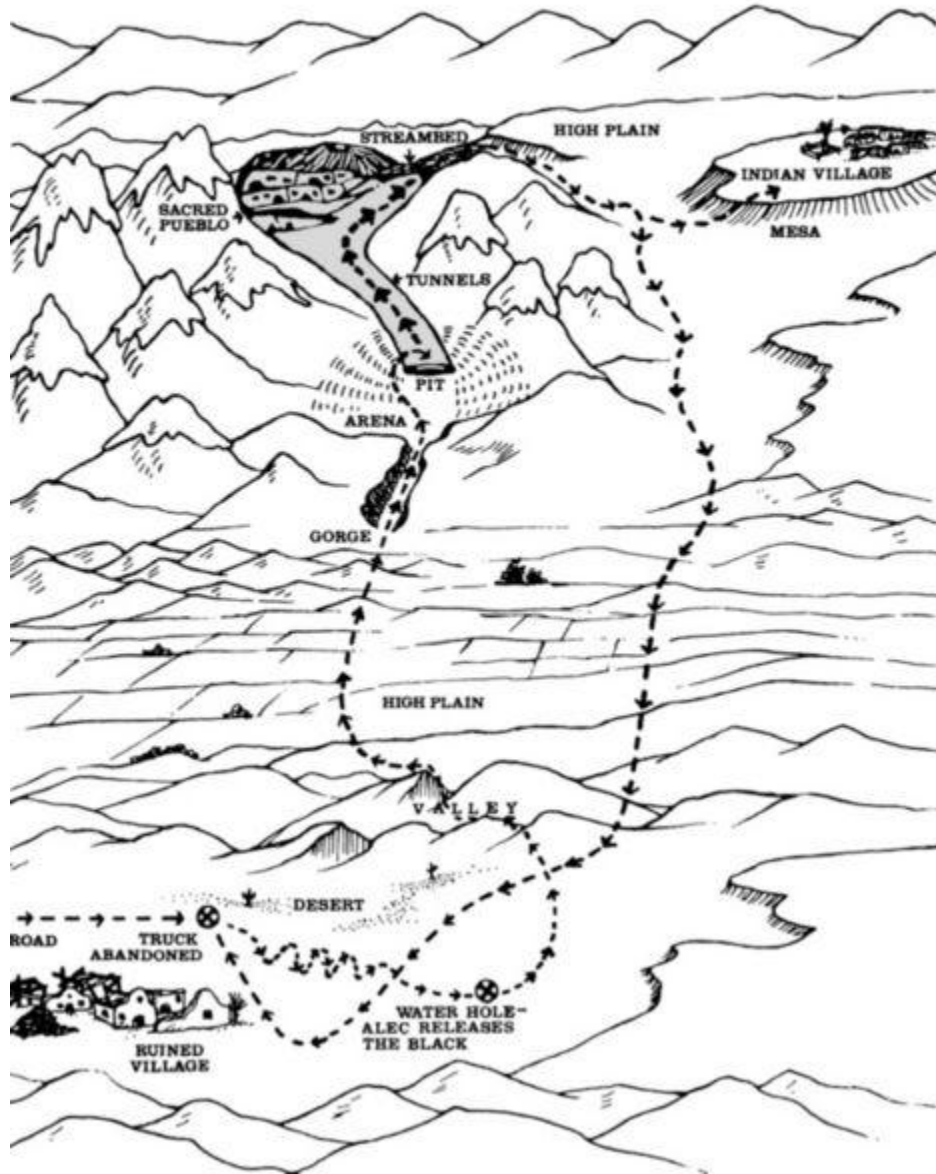




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ALEC'S PATH IN DESERT

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ALEC'S UNDERGROUND PATH



WINTER RIDER

1

Alec Ramsay jogged around the racecourse infield, his body very lean and taut beneath a heavy woolen sweat suit. The temperature was below freezing and the racing strip alongside him was flanked by ice and snow. A frigid wind blew down the stretch and he lowered his hooded head against it.

Alec thought of himself as an outdoorsman and stayed indoors only when necessary. He jogged all year long to keep in shape, to keep his wind. A jockey needed strong legs and good wind. Jogging opened your lungs. It helped in the afternoon, when you raced.

But that morning's conditions were not normal even for December in New York, and Alec would have much preferred clear skies and a little higher temperature. While racing held many good memories for him, it also had taken its toll, just as it had for many other jockeys he knew. His hands were strong, thick and calloused, capable of moving with the quick skill of a musician—yet he felt an excruciating pain between the first two fingers of each hand where he held the reins when he rode.

It was arthritis, the doctor had told him, which would be especially painful during the winter months. Alec shook his hooded head in dismay. Arthritis (which he had always associated with older people) while still a young man! To say nothing of the calcified pain he suffered from a mended collarbone. But falls and broken bones were part of racing. There would be still more pain in the years to come. How much physical resilience was left in his body? Alec wondered. How much longer could he go on?

