
R E G A L

H E A R T

An American Filly

A NOVEL

T . R . R A C K I

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The dimly lit foaling barn was silent, asleep, except for the mare in stall seven. Regal Affair paced urgently back and forth, clearly in distress given her labored, shallow breathing. Rachel watched from safety through the slats of the stall door as the mare lay down, shifting restlessly, attempting to reposition the foal inside.

“How long ago did it start?” Rachel asked of the night watchman as she glanced to her wristwatch.

“About a quarter to midnight,” he replied, face etched with lines of worry. “Should I try the vet again?”

“It’s been ninety minutes,” Rachel murmured. “This is taking too long.”

Regal Affair let out a pained sound as her water broke, dousing the thick carpet of straw that covered the stall floor. The mare’s skin glistened with sweat. She slowly stood, paced shortly, and then dropped back to the floor,

completely spent. She lay on one side, curled up, in visible pain by the glazing of her eyes.

“I just got a text. Says he’ll be here in thirty minutes.”

“That’s too late. We’re doing this now.” Rachel snapped on a pair of latex gloves and drew the stall door aside.

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“Seriously?” The television monitor hanging in the waiting lounge blinked from one station to the next in a rapid-fire sequence. The channel number rose steadily to one hundred before starting over again at four. “Ninety-six stations and not one racing channel?” Jorge pressed the remote’s mute button and shot a look over his shoulder to Robert.

The trainer sat slouched in a chair, head tipped forward, his grey fedora tilted down, aviator’s glasses hiding his eyes. Several chairs over, Victor lay sprawled out, his legs stretched to a chair across from him, his head pointed towards the ceiling over the back of a chair. Both positions looked uncomfortable but somehow each managed to drift off.

Jorge looked up at the clock hanging over the lounge’s refreshment table. The hands indicated that it was a quarter past midnight. Anna was into her eighth hour of surgery to try to stabilize her. Despite the best in safety equipment, the cold reality was hitting the ground at forty miles per hour, even with a helmet, always resulted in life-threatening consequences. The most pressing complication of the fall was trying to find and contain the intracranial bleeding.

Jorge stopped doing online research via his cell phone as soon as he read about the forty percent mortality rate. It

only took two minutes to find that factoid. After that, he just tried to watch television or stared out the bank of windows that offered a view of the parking lot below. Being an optimist meant ignoring the odds.

Every jockey accepted the serious risks of riding every time they got on the back of a horse, whether for a Grade One race or for a morning workout. A love for something made a person do crazy things. Unfortunately, love had its consequences, such as being unable to sleep, mortified that all the positive thinking and well wishes in the world could not prevent the worst case from coming true. Jorge had his own flirtations with injury, a dislocated collarbone here, a sprained finger there, but nothing as serious as what Anna was going through. It made him contemplate his own mortality.

Sneakers shuffling on the laminate caused Jorge to torso twist towards the lounge’s entrance. Robert’s head jerked up instantly.

Victor’s feet hit the floor.

“Good evening—morning?” the elderly doctor said, nodding to the group. His face was grim, his eyes red from staring through a surgical microscope for hours on end. He cleared his throat.

No one moved or spoke. All eyes focused on the man whose hands could shepherd life.

Jorge held his breath.

“We’ve done the best that we can for her. There was extensive bleeding. She’s in a medically induced coma and is being transferred to the ICU. My prognosis is poor.” He looked to Robert, nodding respectfully. “All we can do is watch and wait. It’s up to her now.”

“I’d like to donate blood,” