over the ground.

The farm owner was Kay Stryker, a mildly terrifying woman of indeterminate age who had a *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* look with peroxide blonde hair and an extreme facelift that indicated she could be anywhere from fifty to a hundred years old. I vowed to wear more sunscreen. And a hat.

Kay and the barn manager invited me into the office where their head trainer, a total leading-man type named Archer sat on a desk behind me, ominously tapping a crop against his riding boot. He was probably gay, almost all the hunter riders are, but I bet the women still wanted private lessons. Plus he was a machine in the show ring, I had watched him put in one flawless blue ribbon round after another, he was virtually impossible to beat.

I felt like a phony answering the interview questions, even though the answers were true. "Well, I love teaching and I love riding, so the perfect situation would be one where I got to do some of both, and of course, I would really like to be able to continue to work on improving my performance in the show ring," I simpered.

Archer stood up. I had really only ever seen him on a horse. I realized how tall he was as we all turned toward him. He smiled and it suddenly felt like I was standing in front of an air conditioner vent. "It sounds like you want my job, and that's not going to happen."

"Oh, no, um, of course not," I stammered. "I just want to ride and learn."

Working for people who knew what they were doing had to be better than working for someone who didn't, I thought on the way home, even if they might be a little touchy.

Thursday night Freja dragged me out with her to the Sunset Strip. She said she knew some people at the Sky Bar and we wouldn't have to wait in line. Going out with Freja was as bad for my romantic prospects as going out with Zoe, maybe even worse, since Freja was smoking hot, a foot taller than me, and twice as wild. At least I could count on Zoe to sit down and drink like a civilized person, but Freja liked to dance which meant I was on my own a lot of the time. Luckily the Sky Bar's best features were the pool and the view so most people just stood around the shimmering blue rectangle and looked out at the twinkling city lights below.

Freja's friends were always weird older men, *Goodfella* lookalikes with slick hair and business suits. Where did she find these guys? At least they were generous, buying drinks and inviting us up to the VIP rooms where there wasn't a line to go to the bathroom.

A couple of jack and gingers and the beautiful night opened up like a jewelry box. Everyone was a friend, all the women glittered and the men were appreciative. But hours later the night started to feel distorted and slow. The men were wolves, all teeth and tongues licking their lips. I was ready to leave but Freja went to the bathroom and came out sniffing and wiping her nose, screaming with laughter and wide awake. We moved to a party somewhere in the Hills. At least it was halfway back towards the Valley. I just wanted to go to bed but I didn't want to leave her and she clearly wasn't ready to go

home. Luke and Owen Wilson were there, I couldn't remember which one seemed like the nice one but when I met Owen I remembered it was Luke. Every time Owen said anything, I giggled—he sounded exactly like the surfer guy in the movies, plus he had the exact same nose. Then Freja was shouting over the music, she was smeared, screaming in my ear, she said Luke propositioned her in the bathroom. I tried to clarify: Owen or Luke? Surely it was Owen. Luke wouldn't do that, I thought, he was the nice one. It was almost dawn when we finally drove over the hill and back into the valley, cutting through Forest Lawn Cemetery and paying no attention to all those dead stars buried underground in their party clothes.

The next day I popped ibuprofen and rode my horses as slowly as possible to try to limit the painful aftereffects of the bruising that my brain had sustained the night before. By the end of the day I was recovered enough to agree to go with Zoe to Spago. I desperately wanted to go to bed but Zoe was assisting her photographer friend Lane who had a chronic crush on her, which was probably why he invited her since he didn't really need help, and also probably why she invited me to run interference. But it was a celebrity fundraiser at Spago, so I said yes. I met her at her new boyfriend Eric's house. (She had already moved in with the guy with the hair from the bar. It turned out he was an agent not an actor. Close, anyway.)

We drove together and got there early so we didn't have to be ashamed of my Oldsmobile in front of anyone when we gave the keys to the blue-jacketed parking attendants. The famous cursive name on the entrance was backlit and the greenery sparkled with tiny white fairy lights. The big dining room had a glass-domed roof and soon people started to filter in and stand in the corners while Zoe and I had a drink at the

open bar. Before long the room was jammed. Photographers lurked at the edges while famous people chatted in little clusters. Zoe was mostly there just to hang out, but she picked up a camera and took a few random photos.

An old man who had the same Tang colored hair sported by my infamous home state senator Strom Thurmond complimented me on my red hair. He introduced himself as Blue Zippers, then he laughed and told me his name was really Red Buttons. Zoe snapped a photo and her flash went off, and I felt all the eyes in the room turn. Another flash went off and in seconds the whole restaurant was exploding with light. A great looking actor I couldn't completely identify—Ryan Reynolds? Ryan Gosling? Ryan-Something, came over and shook the comedian's hand. Then he turned and took my hand and the paparazzi frenzy increased. The flashes were blinding, like firecrackers going off in every direction. I didn't know what to do so I just kept talking. I laughed at how all of these photographers thought I was some starlet that was about to break out. They weren't going to be able to figure out who I was or sell any of these pictures since, sadly, I was a total nobody.

But later when I saw Zoe's photos I thanked God I was a nobody—my star moment looked grotesque on film: in every picture my face was contorted, my mouth was twisted open, and my eyes were partially closed. Now I understood why the actresses on red carpets always stopped and posed like magazine models in front of the cameras. Talking is unbelievably unattractive caught in stop motion.

I was beginning to see just how important the camera was in being an actress. Since I had moved into Jessica's old rent controlled apartment near the equestrian center, I was taking a new acting class where I was forced to perform every other week, and

where every performance was recorded on a two camera set up, like a soap opera or a bad sitcom. I found out just how different what the camera saw was from what you thought the camera would see. It was sort of like hearing your voice recorded and then hearing it played back, or seeing a candid photo—only worse because with a photo you can tell yourself that’s not what you actually look like, it was just an awkward moment, but on video the awkward moment just keeps going. Some people who aren’t that attractive in real life look great on camera, but some people the camera just doesn’t take a shine to, and I was starting to see that I was one of the latter group.

I also learned what a huge difference music made. I had never noticed how much the sound underneath scenes filled in the blanks and created suspense or compelled the audience to feel sad or happy. Acting on camera without the benefit of movie magic showed just what a small part of the whole business acting really was.

The morning after my brush with fame was even more painful than the one before and I had to get up early to go to a horse show. Camelot Riding Club was a long drive north of LA. Rosey was horse show point chasing and she wanted me there at seven o’clock to help get kids into the ring for their morning classes since she was going to be busy showing Amelia’s new horse for the first time. After the kids were mounted and warmed up she sent me back to the Equestrian Center to teach the rest of the day’s lessons. She was in a lather because the pre-green division she was supposed to ride in hadn’t filled—it only had two entries and was going to be canceled unless another horse entered. When I left she was shooting off in her golf cart to find another horse to show.

A few hours later Amelia’s mom called me from the hospital and told me that Rosey had fallen off of the horse she had borrowed to fill the class. Apparently he had

stopped at a jump and she had taken a nasty spill. Now Rosey was raising hell in the hospital because the doctors wanted to cut off her riding boot and she wouldn't let them. They told her they couldn't pull the boot off of her leg because she had broken her hip. She insisted that they could hold her leg at the knee and pull the boot off. She was going to have to have surgery and a second hip replacement. She would probably never ride again.

I couldn't leave Rosey high and dry while she was stuck in the hospital and so I passed on the Morning Meadow job. When Rosey told me I would have to take over the show horses I told her that I wanted her to pay for me to take lessons with Sylvie once a week. We could hire Freja to do some of the extra riding. And we were going to need a new barn manager.

The next Monday I got to the barn early to set a new course in the arena then I tacked up Coppertone and warmed him up on a long rein for my first lesson with Sylvie. The Center was unusually quiet since all the barns closed on Mondays. As the chestnut trotted forward he looked around at the trees shaking their leaves, swaying and rustling like cheerleaders with pompoms. He snorted lightly at the jumps in their different places. After a few minutes I saw Sylvie's Mercedes pull into the parking lot and brought him back to a walk. She was immaculate as always, and exactly on time.

"Hi Lauren, how are you today?"

"I'm great, excited to be getting a lesson. Thanks for coming." I patted Coppertone's satin neck.

"How is Rosey?"

“She’s home, but I think it will still be a few weeks before she’s back on her feet.”

Sylvie nodded. “So you’re going to be doing the showing?”

“I guess so. And we’ve gotten a couple of new horses in, an equitation horse for Amelia and a Dutch Warmblood that Rosey found for a client but he has a splint so he’s on stall rest.”

“Hmm. Well that sounds interesting.” Sylvie walked to the center of the arena and started laying some poles on the ground for cavaletti.

“Let’s start with a working trot tracking left, and just go ahead and show me a lengthening of stride down the long sides of the arena and then collect and sit the trot on the short sides. After you’ve been around once you can do a change of rein across the diagonal and go the other way.”

Working with Sylvie was as amazing as I expected. She helped me fine tune my responses to what the horse was doing, never raising her voice or encouraging me to become aggressive the way Rosey did, but by asking questions that seemed almost like she was psychic. She taught me to sink in and wait with the horse to rock back and curl over the oxers, to use my rhythm to find consistent takeoff distances over the jumps, to supple my horse with more advanced flatwork like leg yielding spirals in and out, and shoulder-ins and haunches-in exercises.

At the end of the lesson Sylvie gave me a homework assignment. “I want you to start a riding journal to keep track of what you learn, and to start it off I want you to answer a questions for me. The question is: Why do you ride?”

I bought one of those sort of leather bound books that is so fancy you feel like you've spoiled the minute you write in it. I had never been able to keep up the habit of writing in a journal regularly but I thought about why I loved riding. Because it was outside in the sunshine, because it was exciting, because it was fun...but it was exciting because it was dangerous, and fun because it was challenging, because riding to me meant growing. Because horses were the most beautiful things I had ever seen and to touch one was a gift, to ride one was an art and to become partners with one was like finding true love. I finally decided that was why I rode—because riding was like making friends that I truly respected and admired and it made me feel honored to be in the company of a horse who agreed to trust and share their power with me.

Every week we met, usually on Monday to work without interruption. I would arrive early to redesign the course and make things more interesting. I even started paying for a second lesson with my own money, riding two horses back to back. And it paid off—High Noon was rocketing around the jumper courses and Coppertone was winning class after class in the prestigious first year green hunters, even edging out a lovely horse ridden by Rosey's archrival, the trainer next door who owned Rainbow's End Farm.

I hired a new barn manager, a brunette named Penelope who had a compulsion for organizing and the puppy-dog enthusiasm of someone who loves horses but hasn't ever worked in the horse industry. One day, Penelope answered the phone in the office and came skipping out to me in the ring. I was teaching the five o'clock lesson, slouching against the fence underneath a sunhat, shouting instructions. "Sitting trot—transition into

a collected trot and THEN sit,” I shouted. “And lengthen back to rising. Check your diagonal, Alex.”

“You are not going to believe who just called and set up a riding lesson!”

Penelope squealed and jumped up and down.

“Who?” I asked, still looking at the girls on the rail. “Amelia, close your fingers on the reins and straighten the line from your elbow to his mouth” I called. Amelia was struggling to transition from the robotic lesson horses to her new horse.

“Bianca Machado. Well, she didn’t call, her people did, but still!”

“Who?”

Penelope frowned. “The supermodel—she’s dating Leonardo DiCaprio!”

She instantly forgot about her disapproval of my ignorance and started jumping up and down again. “Can I teach her? Can I? Can I?”

“Sure, fine with me.” I knew from experience that no one would want to keep working here if I kept all the good horses and clients for myself. Plus, models were usually too wussy to be good riders. “When’s she coming?”

“Tomorrow!”

The next morning I wrote out the list and walked back to the feed room. “Jesus, can you tack up Boy Scout for two o’clock? And let’s give him a half cc—media, por favor.” Boy Scout was the only lesson horse tall enough for a six-foot supermodel. I couldn’t afford to have him running away with her on her very first ride. I handed the groom the list of fractions and times, and he pocketed it.

“Si, La Reina.” He said, perfectly straight faced.

Chapter 7: Distances

Finding a distance is the riding term for placement of the horse at the correct takeoff point for a jump. Expert jumping requires exceptional timing. Taking off for a jump too early means the horse has to reach to get across the obstacle, potentially resulting in a knockdown or a crash. Getting too deep makes it hard for the horse to get off of the ground before running into the fence. The bigger the jump, the less forgiving it is of mistakes. Optimal distances vary from jump to jump: oxers with wide gaps between the rails require deeper takeoff points so the horse can clear the spread, whereas verticals permit an earlier launch. The horse's arc, or bascule, should be centered over the fence. To find a good distance, horse and rider must develop a gallop with enough energy to compensate for the amount of energy the obstacle demands. The approach should be perpendicular to the center of the fence, and the horse must be held perfectly straight and balanced in a rhythm to, over, and away from the jump. These seemingly simple concepts require an exacting attentiveness to every momentary adjustment of terrain, environment, and the mental and physical states of both horse and rider.

I was riding a tiny Shetland pony with a poufy mane and fuzzy winter coat and I had to hold my feet up so they didn't drag on the ground then the pony morphed into a big roan stallion who refused to turn even though I leaned on the reins with all my strength as it ran away with me, around and around the arena, while the buzzer kept sounding that I was off course and everyone pointed and laughed. My mother was sitting in the grandstand shaking her head. The buzzer blared again and again—

My hand slapped at the alarm clock and finally the noise stopped. By then I remembered why my clock was going off even though it was still dark outside. The dream dissolved as I stumbled out of bed. Today was the riding clinic with Franklin de la Cruz, one of the few equestrians ever to compete internationally in multiple disciplines of equestrian sport: eventing, jumping and dressage. My stomach twirled. Maybe it was still galloping those nightmare laps. I ate a handful of chalky pink Pepto Bismals for breakfast while I yanked on a clean polo shirt and breeches, then hooked my boot pulls into the tabs inside my tall boots, pulling them up and lacing the ankles. I strapped on a short pair of Tom Thumb spurs since I didn't know anything about the horse I was riding. I didn't see why I couldn't use Coppertone, or for that matter any of the new equitation horses could have benefitted from the schooling. But Rosey didn't want me to, and if she was paying for the clinic I wasn't about to turn down the chance. I knew she had signed me up in the advanced group, but it was impossible to guess how advanced the section was actually going to be. I just prayed I didn't end up reliving my nightmare. At least I knew my Mom wouldn't be there.

After driving forever up the 101 and then snaking across the sheer cliff edge of Las Virgenes Canyon, my stomach was even dizzier. I pulled into the stable with only

about thirty minutes left to find the horse and warm up. The barn was nice but not as fancy as I expected, more rustic than grandiose. Then again, Malibu Barbie's bikini covered about all I knew about Malibu. I wrestled my hair into a hairnet. I had recently cut it myself with a razor to look short and choppy like Meg Ryan's, not realizing how hard that was going to make it to do the hunter swoop under my helmet. I bent over to carefully put on my helmet upside down so the hairnet wouldn't get pushed out of place. Then I called the number Rosey had given me. A weathered old woman's voice answered and told me she was parked in the back with a blue stock trailer.

The woman was smoking a cigarette with one hand while she held the cotton lead rope of a jittery, wide-eyed thoroughbred in the other. She coughed what sounded like a death rattle. It was even worse than I had imagined. The poor horse was bleached-out, unclipped and ewe-necked with jutting ribs. "I'll be back for him at 5:00" she said.

Rosey had sworn she was leasing me a seasoned jumper. Maybe ten years ago, I thought, swinging into the saddle, but it didn't take but a few minutes of warming up to know the horse had never been a show jumper. I couldn't ride in the clinic on this horse. I dismounted and ran up my stirrups, and led the horse over to the little clump of people surrounding the handsome grey haired Olympian.

Franklin shook hands with a man wearing one of those little Irish flat caps. He laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, releasing him and turning toward me. I fumbled. "Hi Mr. de la Cruz, I'm sorry, this is embarrassing. My name is Lauren and I just want to apologize and tell you that I think I am going to have to withdraw from the clinic." His eyebrows shot up and I hurried to explain, "my employer signed me up in the advanced section and she leased this random horse for the day and he is just totally

not capable of going in the jumper ring, I think we would be a disruption more than anything. I'm really disappointed but I just think it'll ruin everyone's day if I can't get this horse to do the work."

Franklin smiled encouragingly. "Oh, I'm sure he's not that bad. You'll be fine, give it a try!"

"It's that bad. I'm telling you, he's a mess. He must be off the race track—I can't even get him to take his right lead at the canter."

Franklin just snorted and motioned me toward the arena. I got back on the poor old bag of bones. Well, there was no escape now. I gave the horse a pat. "We're so screwed," I told him.

A few minutes into the lesson Franklin said, "How about I get on him for a minute." My face was scalding hot. I knew he thought I was incompetent. I had a vision of Franklin stepping gracefully into the saddle and instantly the horse was transformed: flexed and supple, powerful and controlled. He cantered off on the right lead and popped over a vertical and then galloped an oxer. He had me put the oxer up to five feet and the horse jumped it perfectly, folding his legs up tightly and arching into a perfect bascule.

"See Lauren?" he said, "Lauren?"

"Lauren?" Now Franklin was looking at me like I was crazy. "Ride in and I'll get on him."

He told the other riders to walk on the rail. I sat the trot to the center of the ring and dismounted. He quickly lengthened my stirrups four holes and bent his left leg. I knitted my fingers together and gave him a leg up. I don't think I breathed until he started

cantering and the horse struck off on the wrong lead. And again. And again. Thank God, Franklin couldn't do it either.

"Well," he said, "I think you're right. This one isn't going to work. But I believe Jeremy said he brought an extra horse," Franklin turned and looked to the audience and the man with the Irish cap stood up, nodding and already walking toward the barn.

"Are you willing to try another one?" he asked me.

"That would be amazing! Yes, I would love that!"

Five minutes later I found myself mounted on a big, gleaming Argentinian Warmblood.

At the end of the day, after thanking Jeremy profusely for loaning me such a nice horse, I approached Franklin again. "I had an amazing time—thank you so much for everything. I just wanted you to know that my employer only paid for one day so I didn't want you to think I didn't enjoy it when I wasn't here tomorrow."

"Oh, I'm glad you had fun, you're a good rider." He leaned in closer, "Listen, don't say anything to anyone but you can come back and ride tomorrow if you want."

"I can?"

"Sure, come on back."

"Thank you! Thank you so much."

The second day was even better than the first. The jumps went up and the turns got tighter, but the horse was more familiar and I felt more confident pushing the partnership. Afterwards there was a party at somebody's beach house. A grill was set up

in the backyard, which was green grass right up to a border of boulders where the ocean crashed rhythmically. What a perfect weekend. I couldn't imagine how anything could be better. I sat outside, sipping a beer and chatting with Jeremy, who was flirting with me and still wearing his Irish hat. It reminded me of the Sam Savitt illustrations in old horse stories. Jeremy's daughter had ridden in the clinic, (she was the one he had brought a backup horse for) and I wondered about her mother and if they were married or what. Then Franklin came and joined us and the two men joked around while I listened.

Jeremy went to get a burger and Franklin asked where I was from and of course then he asked if I knew Pete Chastain. I said that Pete had bought my horse before I moved out here. Franklin started telling a story about a horse show he was judging where Pete's daughter had fallen off of her pony. "Pete ran into the ring—I thought he was going to help his daughter up—she was still lying on the ground," Franklin said, laughing, "but he ran right past her and grabbed the pony's reins and punched the pony right in the face!"

"Oh my God," I said. "What did you do?"

"I told him he better put some space between himself and the steward before he got ejected from the show." Franklin chuckled.

"Was his daughter okay?"

"Oh yeah, she was fine."

Franklin was looking at me. Appreciatively.

He was definitely married.

My phone rang. "Excuse me," I said.

It was Penelope. “You have to get over here right now. We’re partying at Capital. Brian wants you to come meet the lead singer!” Penelope’s husband was a recording engineer at Capital Records. She’d been telling me stories all week about the band he was working with. I knew their music—you couldn’t turn on the radio for more than five minutes and not hear one of their songs, even though I didn’t own any of the albums.

“I’m in Malibu still, for the clinic.”

“Well leave!”

“Okay, I’m on my way.”

I sped all the way back over Las Virgenes, down the 101, and made a quick stop at my place to tug off the breeches and boots. It was a cool night so I pulled on jeans and a light sweater, and futzed with the tiny buckles on my new wedge heels. Penelope had dragged me into Neiman Marcus, or as she called it, Needless Markup. The clothes felt like they were custom made and I ended up putting a pair of outrageously expensive jeans, a Marc Jacobs bag, and a pair of Miu Miu platform heels that cost more a month’s salary on my credit card. The amount of money I blew through in one afternoon left me with an anxiety hangover for a few days but now I felt completely justified. These were just the kind of clothes a girl wore who hung out with Olympic athletes and rock stars.

There wasn’t time to do anything with my helmet hair so I just pulled it into two nubby pigtails and booked it over to Hollywood. I had never been inside the studio—a landmark building that looked like a big stack of records.

Brian met me out front, “Welcome to Crapital,” he joked, punching a code to open the big wrought iron gate. I parked in the tiny lot and we walked the circular hallways down to the studio where the band he had been working with was recording

their latest album. I stared at the poster sized black and white photographs of artists who had recorded there, superstars like Frank Sinatra and Billie Holiday. When we got down to the studio there was only a handful of people hanging at a bar set up in the back of the darkened room. There were black instrument cases stacked everywhere, and soundboards with hundreds of buttons and dials. Brian introduced me to the guys in the band and the roadies, and all of them seemed nice, but everyone seemed to be paying attention to the lead singer, tracking him even in the middle of whatever else they were doing. I wondered if it was because he was special or if he was unstable. Maybe both. He had deep dimples and luminous skin, and the sexiest voice I had ever heard in real life, sort of husky and warm and intimate. We all sat around and talked about music, and it wasn't long before Johnny and I were sitting on a piano bench together talking about songwriters.

