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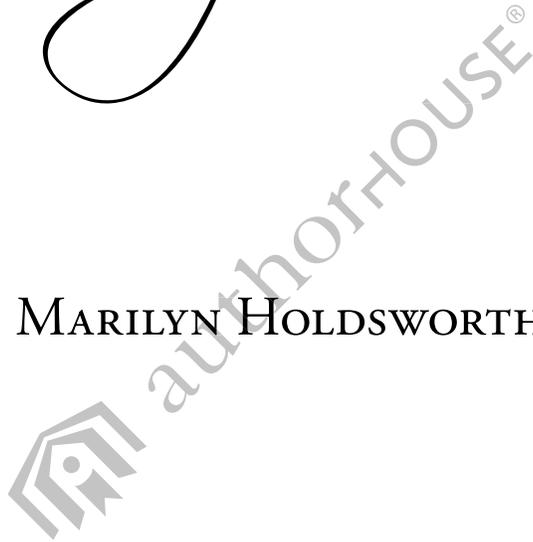




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Pegasus

MARILYN HOLDSWORTH



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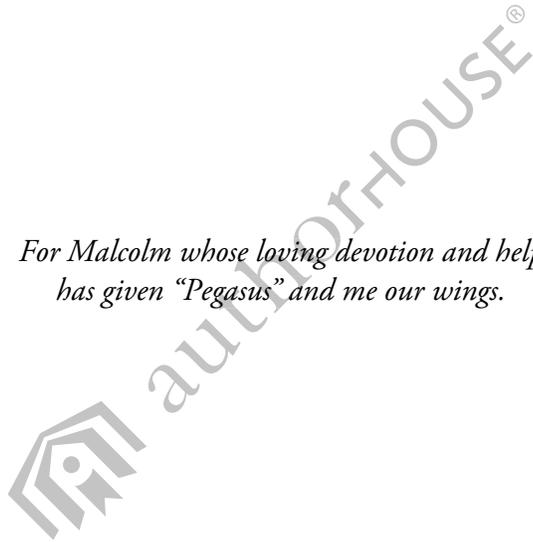
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*For Malcolm whose loving devotion and help
has given "Pegasus" and me our wings.*





Prologue

GRAVEL SPRAYED FROM beneath the tires as the truck pulled onto the open highway. Buddy Winters jerked the wheel to the right and headed toward Southern California's I-5. He pushed his cowboy hat back and cursed as the pounding hooves in the horse van behind jolted the cab. He swore as he accelerated, "Goddamn Hammer Head." He'd had trouble loading him in the first place. It took a blindfold and a rope around his rump to haul him on board.

"Jesus, what a pain in the ass this trip is gonna be with him stompin' and yellin' all the way," he muttered. 'Course the pay was good, mighty good for only hauling three, but that Hammer Head made a dozen all by himself. But Vince Rossi was in a hurry to move him, so he'd come through with the cash, half up front and the rest when Buddy delivered. Buddy patted the wad of cash in his jeans pocket. Old Man Rossi would turn over in his grave if he saw how hard his son was pushing those animals. Buddy scowled at the memory of the senior Rossi. *Never let me transport any of his horses, not after that bay cut her leg and came in lame*, Buddy thought bitterly. *Hell, not my fault she pitched the whole way.*

"Enough to drive a man crazy, and now this nag today is every bit

as bad,” he grumbled as he stomped on the gas. Course if he tossed him about a little to shut him up, the nag couldn’t talk. Even if he could, where he was going nobody would be listening. So what if he played with him a bit? Shouldn’t be shrieking like a banshee back there, stirring up the others. A crescendo of whinnying drowned out the twangy country song on the radio. Again Buddy cursed, and this time he hit the brakes hard, accelerated, and then hit them again. He repeated this three or four times. He heard the horse slam against the side of the van. “Shut up back there.” He turned up the radio. Yes, siree, he’d make good time and collect from Rossi, maybe get a little extra if he was ahead of schedule. Never could’ve worked with the old man. Hell, he expected you to go slow with them, treat them like royalty. Seemed like he wanted you to stop every couple of hours, shovel out the shit, and feed them sugar lumps laced with champagne. But not Vince. He was a gambling man and knew how to make money out of these hay burners. Just like he’d do if he owned them, Buddy acknowledged approvingly. Make the money and head for a tropical island with girls in the sun. Buddy smiled at the thought of girls. His expression soured again when he remembered he’d asked Millie to make this run with him, only to have her turn him down. Damn lonely out on the road. She should have come.