Alec had a good view of the Aqueduct's empty grandstand and clubhouse as he jogged down the long stretch. High above the tiered floors and glass-encased newsroom were the videotape cameras fixed at the edge of the clubhouse roof. His gaze shifted to the track on the other side of the infield rail. It was sloppy with a light snow falling on it. He knew that today every rider should concentrate more on surviving than winning races. But that wouldn't be. They had to race to win. And soon, for it was only three hours before the first race of the afternoon, the stands would be filled with thousands of hardy fans who could have stayed at home.

Alec buried his face in the hood and lowered his eyes to the snowy ground before him. While he had to be there, he couldn't be blamed for envying the riders who were racing in Florida and California during these cold winter months. Despite his sweating, he was wearing too much clothing to get loose the way he should. His knees were beginning to bother him too, and he hoped he wasn't getting water on the knee like some of the other jocks. Anyway, he had a nice, warm whirlpool bath and a steam box to look forward to when he got to the jocks' room. He'd get loosened up that way and lose a few more pounds while at it.

Alec hoped he'd be able to get down to 104 pounds today. If he didn't, Henry Dailey would have his head as a Christmas present. Their filly, Pam's Song, was the lightweight in the race, assigned only 110 pounds, which meant with six pounds of tack Alec had to step on the scales weighing no more than 104, six pounds less than his usual weight. That was another reason for jogging and jogging and jogging.

It gave him time to think, too, before riding. One had very little time to think on a racehorse. You just *did* it, moved when you had to move. His thoughts turned to Pam's Song, the beautiful, strapping filly he would ride—a burnished blonde shade of chestnut, the color of her dam, not her sire, the Black. Yes, and the color too of the golden hair of her namesake, Pam. But he shouldn't let himself think too much about Pam today, for Henry had told him it affected his riding. Henry was right. When Alec thought of the girl he loved, it was difficult to keep his mind on anything else.

Pam had left Hopeful Farm for Europe over a month ago, leaving behind memories so vivid they would always be a part of him.* But Alec wanted more than that. He wanted to be with her during the Christmas break. This was the last day of the track meeting and he looked forward to a two-week vacation before racing resumed in January. If he could get away from duties at Hopeful Farm, he would fly to Europe if only for a few days. He had named the beautiful filly for Pam as a Christmas present to her.

Alec's gaze turned once more to the empty stands as he recalled the dark Saturday afternoon in November when Aqueduct was jam-packed with eighty thousand people watching the running of the classic Empire State Handicap. Pam had raced the Black that day—to prove to herself as well as to Henry and the huge throng of fans that she could hold her own with any male jockey in the land.

Later, back at Hopeful Farm, she had said, "Letting me ride the Black was the greatest thing you could have done for anyone."

Alec remembered his answer. "You're not just anyone, Pam. I love you."

"And I love you, Alec. More now than ever because I know what you gave up for me."

"I don't want you to go, Pam. I want you to stay. We'll get married."

He never doubted her love but it hadn't been enough to keep her with him. Pam wanted more time to seek out new experiences and challenges, all that life offered one as young as she.

"It's too soon for both of us," she had told him with tears welling in her eyes. "I'm not ready for marriage even if you think we are, Alec. And I think too much of marriage not to be ready for it. It's the greatest challenge I'll ever know and I want to make it work. I want to have more to give you than I can give you now. Please, Alec," she pleaded. "I want to stay here with you but don't let me change my mind. Let me grow up a little more, then we'll be together always."

When she'd finished, the tears were falling over her high cheekbones and down her face. Alec had put his arms around her and held her close, feeling emotions that went deeper than any he had ever known.

"I understand, Pam. I'll wait a while and then come after you."

"That will be best of all ..."

Alec shook his hooded head and wiped the wet snow from his face with a gloved hand. He had to stop thinking of Pam or he might make the riding mistakes Henry predicted. The old trainer had told him repeatedly, "It's no time to think of Pam or anything but your work, Alec! This is a tough business. Keep your mind on it!"

Racing was no longer a sport but a business to both of them. It had to be with all their farm and racing expenses. But Alec did not like to be shouted at or treated like a boy. He was a man and he knew exactly where he was going and what he had to do. Today's race, the Merry Christmas Handicap for three-year-old fillies at a distance of six furlongs, only a few hours away, was part of it.

Alec jogged off the infield, heading for the jockeys' room and the warm whirlpool bath that awaited him.

** The Black Stallion and the Girl*

POST TIME!

2

Later that afternoon, with the horses in the paddock for the running of the Merry Christmas Handicap, the public address announcer gave the final weight changes for the race, concluding with "number eight, Pam's Song, three pounds over."

Henry Dailey tightened the cinch about the filly's girth and growled at Alec Ramsay. "You coulda made 110."