“Well, I mean, the obvious choice would be the Beatles, I guess, but if you take them out of it, I don't know, um, maybe Otis Redding? He wrote “R-E-S-P-E-C-T” and Aretha basically stole it from him, right? And did he write “Satisfaction? I know he recorded it.” I was trying desperately not to be boring and stupid. Why didn't I take the time to do something with my hair?

Johnny shook his hair out of his face. “Mick Jagger and Keith Richards wrote Satisfaction, but that's a cool choice,” he said. “Come here,” he held out a hand. I took it and he led me down a hallway full of amps and trunks, moving boxes until he found the one he was looking for. He flipped open the latches on a case and showed me a burnished orange hollow body guitar.

“It’s gorgeous.” I said. He picked up the guitar, tuned it a little and played a few chords. I thought I wouldn’t even mind if he sang something, although I usually hated that awkward, forced-to-sit-patiently-in-silent-admiration thing that is the only acceptable response to someone playing a song for you.

“It’s the same color as your hair,” he said, putting the guitar back down and leaning closer. “You’re beautiful.”

I was speechless. Was this a joke? One time in middle school one of the junior varsity football players passed me a note asking me if I wanted to wear his jersey, something only the cheerleaders ever got to do. I checked yes and that turned out to be a humiliating mistake. Better to be wary, I thought.

"Do you expect me to fall for this song and dance?" I rolled my eyes and tried to look tough but not scary; I was shooting for Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not*, not Kathy Bates in *Misery*. "I'm not stupid, I bet you pick up girls like this every night."

He held my gaze. "Not at all. It's not like people think. Mostly it's just being bored and alone in random hotel rooms." Johnny took a deep breath and looked down, ran his hand through his hair, shaking his head like he was just waking up. “What a crazy night,” he said and put the guitar back in its case. The latches snapped shut.

I followed him back to the main studio and Penelope and Brian were ready to go. I would have stayed all night but I knew it wasn’t up to me. One of the roadies was driving Johnny home so we all spiraled back out of the building to the parking lot together. I lingered as long as I could but Johnny was talking to the others. Finally, I walked to my car, opened the door. I started the engine and turned back to look out the

back windshield and reverse out of my spot when there was a knock on the window. It was Johnny.

“Hey, would you—I wanted to see if I could get your number. Would you be interested in going out sometime or something?”

My heart exploded like a flock of birds. “Absolutely. I would love that.” I couldn’t believe the distance my life had travelled since yesterday morning.

The next day Penelope excitedly reported that Brian had said Johnny was really into me, that he had asked a bunch of questions about me and even that he said he couldn’t believe a girl like me would go out with a guy like him. “Yeah, a rock star is totally beneath me,” I tried to rein in my smile. Penelope said that one of the roadies had wanted to ask me out but Johnny told him he would give him one of his sisters if he would let him have me.

“When you get married, I better get to plan your wedding!” Penelope crowed.

I didn’t even complain to Rosey about the clinic—I just thanked her and told her I had a fantastic time. And I kept my phone close, checking it every few minutes just in case it didn’t ring.

It did ring later that afternoon with a Hollywood area code. I nearly dropped it and then fell off the horse after it, but managed to answer. It wasn’t Johnny, though, it was the casting company that had hired me a while back to do the music video where I met Zoe, calling me in to audition for a new music video.

So in the morning, still no call, I drove to Hollywood for the audition. The Walk of Stars was covered in litter and all the stripper-shoe stores and wig outlets were vacant.

The casting office was a nondescript building on the corner. I walked in and handed my headshot to a guy who directed me into a small empty closet with two plastic chairs, a video camera and a cd player. “So, they’re looking for a sixties go-go dancer vibe here, you just stand right there at the tape on the floor and when I play the song just improvise some dancing, okay?”

“Wait, what?” I asked. “I’m not really a dancer.”

He looked blankly at me and then down at his paper. “We have you down on our list of dancers.” He looked back up, “The director picked your headshot out, he’s not seeing many girls for this one, so it should be a lock.” He shot me a thumbs-up.

“But, really, I’m not a dancer.” I glanced at the exit sign. This was a horrible mistake.

“Well, apparently you were paid as a dancer on the last thing you did.” He glanced at his papers and shrugged. “You know, just do like the swimming underwater thing.”

That goddamn turntable! That was why they paid me as a dancer, because I was chosen to walk on the turntable in that stupid music video. The guy was already pressing the play button, he was standing up to focus the video camera. I was cold. My fingers felt numb. I wasn’t a dancer!

The guitar twanged and then a man’s voice started singing about flowers on the wall. I immediately recognized the song as a remake. All I could think of was some weird Quentin Tarantino roadhouse movie with vampire go-go dancers. I wished it was dark. Like pitch black dark. The song was already hitting the chorus and I was just standing there impersonating a scarecrow, so I started shimmying and singing along. I did the

scuba diver thing like the guy suggested, then made a V-shape out of my fingers turned sideways and moved them across my eyes like I was a bandit or something. Who invented that brilliant move? I wondered which was worse—to not be dancing when you were supposed to be dancing or to dance so badly they wished you weren't.

A couple seconds later the guy finally cut off the camera and turned off the music. I could tell he was thinking, “She wasn't lying, definitely not a dancer.” That was probably my last audition for this casting office.

“Okay.” He said. “Thanks.”

I grabbed my bag and race-walked to the door.

“Wait—how did you know the words?” he asked. “The song hasn't even been released yet.”

“It's an old song.”

That night Zoe called and invited me to visit her in Brentwood and go to a party. I was sick of moping around thinking about Johnny, who still hadn't called, so I agreed to meet her at her boyfriend's apartment.

She introduced me to an agent friend of her boyfriend who obviously was supposed to be my date. We walked a few blocks to one of those restaurants that sort of magically turns into a club at a certain point of the night and then Zoe proceeded to get violently drunk. She must have been becoming aware, in that way that you sometimes know before anything is ever said out loud, that her boyfriend was starting to peel with his fingernails at the sticky edges of their relationship. I got drunk too, in solidarity and to try to spin the night into gold, but it was doomed.

We lost her boyfriend and his pal at some point, but eventually we staggered back to his condo. It was a pretty fancy apartment, very East Coast money, successful grown up vibe—there was a lot of glossy mahogany looking furniture and even a heavy gilt-framed Hampton Classic Horseshow poster. Then Zoe started crying, which I attributed to drunkenness and clumsily tried to smooth over. All I really wanted to do was lie down and close my eyes—I was planning on spending the night, but Zoe went completely off the rails.

“Why doesn’t he love me?” she kept asking. Zoe’s mascara was bleeding down her face, and she looked like she had just seen someone strangle a puppy.

I shook my head and said I didn’t know. I started digging in my purse for my toothbrush.

She cried harder and then suddenly she started screaming like a mental patient and that was when she started throwing things. She broke some dishes, which seemed like not enough bang for the buck, and then she shattered a couple of very expensive looking crystal vases. Broken glass everywhere. I just watched, pie eyed, not sure what to do until Zoe cut herself on one of the shards. I hugged her to try to comfort her, but also to keep her from throwing anything else, and mostly to keep her from taking a swing at me. She was dripping tears, blood, snot...She just fell against me and sobbed. She was hoarse from screaming, but she kept asking over and over in this broken, gravelly voice, “Why doesn’t he love me?” Breathless, with this dazed wonder, like she had a concussion: “Why doesn’t he love me?”

I really didn’t know why he didn’t love her. She was unbelievably gorgeous, smart, athletic, perfect really. Secretly, I found solace in that: if Zoe couldn’t find

someone to love her, then it was totally understandable that I would have trouble, too. Maybe I was also a tiny bit smug. I could see that she gave away too much of herself, too quickly, and like anything that costs too little she kept finding herself thrown away.

“I don’t know, but you probably better come with me. I don’t think we should stay here tonight.” I wasn’t sure how her boyfriend would handle coming home to a huge mess of broken glass. I helped her put some of her things in a bag and bundled her into my car.

I was concentrating on staying between the blurry lines on the freeway when Zoe decided she wanted to go back. Squinting, I turned down the radio. There seemed to be more lines than normal.

“We’re halfway home, we’re going to spend the night at my place.” I told her.

“I want to go back.” She had her hand on the door handle.

“What are you doing”—

Zoe opened the car door. We were on the 101 and I could see the cement river rushing underneath us.

“Zoe! Goddamn it! Close the fucking door!” Cold air felt around inside the car. A piece of paper blew out the door.

She unbuckled her seatbelt. “I’m getting out. I want to go back.”

“Fuck!” I was weaving all over the mostly empty lanes. “Close the door! Fuck! What are you doing?”

“Going back.” Zoe was swaying, leaning toward the open door as the wind whipped her hair across her tearstained face.

I had to get this situation under control. I didn't have time to reason with Zoe. She was going to jump out and kill herself and I was going to go to jail for DUI and manslaughter, if I didn't wreck the car and kill us both first.

I turned and faced the road. "Fine. Jump. Go for it. But I'm not stopping and you're going to die."

I stomped the accelerator and the car lurched forward. The door clicked shut. Zoe sat quietly back into her seat and I focused on getting the rest of the way home, praying the door would stay closed, that Zoe wouldn't lean on it or fall out, that the cops wouldn't notice me, that tomorrow would be another day.

The next morning, I retraced my steps and drove Zoe back to Brentwood. I had promised that I would take her back to the apartment to get the rest of her things and that she could stay with me as long as she needed to. Her boyfriend still hadn't called and she was determined to clean up the mess she had made at his place the night before. I thought she should just let him handle it, it was all his fault for being a jerk anyway. Plus, he had a maid. She had left probably hundreds of messages apologizing and begging him to call. But I was supposed to have a lesson with Sylvie so I dropped her off and headed back to Burbank. Johnny hadn't called either.

I decided to ride Gillian's new horse Pilgrim in the lesson since I was going to be showing him soon in the Pre-Greens. He had finished the stall rest and his splint was healed. I had been hacking him to get him fit again but this would be my first time jumping a course. I was hungover and nervous. I wasn't sure exactly why he had cost a

hundred thousand dollars—he wasn't the nicest mover ever, although he had a pretty, sweeping trot and a nice canter. He was not very big, which meant his stride was a little short, so he had to really gallop to cover the distance between jumps and get down the lines. From what I could tell, he had a straight, neat jump but it wasn't the sort of flashbulbs-popping, magazine cover style like Coppertone had. At least he didn't seem to have Coppertone's stop.

The lesson was a disaster. I missed every distance, holding out of the corners and picking at Pilgrim, adding strides to a deep jump or overcompensating and gunning him forward to a big takeoff. At least he knew how to pat the ground in a pinch.

I groaned. "I keep chipping in to the verticals. It's my fault, I just can't find the right stride."

Sylvie looked at me quizzically. "Where did this horse come from?"

"Rosey got him at Indio, he came from Morgan Thomas, I think."

"Ah. That's part of your problem. You have to be really careful buying from people like that—Morgan has a really great eye for distances and he's a master of making a green horse look more trained than he really is."

I sniffled, on the verge of a breakdown. "I don't want to screw him up," I mumbled. The truth was I was intimidated. All the horses I had ridden were salvaged—I was so busy reclaiming them I never had to worry about messing them up.

Sylvie gave me a sharp look. "Let's try something different. I want you to do the same course, only this time I want you to ride as if you're someone else, someone you've seen ride and you think is really good. You're an actress, right? This is a chance for you to work with those skills—imagine you're this rider, think of what she looks like, what

she is thinking, what she feels like. Then go out there and jump the course as that person.”

I knew who I would be before Sylvie finished her sentence. Nicole Simpson had been a top equitation rider as a junior and it showed in her flawless position. She was an ice queen in the tack, elegant and quiet. On the landing side of the huge Grand Prix jumps, when most riders looked like ragdolls being bounced around, she looked like Tinkerbell, floating on air. These three-foot jumps would be poles on the ground to her.

I took a breath and raised my chin, sinking deeper into my heel and lifting my ribcage into her elongated frame. I coolly touched my heels to Pilgrim’s side and he immediately struck into a trot. I moved him up to a balanced, lengthened canter and approached my first jump, finding it flawlessly, and every one after that too. When I was finished I trotted in to Sylvie.

She was beaming. “That was the best I have ever seen you ride. Who were you riding as?”

“Nicole Simpson,” I said, grinning.

“What’s important here is to realize that it was you doing that riding—you are that talented, that wasn’t Nicki. You’re already there. You just need to believe it, and your mind is holding you back. There are a couple of books you should read that will help you with the sports psychology element. Riding is very much about your state of mind. I would recommend *The Inner Game of Tennis* and another book called *Peak Performance*. We will continue to work on this, but the main thing is to realize that you already have the technical skills you just have to trust in your own ability.”

As I walked Pilgrim back to his stall, Jesus tapped me on the shoulder and told me that Amelia's new horse Idol was limping. He had just come in from the turnout. I asked him if he had seen anything happen and he shook his head, but I also knew that Rosey had told the grooms to chase the horses in the turnouts to make them tired.

Dr. Grey pulled up an hour later and I trotted Idol down the aisle while he observed. We went back to the cross tie and Dr. Grey pulled out the x-ray machine. We strapped on the heavy lead aprons and gloves that were exactly like oven mitts and I held the horse still while he snapped pictures of the bones inside of his hoof.

Chapter 8: Give and Take

A horse and rider become a single unit through the give and take of energy—the rider must take the energy of the horse through the reins and then give it back through their legs and seat. This push and pull creates an energy circuit called impulsion, and focuses the horse's forward drive over his hindquarters, which the rider can then modify and direct. Impulsion only exists where it is contained, which is why a horse that is running away with the rider has energy but not impulsion, and is more likely to crash or refuse a jump. Of course the task is to develop the appropriate amount of energy for the job at hand. This is where riders are separated by talent, technical skill and training, above and beyond the talent and ability of their horses. The degree of impulsion is necessitated by the size of the jumps and also the related distances between obstacles. A big oxer, for example, depletes the horse's forward momentum and if that is followed by another jump set on a long distance from the first, the rider must be able to generate energy between the jumps or risk faults.

I invited Amelia to breakfast at Denny's the next morning. It was near the Equestrian Center and quiet enough for her to cry if she needed to—I knew I would. Plus breakfast food just seems like it makes anything more bearable. There's an inherent cheerful optimism in eggs and hashbrowns, pancakes and coffee. We slipped into a corner booth, sliding across the padded vinyl cushions. Amelia's eyes were red and swollen. Her pale skin was blotchy. I gave her a big hug and we both immediately started to snifle.

The bones in a horse's hoof are stuck between a rock and a hard place. Nestled underneath all of that musculoskeletal weight being pounding into the earth with every step is the tiny little Navicular bone. X-rays showed that Idol's Navicular was broken in half. It could heal to some degree but it probably wouldn't ever be strong enough to withstand the exponential forces of jumping and landing.

"I'm so sorry sugar." I hand her a paper napkin and pull another one out of the dispenser. Her parents already made it clear that they wouldn't be spending another hundred thousand dollars.. "I've already talked to your parents a little and it sounds like the insurance company will only pay out if you guys surrender Idol to them."

Amelia nodded. "But they'll probably put him down," she said, fresh tears spilling out of her eyes.

"Well, that's why your parents have agreed for us to rehab him. Dr. Grey says he'll need at least six weeks of stall rest. I've already talked to Vince and he said he'd be happy to work on him some to keep him comfortable, and he's going to show you some things you can do to bodywork him too. Oh, and I almost forgot—I got you a book."

I handed her a book on equine physical therapy wrapped in brown paper. She unwrapped it and flipped through a few pages. “Don’t worry, we’ll get him better and find a good home for him.” I said. “I really do believe that things happen for a reason, it’s just hard to know what the reason is when you’re in the middle of things. But the Universe has a plan for you, and so do I. You’re going to be good rider, damn it, so we need to find something for you to ride. I’ve talked to Rosey and she’s given permission for you to try Coppertone.”

Amelia finally looked up. “Really?”

“Yes, but I have to warn you, he’s not easy. He’s sort of a wussy and he’s got a nasty stop, but he’s also got a phenomenal jump and he’ll make you into a great rider. Want to go give him a try?”

“Right now?”

“Why not?”

So Amelia started working with Coppertone and a new routine developed. The high school girls wanted to ride in the mornings so I took over their lessons. I insisted that they tack up their own horses for the lessons since they had to be in the tack and warmed up at 6:00 and the grooms didn’t come in to work until 7:00. I made them wear breeches, boots and hairnets for the lessons so they looked like the top riders they wanted to become. I quizzed them on horse care and basic horsemanship, and when their polo wraps were backwards or lumpy they had to get off and redo them. They learned to bandage their horses after hard jumping schools. The results started to show as they moved up to the medal classes and began earning good ribbons. All of the lessons I was

learning from Sylvie I passed directly on to them—breathing and counting in rhythm, improving the horse’s elasticity and suppleness, centering the bascule of the jump, even the sports psychology that I was working so hard on for myself. I taught them about mantras and cautioned them if they were worried about falling off to visualize staying on, explaining that their subconscious mind didn’t understand the negative so even if they were thinking “I hope I don’t fall off” they were still picturing falling off in their head, and their subconscious would be working toward exactly what they were trying to avoid.

I spent nearly every waking hour at the barn, even on my day off, which was good because my one bedroom apartment was full of Zoe’s stuff. She was still depressed about her asshole boyfriend, and the amount of time she spent in the bathroom doing her hair and makeup was borderline appalling. She could have earned a doctorate with all that time. She slept on my loveseat most nights, but a few nights a week she stayed at the Hollywood mansion where she was now working as one of the nannies for an aging rock star’s kids with his second or third blonde model wife. She was entertaining to have around, though. She had some great stories about her various employers in Hollywood and also about her hilarious dates—she had just gone out with one guy who was the brother of a famous actor and the whole way to the restaurant his car alarm was going off. The cops pulled him because they thought he had stolen the car, although they quickly backed off when they realized he was the brother of a big deal. Zoe had even worse luck with men than I did.

Sometimes on a restless night, I would bicycle over to the barn and sneak out with Coppertone for a midnight trail ride. I had the combo to the tack room so I would just grab a bridle and swing up bareback and let him stretch his long legs in their perfect,

precise cadence around the perimeter of the Equestrian Center. Those night rides kept me centered, reminding me of Cinderella and South Carolina, of the woods and the dark, primal connection horses gave me to myself.

It was a good thing I wasn't getting too many auditions, because the barn was booming. Vince was a regular fixture, working on the horses at least once a week, swapping movie lines and telling his own endless stories about his years working for Eddie Nash at the Starwood, his body building friends, his fight choreography for movies, his SWAT team mishaps, and seemingly every other career or adventure known to man. His favorite was the one about going to visit some friends on a movie set which turned out to be a porn film and of course they begged him to star. He was such a talker that he never seemed to finish the list of horses. Even Chuck grumbled that he would have to be a hundred and fifty years old for all of his stories to be true. I laughed, since the farrier could talk a blue streak too. I tried to make sure they were never scheduled at the same time or nothing would get done at all.

Penelope quickly worked Bianca up to buying a horse. It probably helped that the six-foot Amazon was too tall for all of our school horses although she certainly wasn't too heavy. She actually seemed like a really nice person, surprisingly smart and funny. I let Penelope carry on with her since she seemed to be doing well, although despite her total reorganization of the office and the tack rooms she didn't seem to ever get the show entries done or the phone calls returned. Rosey typically showed up late, limped around and watered the plants, taught a few lessons, returned a few calls and always somehow made a huge mess of things before going home again.

One day Vince was fixing my neck and talking my ear off, when Penelope appeared around the corner, marching with a purpose.

“—and the guy asked if he could ride along with us on the bust and we said sure, so when we got to the crackhouse, I told him to go around to the back window where I thought he would be safe and out of the way. So the guy’s crouched under the window, and we start breaking down the door but the one of the drug dealers inside freaks out and throws his gun out the window, and it hits the guy on the head and knocks him unconscious!”

Vince was a little more animated then I wanted him to be while he was working on my neck so I just smiled slightly. Penelope stomped over and stared pointedly. She had on the crisp white oxford she wore every day, a habit that I had started copying since sunscreen just didn’t hold up for twelve hours of dirt and sweat, and reapplying just never seemed to happen in real life.

“The horses are going to be here any minute,” she said. “Are you planning to come see them?”

“Absolutely, give me just a minute.” I said, as Vince pulled me up into a sitting position and patted my head sweetly. I said thank you and “I’ll be back” in my best Arnold Schwarzenegger, and walked to the office to get my phone and hat while Penelope barked at my heels like a bossy little Jack Russell.

“You agreed that I get to ride Bianca’s horse, right?” she asked for the third time that week.

“Fine with me.” I nodded and reached up and redid my ponytail as we walked out to the ring. Since Freja and I did most of the riding Penelope felt like she wasn’t getting

exciting enough horses, but the truth was I thought she wasn't really skilled enough to handle the tricky ones like High Noon or Coppertone, who sensed every shift in energy. It takes a resilient horse with a strong training foundation to teach a rider to jump. The horse needs to be solid in its mind to cope with a rider who is inconsistent or error prone—and every intermediate rider is. The stakes have to be kept low so that mistakes aren't catastrophic. Like people, horses can only be lied to so many times before it takes a toll, and like people, their individual personalities make them more or less easy to get along with. At a certain level of performance, a jumper has to have a solid connection or they will quickly lose confidence and/or have an accident—if the rider is all give and no take, the horse will run around too fast and unorganized, jumping off their front end and swimming over the jumps, until the inevitable crash. If the rider is all take and no give, the horse will feel like they are towing around a dead weight and will lose energy, heaving themselves over the jumps until their good will runs out and/or the inevitable crash.

I gave Penelope a few horses to ride every day but she was a strange mix of outrageously bold and yet curiously disconnected—she was like a musician who tried to make up for poor technique with volume. I was careful not to hurt her feelings but worried that she didn't know how much she didn't know. Her impatience to prove herself could cause a wreck that could get her hurt and ruin a horse. So when the two horses that Penelope was deciding between for Bianca arrived, I had to take a deep breath.

Both horses were big, gorgeous, imported Warmbloods, each one priced around a hundred grand. I would have loved to ride either one. Both were less than five years old and competing in the young jumper divisions, already jumping four and half feet. Bianca

was a beginner rider who hadn't jumped so much as a crossrail yet and who made her living off of her spectacular* (*not smashed up) face and body.