The truck picked up speed as it moved into the flat country. Buddy watched the rearview mirror carefully; no need to get pulled over. After all, he was after a bonus for early delivery. The miles fell away as the day wore on, interrupted only by the stomping of the horse in the van and Buddy’s violent stop-and-go driving. He’d known that horse was going to be trouble as soon as he’d looked at him. The sleek chestnut coat had shone in the sunlight, glistening like it had been sprinkled with gold. Never before had he seen a horse that color at the track. Most were bays or dark sorrels with an occasional gray, but this one had a different look and a different temperament to go with it. Defiant and proud, he dared anyone to try to beat him. Guess that was what Vince Rossi saw in him, too. The way he ran him, most horses would have broken down. How many races had he put him in one right after the other? Jeez, the guy was sure out to make the money, use them up, and get rid of them.

The van lurched again, this time smashing Buddy against the

steering wheel, and he swore again. He checked the time and his location. Hell, just over the next ridge was the Quick Stop Café. Maybe he'd do just that, make a quick stop. And if he was lucky, that Tammy would be there serving the food and drinks. Tammy - what a dumb name for a kid stuck out in the sticks with no future and an old man about as dumb as her name sounded. With a name like that you'd think she was in the movies or on TV or something. But hell, she sure seemed friendly last time he came through. Maybe he'd get lucky, real lucky, this time. Like maybe her old man was out of town—that kind of lucky. Buddy smirked to himself. He prided himself on knowing women, and this little piece looked like she could use some action. Jeez, that tight little T-shirt was stuck down in her jeans so far that her tits poked out like buttons. He squirmed at the thought of Tammy and her T-shirts. Yeah, he'd make a stop. And if he got real lucky, like in-the-sack lucky, he'd make up the time by taking a shortcut he knew. Not a very good road, but it sure would cut off the miles, and a few bumps and grinds would do that old Hammer Head in the back some good. Yeah, he'd look in on Tammy.

Buddy guided the van into the parking area, where a few semi-trailer trucks were already scattered across the dirt lot. He climbed out of the cab and headed for the café. The restless pawing in the van made him hesitate for a moment. Maybe if he pitched them a little hay they'd settle down. But hell, he didn't want to stop for that, and besides, no way did he want to give old Hammer Head more energy.



The door to the café slammed behind Buddy. A couple of truckers were seated at rustic wooden tables. At the far end was a counter with rickety stools in front of it and a few shelves behind lined with dusty whiskey bottles scattered among smudgy glasses. He quickly scanned the dingy room. Behind the bar, with her back to him, was the girl, just as he'd imagined her: tight little jeans, tight little T-shirt, and long, frizzy, bleached hair. It didn't take long for him to see that her old man wasn't around. *Maybe gone for good; who knows?* he thought. *Who cares? Better for me, either way.*

After a couple of beers and a few laughs with Tammy, he'd have to

head out in a hurry. He eyed his watch. Already it was dusk, and soon it would be dark; then he'd really have to make up the time if he was going to go for that bonus. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up into Tammy's vacant brown eyes and suggestive grin. "How you doin', cowboy? Need anything more?" The invitation was more than Buddy could refuse. He pushed back his chair and followed her to the end of the room, through the back door, and across the yard to a little house in the rear.



He was dozing, listening to Tammy's heavy breathing as she slept sprawled on the bed naked beside him. He reached over, pulled the blanket over her, and started to reach for her again. Then he sat up, grabbing his watch. Jesus, the time. His head ached, and he remembered the bottle they'd opened as they sat on the bed together. It still stood on the side table, almost empty, a testimony to their partying. He fumbled for his jeans and boots. "Gotta get outta here," he mumbled as he opened the door and stepped into the cool night air. God, he felt fuzzy. He shook his head as he walked unsteadily toward the van. The hoofs were beating a steady tattoo on the siding. It sounded like the horse would break right through it. At the side of the café, he saw a long hose stretched out to a tiny clump of half-dead flowers. He turned it on full blast and showered it over his own head. Shaking himself, he wiped his eyes and swore again at the thunderous sound coming from the van. Reaching the side of the trailer, he jerked open the tiny vent window above the horse. He trained the powerful jet through the opening, drenching the horse, pummeling his face with the full force of the water until he stood shuddering, at last subdued.

"How'd ya like that, ya bastard? Ya want some more, or are ya gonna shut up?" He poked the hose in again and doused the animal once more. Then he carefully reached in and untied the rope that secured him in the van. "Don't care if ya pitch clear across to the other side," he snarled. "Maybe that'll shut ya up. Where you're goin', don't matter if all your legs is broke." It was as if the two were fighting a personal battle now, and he was going to show that Hammer Head who was boss.