"I couldn't," Alec said. "I sweated off all I could."

"Three pounds less would have made a big difference in this race," the trainer retorted.

"I'm sorry," the jockey said. "I did the best I could." Alec didn't like to be scolded by his old friend but there wasn't much he could do about it—except to understand the reasons for Henry's tirade. It wouldn't have been different with another trainer. Weights were assigned by the track handicapper in an attempt to bring all the horses in a race down to the finish line together. They were an important part of the game and despite a jockey's ability to ride, a trainer looked elsewhere when a rider could not make the assigned weight for his horse.

Once upon a time, Alec had thought that success was having the money to buy what he wanted, including horses, and the freedom to enjoy them. But it wasn't. He had learned that to be successful in business called for a lot of self-denial, whether one

was talking about personal comfort or self-interest. He had to do what was expected of him.

Henry straightened after making certain the saddle was secure, and turned to Alec. He studied the face of the young man in the black-and-white-checkered racing silks. "You know what to do," he said. It was not a question and only required Alec's confirmation of what was expected of him in the race.

"I know," Alec said quietly. "I'm just afraid she won't like the track today. Despite the cold it's soft in spots and she'll slide."

"Don't worry about it," Henry said. "She'll do okay. She's going to be Aqueduct's horse of the winter."

"If you say so."

Henry didn't like the way Alec said it, or the way he looked. Alec's face was thin, good-looking, unlined and set off by prominent, even teeth that flashed whenever he smiled, which wasn't too often these days. The same thing went for his eyes, blue and usually laughing; but lately the skin was stretched drum-tight across his cheekbones, making his eyes seem sunken and piercing. He looked tired, despite his healthy body.

The old trainer smiled suddenly and put his arm around the young man's shoulders. "I didn't mean to get sore about your weight," he said kindly. "Maybe we lost some advantage over the rest of the field, but we can still whip 'em."

Alec knew Henry wasn't apologizing but appeasing him, comforting him so he would ride this race as he should and bring the filly home a winner. Winning a big stake race was important to Henry and, of course, to Hopeful Farm. The better their horses raced, the more money their yearlings would bring at the sales, where prices were already setting records.

For Alec, what mattered was not the size or importance of a race or the price yearlings got at auction, but bringing home a winner. His biggest thrill was winning races where he never thought he had a chance. And, contrary to Henry's expectations of the filly, Alec thought this race might be tough to win. He might not succeed but he'd been beaten before in big races.

Alec raised a leg and Henry boosted him into the saddle. He stroked the filly's neck, quieting her.

Pam's Song was tall, already over sixteen hands, and still a little ungainly for her size. She jumped and played a little, enjoying the snow, as Henry led her about the walking ring with the other horses in the field of eight going to the post.

They'd soon find out if Pam's Song liked to run in bad weather, Alec decided. Today's race was something of a proving ground for her. A little over three months ago she had been a nonentity in the Hopeful Farm Stable, a good-looking sort of big, lazy filly, one of many at the farm, promising but not proven. Then they had raced her conservatively in three races where the competition had not been tough, and she had won all of them. This was to be her first major race on a cold and very windy day, which Henry thought to her liking.

Alec kept stroking the filly's neck, telling her to settle down, that the time for play was over. She'd acted the same way on the track that morning when he had loosened her up. It was a good sign to Alec, for a horse had to enjoy life, the same as a person. If a horse wasn't happy, he wouldn't run for you. So maybe Henry was right. Maybe Pam's Song would be Aqueduct's horse of the winter. At any rate, Henry wasn't going to send her south for the winter or, for that matter, even out of New York City.

Alec looked at the seven other horses in the paddock walking ring. Six of them were the very best of those who had stayed north during the winter, and the remaining one had come up from Florida just for this race. Her name was Delta Belle and she was the favorite, carrying the heaviest weight in the field at 118 pounds. She had been one of the top two-year-olds racing last year and had won her first three races at Gulfstream Park in Florida. Delta Belle was being ridden by her regular jockey, Eduardo Gomez, who didn't look too happy with the day's weather after having spent several months in the sunny southland.

Henry said, "You got two choices, Alec. If she breaks sharp, go on with her. If she doesn't, just let her settle down and get her clear."

Alec met Henry's gaze, eyes that still held the fire and gusto of youth despite the mass of wrinkles that crisscrossed the old man's face. Henry looked like what he was, one of the nicest and best-liked trainers ever to saddle a horse. To others he appeared calm, patient and kind. But Alec knew otherwise. Henry was hypersensitive, a bundle of nervous energy and a perfectionist. Nothing was ever done quite the way *he* wanted, the way only *he* could do it. And Henry did everything but ride. That morning he had gone nonstop despite the cold, applying bandages, walking the filly back from the track, even taking her away from Alec to cool her out.