"Penelope, I'm not sure Bianca could ride either of these horses without getting killed." I wasn't sure Penelope could ride the horses, either.

A cloud crossed her face, and her voice got higher. "Well, I'll be working with the horse most of the time, she can only ride a couple of times a month at the very most. We can put him on the list if we have to."

I immediately regretted telling Penelope about the list and started to say she was being idiotic, but we stopped talking as Bianca stepped to the arena fence and waved. Her big sunglasses and plain t-shirt did nothing to hide her impossible figure, although she didn't have the sort of knock down beauty I had expected after seeing her ubiquitous magazine ads.

"I am so excited!" She laughed. "I hardly can keep my car on the road I am so excited. Which one do you like?" She asked me.

"The dark bay looks a little quieter." I said.

Penelope smiled triumphantly. "His name is Royal Win."

Within a few weeks, things were going to pieces. Penelope was struggling to control Royo, as we nicknamed him, (it was that or Winnie) and in the one lesson Bianca had taken he bolted with her and ran full speed around the ring until she finally fell off. Luckily she wasn't hurt badly and she was only going to have time for one more lesson before leaving the country for a few weeks.

The next afternoon when Bianca came, she brought her boyfriend Leonardo DiCaprio. Leo was much taller than I ever would have guessed, for some reason I thought he was little, maybe because so many movie stars are—when I met Jean Claude Van Damme I was confident I could beat him up all by myself, and I would have if he had been staring at my chest the way he was staring at the overinflated, unbuttoned top of the woman next to me. But she seemed to be okay with it.

Anyway, Leo was a big guy, and he was a lot slouchier and paler than I imagined, but his *Titanic* presence swept through the stable faster than a barn fire and little girls were peering around every corner. Amelia was tacking up Coppertone in the crossties and coolly ignored him, after giving me a surprised look. Jesus had already saddled up Royo, who was waiting in the other crosstie, and based on the horse's sedate expression I was sure Jesus had remembered the list.

"Here is my new horse—oh he looks so sleepy today!" Bianca said, as she kissed the horse on the nose. Leo stood back with his hands in his pockets.

"He was not sleepy last time I rode him!" she laughed. "I have to change my boots." She said, pointing to her flip flops.

"Change into your boots," Leo corrected her.

Why do we always love the losers, I thought and headed to the arena to teach my girls, who had switched back to afternoons for the fall. As I walked to the ring I was intercepted by Rosey.

"Lauren, come here for a minute, I want you to meet Chet." Rosey was sitting in her golf cart with a skinny guy wearing glasses and holding a leather-bound notebook. He stepped out and extended his arm, so I walked over and shook hands with him. He had

the kind of soft handshake that instantly irritated me, the dainty little clasp that suggests that as a woman I am too delicate to get a real handshake, so I squeezed extra hard.

“Chet is a business advisor. He’s going to help us bring the barn up to the next level,” Rosey said.

“Great! That sounds great.” Where did she find this guy? He was wearing a tailored three-piece suit with a pink pocket square. At a stable. “Are you an accountant?”

“No, but I’m taking some classes and I want to help Rosey with her life goals.” He answered, like he was her fairy godfather. Well, he was probably a fairy, at least.

“Are you a rider? Have you worked in the horse business?” I asked.

“No, but a good friend of mine in Colorado is a Grand Prix Rider so I have some familiarity with it.” His glasses glinted.

Something smelled off to me but Rosey’s attention span was already taxed by such a lengthy conversation so she punched the golf cart into drive. “I want you to let Chet spend some time with you so he can help us transition to the next level!” she shouted over her shoulder as she spun off toward the office.

It’s too bad in real life we can’t see the plot points that mark the moment when things take a turn, until it’s way too late.

Every day was spinning faster and faster, on the Days of Our Barn soap opera. I couldn’t get over all the swag the barn clients showered on me rear round: a gift bag with a spa certificate for showing their horse, a fancy candle, a Kate Spade purse, an Ariat puffy vest just because it was getting cooler...But Christmas was amazing. Gillian gave me five hundred dollars towards a pair of Vogel boots. My other clients pitched in another five hundred and for the first time in my life I was going to have a pair of custom

made riding boots. Rosey gave me a new Grand Prix hunt coat for horse shows. I gave Rosey several books on riding, including copies of the German training handbooks that Sylvie had introduced me to, *The Principles of Riding* and *Advanced Techniques of Riding*, along with a really great book called *Winning Ways* that had descriptions of different riding lessons from top equitation coaches all over the country. I told her I wanted to read it when she was done.

One of my students, an entertainment lawyer named Paul, gave me a signed copy of William Steinkraus's book *Reflections on Riding and Jumping*. Paul had been Rosey's client for years, content to lease school horses and ride once a week. She called him an evergreen when he wasn't around, but he was a hard worker and he seemed to really enjoy riding. We finally persuaded him to buy a horse and within a week or two of starting the search they had found a very nice prospect that seemed to have the right temperament. They tried the horse at a show, and I told Paul I thought that it was a very good fit, but he had just started looking and wasn't quite ready to spend the money. The price tag on the horse was not cheap, but the horse was a rare combination of big, fancy and utterly bombproof. Apparently Paul thought he was car shopping so he made a very lowball offer. I suggested the offer was too low and it was insulting, but he insisted that it was where negotiations should start. I tried to explain that the horse was priced fairly and that it wasn't like an automobile where there were a million other makes and models. I was worried it was a slap in the face and made us look like jerks. Rosey called the sellers and sure enough they were pissed off to get an offer that was less than half their asking price. They sold the horse within the day to someone else. Fast forward through six months of comparing every horse to the one he passed up, and Paul began to realize that

he had already found the right horse and missed his chance. He got more and more frustrated. Just after Thanksgiving he presented me with a blank check.

“I don’t want to go over thirty thousand dollars, and I want a horse by the end of the day.”

“Whoa, Paul, I can’t just get a horse for you without your input”—

“Seriously, I want a horse by the end of the day, I’m sick of shopping. You know what I need.”

I actually kind of understood. Horse hunting was a little like car shopping in that at a certain point the process is just overwhelming and what starts as a series of fantasies—winning the jumper class on this beautiful bay—winning the medal finals on this grey—winning the hack and the hunter division championship on this chestnut—eventually dissolves into a long nightmare of paralyzing decisions and ultimately, a terrifying commitment to an uncertain future.

So I walked next door to the trainer at Rainbow’s End and made an offer on a big goofy Mecklenburg Warmblood gelding that an adult amateur had been riding badly and winning with—a total seeing-eye dog. We set up a vetting and by the end of the day Paul had a horse for Christmas.

Just before I finally flew home for the holidays, Amelia invited Vince and me to see her dance in her high school production of the Nutcracker. She went to one of those ultra exclusive private schools, so it shouldn’t have surprised me that they had a ballet program with enough dancers to stage a whole performance. When Amelia danced the sugar plum fairy role on pointe I was amazed at the talent and grace of my serious little rider. Hugging her afterwards I felt like a proud mother.

My mother and father met me at the airport and since it was still pretty early in the evening we went out for dinner to one of our favorite restaurants. The restaurant was an old motor supply company and it was tucked behind an art gallery. As we walked through we looked at the unique artwork—gorgeous watercolor multimedia shadowboxes. I was smitten with a small horse made of a pastel pink wash of color and inlaid with pieces of glittering mica and copper wire shaped to suggest a landscape. There was a tiny, penciled title buried in the rocks. It was ephemeral and beautiful and I wanted it badly. It was well beyond my finances but I was ready to plunk down the plastic immediately.

“Lauren,” my dad laughed, “you have a champagne appetite and a beer budget.”

“Lauren, you can not be serious,” My mom scowled. “You don’t have the money!”

I was ready to go to battle, even knowing Mom was cueing up a lecture about the importance of saving money for emergencies and retirement, but Dad somehow kept us from wrestling in the street and got us into the restaurant. During dinner Dad distracted me from my plot to break in and steal the painting by mentioning that he had worked on the home of a woman in Camden who owned horses and she had invited me to come to a clinic she was hosting after Christmas.

“I think it was Anton something. Is that someone you’ve heard of?” Dad asked.

“Anton Something. Anton Webber?” Several people turned to look at me. I think food might have fallen out of my mouth. “Are you kidding? He’s the Olympic Equestrian Team Coach. He’s the most famous riding instructor in the world. Oh my gosh, yes!”

I was getting everything I wanted, I even got the gorgeous little painting from my parents for Christmas. When I opened the package, expecting a book from the size and shape of it, I burst into tears. I couldn't believe my luck.

But it didn't take long for me to question my good fortune when it came time for the clinic. What was I thinking? I was borrowing my sister's old saddle, which was an antique already and made out of some kind of smooth bridle leather that was so slippery it felt like it had been lacquered with Show Sheen. I was wearing an old pair of tall boots leftover from high school. I was borrowing a horse I had never even sat on, and he was a stallion so if I fell off he was probably going to run around raping all the other horses. And I was doing this all in the advanced division in front of the most famous and famously mean riding instructor in history. I was a luckless moron.

I walked past a couple of girls who were leading immaculately groomed horses toward the arena. I recognized Pete Chastain's daughter, but I didn't know the girl that was talking to her. I knew who they were talking about, though.

"...and one year he made a girl get off and roll in the dirt. She was wearing a sparkly sweatshirt, remember when everyone had those sweatshirts with like glitter and puff paint? He was offended because what she was wearing was too nontraditional so he literally made her get off and roll around in the arena mud..."

Oh God. At least I was wearing a dark navy blue sweater with my boots and breeches.

Just then the trainer who was loaning me the stallion found me and handed me the reins. The horse was a cresty dark bay with a kind eye.

“He’s a good horse, doesn’t even know he’s a stallion. He’s fox hunted, he’s done the shows. He won’t give you any trouble.” He had a pad and girth ready so he tossed the flat little saddle onto the horse, buckled the girth straps and cupped his hands before I could invent an excuse to run away. I bent my leg and he lifted me onto the horse’s back. “Have fun.”

I had a blast. Anton worked the group hard, we dropped our stirrups, we practiced the automatic release, we jumped a grid and then cantered a long approach across the diagonal to a big single oxer. I tried so hard I thought blood might trickle out of my ears. Mr. Webber noticed. “I like this girl. She’s a tryer. When I say for her to do something, she gets it done,” he proclaimed to the small audience of auditors, parents and riders gathered shivering on the bleachers next to the ring.

“I was never the most talented rider, but I was ambitious” he said. “I paid attention. I read books. I worked at riding, and I still do.”

Towards the end of the lesson he set a huge triple bar, it looked like it was at least four feet high on the back rail. Skylar Chastain was the first to jump it, flawlessly of course. Then the guy on the wild chestnut, the trainer on the big grey, and then the stallion and I sailed over. I patted the wonder horse on the neck and breathed a sigh of relief. Then Anton put the jump up and spread it out even wider. We all filed through again, and then Anton raised it again and we jumped it again. It was unbelievably scary and thrilling. When Anton Webber tells you to jump a three-story building, you go jump over the three-story building.

After helping to put away the stallion and thanking the trainer, I walked back to say goodbye to Mr. Webber.

“Thank you so much for an amazing day.” I said.

“You did a nice job.” He said. “Are you from Camden?”

“I am, but I live in Los Angeles now. I’m only home for Christmas.”

“Oh, what took you out to LA?”

“Well, I moved out to be an actor, but I mostly work at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center.”

“Oh yes, I’ve been out there.” He nodded, gravely. “An actor, huh. I wanted to be an actor when I was younger.”

“No kidding, really?”

“I did.” He smiled, a thin lipped, wry smile. “My father didn’t want me to. He didn’t want me to have anything to do with horses, either, and then one summer he saw me in a New York production of “Hair.” I had long hair and very few clothes on, and he decided then that it was okay if I became a horse trainer. He said he would give me a start and I could see if I had what it takes.”

Chapter 9: Falling

Falling is part of riding. Every rider, no matter how skilled or advanced, falls off on occasion. Expert riders fall enough in the process of becoming experts that they accept the risks of riding as part of the flip side of reward. Riding wouldn't be exhilarating if it weren't challenging. Beginners count the number of times they have fallen, at first with horror and then with pride, listing their falls like notches in a bedpost, but the mark of a more advanced rider is that they have lost track of how many times they have fallen. Sometimes falls happen so fast they don't hurt at all: one minute you're up and the next you're down. The slow ones are worse—the ones where a rider has time to see what is coming but there is no way to stop it. Some falls look to spectators like the only outcome possible would be catastrophic and yet the rider and horse emerge unscathed. Some falls that seem like no big deal end up being a very big deal. Learning to tuck and roll away from the horse, and not to try to break your fall with your hands and arms is very important. Learning to ride as a child is a huge advantage because part of riding is literally learning how to take a fall. Adult riders joke that kids bounce, but falls are probably just not as upsetting to kids because they are used to being powerless, as opposed to adults who have learned to dread feeling dangerously out of control.

Out of the blue. The exaggerated California blue sky: the color of food coloring, as artificial looking as a plastic tarp. The Los Angeles River piddled in its concrete culvert below as I cantered on the path next to Bette Davis Park. Then a sudden lurch and Pilgrim's hoof punched through the sand into a hole that wasn't there until it was. Whirlpool of sky and earth, hard colliding with soft—hurtling and heavy, the horse went down and somersaulted right over me, the portcullis of ribs crushing my lungs, forcing them to expel.

Long seconds afterwards, my body was still ironed to the ground. I tried to move but couldn't. My mouth opened and croaked at the air but it wouldn't come. Pilgrim was a shadow pasted to the ground next to me. He was stunned, but starting to rise. Then out of the corner of my eyes I saw that the reins were looped over his neck and wrapped around his hoof. I sucked urgently for air as I watched the horse's face tighten with panic. He threw his head up and fought the reins. I still couldn't move but I forced my body up anyway and went to him, walking into the tornado and around his flying hooves. I touched his shoulder and asked him to quiet and let me help. He dropped his head and let me pick up his foot to take it out of the leather noose and then I sat down again on the ground while we caught our breath.

I called the vet from my cellphone as we both limped back to the barn. Luckily a few days of bute and cold hosing and Pilgrim was back in business in time for the next show. We were chasing points for the Pre-Green year-end awards so Rosey had us horse showing almost every weekend.

Over the next few weeks Chet would show up periodically and pepper me with questions. He asked about my pay, Freja's pay, Jesus's salary. He asked about insurance, lesson horses, vet bills. I wasn't sure why he was asking me and not Rosey, but I told him. I added that I thought the barn was making tremendous progress toward being an A barn, and that the best way for Rosey to help would be for her to basically get out of the way. He asked me about what I wanted. I told him I loved the riding and the teaching, all I wanted was to be able to go on auditions when they came up, because my ultimate plan was to be an actress.

Then Freja disappeared. After the first day she didn't show up for work, I walked over to the little RV she lived in at the back of the Equestrian Center. Her Jeep wasn't there, but I knew something was wrong because her dog was locked inside the trailer. I used my library card to jimmy the rickety lock and Tiny came barreling out. The trailer was a mess, but it just looked like clothes were tossed everywhere. Nothing was broken or overturned or anything. I grabbed a leash for Tiny and his dish and took him for a walk. Freja was still gone when I got back so I left a note and took the pitbull with me.

The next day when Freja still hadn't turned up, Rosey brought in non-compete forms and liability waivers and said I needed to sign them, and to get whoever I hired to replace Freja to sign them, too. I told her there was no way I was signing her papers, that I thought they were unfair to me and to her other employees. I said that making her employees happy and protecting them was a better way to keep their goodwill than trying to force them into indentured servitude. She insisted on paying me as an independent contractor and she sure as hell didn't pay me enough to sign over any liability—she didn't even pay my health insurance. I knew the forms were so that she could distance

herself from me if there was an accident, whether she thought I was to blame or if I was the victim. She left the forms taped to the desk with our names on them. Over the next few days everyone else's disappeared. Finally mine was the only one left so I took it and tore it in half and tossed it in the trash can under the desk.

She didn't bother me about papers anymore. But Chet kept coming around in his corporate executive clothes, asking about my five and ten-year goals, talking about developing a business plan, blah blah blah. Most of the time, I was too busy to think about my five and ten-year goals; I was riding, teaching, making sure Jesus showed up for work and that Penelope actually returned phone calls instead of just organizing the office.

Rosey was away with our new groom at Indio with a couple of students while I held down the fort at home when Penelope told me that I had a call from Stan, Gillian's husband. I knew Gillian was in Indio, looking for another horse that she could show herself. I called him back, wondering what was going on, and he asked me to meet him at the bar at the top of the Holiday Inn in Burbank.

I wasn't sure what was happening, but I guessed I couldn't just refuse to meet. Why did he want to meet me in a hotel? The whole thing was weird, I felt like I was walking into a trap. I dressed carefully: didn't want to look sexy, but I needed to project competence and power. After going through wardrobe possibilities long enough to make Zoe look quick, I gave up and just wore jeans.

Stan was waiting at the bar. After the awkward one shoulder hug and air kiss, he got down to business. He told me he wanted to write a book, about the music industry, with gangsters and rap and women and drugs. "We should write together."

“Oh, wow. Well, I aspire to write, but mostly I just go to sleep.” I laughed. “I’m flattered you would even consider it.”

“Well, think about it and tell me if you want to write together, I think it would be productive.” He seemed eager and sleazy at the same time. I didn’t know what to think. Or say.

“How’s Gillian doing in Indio?” I asked.

“I wanted to talk to you about her. I don’t want you to tell her I met with you, but I think it is important that you know my wife is a quitter. It’s very important that you make sure she’s winning and having fun.”

“Well, I’ll certainly do my best.”

Gillian had invited me to a big charity gala at her house on Mulholland the following weekend, and Penelope’s husband had gotten Johnny to come as my date. I put a gorgeous pair of black Theory tuxedo pants and a strappy black top on my credit card, along with a sexy new pair of strappy black platform heels from Needless Markup. Penelope persuaded me to go with her to Burke Williams Spa, and I had a whole stack of gift certificates from clients so I agreed. Spas made me nervous—I wasn’t sure what was expected. How much of my clothing was I supposed to take off? Was I supposed to wear a bathing suit or go naked or what? Was I hairy and gross compared to normal people? My legs were fluorescent white, and my hands were red and calloused. I wanted my clothes back. But I sucked it up and followed Penelope’s lead. We wore fluffy white bathrobes and drank cucumber water and flipped through magazines full of pictures of flawless women (mostly Bianca) wearing outfits that cost more than a nice horse while

we hung out in the sauna between appointments. The steam room just felt like a South Carolina summer. Why would anyone want to go in there, ever?

I wondered how celebrities do it. How do they stay so perfectly polished and exfoliated, waxed, dyed, tanned, plucked, plumped and slimmed and blow-dried and manicured? It was exhausting.

When we finally got home I was dying for a nap but we were already late to get to the party. Penelope drove her Range Rover so I didn't even have to suffer the valet embarrassment.

But the best part of the night was after the party. Penelope and Brian and Johnny and I went to visit the horses. We drove in and parked in front of Rosey's barn. Penelope took Brian to see Bianca's horse Royo. I wanted Johnny to meet Coppertone. I rolled open the stall door and the big chestnut snorted softly from the back of his stall.

"Wait," I told Johnny, "He'll come to us." We stood close in the darkness, I could feel Johnny next to me, solid and magnetic. Coppertone took a step forward, stretching his nose out to see if I had anything interesting to sweeten the deal. I pulled a peppermint out of my pocket and unwrapped it, and the horse swept the mint into his mouth. Johnny stroked his glossy neck.

"He's magnificent."

"Isn't he?" I breathed.

Johnny leaned toward me and then, magically, we were kissing. It felt like touching an electric fence, the way the voltage pulls you in, except it tingled in a delicious way. We were breathing each other, pressed against each other.

It was a fairy tale kiss. A long awaited, romantic, meant to be kiss. An epic, IMAX movie kiss.

“Lauren, are you in Coppertone’s—oh, sorry!” Penelope backed away immediately, but the spell was broken. Johnny laughed softly.

“I guess we better get out of here.”

The next few days were lit with the soft-focus glow of those happy montages from movies. The ones that always show two people falling in love, right up until the wheels fall off and everything screeches to a halt.

Johnny actually called. He was in New York doing a late night talk show appearance but he’d be back in a few days and he wanted to take me on a proper date.

“That kiss,” he said.

“Yeah, that was something.”

“Let’s go out without drinking,” I said. I wanted to see the real Johnny and to see if the Ferris Wheel feeling he gave me was still there without the alcohol speed and sparkle. He agreed and we made plans for Friday.

Freja showed back up—turns out she had spent a week in jail for a DUI. She had been arrested and her car was impounded. It wasn’t her first DUI, apparently, and she was driving without a license. She was thrilled to get Tiny back, and he was elated to be reunited.

I knew exactly how Tiny felt. I was looking forward to going out with Johnny so much I left work early to try to produce my best self. I showered, I shaved. I felt like Zoe, spending hours in front of the mirror, trying on every article of clothing I owned, getting

my makeup just right, perfecting my hair. I spent forever getting ready and Johnny hadn't called. I tried calling him, but it went to voicemail. I ate an apple. Then I drank a beer. I tried him again.

At 10:00 I tracked down Zoe and told her that Johnny had stood me up. I convinced her to go out with me since I was all dressed up with nowhere to go.

"You have to swear you won't let me call him." I said.

"I won't." she said.

"I mean it." I said. "No matter what. And if he calls me, I can't answer it."

We went to The Whiskey Room at the Sunset Marquis, which was one of our favorites. For some reason, there were always beautiful people and frequently even famous people and none of the riffraff you saw on the Strip. Most importantly, we could park in the garage under Zoe's photographer friend Lane's office and walk over so we didn't have to pay the twenty-dollar valet or worry about our cars getting busted into or towed on the street if we left them overnight.