Buddy slammed into the truck's cab, and the engine roared to life. He jerked into gear and pulled out onto the highway, blinking his eyes in the darkness. He kicked the headlights onto high beam. God, it was dark. He felt sleepy, still fuzzy from the cheap booze, and his mouth felt like the bottom of a birdcage. "Should've brought some water," he muttered. "Should've watered the horses, fed 'em, too." Hell, he'd watered old Hammer Head good enough, and for once he was quiet back there. He squinted at the road, watching for the turnoff for the shortcut he planned to take.

Up ahead to the right, a small road left the highway and climbed into the hills. The truck bumped and lurched when he made the turn, and the horses in the back sounded their disapproval. *Never much traffic on this road, he consoled himself. I'll make up time.* He accelerated, and the truck sped down the center of the road through the blackness. Sharp turns and the steep, steady incline slowed his progress. "Gotta go faster," he muttered. Then he heard the thumping, pawing commence again, and he lurched into the steering wheel, cracking his already bruised ribs. "Started up again, goddamn," he growled. That endless pounding hurt his already aching head. It sounded like a thunderous roar. He had to shut that nag up. He pressed the accelerator to the floor, and the truck surged ahead. Then he braced himself as he slammed on the brakes. He heard the horse pitch again into the side of the van. He grinned as he repeatedly accelerated and braked until he heard the horse's cry of pain as he slammed back and forth in the van. "Don't care if I break your fuckin' legs," he shouted back at him.

The truck had been climbing steadily, and at the crest of the hill, Buddy accelerated again. "Goddamn it, I'll show you, Hammer Head. You wanna play? Let's play." He jammed the accelerator down harder, and the truck raced down the hill. Buddy clutched the wheel, trying to control the catapulting vehicle, but the curving road and the van's speed sent the truck careening against the opposite embankment. Buddy never saw the approaching car until their fenders smashed together and locked. In one instant, the two shot out over the cliff and crashed to the bottom of the ravine. Buddy's head split like a pumpkin as he hit the windshield, and the last sound he heard before losing consciousness was the piercing shriek of the horse, a high shrill neigh, not of terror

but of defiance. Then there was only dust and tangled steel engulfed in flames. The entire gorge reeked with the stench of burning horseflesh.



One



HANNAH PIERCE BRADLEY sat curled on the sofa in her country-style family room. Her long, silky chestnut hair tumbled around her shoulders, pulled back from her face with a wide blue band. Her large brown eyes, fringed by thick dark lashes, intently studied the papers strewn around her. Her creamy skin had a healthy glow from jogging in the morning air. The warmth of the room's colors and the friendly, comfortable, early-American furniture made it Hannah's favorite place in the house. Glass sliding doors opened out onto a wide brick patio, where two shaggy mongrels lolled in the sunlight. The larger of the two cocked an ear and thumped his tail as Hannah got up and crossed the room. The dog didn't move but watched her protectively as she passed into the kitchen to pour a cup of coffee and then returned to her place on the sofa, plumping the pillows and reaching for a tablet that lay on the side table. She sipped her coffee as she flipped through the pages of the notebook.

The phone shattered the stillness, and she answered reluctantly. This was going to be her day to begin work on her new series of articles. There was still much research to do, and she resented any intrusions. She reached for the phone and answered with a note of impatience

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in her voice. "Hello." Her tone immediately softened when she heard Winston Caughfield III's voice on the other end. "I'm so sorry, Win," she said affectionately. "I didn't mean to bite your head off. It's just that I was about to get into my first article. You know how I am when I'm working." She knew he'd understand as always.

His warm laugh was all the reassurance she needed. "It's okay, and I do understand," he replied. "But your work is why I called. I wondered if you'd seen the morning papers and thought perhaps if you were knee-deep in research you might not have. There's a story about an accident that might interest you. Take a look at the *Daily Register*, page two, bottom right-hand corner. Not a big write-up, so it might not make TV or radio news, and you might miss it. Now I won't keep you any longer from all that thinking and planning I know you're doing. Call me later about Saturday and tell me what you think of the story." The line went dead. Hannah unfolded her long legs and immediately went in search of the morning paper.

How very like Win, she reflected, undemanding, always interested in whatever concerned her. She pictured him this morning, his strong, even features and quick smile. He was over six feet tall, trim and athletic; only the silver streaks in his dark brown hair hinted at his age. Yes, Win was a special person, but it was still too soon. The ache and longing for Jonathan was too close to her heart, the healing process a long one. Jonathan's death had been such a shock, so swift; one day there, the next on his way to Chicago on business, and then the terrible snowstorm and fatal flight of United Airlines 111. Engine failure in the storm. She willed herself back to the present and her thoughts of Win. Maybe with time. That's what Win always said when they talked about their relationship. Just give it time.