I was drinking savagely, with one eye on my phone. We met a group of hot Australians. Australians are amazing: bronzed and healthy and those sexy accents, plus they can outdrink anybody. Although they could have been New Zealanders, I don't remember for sure, and same difference, right? Prison colonies, etc. I went to the smoker's patio to check and see if I had missed a call. The phone was weaving back and forth. I had to stare hard at it while I sagged against the door. I deleted Johnny's number just to make sure I didn't call him. I would show him I was not the kind of girl who got totally carried away just because of one kiss.

Zoe and I were in fine form. Hot men were buying us drinks, beautiful women were shooting us ugly looks, the splendid night was spinning into gold. We got into someone's car to go to a party that was going to be even better than the bar. Only the party was just the same people that we'd been hanging with at the bar. We weren't there but a few minutes (it could have been hours) when I stumbled off to find the bathroom.

Zoe followed me and then shoved me into a bedroom. "Lauren, these people are sketchy."

"Huh?"

Huh. I was swaying.

"They're freaking me out, we need to get out of here. Did you see them pulling out drugs and stuff?"

"What? No." I scratched my head. "How are we going to get out of here? We left the car."

"We can call a cab."

"Let's just go to bed."

I thought Zoe was probably overreacting but mostly I was just getting really sleepy.

"Shh. They're coming." She twisted the teensy little lock on the doorknob and pulled me over behind the bed.

I giggled. Zoe punched my arm, "Shh!"

"Ouch, okay!"

The doorknob rattled and a man's voice said "Are you in there?"

Another guy said, "What the fuck are they doing?"

Zoe's eyes were huge and glassy just like her lip-gloss. She was starting to make me worry, but the voices were moving away from the door now and I started pulling back the covers and climbing into the bed. "Wait, You're going to sleep?" she asked.

"I'm not going back out there."

So she climbed in on the other side and I passed out before she even pulled the covers up.

When I woke up the house was silent.

I tiptoed to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge while Zoe went to the bathroom. The lock on the front door made a quiet snick as I turned it, and keeping the knob twisted, I motioned Zoe out. I pulled the door to, and released the handle softly and silently. Turning around, I almost tripped and fell on the steps. I fought back a nervous cackle and held my breath until we were far enough away not to be heard inside.

We stopped at the street and looked around. We were on the edge of a canyon and the houses were fancy. Just about anywhere, Los Angeles. "I guess we just go downhill, huh?" I said.

Zoe laughed and we started trudging. Our makeup was mostly erased and our sexy clothes looked misplaced in the daylight. I pulled the bottle of water out of my purse and handed it to Zoe.

"Where did you get that?" She asked.

"The fridge." I said. She started laughing even harder. We skittered over the pavement, tipped precariously forward by our strappy high heels on the steep slope. I was

already getting a blister when a Mercedes convertible came around the corner. A cute blonde guy with a tennis visor leaned out of the window. “Do you need a ride?”

We looked at each other. Who knew how long the walk ahead of us was? We nodded and jumped in the car.

He laughed. “Are you the girls that spent the night in my room?”

Luckily, the guy in the Mercedes wasn’t upset that we had monopolized his bed the night before. And thank God we took the ride because it would have taken us several hours to walk all the way back to Hollywood.

The Johnny debacle was only the beginning. A few days later Jerry called again, asking me to go down to Indio to help Gillian.

“I can’t just leave the barn Jerry, Rosey wants me here to teach while she’s at Indio with Gillian.”

“Gillian wants you to help her, not Rosey.”

“That’s really nice, but I’m sure she’s doing great up there and Rosey knows what she’s doing. Gillian is doing flat classes, right? She’s not jumping?”

“I’m not trying to be nice. Gillian wants you. We’ll pick up the tab for the hotel and pay you ourselves. She wants you to come tomorrow.”

I clearly wasn’t in control of this situation. Honestly, I didn’t want to go to Indio. As much as the horse show was interesting for a few hours, it got boring fast if I wasn’t riding, and I hated staying in cheap motels and eating crappy fast food for every meal.

“Look, I’m sorry but you guys are going to have to talk to Rosey. I can’t go out there against her orders.”

“Are we your best clients?”

“What?”

“Are we your best clients? Don’t we spend the most money and have the nicest horses?”

He was waiting for my answer—the line buzzing with impatience.

“Sure, you guys are great clients, but you have to talk to Rosey. She runs the show.”

That evening Rosey called me and told me to come to Indio to help Gillian. Gillian and Stan were putting me up at the La Quinta resort where they were staying. Rosey was at the Motel Six.

This wasn’t good. And there wasn’t a thing I could do about it.

I drove out to Palm Springs and schooled Gillian on the new horse Rosey had found for her to buy to ride until Pilgrim was trained. I didn’t know the horse, but I could see that he wasn’t particularly fancy. I hoped he was at least safe. He seemed simple enough. Gillian was a pretty woman and she had a good body for riding, she was slim and fit but she had a suspiciously large chest that threw her a little off balance and she was stiff probably because she tried way too hard.

“Stretch up with your chest, Gillian, but release your hips and let them move so the horse doesn’t feel like you’re locked in place. That’s it. He’s going to get worried if you’re holding your breath and rigid in your body, you’ll make him nervous!”

Gillian’s face was stretched tight with concentration.

“I know you want to do well, but its like choreography, right? You have to learn the moves and then just feel the music. That’s it—just think about breathing and feeling

the horse, connecting your seat with his hindquarters, giving him energy with your legs and letting your arms gently take back the energy from the reins. Good! And walk.”

That night Gillian and Stan invited me to dinner. Rosey wasn’t there. Stan didn’t mention our meeting to Gillian and neither did I, concentrating instead on eating as fast as I could.

“Well, I better get to bed, we’ll have to get up early tomorrow! Gillian, I’ll see you at around seven, come dressed in your show clothes and we’ll go ahead and find a little time to warm up before your class.”

In the morning I got to the barn and fed the horses. Her horse was already braided, his mane in neat little tiny button braids and his tail was rolled up into a pinwheel and wrapped securely in an ace bandage. The braider’s invoice was folded and stuck between the bars of the stall door. It seemed like a whole lot of trouble and money for someone who was only doing a couple of flat classes, but whatever.

Gillian was a nervous wreck. She looked like an iron bar had been rammed down her throat. Or up her butt.

“Gillian, take a deep breath. Take another—all the way into your stomach. This is not the Olympics!”

The horse warmed up passably and too soon it was time for the huge crowd of adult amateur beginners to cram into the tiny annex ring that the show had added to make more money off all the suckers who couldn’t ride in the big rings but wanted to show at Indio anyway.

Gillian looked like a plastic Barbie doll, and I knew that no judge would reward a rider that stiff and incompetent. But it wasn’t until the riders changed direction that all

hope for a ribbon disappeared. By the second lap of cantering the horse had enough of the uptight psychopath on his back and he started picking up speed. He went faster and faster until he was running laps around the other riders.

“Gillian, sit up and pull back!” I shouted at her as she passed.

The class was called to a halt and other riders nervously clutched at their prancing horses. Gillian shifted left and then bounced right as the horse dodged the other horses and riders and continued to run out of control. Finally Gillian fell off, right into the fence rail. I ran into the ring to help her up.

She was breathing in gasps.

“I can’t do this.”

“It’s okay Gillian, are you hurt?” She was a crumpled heap but she wasn’t hurt.

“I can’t do this. I can’t afford to fall off. I have a family.”

“Let’s just get you out of the ring.” I helped her up and she leaned heavily on me as I walked her out of the arena. The bystanders clapped as Gillian got up but instead of taking it as consolation and congratulations for being tough, I could see she was mortified. Another trainer caught the horse who had stopped running almost immediately after Gillian fell off. I had seen her around, I thought she worked for Far West Farm.

She ducked under the rail and walked the horse over to me. “Isn’t this Cola? We told Rosey he doesn’t go in flat classes.”

“Good to know,” I smiled. “I wasn’t informed, but thanks, I think now we’ve got the memo now.”

Rosey was standing by the ring so I handed her the reins. She frowned.

“I thought you told her not to pull on him or something.”

“That’s right Rosey,” I hissed, whispering so Gillian wouldn’t hear me. “I told her: if the horse runs away with you be sure to drop the reins and flop all over the place until you fall off.” I turned back to Gillian who was hyperventilating from trying not to cry, and put my arm around her. “Come on. Let’s go get you cleaned up.”

When I got back from Palm Springs, Chet stopped by with a letter for me from Rosey.

“Why are you bringing me a letter from Rosey? I see her every single day.”

“She wanted me to let you know we’re making some exciting changes. We’re bringing in a grand prix rider from Colorado as head trainer. And I have good news, since you want to be an actress, Rosey is willing to reduce your hours so you can be free to go on auditions in the afternoons.”

I just shut the door in his irritating face while it was still making noises and sat down on the floor. And then I got the call that pulled the rug out from under me.

“Hi Lauren, it’s Mom. Dad’s on the line, too.”

“Hi Lauren.”

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Well, we just wanted to talk to you about your Dad, he’s been coughing a lot and we went to the Doctor and they’ve found a mass in his lungs.”

“What?” This was incomprehensible. I couldn’t imagine life without my father. When I was little, Dad would wrap my sister and me in a blanket and carry us out in his arms to look at the stars. The nights when the cloud cover was whisked away were the

coldest, but the air was so sharp and clear the atmosphere was like a jeweler's loop, magnifying the stars in their plush velvet darkness. Little cumulus clouds of breath puffed out and evaporated right in front of our noses as he directed our eyes to Orion the hunter, throwing his leg up over the horizon, always on the heels of Taurus with his long horns and the red eye of the giant star Aldebaran. Dad pointed out Alpha Centauri and Betelgeuse, Venus and Mars, the Pleiades, the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, Cygnus—all the major stars and constellations of the sparkling winter sky over South Carolina.

“We don't know yet what the test results are going to be but we wanted to tell you right away.”

I didn't have anything to say. Stupid empty words surfaced like fight, and win, and phrases like everything will be okay, and we'll just have to see, but they were all the kind of cheap slogans a little league coach would use to rally a bunch of dumb kids.

Dad told me the Perseid showers were peaking and I should go watch them if I could. I drove out toward Sunland at midnight, up random canyon roads, trying to find a place that would be dark enough to catch the show over the big city. It was cold and clear, and I parked the car on the shoulder and got out and sat on the hood. The stars winked and danced and then suddenly a streaking ember of cold fire lingered in the air, then another and another, like fireworks, until there was a sky full of falling stars. Thousands of them.

I wished the same wish on every one.

Chapter 10: Rehabilitation

Despite their size and strength, horses are surprisingly fragile. Tendons, ligaments, bone and muscle are all placed under incredible strain by the demands of upper level sport and the unnatural restrictions of captivity. The more expensive and important a horse is, the more they are confined, isolated and protected. Horses are designed to move constantly and slowly; wild horses amble across the landscape many miles a day, foraging as they go. Sport horses work intensely for an hour or so a day and are locked in a tiny cell for the rest of the time. No wonder sport horses suffer from injuries. Unlike human athletes, who can usually feel an injury in the early stages and accommodate it enough to prevent further damage, horses have only subtle ways of communicating mild discomfort. Then, when a horse is injured there is a difficult and costly diagnostic: physical exam, ultrasound, x-ray, even nuclear scintigraphy and MRIs can be called on to determine the source of the problem, but many problems are never clearly diagnosed. Eventually these injuries linger and frustrate to the point where the once precious and valuable horse becomes useless, unsellable and worthless.

Rehabilitation involves incredible sensitivity to the horse's soundness, to the minute cues of their healing process, to any swelling or hint of lameness. It involves careful, methodical, painstaking reconstruction: pushing in intervals, building strength and soundness one block at a time or the whole process collapses.

I was still in bed when Vince started banging on the door.

“What the... go away,” I grumbled, pulling the duvet over my head to block out the sun trying to shove through the window like a spotlight. A spotlight in a play where you’re onstage opening night and you’ve forgotten your lines. But the banging kept up, getting louder. “I’m sleeping!” I yelled.

The noise continued. Finally I shoved aside the blankets, “God, you’re going to break the fucking door.”

I flicked open the deadbolt and yanked the rattled door open.

“Only if I have to. I brought burritos,” Vince said, filling the frame like some cartoon thug. “Say hello to my little friend,” he gestured with the burrito.

“I want to be alone.” I rubbed my eyes, moving aside. As if I could stop him.

“Haha, good one, Garbo.” He looked closer at me. “I see dead people.”

I laughed. “Late night.” The truth was I hadn’t left the house for anything but an occasional hopeless audition in weeks. Zoe had moved in with a new boyfriend and abandoned my couch and me to our pathetic, empty, unperfumed lives. I was running up my credit card and thinking about writing a screenplay but watching old movies for research was the most I could manage. I sniffed and glared at Vince. His overalls were dusty and his hands were black with dirt. “You’ve been at the barn.”

“Yeah,” he gave me a blatantly sympathetic look. “Everybody misses you. The new guy is a dick. I think Rosey already realizes she made a huge mistake.”

“You always know just what to say,” I said, trying to hide behind sarcasm. “I mean, seriously, I haven’t heard from a single person except Amelia. Every one of the kids has just moved on like they never even knew me. I mean, Grace called me ‘mommy’

for years and now she's taking lessons from that asshole like she didn't miss a beat. She probably calls him daddy by now." God, my bitterness could melt human flesh.

I honestly hadn't seen it coming, but I should have. Chet had been talking about his "friend" in Colorado who was a Grand Prix rider. He had even showed us a picture of the guy, an overweight slob on a nice horse, jumping a big fence. I should have known how impressed Rosey was by a good photo.

Only Amelia had refused to move on without me. She wouldn't ride with the new trainer, whose name was Doug and who was even more oily in person than he was in my imagination. I almost felt bad for Rosey. It was one hundred percent guaranteed that he was going to get a hook into her clients and then rob her whole business blind, taking all the good horses and riders and ditching the dead weight. I shrugged, she was an idiot and she deserved what she had coming.

"Do you want to see the mail I just got yesterday?" I wasn't done ranting, apparently. "I got a letter from some lawyer about a job with a trainer that I didn't even know about!" I snatched up and waved the piece of paper violently. "I have no desire to work for ____ . I haven't had a single conversation with him ever in my life, and I get a Cease and Desist from Rosey's rent-a-loser attorney telling me I can't take a job I haven't even interviewed for. I half want to go ask for the job just to spite her, except I don't want to end up working for another moron who hates horses."

I threw the paper down and shoved the burrito into my mouth so I would stop screaming. Plus I was starving. I needed to go to the grocery store.

Vince shrugged at the piece of paper. "She can't come after you for taking another job, she's just terrified you'll steal all of her clients."

“I know she can’t stop me from taking another job—I wasn’t stupid enough to sign her ridiculous non-compete forms. And anyway I don’t want her lame, penny ante, disloyal clients.”

Vince looked at me with his surprised watery blue eyes that suggested he’d been the victim of too many hits to the head. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “It doesn’t look good for being a movie star.”

“I’m going to make you an offer you can’t refuse. I could use some help. I have more horses to work on than I have time. You could go with me and get them out and hold them and make notes on everything.”

I rolled my eyes. “Please, Vince. Every barn you go to has grooms to get the horses for you and crossties to put them in. You don’t need my help.” It wasn’t like Vince worked at the kind of pace no one could keep up with. Between his talking and stopping to talk, it usually took him an hour to do fifteen minutes of bodywork.

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning at 9:00. I have to go to Middle Ranch and then Hansen Dam.”

“I don’t need your pity job.”

“9:00. Remember, I can use these hands for good or for evil.”

I rolled my eyes. “I could take you out with one hand tied behind my back.”

“You and what army.”

I knew I would be mostly playing the studio audience to Vince’s highlights and bloopers reel, with a canned laugh track whenever necessary, but I missed the horses and I wanted to know more about the mysterious adjustments Vince did. His usual explanation of how something worked involved either aliens or magic but if I watched

closely maybe I could learn a few things. The work Vince did was amazing in both its depth and gentleness. I knew it involved myofascial release, I had read the rehabilitation book I gave Amelia, as well as a few others on Feldenkrais, Rolfing, and horse anatomy. Horses are so physically and mentally interconnected—what is bothering them physically affects them emotionally and vice versa. Being able to confront a problem from another direction would be a helpful tool.

So I worked a few days a week for Vince, who always talked until my ears bled and took me out to eat a big lunch. I charged everything but the rent on my credit card and did some temp work for an agency that Zoe hooked me up with. Every day was different: one day I was waking up in the empty office of a private ambulance transport company with a puddle of drool on the desk, my only responsibility to answer the phone that never rang and politely be of no help whatsoever. They even made me a little ID badge with my picture, but no one was there to check if I was legitimate. The next day I did busy work for a party-planning agency. Temp worker is like being a substitute teacher. There is no real investment and very little accountability, basically you're just a place-filler. I treaded water and wondered what to do next.

Meanwhile I planned a trip back home. I was desperate to get back but my parents wanted me to wait until Dad was through with the chemotherapy. I missed my dog, Jackson, and hoped to bring her back with me but my parents made it clear that she was theirs now.

“Lauren, you know she's happy here. You need to do what is best for her.” Dad said, and I couldn't exactly argue with the man while he was fighting lung cancer. It was

true there was no better place in the world for a dog than free range in South Carolina, and Jackson was the first dog my parents had ever allowed to sleep in the house with them. I found myself hiking in Runyon Canyon, and unlike most of the people who were trying to notch star-sightings, I was trying to get my animal fix. I missed the hard work of riding, and the way an animal centers you in their physical presence. One day I complimented a guy on his Dalmation and he offered me the leash. “Her name is Ruby, do you want her?” he asked.

“What’s wrong with her?” I kneeled to pet her and she licked my chin.

“Nothing, my girlfriend got her from the pound and I’m a writer and it’s just a lot to handle,” he said.

“Seriously?” I asked. “I’ll take her!”

Ruby was just what I needed. Who knows what would have happened to her if I didn’t take her? I told Vince I had adopted a dog and he made an announcement of his own.

“I’ve found your horse.”

Vince really didn’t know anything about jumpers, but he was bodyworking almost all of the Los Angeles area Grand Prix riders and their horses. He was convinced he could fix anybody. When he told me he’d found my grand prix horse I thought maybe he was just trying to get me to go on a road trip with him, but I figured it was worth a look. I was amazed when I saw the blood bay horse that looked like a dinosaur skeleton. Vince had barely gotten to him ahead of the killers. A lot of horses are still sold to slaughter. Many of them are worthless, and frankly, many of them would be better off slaughtered than living their lives out slowly starving and sick in the disgusting situations that they

are kept captive in. But some of the horses are hidden diamonds, brilliant horses whose greatness has either remained undiscovered or robbed and tortured into hiding. The legendary jumper Snowman came from a kill pen. Maybe this horse's greatness was undeniable. Vince told me he had come from McLain Ward. All I knew about McLain Ward was that he was consistently ranked as one of the best showjumpers in the world and that his father was barred from ever entering United States Equestrian Federation show grounds because he had been convicted of coordinating the murder of horses for insurance money. That didn't stop Ward Sr. from having a thriving business. A barn full of wealthy clients set up on a property adjacent to the showgrounds where they could receive the full benefits of their cheating murderer of a trainer and then walk over to the horse show and compete with everyone who followed the rules, or at least hadn't been caught yet for breaking them. I already knew staying on top of the show circuit was a blood sport. I doubted the apple fell far from the tree.

When we got to the farm in Temecula where the horse was being held, Vince opened the gate to walk into the stall, and the horse pinned his ears flat against his head, and swung his huge, bony haunches toward the door.

"I'm going to name him Valoir." He said.

"Vince, don't go in there- he's going to kick your head off! Hang on, let me."

"He wouldn't hurt me. Right, Val?" Vince made moon-eyes at the beast. He thought because he was almost as big as a horse that he couldn't be hurt. Val thrashed his tail like a rattlesnake and bit at the air. Vince handed me the lead rope and halter.

"You know if you name him Valoir, all the announcers are going to call him Velour." I coiled the rope.

“Not if I tell them not to. You’ve got to ask yourself one question: Do I feel lucky? Well do ya, punk?”

“Oh please.” I rolled my eyes. I mean, the guy wears overalls. “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

I flicked the end of the rope at the horse’s hind end. He kicked out, hard. I gently tossed the rope again, trying not to scare him but wanting to get him to turn around and face me. He slammed into the back wall and danced, looking for somewhere else to go. I gave him a minute to settle and then asked him to try again. Finally he turned around and I offered him a baby carrot.

“That’s a good pony. Someone really did a number on you, didn’t they? I promise I won’t hurt you.” He lipped the treat with glittering eyes and spit it out.

Vince examined me. “You don’t seem very excited.”

“I am, I just don’t know anything about the horse, except he’s obviously been abused.”

“Well, he can jump a house.”

I offered the horse another baby carrot but he refused to take it. I wasn’t going to be able to evaluate whether this horse could jump just by looking at him in the stall.

Vince was staring at me. “I’m doing this for you, you know.”

“Well don’t. Don’t do it for me.” I snapped. “Don’t give me this martyr act—do it for you, so people will see how amazing you are at rehabilitating horses. And so people will see that good horses fall through the cracks and they can be saved.”

I knew he just wanted me to succeed and owe it all to him. But I wanted to succeed, too, so I ignored how uncomfortable it made me when Vince said things like that. If the horse could jump I wanted him. Now I just had to find a barn.

The gravel popped under the car tires as we turned into the driveway. What had been another brilliant, hot day in the Valley—perfect for painting—twisted into a cold, wet mizzle as we descended to the barn in Malibu. It seemed more like Ireland than California. Rock walls on both sides of the road loomed out of the fog and kept us from driving over the edge of the cliff as we snaked down into the property. I could barely even see the lemon trees on the other side of the riding arena. I slammed the door and looked desperately at Amelia and her boyfriend Danny getting out of their car.

“What are we going to do? We can’t paint in the rain!” Ruby was already rummaging in the geraniums next to the road, shaking drops of water off her spotted fur.

“It’s the marine layer,” Amelia said.

She started talking me down but I was panicking. Amelia was here to help, Vince was on his way and my friends Nigel and Jeff were coming to help build some of the jumps. Typical Hollywood riffraff. Jeff was a lawyer/actor/contractor I had made friends with on a movie set and Nigel was an ex-rock star/contractor. He had shown me pictures of himself from when he was the replacement lead singer in a major band from England that I had heard of but that was before my day. Nigel was the kind of guy who bad luck just hovered around, “like stink sticks to shit,” he said. And here it was, in the form of a wet blanket of fog, ruining my painting plans. But he was hilarious, a good sport and a dog lover.

I had already designed a rolltop just like the big scary one Max Bonham had in his ring in Camden, I even had the green astroturf to cover it with. I had written out the specs and bought paint and lumber for an Hermes orange panel jump with flowerbox standards and a big wall with columns that we were going to paint to look like the famous boxes from Tiffany's jewelers. This was a disaster. I took a sip of coffee while I wondered how to salvage the day.

Nigel got out of the truck and started telling a joke in his nasal British accent. "So there's these two agents walking down the street and they see a great looking woman. One of them says, Man I'd like to screw her." He forced me to meet his eyes. "And the other one says, Out of what?"

He grinned at me and I laughed so hard my drink came out my nose. Maybe everything was going to be alright, I thought.

And it wasn't long before I had a growing collection of people and horses. Amelia was in college but she still came by to hang out, even though she didn't have a horse anymore, since Coppertone was still at Rosey's. I got a call from Bianca's people. Her horse had been sent to layup for a minor tendon strain and she wanted me to bring him back into work. I was able to persuade Sylvie to come teach me once a week and even talked Chuck, the farrier, into driving up to Malibu to shoe everyone. I even ran into Freja at the local Starbucks—she had moved to Malibu for an alcohol/drug rehabilitation program. I offered her a job. My life centered more and more around horses. Zoe got cast on a reality TV show and disappeared to an island for several months. My agent still called me some, but it was too inconvenient to rush home from the barn, shower, do hair and makeup, and drive all the way into town for a five-minute audition. It took too long

to get to Hollywood from Malibu and back, just for the long odds of booking some random commercial. The horses still had to get ridden and they were a sure thing. Plus, its not like Steven Spielberg was going to see my Toyota commercial and call me to be in his next movie.

Val was making progress. He would probably never be Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky but he wasn't nearly as irritable as he had started out. He was strong as an ox and he wasn't easy to ride but he could definitely jump. I jumped him over the panels one day, putting it all the way up to five and half feet and he cleared it without difficulty. The problem was that he hated in and outs. I did a lot of trail riding. The hills were great for the horses and the ocean air was bracing. Vince picked up another horse, and then another. Each one prompted a run-through of our, by now well rehearsed, "Why aren't you happy?" skit.

"I am happy!"

"You don't look happy."

The next horse it escalated again. "You're an actress aren't you? Act like you're happy." Vince ordered.

"What do you want me to do," I asked, "a song and dance routine?"

"Damn right, I want you to put on a cheerleader outfit and dance on the fucking table."

I ignored the creepy porn imagery. "You know, I'm perfectly happy until you start asking me to perform happiness for you. This isn't a script. I'm not a character. Why should I have to act happy—I am happy." Honestly, it probably would have been easier to just put on an act but I resented the fact that he wanted me to.

All of the horses were interesting puzzles, but they all represented work that didn't pay. I had told Vince I would train a big jumper for free. I didn't anticipate that he was going to start a menagerie. Vince covered their expenses but I could only ride so many horses in a day, and without a groom it took a long time to get through the set. Luckily, Freja was a hard worker but I still had to pay her. Vince was so busy doing every other horse in the area, he rarely worked on his own, and when he did come to the barn he wanted to talk and hang out, not be forced to plow through a long list.

Amelia's parents had sworn off buying another horse after what happened to Idol, but I heard about a Belgian cross mare that kept jumping out of her turnout paddock just down the road and went to look at her. She was a big rubenesque bay stuck doing bad dressage with a heavy woman waterskiing on the reins. The opinionated mare showed how much she hated the work by refusing to move, swishing her tail, grinding her teeth and kicking out. But she jumped right over her paddock fence.

"I love mares," I said. "We'll need to retrain her but she does seem to love to jump." Plus, for five thousand dollars, she was the right price. So Amelia finally had a horse of her own, and I found one too. The California Horse Trader was full of tiny little square inch photos of horses ranging from free to six figures. Most of them were worthless. But one postage stamp sized photo had completely captivated me. The horse was a bay yearling, an Oldenburg, with gorgeous confirmation and a stunning head. I had to have him. I thought about getting Bianca to buy him but I was sick of unpredictable clients owning the horses that I invested my heart and soul into. I wanted one that was mine to love.

I asked my parents if they wanted to invest in a jumper prospect with me, fully expecting them to laugh me off of the phone. I explained that for only ten thousand dollars they could own a horse worth ten times that in a few years when he was trained. I would pay all of his monthly expenses, I just needed help with the purchase price. To my surprise they heard me out and agreed. I suspected my Dad.

Amelia went with me to look at the baby in person. His name was Bravado. He was a tall, leggy little monster. He kept trying to bite us and then he wheeled and kicked at his breeder and showed off a breathtaking extended trot all over the property, trailing his lead rope while he tore chunks of dirt out of the ground and tossed them in the air as he trotted and galloped through the garden, the yard, the barn, over the hedge that separated her dressage ring, snagging and ripping out the plastic chain around the arena, then back through the garden and finally we cornered him in a pasture next to the other horses who were gaping at the little beast's antics. My baby. I arranged shipment to Malibu.

Bravado was more difficult than any horse I had ever worked with. Leading him was a two-woman job, I held a lead rope with a chain over his nose on the left and Amelia held a lead rope with a chain under his nose on the right, so each of us could keep him from mauling the other. Between the two of us we could get him from the stall to the paddock. He was an expert at escaping, the instant he got his head turned in the direction he wanted to go it was all over, he simply threw the powerful mountain lion bulk of his body after his head and off he went. All I could do was watch him gallop away and admire him, though. The strength of will and athleticism he demonstrated were impressive, but I didn't know how I was ever going to get him to cooperate.

I had heard of people using an animal communicator, so I decided to try talking to Bravado and the other horses. I persuaded Amelia to listen to the call and take notes, asking her to pay particular attention to whether or not I was giving the communicator information without realizing it. I was skeptical and curious, but when we hung up the phone after that first conversation neither of us could believe what had happened. The animal communicator's name was Lydia and she lived in Oregon. She only asked for the address of the barn and the name and color of each horse. Then there was a long silence while she located the horse. She would ask a few conformational details, like "Oh Bravado, he's so mischievous! He's wearing a red blanket, right? He admires the big bay in the stall next to him. Do I have the right horse? What did you want to ask him?"

Bravado indicated that he hated circles, she said that he was complaining about always ending up where he started. Lydia suggested that giving him a new name might help, since the name Bravado had implications that might not be desirable. "Bravado can be positive, such as acting courageous when you aren't feeling brave, but it can also be about bluster and false courage."

I asked about Val's history. She said that he had been worked hard but that "it was never enough, they always wanted more." She said that he had an accident and lost his confidence but that he was working on getting it back. He said he loved trail riding.

We talked to Amelia's horse and she proclaimed that she was very proud of her big butt and that she loved to jump. She said she didn't want to be bothered about the flatwork she just wanted to jump things. We laughed because that was entirely accurate.

Lydia told us that everyone could communicate with animals, that every child was telepathic but as we became verbal we began to think in words instead of pictures and

most of us shut off the ability to receive pictures from others. It reminded me of the sports psychology work Sylvie taught me about the power of the picture in your subconscious, the importance of thinking in positive terms. It was essential to recognize the negative image being formed even if you thought you were being positive by saying something like “I hope I don’t fall off.”

“Absolutely,” Lydia agreed. “Animals have no concept of the negative. So if you tell your dog not to get on the sofa, what you are picturing is the dog getting on the sofa, and they get confused because your tone is warning but your mental picture is inviting.”

Finally I got a ticket to go home to see my father and the rest of my family. Amelia and Freja agreed to take care of the horses and Vince took Ruby to stay at his house.

Dad seemed a little thinner and he had a lot less hair, but otherwise he still seemed like my Dad, the hero. He had lost his voice with the radiation, so he only whispered. They had also done a gamma knife surgery on his brain—the lung cancer had spawned brain tumors and they had to screw a headframe into his skull to hold it perfectly still during the surgery. It was hard to look at the spots where the screws had gone in his head.

After I got home I headed out to the barn to see Cinderella. The night was cool and the woods were full of insect orchestra. A frog leaped out of the way of the flashlight’s projection of a miniature full moon.

Cinderella looked older than I remembered. She was thin and even though it wasn’t even winter yet she was as furry as a bear and she shivered in the cool evening. I

stood with my arms around her neck and she leaned quietly against me. I wished I could blanket her but I knew Mom wouldn't do all the extra work of watching the temperature and blanketing and unblanketing with the weather. I brushed her long mane and curried her gently.

The next day I went for a walk and saw a huge black snake on the dam near the pond, right near the spot where I sat on our first pony. Out of reflex and childhood habit I shouted for Dad. He heard me and came down the driveway full tilt just like he always had, and picked up a stick from the ground. Water Moccasins are dark and dangerous, and growing up, Dad had always killed them because they are so aggressive and lethal, unsafe for people or pets. The thick muscular menace of a poisonous snake is not always obviously different from the benevolent adult rat snake or water snake, and he had taught us that besides the hissing threat of the open white mouth that gave the cottonmouth its nickname, the most obvious difference between a harmless water snake and a poisonous water moccasin is the moccasin will turn and attack aggressively, while the water snake will slither away.

The snake had been sunning itself on the warm bank of the pond, and Dad bent down with the long stick and prodded the snake, ready to jump back if necessary. The big black snake began to turn and Dad stepped backwards and stumbled on the hill and fell down, practically on top of the poor snake, which thankfully was almost as scared as I was. If it had been a cottonmouth it would have struck him, but it slithered into the pond as fast as it could. Dad was embarrassed, and I felt like I had seen something I shouldn't have. My Dad who had always been the infallible center of the universe, was dying and it

couldn't be stopped. It was the first time I fully realized that nothing would ever be the same.

The morning I was scheduled to leave Cinderella was lying down and she didn't want to get up.

I called Lydia. "She says she was waiting to see you one last time. That she loves you and that you have had many lives together. She is a grandmother spirit. She's ready to go, she is tired. She wants you to stay with her while she goes."

After I got off of the phone with Lydia I called the airline to see if I could reschedule my ticket. They told me that it would cost five hundred dollars. Mom and Dad both thought it would be better for me not to be there and I didn't want to pay an extra five hundred dollars.

When I left for my flight Cindy was lying quietly in the sun and the vet was scheduled to arrive within the hour. The backhoe was coming too. My Mom was driving me to the airport and my Dad said he would handle it and I knew he would cry as hard as I would. I hugged him hard and kneeled on the ground to kiss Cinderella's nose.

On the airplane I regretted my decision. I turned my face to the window but my shoulders shook and I kept making little inadvertent shallow huffs while tears rolled down my cheeks, leaving puddles of water in my hair and on my shirt. The couple sitting next to me was horrified. The woman looked like an aging southern beauty queen with loud, bleached hair and a big cushy chest and a personality the size of a trailer park. Before we had even left the gate she put her hand and the biggest diamond ring I had ever seen on my arm. "Sugar pie, what happened?"

“A death in the family.” I told her and she didn’t ask for me to elaborate.

Her pink glossy lips formed a sympathetic pout and she elbowed her husband who ordered me a vodka screwdriver, and then another after that. It did help, sedating me enough to stare out at the unbearably bright sky over the wing until we landed. When we disembarked in Los Angeles I felt like a helium balloon, weightless and bobbing, skin stretched around, and pressed upon by empty space.

Chapter 11: Carrot and Stick

Motivating horses can be difficult. Horses aren't like dogs, which are a lot like humans. Dogs and Humans are both predators: we are programmed to hunt our food. Our attention focuses on what we want, and then we take steps to get it. We tend to be direct and we respond predictably to both threat and reward. Horses are prey. They are surrounded by both food and by peril. They have no need to hunt their food so their attention and panoramic vision are constantly attuned to the environment in a way that humans find difficult to comprehend. Horses are indirect. Additionally, horses in the wild forage constantly and move slowly unless fleeing a specific menace, whereas horses in captivity are generally kept in extremely limited enclosures where movement is restricted. They are fed sporadically and then asked to work in a way that is intensely foreign and divorced from their nature. The human need to cultivate focus and sustained effort in a horse runs almost completely counter to the horse's structure and instincts, and furthermore we rely on profoundly human motivations: praise and fear. Yet for some reason most horses seem to be interested in working with humans. They are willing, for the most part, to bend over backwards to accommodate our oversized egos, our violent natures, our micromanaging, controlling, clueless and sometimes even sadistic expectations, and when they find a true partner they are willing to give every particle of their power and trust for a scrap of blue ribbon, a check, or a title that is utterly meaningless to them.

When I got back to Los Angeles Freja had disappeared. She didn't show up for work one day, two, a week went by. I thought maybe she had relapsed and been thrown into jail again. Then the police came to the barn. Ruby barked and wagged her tail, not sure if they were friend or foe. The officers questioned me about when I had last seen Freja. They were concerned, they said, that she had been involved with a dangerous man. They were worried she might be dead. I told them her saddle was still here and that I had not seen her in over a week. I was worried but her phone had been going straight to voicemail and there was nothing I could do. I went by her place at the rehab facility and they said she had moved out a while back. I hoped she and her dog were okay.

The isolation of Malibu and the facility was wearing thin. Bianca came out to ride and promptly fell off when Ruby popped out from behind a jump while the horse was jumping it. I had nightmares about Bianca needing medical attention and my cell phone not getting a signal. Bravado, who I rechristened Brighton around the barn, colicked and I had to drive all the way out of the hole to get a signal to call the vet, and then drive back down to tend to him. There was no electricity and no lights, which became an issue if you had an emergency in the night. I decided it was time to move.

There was a new facility in Moorpark, just east of Malibu, and there was an empty barn at with enough stalls for our horses. Vince knew a couple of trainers there so I went with him to see the stable and meet Tom and Tracy, the husband and wife trainer team. I was hoping to hook up with other people to maybe share a groom with and possibly even get help on the ground at the shows. Sylvie was amazing but she didn't go to the shows and warming up in the schooling ring without someone to settle your nerves and set jumps was difficult. It was time to get out there—Val and Brighton, Amelia's

mare and a few of the others were ready to be competitive in the jumper divisions. Shipping more than two horses at a time was a problem in Malibu because the big rig couldn't fit down the snaking driveway, and it was a long way to walk multiple sets of horses to the top to load. We were scheduled to go to a show in Santa Barbara at the end of the month and I was hoping to pack up and move after that. The Moorpark facility was nice, there were rows of rosebushes and the barns were clean. The stalls were a good size. The arena was a weird shape but there were some jumps and of course I would bring the ones that I had made. Tom and Tracy seemed nice, although Tom seemed a little aggressive. Most trainers who work in pairs fall into a good cop/bad cop routine for clients and he was obviously the bad cop. It would be handy to have a bad cop for the bill collecting and problem handling. Vince always acted like he was going to be my bad cop and solve any problems that I told him about, but he never actually did anything about anything.

I watched Tracy ride. Tom was instructing her but it was obvious who the talent of the operation was. She was schooling a gangly young chestnut gelding over fences and they had braided his tail and then somehow tied it underneath his belly to his noseband. Tom said it was to improve his bascule. I didn't say what I thought which is that it was stupid and mean and wouldn't make a single bit of difference in the long run. I sighed. If the horse needs to arch more around the jump, he'll either figure it out or he won't, but tying his tail to his nose is only likely to pull his tail out.

The following weekend was the Santa Barbara show. The Earl Warren showgrounds had an open air amphitheater for the jumper classes that was a blast to ride in. Val won all of his classes in his debut show, and Amelia's horse was promising to do

the same. I warmed her up in the schooling area and we were almost ready to go in the class when the tractor came to drag the arena next to the schooling area. The bucket was up in the air, so as the tractor was turning toward Ella she spooked at the looming claw and sidestepped at a gallop across the arena, through the path of another rider cantering to a warm up jump. The rider pulled out of her approach and Amelia apologized, but the trainer started swearing loudly. He was grossly overweight and wearing ludicrously incongruous golf clothes—he didn't look like he had ever been on a horse in his life. I apologized to him and to the kid, and explained that the tractor had spooked the horse, but he ignored me.

“Get your fucking horse under control,” he lectured Amelia, trailing her around the arena and shouting. “Jumper riders need to—

I interrupted in my loudest Queen of England voice. “Amelia, let's just approach the vertical one more time to make sure we've got her focused before we go in.”

I could still hear him swearing but I was trying to ignore him.

“...learn some manners...to ride your horse, you little bitch”—

Enough.

I swiveled toward the trainer and glared holes through my sunglasses. “You can stop swearing at my rider right now.” I commanded. “Her horse spooked, it won't happen again. She doesn't need any further discussion from you and I won't have you berating her. You can take up your problems with me.”

The man's face turned completely red and he wheeled on his white loafers and marched off to his golf cart, leaving his student standing there with her mouth open.

Good. I walked with Amelia to the coliseum entrance, wiped her boots and patted her mare's big, shiny shoulder. "Have fun!" I said.

The steward walked up to me while she was riding her course and threatened to eject me from the show. He said that a trainer had complained.

"What did he complain about?" I explained my situation. "I'm a trainer, too. The man was swearing at my student. The horse spooked. She couldn't help it, she apologized and no harm came from it."

"Do you know who that man is?"

Amelia was coming out of the ring. "I don't care who that man is." I shot her a thumbs-up. She was in first place.

"He works for the Von Willenburgers."

"So what, you should be chastising him, not me. Do I need to file a formal complaint with the USEF? I'm sure there are a few witnesses that can testify to his unreasonable verbal abuse. It's probably not the first time." I stared hard at the steward.

"Look, he used to be police, and he was involved in some ugly business. Just try to avoid, him, okay?"

I would have to take my tiny victory—not to get run out of the show by a disgusting bully—when what I really wanted was to teach the jerk a lesson. But I knew I had better leave it alone. The guy was obviously a lot more powerful than me, especially with big money clients.

I hate relying on karma, it just takes so long.

After Santa Barbara we packed up and moved the horses to Moorpark. Amelia was moving too, she had decided to finish her last semesters of college in Boulder, Colorado. I would miss her—she was the best student I had and she was always ready to do one more thing, never in a rush to leave the barn like most of my other clients who sandwiched riding into the rest of their busy day. Amelia knew me so well I didn't have to finish my sentences, I didn't even need to point, she was already handing me whatever I was about to ask for, helping to tackle the mountain of work that came with riding horses. She had helped me start Brighton under saddle, painted all the jumps with me, ridden out on trails bareback. She was practically Ruby's second mother. We hugged goodbye and I promised to take good care of her mare and said I would be here when she came home.

Moving cost a few clients, since not everyone wanted to move their horses farther away and some of them really loved the facility. But all the best horses and clients were on board, Vince's horses would go, Bianca's horse, Amelia's mare, and obviously Brighton would go. I was going to miss the beautiful trails, the geraniums and the lemon trees but not the rattlesnakes or the lack of phones and electricity. I was ready to get back into civilization and focus on training more than rehabilitation anyway. I figured I could probably pick up a few clients at the new barn.

Vince's herd had grown to twelve horses, and I finally had to insist that he pay me for my work. I felt bad about it, but I wasn't sure if these horses were ever going to sell and not all of them were the amazing grand prix horses he thought they were. Then he surprised me because he actually did bring me a truly special horse.

Vince had been friends for a couple of years with a breeder who stood several high quality warmblood jumper stallions at his farm. The breeder gave Vince a young stallion. He had the look of a grand prix jumper: gorgeous, pure glossy black with a white blaze down his face. But when I glanced at his legs, my smile faded. I understood why the breeder had given him away. He had obviously bowed a tendon, and there was some other damage as well, as indicated by swelling and puffiness where there should have been cold, tight sinew. Grand Prix jumpers need to be incredibly strong, and major tendon injuries tend to cause lingering weakness. But there was something about this horse that was special. His name was Devoted, and I loved him immediately. He was just a joy to ride, the kind of horse that would play with the shadow skimming across the ground under a bird overhead. He would jump anything I put in front of him, I could have lit it on fire and he wouldn't have questioned me.

Vince also brought in another stallion from the same breeder, a grey Holsteiner named Moonstruck who was a nice horse, not a great horse. He was a short-term training project that Vince was supposed to bodywork and I was supposed to put some miles on at the shows. I put the stallions at the other end of the barn from the girls and made sure to work them at quiet times when if they somehow got away from me it was unlikely they would be able to go on a rampage. That worked well for a while, but then I got another stallion and he made some big waves.

The facility was a lot like the Los Angeles Equestrian Center, multiple trainers working in adjacent rings and none of them minding their own business. Tom and Tracy moved out shortly after I moved in, but I wasn't too bothered since I didn't agree with their methods anyway. The stable seemed a little like Zoe's television reality show, like

the trainers were making secret alliances and suddenly it would come time to vote someone out. I should have suspected that my turn would come but I didn't imagine it would come so soon.

The newest stallion belonged to a new client, another random friend of Vince's. The owner was a little sketchy and wanted to pay cash. I wasn't sure what that was about, but I didn't care as long as he paid. A shipper brought the stallion over, and everyone at the Center knew when he unloaded. It was like a Tyrannosaurus Rex had been unleashed in the parking lot. The stallion screamed and leaped, performed athletic caprioles and levades, he walked on his hind legs and pawed the air and paraded the whole way to my barn which was unfortunately in the very back of the facility. He was huge, magnificent, and completely batshit crazy.

One of the first things we did was give the guy a makeover. He needed some serious manscaping—he was long-maned and dirty. We clipped him and trimmed his mane and tail and then I tacked him up to lead him down to the small round pen to lunge him. As soon as we stepped out of the barn he reared to his full height and then flipped over backwards onto the asphalt. My saddle was folded in half and crushed flat as a pancake.