She found the paper and quickly flipped to the article on page two. It was a brief account of an accident on some desolate canyon road. But what leaped out at her was the name, Vincent Rossi, and the Circle R horse farm. It was suspected that the horses in the van had belonged to him and that the van's driver was unlicensed, driving under the influence of alcohol. A truck and horse-trailer rig the size of the one in the accident should not have been on that narrow, winding road at all. There were no survivors reported at the scene. The driver of the van, the horses, and the two occupants of the small car that collided

with the van had died in the crash. The wreckage at the bottom of the steep ravine was severely burned, making positive identification of the charred remains difficult.

Hannah let the paper slip to the floor. "What a waste, what a miserable waste," she said out loud. "Those beautiful animals carelessly killed. A crime." The worst kind of crime, in Hannah Pierce Bradley's opinion. A crime against harmless, helpless creatures. "That kind of scum shouldn't be allowed to raise animals," she muttered fiercely. "I hope they hang Vincent Rossi out on this one. And maybe I can help add some more fuel to that already smoldering fire."

She called Win later that evening, after spending the day organizing her notes and outlines for her newest project. Most of her past work she had done as a freelance writer. But lately she had been approached by several magazines offering assignments after her tremendously successful series of articles on the brutalities of puppy mills had appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*. Acclaimed as the brave new voice of social conscience, she was bombarded with offers to speak at animal rights groups across the country. She declined each with a thank-you note and a firm refusal, citing her need to continue her work raising public awareness of the need for laws and strong legal action against those so willing to exploit animals for greedy financial gain.

"Those horses didn't stand a chance." She spoke with much feeling in her voice, and Win could imagine her soft features set in a firm, determined line. He remembered similar words when she fiercely attacked the puppy-mill owners. "Vincent Rossi should be run out of town on a rail and his stables shut down," she said flatly. "He's criminally abusive, and a little slap on the wrist isn't going to change him. A fine and a few lines of bad publicity aren't going to do any good. And you know it as well as I do, Win."

"I do. I know what you say is true. I also know the guy is a sleazy small-time gangster. He's not at all like his father. The Rossi farm raised some fine horses in the old days. Trained them well and raced them fairly. They were some of the best in the smaller racing leagues. Never made it to the big time but did real well at the small tracks, fairs, things like that. My dad knew old Dominic Rossi, respected him as a fine horseman. But Vince's gone sour, bad as they come. The guy is

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unscrupulous and mean. Backed into a corner, you don't know what he'll do."

"He's gotten away with it too long, Win," Hannah said firmly. "And for every one of him, there's another coming right up behind him, willing to make the money any way they can. Ready to follow his lead."

"Hannah, I didn't call attention to the article because I wanted to encourage your involvement in any attempt to bring Vincent Rossi justice," Win said firmly. "I just knew you'd be interested and want to follow the story, that's all. I really don't think you should entertain any idea of digging into it. You still get threats after all those puppy-mill stories. You don't need to open any more of Pandora's boxes."

"Yes, I do. The stories need to be told," she said determinedly. "My next series is a follow-up on the adoption of the animals rescued from the mills and the outstanding efforts of the humane societies and private funding across the country that saved those dogs. Three different magazines have approached me on the follow-up stories. I started working on my outlines today. And I honestly think I should work straight through the weekend," she finished.

"But what about Saturday?" Disappointment edged his voice. "I thought you could come out to the ranch for the day, have lunch, and ride in the afternoon. Quiet, just the two of us. All the help will be off except Mary Little Deer. She always stays at the ranch. Wouldn't know what to do with a day off."

"It sounds so nice, Win. Just what I need—fresh air, riding, and quiet. I'd really love to come. Let me work like crazy for the next couple of days. Without too many interruptions, I should have things pretty well outlined by then."

"I'll pick you up on Saturday morning. The weather should be good; forecast is for a fair weekend. Besides just seeing you, I have something I want to show you." She could hear the enthusiasm in his voice.

"Win. You've done so many nice things for me already. I really couldn't accept more right now."

"Now don't start that again. You know how much I enjoy being with you. I'll look forward to Saturday."

She hung up the phone and sat for a moment, speculating on what Win might possibly have to show her on Saturday. She smiled; she had

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to admit he was clever. Her interest had been piqued, and she found herself eagerly anticipating the weekend. She not only looked forward to seeing him, but she wondered just what it was he wanted so much to show her at the ranch.

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