“Well, I guess I'm glad I wasn't sitting on him,” I said. I knew the owner wasn't going to buy me a new saddle, though, so that sucked. Several thousand dollars down in one instant. I went ahead and pulled off the mangled saddle and led him to the round pen anyway. He needed to know that histrionics weren't going to work around here.

It was a lot like flying a kite made of King Kong. He was a maniac, and other trainers and their students gathered to gawk at the screaming monster. He was a lovely

dappled grey, over 17 hands tall. Everyone seemed to think he was trying to kill me, but it was obvious that if he wanted to kill me he could. And I thought he might kill me accidentally, the way he threw his hooves around, but his expression was more over-stimulated than malicious. His ears were forward instead of back and his eyes were bright. He wasn't charging me, he was just barely aware of me. He was simply overcome with excitement.

I was sure he would work it out eventually, he just needed to learn some composure, but I knew it would be bad if he got away from me. I needed to think of a way to correct him that enabled me to be safely out of striking range of his hooves and that didn't enrage him and make him turn on me. And I needed to solve him quickly or there would be trouble for both of us.

Meanwhile my farrier gave my number to a guy who was apparently loaded and looking to buy a horse. Chuck warned me the guy was a little crazy, which in the horse world generally meant he wasn't safe to let out in public, but he said the guy had the money to spend and he was looking for a fancy jumper prospect. Chuck knew I had a few horses from Hans, Vince's friend the breeder, and he thought it might be a good commission for me to make the deal.

Sure enough the guy called. He said his name was Rick, and he was looking for a mare, and he didn't mind biting or kicking. He told me that he had found one he wanted in Europe but she had attacked and killed a groom and the breeders had euthanized her. He was upset that the Europeans had refused to sell her to him, but it was too late now and he was looking for something just like her. He had about \$150,000 to spend.

Wow, I thought. I mean, I get that everyone wants their *Black Stallion* moment, but this guy is certifiable. Of course, he probably doesn't have the skill to ever develop that sort of rapport with a horse but maybe they'd get stranded on an island somewhere together and have to depend on each other for survival or something. I figured that was not really my problem.

"Would you consider a stallion?" I asked. (I have the perfect horse for you, I thought.)

"Absolutely not, I only want a mare."

I called Vince and asked him to see if Hans had any mares for sale, and a few days later we met at the breeder's farm. It was a one of those gorgeous farms with a Spanish mission style barn covered with bougainvillea, but it was sort of forlorn and unkempt. Like so many horse people, the breeder was probably constantly robbing Peter to pay Paul and only occasionally running his business in the black. Rick pulled up in his Cadillac and Vince pulled up in his truck. I introduced everyone, and we walked into the barn to find Hans. The breeder pointed to the ring, there was a dark bay wandering loose in the arena, so we walked that way.

"This is Star. She is five year old, wait until you see her jump."

The mare was so dark she was almost black, and she was a giant, probably eighteen hands. She had the requisite white star on her face to earn the name, and good bone but she wasn't so heavy looking that she looked unathletic. She had the equine equivalent of the build of a professional basketball player. She snorted as the group approached, it was hard to say if it was a warning or just an exclamation.

Rick started telling his story of the vicious mare he wanted to buy in Europe. I imagined that he thought the pertinent details added up for his audience like this: Europe + vicious mare = experienced rider with big bank account. In fact, his story signaled: idiot + big bank account = ready to be robbed blind. I noticed that Hans was good at hiding his contempt. Vince probably didn't even know what a joke this guy was.

Hans set a placement pole to a crossrail in a jump chute on the side of the arena and picked up a lunge whip to encourage the mare to trot through it. Then she trotted in and nonchalantly popped over the little three foot vertical he set, so he raised the back element to four feet and she trotted through again. My mouth was hanging open—usually fences don't move up a foot at a time, most people move the pole a few inches at a time to let the horse warm up and build to their capacity. But this horse was clearly not having any issue with the adjustment. He put up an oxer over five feet high and she trotted through with as much effort as it took to step over a crack in the sidewalk. I hated the thought of such an outrageous jumper going to such a stupid owner but at least Rick had said he would keep the mare with me. That meant I would have to put up with the guy.

Rick bought two horses that day, and spent several times his original budget. Luckily the other mare was already decently started since she had been at Hap Hansen's barn for a while, so I would only be starting the five year old. Rick insisted that he wanted to be involved in the training process, which generally means major headaches for horse and trainer as the owner goes right behind the trainer and undoes everything the trainer just did, all the while judging the trainer against the impossible standard of what the owner would be doing if they were anywhere near the rider they thought they were in their own head. Instead of thinking about why a five year old of this caliber was still

sitting around in a field, and why Hans was willing to sell her to this idiot, I let the dollar signs dance in my mind. The standard commission for a trainer is ten percent, so I was already planning how to spend the money.

The next morning I got a phone call. I always answered the phone, no matter what. It could have been an emergency with the horses.

“Hi, Good Morning! How are you this morning? I’m not waking you am I?”

I glanced at the clock. 6:02. “No, of course not, Rick.” I cleared my throat. “Everything okay?” It was Monday. My one day off.

“Absolutely, I was just thinking about my girls and wondered if I could get you to do me a favor.”

“Sure, what’s up?” Why the hell was he calling me at the crack of dawn on Monday morning?

“I can’t get by there this morning but I was hoping you would stop by the barn and give them some carrots. I’ll give you some money, just stop and get one of those really big bags of carrots at the grocery store and go by so they’ll know I was thinking about them.”

For God’s sake. Of course my soul had already been sold so I agreed to spend my own money and time to go pet his new mares, who of course would have no idea that I was his emissary or that the carrots had anything to do with their crazy new owner. I didn’t have my commission yet so I really didn’t have a choice.

Rick invited me to dinner to celebrate his acquisitions. I wasn’t sure if he was inviting me on a date or a business outing, but I figured the answer had to be yes either way if I wanted my commission. Where did this end?

He insisted on picking me up which made it seem like maybe it was supposed to be a date. He warned me that there was a strict dress code, and that jeans were unacceptable. But that was about all I had to wear, I thought. I wasn't about to put on a skirt and show my cadaver colored legs, so I scrounged up a pair of pants I used when I did temp work.

I got in the car and hoped to hell he wasn't a serial killer. Surely he wouldn't want to kill his horsetrainer? I hoped he didn't drink too much. I hoped I didn't drink too much. I hoped he wouldn't put a move on me and get angry if I rebuffed him. I hoped he could take a hint.

There was a tiny, resilient, stubborn part of me that had read too many romance novels and hoped I would maybe fall in love with him and that all of the other concerns would melt away and I would be rich and taken care of and have magnificent horses. Rick was a fairly good-looking man, salt and pepper hair, tall and athletic. But he had a sort of jovial forcefulness that seemed like he could really lose his sense of humor easily. Plus I already knew he was an idiot. I don't know why I thought there was any chance of liking him but I guess it was that same stupid sliver of optimism that moved me to Hollywood to be an actress, that still made me believe I could get to the Grand Prix ring, that suggested that someday Vince would actually solve a problem instead of just jumping in and wading around in it.

He drove downtown and we dined at the Los Angeles Athletic Club, right across from my favorite building, the Oviatt. Rick proudly explained that the restaurant was part of a private, members-only club. The décor was polished and masculine, which I guessed was appropriate for a restaurant that served a gym. The evening turned out to be mostly

awkward, and I somehow walked the line between date and business associate without ever knowing which one he thought I was.

I didn't tell Vince about our dinner.

Vince and I had recently gotten into a huge fight, and I was actually afraid for the first time in my life that someone would hurt me. He was furious. He had come over to my place late, he had said he was going to come by and put me on his table but I had thought he meant earlier in the day. There is nothing more uncomfortable than someone touching me when I'm upset—it's like someone I'm mad at trying to hug me.

Vince was grumpy because he had wanted me to go to dinner the week before and I had cancelled because Penelope's husband had invited me to go to Capital to see Radiohead perform in studio. I told Vince that I had an opportunity to see a really cool band in an intimate venue and I wanted to reschedule. He was pissed. Whatever, I thought, he flakes on me every five minutes and he can't handle it if I want to do something once in a lifetime instead of have dinner with him? He was still acting like I had stood him up for our anniversary or something, but in his typical martyr way he insisted on putting me on the table. He kept making little digs for standing him up, and I finally said I just felt a little weird about going out with him, that it seemed sort of inappropriate.

"How is it inappropriate?" he scowled.

"Well, its just weird—you're married, you should be going out with your wife." I knew I was stepping off a cliff but I was tired of this high wire act.

"We've been out to eat before."

I wished I just had a boyfriend. Did other trainers go out with their clients? Did it feel weird? I didn't know but I was sick of feeling dirty, like a paid escort and not like an appreciated horse trainer. "Yeah, and it makes me a little nervous. You never let me pay. It's just the two of us. I would rather be more professional in our relationship."

I immediately knew I had made a mistake being so candid.

He was furious. He just kept acidly saying things were 'inappropriate' and finally we were screaming at each other.

I hate screaming. I just wanted to stop arguing, to leave the room and cool off but Vince threatened that if I left now, it would be over forever.

What would be over, I wondered? Our "relationship?" Or my business? Vince knew a lot of people in the horse industry. I knew he would trash me all over town, and he had twelve horses in training, including Val who was getting ready to move up to the 1.40 meter division in the jumper ring, just a breath away from Grand Prix.

I swallowed my resentment and retracted everything. I had learned my lines and I recited them on cue. I soothed him and placated and hated every minute of it. When he finally left I washed my face and got ready for bed, and avoided looking in the mirror.

Keep your eyes on the prize, I thought.

A couple of nights later, Zoe called and invited me to go out. I told her I didn't have the energy to get all dolled up and drive all the way into Hollywood. I just wasn't motivated to practice my pick up skills on the rich and the restless. I had seen Zoe a few times since she had gotten back from filming her reality show, once for the premiere and again for the finale. She had done surprisingly well, making it all the way to the end of

the progressive elimination show by dating the best looking guy on the island. Now she was enjoying her celebrity and going to parties peppered with up and coming athletes and television stars who thought they were movie stars, entitled assholes who dropped small fortunes on bottle service and silicone enhanced caricatures of women. She wanted to me to come along but I just wasn't feeling motivated to gawk at all the plastic people anymore.

Maybe I was just jealous because I was having trouble getting my commission from the sale of Rick's two horses. Somehow Vince had inserted himself into the deal so completely that I had been shouldered aside. He had cooked up a convoluted arrangement with the breeder that involved embryo transfers and breeding rights and all sorts of other moving parts. He kept telling me I would get something. I told him I had better get my ten percent, in case he was thinking of throwing me some thousand dollar bone, and that there needed to be some money for Chuck too, for directing the guy our way. Vince said he would handle it, so of course I felt completely unreassured.

Meanwhile, I figured out a way to reach the grey stallion when he lost his mind about other horses. I had used a shock collar on Ruby to teach her to stay out of the ring after she caused Bianca to fall off by bouncing out from under a jump as the horse was going over it. It was an elegant way to train—the dog hears you correct them but if they don't listen, the remote control activates the shock collar and they feel an electric shock that immediately is associated with failing to listen. So instead of chasing after her and spanking her whenever she stepped into the ring, which seemed like a personal betrayal and obviously resulted in Ruby not wanting to be caught, but unfortunately did not seem

to help with making the association that the punishment had anything to do with her entering the arena, the shock collar very effectively and impersonally trained her to avoid the ring. I had heard of other trainers using electricity on horses. My farrier had told me about shoeing a horse once for a legendary west coast trainer. Apparently the horse was still fully tacked because he had just come out of a lesson, and he kept going ballistic in the crossties. The horse had never acted like that before, and the farrier couldn't figure out what was wrong until the trainer realized that he had been accidentally shocking the horse with the remote. Apparently he had gotten his remotes switched and thought he was shocking the student's horse that was jumping in the arena.

I had always thought that mixing electricity and horses was a terrible idea, it made me think of the ruthless people who were convicted of collecting insurance money on their horses by electrocuting them, because it was apparently undetectable except by necropsy. I had heard that only the inside of the electrocuted horses' skin was burned. But Cal presented the perfect problem: I needed to keep my distance, I needed to call his attention back from a dramatic, disrespectful loss of focus, and I needed him to not associate the correction with me, personally.

I wrapped the dog collar around his neck and walked him to the ring. Right away he went up in the air and I hit the remote, sending a light current to the collar. Cal's ears tipped back and he stopped mid-rear, confused about the new sensation. Then his ears tipped up as he caught sight of a horse around the corner and he screamed and went up again, and I turned the collar up a notch and hit the remote again. His eyes widened and he dropped back to the ground.

I patted his shoulder. "That's a boy, Cal." I said. "Keep your composure."

He snorted and flexed his neck and broke the collar, which fell uselessly to the ground. I would have to work on how to attach it to him, but it was enough to see I was onto something. In no time, I was able to lead him to the arena without any aerial acts, although he still nickered and snorted at other horses. He was a dream to ride, absolutely powerful and confident. This was the kind of horse that could go international. I only hoped I could hold on to him. His owner seemed pleased, but he was a big namedropper and I suspected that once I got the horse safely trained past his crazy catcalling thug phase, he'd be yanked out from under me and given to someone famous to ride.

Val was as strong and stiff as ever, but fit and happy. The stallions were on track. Rick's mares were beasts—he was doing his best to spoil them into unmanageable brats, but they were both promising jumpers. Bianca's horse was jumping great, and was ready to do some serious showing. Amelia's horse was a superstar. Brighton was still a little demented, but he was indubitably the fanciest horse in the stable, plus he was mine, all mine.

Then someone stuck a stick in the wheels.

Chapter 12: Refusal

Sometimes a horse stops in front of a fence rather than jumping it, and this disobedience is called a refusal. There are many reasons a horse may refuse to jump: and they range in seriousness from the horse simply being unprepared to take off, to the horse lacking the confidence to attempt the obstacle, to the horse being chronically uninterested and/or incapable of jumping. One of the most difficult and important decisions a rider can make is how to handle a refusal: the wrong choice can exacerbate the problem or even ruin the horse or get the rider killed. The split second judgment must be made whether the horse should be punished or reassured. Did the horse see the jump in time to prepare himself? Did the horse have enough energy on the approach? Was the distance workable or was the horse making a wise choice to prevent a nasty accident? Was the approach organized or chaotic and sloppy? A horse must be in balance in order to jump well. Is the horse being overfaced, is he capable of jumping the obstacle? Did the rider send a mixed signal? A hesitation, a held breath, even a downward glance can tip the scales with a sensitive horse. Sometimes a horse needs to simply circle and come again. Sometimes the bar must be lowered and the confidence must be rebuilt.

I got kicked out of the facility. It was supposedly because of Cal—they told me he was too dangerous to train at a facility with kids and amateurs. That was probably true a couple of months ago, but he was doing great now. I wasn't about to get rid of one of my most promising horses, and I could see the writing on the wall. My number was up, it didn't matter if I kept the stallion or not. When I told Dean, he refused to believe it, and then he said he would handle it. I thought he meant he would fix it, since he got off the phone with me like he was going to make a few calls and get everything sorted out. I halfway thought he could fix it, since everyone seemed to eat of his hand, but he just called me back later with a list of places we could move to.

I looked at a couple of the usual suspects, but I didn't want to go to another big facility with a bunch of bitchy back-biting trainers. One promising little place in Sunland was impeccable. A gorgeous barn with a boxwood hedge in front, an excellent indoor arena with perfect sand footing, small and private. But the woman running the place handed me a fat stack of papers roughly the size of a preacher's Bible with her rules written on them. The rules covered what hours you could use the indoor, when you could bathe a horse, how long a horse could be turned out. I wondered if there was a rule about when you could go to the bathroom. One of her rules was that all riders must wear a helmet while mounted, which wasn't unreasonable, but she explained that a client who was grooming her horse in the crosstie had apparently been kicked in the head and the horror of that scene had prompted her to make the rule. I didn't point out that the vast majority of her rules about wiping boots and picking the horse's hooves before taking them out of the stall were tied to an obsessive-compulsive fixation with order and had nothing to do with safety. In fact, the rule about wearing a helmet while mounted

wouldn't even have altered the incident she was traumatized by since the student wasn't mounted while it happened. I had a theory that the less skilled a rider is the more obsessed they get with cleanliness. People who care more about their barn aisles being perfect than their horses being happy are missing the point. Horses don't care about being pristine—they roll in the dirt every chance they get. They care about moving around, eating whenever they feel like it and having friends. I was all for a well-groomed horse and a tidy barn, but the whole sterile, eat-off-the-barn floors thing eluded me.

Another place I considered was the opposite of the first. Too dirty, too western-themed. Everything was grey, and surrounded by colorless metal galvanized pipe. Cowboy boots were the constant decorative theme, old boots even served as planters full of dusty, prickly cactuses near the office. Someone had a horse in the arena tied to a tire. Just no.

The place I settled on was the barn of a friend of Hans, the breeder. It wasn't perfect. The owner was a tiny little troll of a woman named Lila who had a dressage arena and a twelve-stall barn. There wasn't a jump arena but she was willing to build one. She had a lot of accumulated trash sitting around but she was willing to let me pick it up, and the place was private which was my number one priority after all the drama at the last facility. There were a few small turnouts and it was right down the street from Hans's farm so Vince was excited about the possibility of developing a pipeline for training and selling some of his young stock. I was torn between excitement about the idea, and concern that it sounded like a lot more work for me and probably money I would never see. I had finally gotten my commission from Rick's horses after pitching a huge fit. Vince thought it should be enough that I had the horses in training but I informed him in

no uncertain terms that it wasn't. Rick sat down and wrote me a check for ten thousand dollars, which was nowhere near ten percent of the entire deal but it was the biggest payday I had ever had. I finally paid off all those beautiful clothes I had put on my credit card, and put money down on a car lease, a black Volvo SUV that meant I no longer had to be embarrassed when I went out. Not that I ever did anymore.

The move was tough. Rick defected to the Los Angeles Equestrian Center, saying it was closer to his home—he needed to be able to feed those mares their carrots. He was ridiculously high maintenance and Star was turning out to be 18 hands of mean, so I wasn't that sorry to see them go. But I also lost Bianca. Apparently she had realized that she was only in town four days a year and maybe riding wasn't the kind of sport you could be good at with that sort of schedule. She decided to sell her horse. I found out that the snake that owned the Moorpark facility had called her up and told her that her horse was happy there and could stay there without me, and that another trainer would be better at selling him. That was probably true since I continually proved that I couldn't sell a life raft to a drowning man, but I was sorry to lose Royo and I had liked Bianca. The last time she had come out I had asked her why she never wore her custom tall boots that I had helped her order.

"I can't get them on and they are impossible to take off," she had said. "I have to make my maid pull them off while I put one foot on her butt."

"Do you have boot pulls and a boot jack?" I asked.

"What is a boot pulls?" she asked in her heavy accent.

I had laughed. How had she been riding for years and not learned that there were tools to help you get your tall boots on and off?

And now she was gone, just like that. I would miss her but I hated the way I felt gutted when a horse that I had poured my heart and soul into was snatched away and I was utterly powerless to do anything about it. I hoped the horses didn't feel as bewildered and hurt as I did.

Amelia was in town for the summer so she and I set about painting jumps and picking up trash. I ordered a huge rollaway container and we filled the whole thing. Lila had a man come out and strip the shredded rubber footing out of her dressage arena and get to work building a jump ring, which would be bigger. I had paid a month's board up front to give her some operating budget. Meanwhile, I was praying none of my clients would come see the place while it looked like a junkyard.

The days passed as we unpacked and tried to work the horses in the small space. Ruby was thrilled because she didn't have to be on leash anymore. Cal caught a glimpse of himself in the mirrors that Lila had pulled out of the dressage arena and couldn't get over how virile and handsome the stallion screaming at him was. He snorted and pranced, but stayed four feet mostly on the ground. He nudged my shoulder and then pointed with his nose at the other horse, it was like his twin!

Then, suddenly, the man working on the arena stopped showing up. Lila wouldn't return my calls. I had a bad feeling, but Vince said he would handle it. The next few days I didn't see any sign of Lila, and then I got an email from her asking us to please leave the premises within a week.

"She can't do that." I said to Vince.

"Don't worry, I'll figure it out."

“I knew we should have made her sign a contract.” Originally, she had agreed to build the arena before I moved the horses, but I knew she needed money and I needed to get out of the other facility so I had taken the leap. Once she had torn up her dressage arena I figured there was no way to go but forward. “Do you know how much work I have done, picking up all of that trash and crap that she had lying around? I bet that’s why she’s freaking out. She doesn’t seem to be at home, I need to find her and talk to her. She can’t do this.”

“I’ll call Hans,” said Vince.

“What a maniac. She’s ruined her dressage arena. I can’t believe she’s backing out now.”

Packing up a barn is sort of like moving out of a home. There is an unbelievable amount of stuff. Every trunk is like that kitchen drawer full of things that can’t be organized but can’t be thrown away, only in a barn everything is dirty and heavy. A ton of things can’t be packed until the actual moving day because they are in use until the last minute, like buckets, blankets, saddles and bridles, and halters and lead ropes. Lila hid from me while we packed up, and she didn’t appear even when we moved everything. Again.

The place we moved to was not bad, in fact it was probably better than Lila’s. She had suggested it when she suggested that we vacate the property within a week, which was smart because otherwise it would have been impossible to find a suitable place that fast. I hadn’t known about it before moving to Lila’s but it wasn’t far away and it was a newish set of those prefabricated Morton barns. There were a few other trainers on the

property but they didn't seem to be inclined toward drama. The arena was decent and there was even a little bridle path.

Vince said, "This is great, we'll finally be able to get down to business."

I just felt tired.

I perked up a little when I got a call from Sylvie. She had moved up to Santa Barbara with her new husband and she told me she had purchased a horse. She was excited because in her whole career as a top trainer she had never bought a horse for herself. The mare's name was Windfall, which was funny since that was the name of the barn my trainer owned where I grew up in South Carolina. She was a four year old, mid-sized, black Dutch Warmblood with a tiny white star. Sylvie told me that she had broken her back in a riding accident way back when she worked for Joe Fargis, and she had hoped that her back was healed enough to ride again but apparently it was not working. She wanted to know if I would take the horse into training.

It was the biggest honor I could think of that my mentor trusted me to ride and train her own horse, and Windfall made the trip down to my new facility. Then I got another call, from my Mom.

"Lauren, your father is getting close. Do you want to come home now or do you want to wait? The hospice worker says it could be anytime now, but it could be as much as a week."

Dad had deteriorated steadily and for the last several weeks he had been on a morphine drip. He was at home with hospice care and Mom and my sister Caroline were there. My little sister Leigh was living in Paris. It was strange to be across the country from my father dying, because even though I knew it was happening it was impossible to

comprehend. He wasn't part of my daily life in California so it had been relatively easy to refuse to think about the huge hole he would leave in my life when he left the earth.

Amelia and Vince agreed to look after the horses and I flew home.

When I got there he had already passed.

The funeral was huge and afterward we stood for hours hugging people who told us how much Dad had meant to them. By the end we were exhausted and punch drunk, laughing inappropriately, feeling the relief of Dad's release from an ugly, poisonous suffering more than the grief that we knew would come.

The grief did come, and it kept coming. Waves of memory swept over suddenly, invisible tsunamis: the whiff of sawdust from the workshop, the sight of his books on Nietzsche and Deleuze piled with their ragged edges of little tiny post it notes filled with his cramped writing, a Beatles song on the radio reminding me of how he would turn up volume on the Abbey Road album on the stereo on Sunday mornings to wake the house up. A relentless undertow of loss pulled back toward the past underneath each moment.

When I flew back to Los Angeles I packed up for a horse show at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center. I was taking a handful of horses, including Brighton just to give him some exposure, and Val who was scheduled to jump in the Jimmy Williams Classic.

I slid my thumb into the corner of the horse's mouth. My heart was kicking my ribs and sweat was already pooling in my sportsbra. I pressed my finger against his tongue, holding the bridle up to his face. "Come on, Val, we've got to go." His teeth were the color of old, yellowed paper. He wouldn't unlock them.

I unwrapped a peppermint, crinkling the wrapper so he could hear it. He pricked his ears and unclamped his jaw just long enough to grab the candy and I slipped the bit in between his teeth before he ground them back together. I had to stand on tiptoe to get the bridle over his head while he shivered, eyes rolling. He was shining, magnificent, a warhorse. Nothing like the broken, half-starved animal from before.

I opened the stall door and he pinned his ears and whipped a warning with his tail, then charged forward. I turned him in a circle and worked my gloves on. Amelia stood at his head while I stepped up on the mounting block and into the saddle, releasing him just as he began to rear back at being held. “It’s okay, Val, easy,” I murmured, stroking his neck. “He hasn’t acted like this in a long time. Where’s Vince?”

Amelia rolled her eyes, “Doing his dog and pony show.”

“I thought he was going to be here to help warm up.”

“Not with a crowd of admirers to entertain.”

Val pranced in the direction of the warm up arena while I kicked my leg forward to tighten the girth. I swallowed but my mouth was waterproof. Rosey drove by in her golf cart, with her wacky side ponytail and kabuki titanium dioxide sunscreen. I pretended not to see her and concentrated on straightening my reins. Doug was there, too. He had stolen most of what was left of Rosey’s clientele and gone out on his own only six months after moving to California to be with his boyfriend, Chet. I heard that then he had dumped Chet.

“Do the jumps look big?”

Amelia ducked her visor and wiped my boots, “You’re going to be amazing!”

So they were huge. I caught my first glimpse of the five-foot jumps and the crowds dressed up and milling around with their cocktails under the umbrellas at the edges of the field. I saw Vince, standing in the gate talking to a gaggle of open-mouthed men and women. Apparently they were all now part owners of Val. I heard one lady say, “It looks like the Mexicans have the nicest horses!”

I snorted. No, it’s the nicest horses that have Mexicans. I was the only rider there without a team of grooms. The warm up ring was crowded, eight or nine horses galloping and jumping over three fences in the equivalent of a twenty-meter circle. I recognized some of the best riders in the country—several wore the scarlet coat of the United States Equestrian Team. It was a fight to claim a spot but finally Amelia elbowed someone over and set a vertical for us. Only two horses were left to go, so I let Val thunder through and then everyone got out of the way. I didn’t have much time, so I jumped a three-foot spread, a three and a half foot oxer, a four foot oxer, a four and a half foot oxer and then a four-nine vertical. Val was so strong and stiff I was seriously concerned about controlling him. My arms felt like rubber bands.

The gate guy was calling my name. I entered the show arena and took a shaky breath. I smelled fresh mowed grass and sharp, musky fear.

“And now we welcome Lauren Allen to the Jimmy Williams Classic on an entry from Centaur Performance Horses. Lauren Allen on Velour.”

I told Vince. Nobody wants to sound like a jerk trying to speak French.

The timer buzzed. I touched Val with my spur and we cantered a tight circle. Val locked onto the first jump as soon as he saw it and started to run, digging up clods of turf

with his hooves. I squeezed him together, concerned that he was going to run right through it but he grunted and gathered himself, launching over. I violently yanked at the reins, which had already gotten too long, and turned him to the next jump. He was running like his tail was on fire and my arms and legs were already screaming. The crowd inhaled as he hurled us over the fence and we turned back to the triple combination. Looming in front of us were three huge jumps in a row, with one step in between. It looked like a massive pile of rails and I felt Val grabbing the bit, stubbornly locking his jaw, galloping faster as if he might try to leap over the whole thing. I randomly thought of Laika, the poor dog catapulted into outer space by the Russians. I leaned back, sawing on the reins but he was out of control, running through my hands. At the last second he ducked out, jolting left so hard I saw sparkles.

My body felt heavy, like wearing the lead apron to help the vet take x-rays. We re-approached the combination and somehow I got him to jump through it, but I wished I could just stop and take a nap. There was no way to win now; a refusal costs three faults. We turned toward the biggest jump on the course and Val tore over it. Tight turn to the in-and-out—I could barely bend his neck. He was going so fast we were skidding and I knew it was over. He accelerated to the fence, slid to a stop and crashed into the jump. My shoulders dropped. I opened my fingers and closed my eyes. I was still on the horse but the buzzer sounded and the announcer explained to the crowd that I had been eliminated.

I rode out of the ring, slid off and walked back to the barn on wobbly legs. My mouth was full of the inert metallic taste of failure. Amelia helped unsaddle Val. I unwrapped another peppermint and his nostrils blew steam into my palm as he whisked

the candy into his mouth. It's not his fault. Some things just can't be fixed. My sunglasses were fogging up, a rising tide of saltwater was filling my head but I didn't want my friend to see.

"Can you cool Val out? I need a minute."

She took the horse and gave me a look that tells me she wants to make me feel better and knows that she can't. I took my helmet off and turned to sit down on a tack trunk to cry, my breath already coming in jerks, but before I could sit I was being lifted off the ground in a too tight hug.

"Congratulations!" Vince was flushed with excitement.

It seemed like Vince was always trying to touch me. I pushed him off. "Put me down."

He set me down with an injured look. "You were wonderful!"

His pack of owners was right outside the tack room. I heard someone saying, "Val just didn't like that jump, I guess."

"It's the combinations. I never realized before but that must have been how he had his accident."

Dean looked at me blankly.

"You did see that we got eliminated, right?"

"Yeah, but you were great! He jumped everything a mile high."

I wanted to grab the big stupid knife he always carries and stab him in the heart with it.

"Are you upset?" He asked.

"He stopped. Twice. We didn't even finish."

“But you should have seen how high he was jumping. Everyone wants to come say congratulations.”

“Please not right now. I would really like to be alone for a few minutes.”

“Well, okay. I’ll tell them to go away.” He stood there.

“You too. Just leave me alone for a minute.”

My lips quivered, my eyes were leaking. Dean tried to hug me again. He smelled like alcohol and sweat, and also like a puppy.

“Stop touching me!” I felt meanness surging up inside me.

“Why are you upset? It was just your first time in the big leagues. You’ll be better next time.”

“Val can’t do it. He doesn’t want to.” I took off my gloves and threw them in the grooming box. “Why are we making him? Maybe I can force him to jump, but what’s the point? He doesn’t want to do this anymore.” I stared at the crescent moons of dirt under my nails. “This isn’t how I wanted it to be.”

Nothing was how I wanted it to be.

Chapter 13: Serpentine

A serpentine is an “S” curved pattern used for practicing changes of bend and precision of track. The objective is to meet the midpoint of the arena exactly straight, carrying the x-axis of the snaking turn across the y-axis of the centerline and fitting the curve to the arena edges, while maintaining tempo and balance and alternating aids to change the bend of the track. Serpentes improve the horse’s flexibility and coordination, and hone the rider’s ability to guide the horse through complicated figures without losing energy through the outside edge (bulging off of the track) or the inside edge (falling into the turn.) Practicing bend is one of the most effective ways to learn to track straight. The serpentine tests the rider’s ability first to mentally envision and plan a pattern, then to execute the plan in an organized, balanced and symmetrical fashion. Jumping courses are the ultimate test of this ability to control track, as the rider must ride lines and turns through a course of jumps without losing energy, rhythm, balance or straightness. Riders at the in-gate of a horse show can universally be found standing in front of course diagrams and drawing patterns in the air as they translate the two-dimensional plan on paper into a mental strategy of attack for the three-dimensional demonstration of control that is a jumping course.

When I made the decision to leave Los Angeles, it was like running downhill. Everything picked up speed without any effort, which was good because I was so burned out I barely had the energy to dress myself. I wasn't sure what Sylvie would do, but as much as I loved and hated to disappoint her I just couldn't do it anymore. I wasn't an actress. There was no real reason for me to live in Los Angeles, three thousand miles away from my family. I missed trail rides and authentic horsepeople. Our barn in South Carolina was sitting empty, I wanted Brighton to get to eat grass and gallop around a pasture.

I told Vince I was moving home and let him think it was because of my Dad. Part of it was because of my Dad, but I was mostly just disappointed and sick of the drama and the struggle. I knew if I fired Vince as a client he would act like an ex-boyfriend and do his best to ruin me, and I just didn't want to fight anymore. Val didn't want to jump. None of the other horses Vince had collected were going to amount to much—Violetta was inexplicably and erratically gimpy, Moonstruck was still a hot mess and had already gone back to Hans, Gene Kelly was hopeless at jumping, the rest of the horses were all mediocre, except for Devoted, and his legs were ruined. In my heart I felt like he belonged to me, he had put his entire soul into my hands from day one. I also knew Vince would never give him to me.

I hated most to lose Cal, but I guessed that I would lose him eventually anyway when he started showing and some famous rider who already had a whole string of grand prix horses seduced his owner over to their stable.

However, the person I dreaded telling the most was Amelia. Amelia, who was finishing her last semester of school and moving back to California. She would be so disappointed, and I had promised her I would be here.

Moving again. I gave away my tents, my flowers and their pots, sold my jumps for a fraction of what they were worth, and packed up my horse, tack, clothes and some of my furniture. I hired a moving truck to take my things and packed Ruby, some clothes and my down comforter in the back of the Volvo. I had organized a shipper to drive across the country with Brighton and Windfall, who Sylvie had decided to send with me. She wanted me to buy her and I agreed that I would take her home to South Carolina and either buy her from Sylvie when I sold Brighton or sell her back east and split the profit.

I had found the shipper online, and he had mapped a route across the country where we would stop each night and offload the horses so they could rest. I was planning to follow along and keep an eye on them along the way. I knew that Brighton would struggle with the long trek, he was so Type A. I imagined the horses resting their legs peacefully each night in clean stalls with fluffy shavings.

I didn't really consider what I would be doing, and planned on finding a hotel or simply sleeping in the back of my SUV, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway since my vision for the horses couldn't have been more wrong.

The shipper was a brawny, baseball hat wearing, tobacco chewing redneck like I would have expected to find in South Carolina. I had spoken with his wife on the phone a couple of times as we confirmed departure plans, and he showed up on time and introduced himself as Jerry. The trailer was a step up, which worried me a little since my

horses had only used a ramp, but they loaded like champions. Leaving Los Angeles was anticlimactic. No one waved goodbye and the 10 unrolled seamlessly, colorlessly, underneath the tires.

Eight hours of driving later we stopped at an empty stable in New Mexico. The stalls were wooden and dusty but the horses were happy to unload. They explored every corner, raising little clouds of dirt up as they snorted and blew their noses in the corners, whuffing at the smells of horses who had been there before them. I set up their water buckets and hay nets and fed them dinner. Brighton had thrown a shoe, so I used my cellphone to track down a local farrier who said he could tack it on in the morning before we got on the road. The evening was chilly and I was exhausted so after Ruby had stretched her legs we both curled up in the back of the Volvo and went to sleep.

And woke up shortly after, with Ruby barking at someone knocking on the window. It was Jerry, carrying a flashlight.

“Yes?” I asked, opening the car door.

“Don’t you wanna sleep in my trailer? I got a real bed up top.”

“Oh. No thanks, I appreciate it, but, uh, you know, my dog hates men.” Ruby looked up and thumped her tail and her soft Labrador mouth opened in the friendliest dog smile ever.

He stopped smiling, shrugged his shoulders and walked back toward his horse trailer. I waited a few minutes and hit the key lock.

In the morning the farrier was late and the shipper was pissed off about the delayed start. I didn’t like the discomfort of his irritation but he seemed to get over it after the farrier showed up and fixed the shoe and we got on the road. He called my cellphone

whenever he wanted to pull over to get gas or to eat, and talked more than I wanted him to but I couldn't pretend not to be available since he could see me in the rearview ignoring his calls. We drove forever, through magnificent red rocks and windswept erosion sculptures and eventually into bare, flat, brown country. Finally the shipper was satisfied that we had gone far enough and we stopped. We were somewhere in Texas. The stalls were all splinters and dirt and the whole place smelled like cows and shit and despair.

“What is that smell?” I asked Jerry.

“They's a feedlot next door.”

I did the best I could to make the horses comfortable, wrapping their legs and watering and feeding them. I was frustrated because Brighton wouldn't eat his food, probably because I had added electrolytes. I had prepared their food before leaving in ziplock bags with the supplements already measured out, so I couldn't get the electrolytes back out of his food. He would just have to go hungry.

We splurged and stayed that night in a motel with a blinking neon sign. My room had a view of the writhing mass of cattle confined in a filthy paddock next door in order to eat themselves fat before slaughter. I locked Ruby in the car and took a much needed shower, then reluctantly met Jerry in the restaurant downstairs that was bursting with men in western snap shirts and cowboy boots. He wanted to get something from his truck and I wanted to collect Ruby and check on the horses one last time so we walked back to the barn. I stood next to him as he opened his glove compartment and showed me the stubby black gun, heavy and muscular, like a water moccasin poised to strike.

I forced a smile and made an excuse and headed for my room. Country music spilled out into the parking lot full of tractor-trailers. I hoped the horses were as tired and beyond caring as I was. I hoped they didn't recognize the smell of death that blanketed the flat, ugly plain.

As tired as I was, in the morning I was ready to get the hell out of there. Another eternal day of driving later, and we were in Tennessee. The hot sticky heat proved that we were getting close to home. It was already dark when the horses were unloaded into stalls that were straight out of a horse horror movie. My biggest concern about driving the horses across the country was the likelihood of them either colicking or developing a respiratory infection, and putting them in the stalls that were the dustiest I had ever seen made me furious.

"What the hell? These stalls are disgusting. We're paying to put the horses in these shitholes?"

I made Jerry hold the horses while I hosed down the stalls, swearing the whole time. Even after wetting down the walls and bedding, every circle the horses made turned up a dust devil. I wrapped their legs, knowing in the morning the wraps would be covered in mud. Then I went to bed, or tried to, since my fury at being unable to keep my horses safe was unabated. The heat was unbearable. Ruby was like a fur blanket. Finally, I rolled down the car windows but the high pitched wail of a mosquito immediately doubled, tripled, quadrupled, as mosquitos began to pour inside. I turned the car on and rolled the windows back up, preferring to die broiled in an oven rather than being eaten alive. I wondered what would happen if I left the car running all night with the air conditioning on.

“It’s hot as hell out here, whyn’t you just sleep in my trailer,” Jerry offered again, shouting through the closed windows. “I got a generator and an air conditioner.”

I thought of the gun in his glove compartment. “No thanks, I’m fine!” I smiled.

I was pretty sure it was probably more like a hideous grimace, but it was dark. Close enough.

The next day we made it to South Carolina. I was more tired than I had ever been, even after a week of horse showing. I started to recognize the sand hills and the clean smell of pine trees, even the fuzzy weeds on the side of the highway looked familiar as we began to pass road names I knew. My plan was to stash the horses in stalls at my old trainer’s farm for the night and get them home the next day after I had set up the paddocks and water troughs and all the things I would have to do in the daylight. I called Michele and told her we were almost there, and then I called Mom. I told her that we were getting near and she informed me that she was having company for dinner, but that I was welcome to join. So much for the prodigal daughter return, I thought.

“All I want to do is go to bed, Mom. I have been driving for four days straight and I am half dead. I am filthy and covered with mosquito bites and sleep deprived and I don’t want to have to smile at anyone, or pretend to be nice. All I want to do is go to bed.”

“Well, Lauren, you don’t have to join us. You can march in and ignore my friends and go right to bed. But I already invited these people to dinner and I am not going to cancel.”

I hung up the phone and burst into tears.

When I finally turned on to the dirt road, there was a new sign posted, a big yellow reflective triangle proclaimed “Dead End.”

Don’t I know it, I thought, and giggled a little between sobs.

The horses were thrilled with their new pasture. They galloped laps and stopped prancing only long enough to snatch mouthfuls of grass. Michele had trailered them over for me since I didn’t own a truck or horse trailer. Neither horse had a fever and both seemed none the worse for the wear despite the miserable trip. Michele even said that she had a boarder with a young German Warmblood that would love for me to do some riding.

I watched the video of Stacy Westfall’s bareback and bridleless reining performance to “Live Like You Were Dying,” and welled up at the beauty of her horsemanship, the song lyrics, even the dedication to her father who had recently passed. I found the neck ring that I had ordered from Linda Tellington Jones and packed up with the rest of my unbelievable amount of tack and started riding Brighton and Windfall bareback and bridleless in the woods. I felt like an Indian, and remembered the way my sister and I had played when we were kids, building teepees and trying to walk silently in the forest. I prayed the horses wouldn’t spook at the quicksilver deer in the woods and slip me off of their shiny backs. I found a quartz spear point in Brighton’s pasture.

Ruby was in seventh heaven, running after the horses, swimming in the pond, and sleeping in the bed with me at night. I admired the way every minute of her day was the most excellent moment of her life, she always jumped out of bed and hit the ground running enthusiastically. I attempted to model myself after her, but Mom still brought out

the worst in me, every question she asked felt like an accusation and I would respond with the surly defensiveness of a teenager even while I wondered why.

“What is your plan, Lauren?”

“I don’t know, Mom, why do I have to have a plan?”

I couldn’t control it, it was like a reflex.

I started riding horses at Michele’s farm, just like in high school. Michele’s daughter was an infant when I moved away and now she was a shy kid on a pony. Michele asked if I would teach her lessons. Cameron was a tough nut to crack—she listened to what I said in the lessons but would refuse to answer my questions when I asked how something felt or if what I had said made sense. She wouldn’t smile when I made jokes, I even started to gently mock her seriousness in an effort to get a response from her, but that didn’t work either.

I was aware that I wasn’t making enough money to support two horses and Mom’s questions about my plan were starting to become more pointed. I knew my only ticket out of the corner I was boxed into was to sell Brighton, so I made plans to go to Aiken for a big A-rated show to try to get him publicized and to maybe hook up with a trainer who could help me out, possibly even offer me a job.

And that was a mortifying catastrophe. When I came home defeated, I decided that I would have to find another way. I started looking online for riding job opportunities. I found one in Ireland that seemed promising, the woman had international caliber horses. She wanted a video and I sent her one Amelia had taken of me riding Val in the Jimmy Williams Classic, over the first seven jumps anyway. She made an offer,

but I balked. I wouldn't be able to bring Ruby. And why would someone in Ireland be trying to find a rider in the States? It made me nervous—it would be a long way to go to be trapped in a bad situation.

I interviewed for a job riding in Kentucky, but the place was awful- the ground was slick with mud and it had frozen into divots with knife-edged ice rims. Plus the living situation was a room in a trailer with the owner and her husband. Bad idea.

Then there was a job in New Jersey that sounded like it had potential. It looked like a nice facility, privately owned by a lawyer, with ten to twelve horses, an off the property apartment, and I was welcome to bring my horses with me for free board. I flew up to interview, agreeing to pay for the flight if the owner would cover the hotel. We met for dinner at the hotel, and Pam seemed nice enough, although there was a shiftiness about her I didn't like. She talked about how her horses wintered at Anton Webber's farm and how great her two grooms were, "they were part of her family," and apparently they took the horses' temperature every day. She talked about the horse she got from an Olympic show jumper's sport horse auction. But what I heard was that she wintered at Anton Webber's farm because her farm didn't have an indoor arena, and his farm was empty because everyone that mattered went to Wellington for the winter. And taking every horse in the barn's temperature every day was just excessive, these weren't racehorses travelling and running hard. It sounded like most of her horses were basically PMU rescues. And a European sport horse auction is generally full of horses that are being culled because they are either not talented enough, not sound enough, or not sane enough to be good prospects.

The next morning Pam brought Dunkin Donuts and coffee to Hunterdon and I rode a few of her horses in the tiny indoor. The grooms seemed friendly and the horses and tack were spotless. Pam was amazed at how much the horses liked me, she said. She offered me the job and offered to pay to ship my horses to New Jersey.

The spun-sugar sunset was already fading when I finally pulled up to the barn in New Jersey. I didn't know where the light switch was but I figured if I hurried I could see well enough to check on the horses and throw them a flake of hay and a few kisses before I found my new address and unpacked. Pam had said that she was at an important business dinner and she would check in with me tomorrow and the grooms went off the clock at five, so the rubber brick aisle was still and silent.

Brighton and Windfall whinnied their locations before I could even see into the stalls to look for them. The mare was peaceful but Brighton looked squinty and worried. He banged his knee against the door and circled the stall. There were shavings in his tail.

My heart stopped.

Brighton circled again and then buckled his knees and started to lie down when I clucked loudly to him and slid open the stall door. He stood back up and rushed me, bumping me like a shark. I slipped his fuzzy sheepskin-covered shipping halter on, fumbling with the buckle and lacing the chain over his nose before he towed me out of the stall and down the aisle. I pushed back the rising panic and snapped the chain to remind Brighton of his manners even though it was clear that his stomach hurt and he felt miserable. I couldn't have him getting loose and running all over the backwoods of wherever we were.

I walked him up and down the dark aisle to keep him from going down again, hoping there would be a list of emergency numbers somewhere. There was one in the feedroom. I called the veterinarian listed and punched in my cellphone number for the answering service to call me back. I had to do it twice because my fingers were shaking so much I got my own number wrong.

A few minutes or a few million years later I answered the blue glow of the phone before it even had a chance to ring, blurting into the mouthpiece. “Hi, I just moved up here today, I’m a trainer, one of my horses is colicking, I wonder if you could come out and look at him? He’s pretty uncomfortable”—Brighton started dragging me back down the aisle.

A woman’s voice replied, too calm and slow, “Well, if you’re a new client there’s a minimum emergency charge of \$300 in addition to whatever I do to treat your horse. I don’t think he’s going to want to have a tube shoved up his nose after all he’s been through. Do you have any Banamine?”

I thought about all the new charges on my credit card for the move. “Yes. Okay, thanks,” I said and hung up.

Brighton pawed at the rubber bricks. “Okay B, you’re going to have to go back into your stall for a minute. Don’t thrash around and hurt yourself, promise?” A colicking horse wants to roll to alleviate the pain but this can twist their intestine, which requires surgery and even then can still be fatal.

I galloped to my car and tore through boxes until I found the Banamine and syringes and drew up 12 cc’s. I pulled Brighton into the back corner of the stall and pushed him against the wall to hold him steady while I pressed my thumb against his

jugular vein until it pillowed. He shoved back against me and struck the wall, scarring the wood. I hoped the owner wouldn't notice.

I tried to hold him still with my shoulder while I pressed the needle into his vein but he flinched and raised his head. I followed him and drew back on the syringe: red blood bloomed into the clear fluid. Good. I depressed the syringe with my thumb and immediately there was a sort of fluttering, like leaves falling from the sky.

Then my horse was flailing wildly, falling, crashing into the walls and onto the floor. I backed out of the stall so he wouldn't kill me while he flopped around like a huge fish out of water.

I must have hit the carotid artery, I'd seen a vet do it once before in Los Angeles.

I dialed my South Carolina veterinarian's cell and he answered, gently talking me out of my hysteria. He told me if my horse got up in the next few minutes, he was probably going to be ok. I watched. Within a minute Brighton stood up and shook his head. He foggily chewed a mouthful of shavings. He shook his head again and ate another mouthful.

I slid open the stall door and went back inside, touching his shoulder, apologizing.

Eventually I found the lights, took a deep breath and carefully drew up another shot with shaking hands.

Brighton was fine but things in New Jersey deteriorated steadily. Pam had suggested that I bring breakfast to the grooms to show them that I was "one of the team," so I did, but they clearly were not happy about me supervising their work. "Walter and Edward" were Guatemalan brothers, and they studiously ignored me, spoke Spanish

exclusively, and blatantly refused to answer any question. I tried to stay out of their way, and I wasn't interested in supervising their work but I did notice that they never once took a horse's temperature. They did however thoroughly scrub the stall walls every day to make sure there was no manure anywhere in the vicinity of the horses, per Pam's instructions.

I also noticed that whenever I came by after hours to check on my horses they had no hay, despite the fact that one of the grooms was supposed to do a night check and feed hay every night. I didn't know if they just refused to service my horses or if they weren't checking on anybody, but I got in the habit of dropping by and throwing all the horses a few extra flakes.

Pam arranged for me to take riding lessons from another trainer in the area, saying that she wanted me to have help, and she had Walter drive me over with the big grey gelding that she had gotten from the sporthorse auction. I didn't like the implication that I was a working student or something, but I decided to put my ego aside and enjoy working with another trainer. Every top rider needs eyes on the ground, and there were several very talented trainers to work with in New Jersey.

Pam lived in New York City, which was only about thirty minutes away, so she wasn't underfoot every day but when she came out it was a nightmare. The horses hated her. I had never seen anything like it, they totally stonewalled her the way the grooms did me. I taught her on her favorite mare named Chica. I had been riding Chica for weeks without incident. For her first lesson, Pam led Chica out to the arena. I pulled her stirrup leathers down with a snap and held the stirrup while she mounted. Pam asked the horse to walk on, and the mare would not move one foot.

“Okay, Pam just give her a squeeze with your heels, and give her a moment to process your cue.”

Nothing. “She hasn’t moved, so this time use your spur a little, and give her a cluck.”

Nothing. “Let’s try giving her a pop with your whip, but be prepared for her to move forward so you don’t accidentally punish her mouth when she does.”

Still nothing.

I was perplexed, Chica hadn’t done anything like this with me before, so I asked Pam to get off. I got on and Chica immediately trotted forward as pleasant as could be. I jumped a jump and returned to the center, confident that I had unlocked the horse and solved the problem, whatever it was.

Pam got back on, Chica refused to move one muscle. Pam came unhinged. Her lips were white and she was incandescent with rage.

“I work all day to pay for your food,” she screamed at the horse. She dismounted and threw her whip across the arena. “All you do is sit around and eat. You are the most ungrateful—

“Pam,” I interrupted, “she’s a horse. She doesn’t understand any of that. When you’re not here, she has no idea what you are doing. Let’s try—

“I am done. I am just done. That’s it. I am leaving.”

And she left. I put the mare up and wondered if I still had a job. Then I wondered if I still wanted it.

At the monthly barn meeting, I expressed to Pam that I was struggling to communicate with the grooms. They were getting worse, especially Walter. He had

started playing rap full volume that I thought might be directed at me. While I knew the horses enjoyed the music as much as I did, I knew they couldn't possibly appreciate a fine lyric like "Suck My Dick Hoe." Both Walter and Edward still completely ignored me. They tacked up Pam's horses every day for me to ride, but they refused to tack up my own horses. That was fine, since I liked to spend that time double checking their legs and finding out their moods before I got on.

When I explained during the meeting some of the discomfort about Walter and Edward ignoring me, Pam scoffed.

"It sounds like you need to have a glass of wine before you come to work," she said.

Walter smirked.

Pam continued in an elementary school teacher voice. "Guys, you need to greet Lauren when she comes to work in the morning, okay? I want you to say 'Good Morning, Lauren,' every morning, alright?"

They nodded innocently, and thereafter every morning they made a production of saying "Good Morning, Lauren" before going utterly silent for the rest of the day.

I spoke to the trainer that I had been working with, now that I was able to drive the truck alone without Walter, and she warned me to be very careful about quitting.

"Pam is very vindictive. I would absolutely get your horses out of there first, if you want to quit. I would love to hire you, but she would come after me. I'm sorry, good luck."

On the way home, the truck began to ding because it was low on gas. I pulled into a gas station and the attendant pumped the gas, as is required in New Jersey. He asked me if the truck was diesel and I said, “I have no idea. Doesn’t it say on the gas cap?”

It said gasoline only so he pumped the tank full and I paid with my own money. Thank God I got all the way back to the barn before the truck broke down.

I didn’t know what had happened but apparently the truck was diesel. The engine had to be flushed. I still didn’t understand why the gas cap had said gasoline only, until Pam explained that it wasn’t my fault, apparently Walter had had an accident in the truck before I moved there and the gas cap had been salvaged from another vehicle. Walter knew the truck was diesel but hadn’t bothered to remove the sticker on the cap, or to tell me.

I decided I needed to take a vacation so I used my day off to take the bus in to New York City and see Zoe. She was staying in New York with a friend, she said she was sick of LA. We met up at the Guggenheim and spiraled up and down the museum, looking at the art and catching up on each other’s lives. Zoe told me that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and that her boyfriend had dumped her a few months after her diagnosis. She had been treating it but it wasn’t working.

“Oh Zoe. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m finding my peace with it. I’m going to Switzerland soon to a treatment that will help me really spend some time sitting with why this is happening to me, and what it all means.”

I thought about my father’s lung cancer and the idea that the lungs were about prana and self expression, and that my father had dreamed of writing a book but had

never done it. I thought about breasts and nurture and Zoe's career as a nanny for other people's children.

"Have you looked at Louise Hay's book *You Can Heal Your Life*? And Byron Katie's book *Loving What Is*, might be helpful."

Zoe and I spent the entire day paying full attention to each other. Neither one of us was scoping out the men in the room and neither one of us was wearing a mask. At the end we hugged, hard.

"I'm sorry about your Dad," she said.

"Thank you. Good luck and I love you." I said

When I got home I drove out to check on the horses. The day had been hot and the temperature was still in the 90's. My horses didn't have any water in their buckets. I walked through the barn and every single horse was out of water, so I pulled out the hose and filled the buckets, threw out flakes of hay to everyone and made a call to arrange a shipper home. I packed all of my things that night and two mornings later, at six o'clock in the morning, I met the shipper to load the horses to travel back to South Carolina.

Chapter 14: Collection

Collection is the term for when a horse's energy is redistributed and coiled over the hindquarters, as opposed to over the forehand. The horse naturally travels heavily on the forehand, due to the additional weight of its head and neck, but brings the hind end under to rear, spring, and jump. One of the goals of advanced riding is to train the horse to carry more weight over the hindquarter, which has two advantages: on the one hand, the hindquarter is composed of bending joints supported by the muscles of the hindquarter and back, which when strengthened can reduce wear and tear on the bones and increase the longevity of the horse's athletic career, as opposed to the forehand which is subject to more concussive impact due to a more vertical bone structure. Additionally, the hindquarter produces the driving force. Impulsion that is generated by the horse but not impeded or channeled by the rider creates speed. Impulsion that is contained by collection in the rider's hand creates power.

The shipper promised to get the horses home in one hard drive. I gave him the address to deliver them to Michele's farm. She had agreed to board them until I came home and she was probably the only person in the world I trusted with them besides Amelia. Windfall was a pleasant horse but Brighton was not easy.

Edward showed up just as the shipper finished loading my tack trunks. He looked confused when I said that I was sending the horses home. I hoped he wouldn't call Pam. I was nervous she would call the police or something and have me arrested for stealing my own horses. I had already written an email giving notice but offering to continue to work until Pam found someone new, and I left my saddle and helmet in the tack room to reassure everyone that I was not leaving with my horses.

I called Mom after the shipper pulled out of the driveway.

"The horses are on the road. I've sent the email and now I just have to see what happens," I said. "I hope she'll let me go and I can come home immediately but I really have no idea. I left my saddle there so everyone would know I am still willing to work."

"You left your saddle? If you're that worried about her, that might not be a good idea."

She was right. I turned around to go back and get my saddle.

The minute I got out of my Volvo, Edward walked up to me holding his cell phone. It was Pam.

"You lying little bitch, I am going to ruin you. You are fired and you are never allowed to step foot on my property again. I am so disappointed in you—

"Pam, did you get my email? All I did was send the horses home, I am still happy to keep working for you until you find someone—

“I want you off of my property right now, I am calling the police.” She hung up.

Well, I guess I was going to get to go home. I shouldered past Edward and jogged to the tack room to get my saddle.

It was gone.

I turned around, “Edward where is my saddle?”

He shook his head and shrugged like he couldn’t understand me.

“Edward, donde esta mi silla?”

Then Walter came around the corner and a police car pulled up the driveway.

The police officers were very nice actually, and they must have sensed that Pam was a psychopath because they clearly believed that the saddle was there. Pam was on the phone with them telling them I never owned a saddle, but one officer asked Edward where the saddle was before and he pointed to the empty rack. Then Walter glared at Edward and they both pretended not to speak any English after that.

How could I have been so stupid? At least I had gotten the horses out. The police looked around for my saddle but they said they couldn’t search the groom’s trailer without probable cause, which I was sure was where Walter had put it. Oh well, Pam wouldn’t fit in it anyway. She’d probably hack it up with an ax and bury it or something. It was a lovely new Antares, too, custom fit buttery soft calfskin leather with an integrated panel.

Pam also somehow succeeded in reversing not just one but two previous paychecks. The woman was some kind of criminal mastermind. I counted myself lucky to

escape with my animals and packed my last bags. Ruby and I were on the road home only a few hours behind the horses.

Getting home this time felt like a reunion. The horses galloped around their fields and Ruby was thrilled to be off leash again. The horses and riders at Windfall Farm were happy to see me too, even Cameron smiled.

Michele said, “I’m so glad you came back. You know Cameron cried when you left.”

I made a deal with Mom to clean out my grandmother’s cabin just over the hill from the house in exchange for letting me live there a few months rent free. After that I would have to pay, but we negotiated a family rate since I would keep the azaleas pruned, pay the electricity bills and take care of the house.

I emptied the closets of Monue’s little old lady elastic waistband polyester outfits and donated them to Goodwill. I packed away the thimble collection and the doodads, but Monue’s spirit still filled the house and welcomed me home.

Money was tight. No, money was nonexistent. It’s not cheap to feed and care for two horses, and the car payment I had negotiated in California for my Volvo seemed like a million dollars a month now. I picked up supplemental work writing for equestrian magazines but it wasn’t consistent and Mom started making suggestions about my finances again.

On Christmas Eve, I had a visitor, and it wasn’t Santa Claus.

The lady pulled up and got out of the car, obviously looking for someone. I was up at the barn feeding the horses, so I called out to her. “Hey, can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Lauren Allen?”

“That’s me.” I said.

“You’ve been served.” She said, and handed me an envelope. She got back in her car and drove off.

“Merry Christmas to you, too.” I muttered, as I opened the envelope. It was a lawsuit: Pam was suing me for fraudulent breach of contract.

I had to hire a lawyer to defend myself, even though the claim was completely bogus. I told him the whole story and showed him the police report on my saddle. Pam had not proposed a written or an oral contract that I was aware of, and I hadn’t signed on for lifetime servitude, so I was confident that I would win. But she was seeking fifty thousand dollars in punitive damages, so if I didn’t win it would be a problem.

I realized I was drowning and the only way to survive was to let go. Collection agencies began hounding me. The bank repossessed my Volvo. Mom was disappointed at what a loser her daughter was, but she let me lease Dad’s old truck from her. It was strange driving around in his truck. People still stopped me sometimes to tell me how much they missed him, I wondered if they thought it was him for a moment, when I drove by.

Once again, the only way I could think of to get out of my situation was to sell Brighton. I didn’t need to have two horses, and Brighton was the one that everyone noticed, he was the one worth much more money, and I reminded myself, he was supposed to be an investment all along. If I could sell him I could pay off my credit cards, pay back the money I owed Mom, maybe even buy Windfall.

I showed Brighton to another trainer in Camden who had a client that would pay the hundred thousand dollars I wanted. I knew the trainer was probably making another fifty thousand dollars on top of the deal, but that was none of my business. He rode Brighton and said he wanted to try him in a bit that was custom designed to hold the horse's tongue down. He changed the bridle and then said he wanted him to carry himself more collected, so he jumped a few jumps and halted harshly. Brighton looked worried, but the trainer was ready to move forward. The vet watched him jog and then took some x-rays for the pre purchase exam.

Brighton's x-rays were horrible. He had osteoarthritic changes in his front legs, probably just from being so tall and fine boned. The deal collapsed. The trainer offered me a fraction of the original price, and I decided that I would rather keep my horse than sell him for money that wouldn't even solve my problems. He still probably had years before the arthritis became an issue. He was an incredible horse. He was mine and I loved him, and now the universe made it clear that I was stuck with him.

Only a few days later the buyer who had vetted him died of a drug overdose. Thank goodness I had done the right thing.

I contacted Sylvie to tell her that it didn't look like I was going to be able to buy Windfall and that I didn't know how at this point I could sell her for enough money to make anything beyond what Sylvie wanted for herself. I had paid the horses expenses and trained her for free for almost two years but I could see that I wasn't going to make a dime and I was just digging myself in deeper. I asked Sylvie if she would consider giving me the horse for a better price, I loved her, but I couldn't pay her what she wanted. I had

no business offering to buy the horse at all with my finances, but I did love her like she was mine and I hated to see her go.

Sylvie arranged to ship the mare to New York where another trainer promised to sell her. Windfall won a class at The Hampton Classic horse show shortly after she went up there, and I found out later that she had sold to a young boy. I hoped he was a nice kid.

Sylvie never called to let me know.

After dragging on for quite some time (my lawyer said that she was just trying to inflict maximum damage, but luckily he was very generous) Pam indicated she was willing to drop the claim. I didn't want to let her off the hook but my lawyer advised me that even if I won my case it was unlikely I would ever see the money from her. So after all that sound and fury, the lawsuit signified nothing.

Amelia called and told me when Rosey died. Apparently she had been diagnosed with cancer but she had kept it from everyone and refused treatment. I thought maybe Rosey was braver than I realized. Maybe I didn't realize how much guts it takes to be a woman getting older alone, with Crohn's disease, and no family, and two hip replacements, and no safety net.

Maybe I didn't really know as much as I thought I did.

Amelia went to the funeral and said it was a packed house. Then she told me that she had seen Freja there—she had turned up again, back from the dead, at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center with a big diamond ring on her finger.

My sister Caroline told me when Zoe died. She saw it online. That week Zoe made the cover of *People Magazine*.

I was starting to see that maybe what was important wasn't how high the bar was set or even whether or not it was cleared. Maybe what mattered was the way a horse's ears tick when it drinks water. The glycerine soap smell of clean leather, the waltzing cadence of hoofbeats at the canter, the warm satin sheet of a horse's shoulder. The lessons you learn. The lives you share in and not the life you planned for yourself.

Chapter 15: Broke

Broke is an old horseman's term that means trained. A trained horse is a horse that understands the rider's aids and responds quickly and correctly. The process of 'breaking' or 'starting' a jumper is one that takes years, from the initial ground work to basic dressage to cantering poles and cavaletti to attempting single fences and then jumping combinations of increasing height and difficulty. A rider who wishes to train a horse must first gain the horse's trust and respect, and then must be coherent enough in their handling for the horse to detect a logical system and learn to produce the desired reply. The reaction must be rewarded in order for the horse to repeat the connection. An expert trainer makes the wrong choices difficult and the right choices easy, but also respects the integrity and individuality of the horse being trained and their fundamental right to make a choice, not be forced into a response. An expert trainer allows the horse to determine the pace and to some degree, even the process. A trained horse is one who is able to consistently produce a conditioned response instead of an instinctive response.

I jogged the pitchfork a few times to separate the sand and dumped the manure in the wheelbarrow. Barn chores gave a symmetry to my life that I didn't mind, I marked the beginning and end of every day with feeding and mucking. Ruby was busy trying to pin down the sparkle that her tags reflected onto the ground when they caught the sunlight. Brighton was contentedly chewing his hay and Mom was drinking sweet tea and talking to me over the fence while I mucked the paddock. I was telling her about who I was taking to the upcoming show at the South Carolina Equine Park.

"Sid and Morgan are going, and Magda and Nicole. I was thinking about showing B in the new South Carolina Hunter Derby but the entry fee isn't cheap. The prize money is good, but you know, it's a gamble. I wish I wasn't so broke." I laughed.

"Do you think he could do well?"

"Yes, I do. He's really getting trained. He practically has his own fan club at the shows."

"I'll loan you the money."

"Really?"

"Sure. When is the class?"

Mom even came out to the show like she used to when I was a kid. She sat with Michele and my other friends from Windfall on the hill next to the ring as everyone watched the special derby class. The entries were huge, and the first round was taking forever. Brighton had done a good job, and we were standing in second with only a few more horses to go. It was getting dark and the lights were coming up. My heart was beating faster as I started to think about winning. I patted Brighton's long smooth neck,

Careful not to mess up the tight row of tiny button braids, and went over the handy course again, planning my inside turns and thinking about where the lead changes were likely to need some attention.

I walked Brighton over toward the group to keep him from getting too cold or stiff. One of my kid's moms stood and gave my boots a quick wipe.

Mom asked, "Is this going to take much longer?"

I laughed. "You can go home if you want. Only the top ten horses qualify for the second round, but I won't go in until almost the end."

Mom frowned but decided to wait.

I walked back to the in gate and told myself not to think about winning or losing. I would go out there to enjoy my horse and continue to deepen our relationship.

It was time. I touched my heels to his side and Brighton pricked his ears and walked through the gate. He stepped smoothly into the canter and we galloped directly to the first jump, then on to the next, a hay bale oxer, then a tight roll back to a brick wall. He jumped fluidly, launching from a soft canter into a tight bascule over the jump and then lightly turning and hunting the next jump. Another hard turn to an option, then a smooth transition to a trot fence, to the in and out, and finally all that was left was a hand gallop to a halt. He swished his tail in acknowledgement as I pressed my heels against him, moving up swiftly into a powerful gallop. As we passed the judge's stand, I sat taller and closed my thigh and he slid like a reining horse to a perfect, square halt. He paused, still and collected, and then I threw down my reins and hugged his neck as he walked proudly to the gate. I patted him as we listened to our scores from the three judges: 93, 96, 91 plus four high option points. The leader walked into the ring and began her round

but I already knew we had won. My horse was just about perfect. And so was everything else.

Mom even stayed for the ribbon ceremony and I finally won my first cooler.

After the victory gallop I wrapped Brighton and groomed him, and loaded him into the trailer. It was time to go home.

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The frozen grass crunches softly underfoot as I walk out into the center of the pasture. The stars glint in the sky and the frosted ground looks scattered with diamonds. I look up at Orion, the hunter. The Pleiades blink. Brighton looms next to me, a shadow in the dark. He blows gently on my shoulder, twin puffs of warm steam. A shooting star draws a long slow streak across the sky, but I just enjoy the view.

Maybe this is the grand prix.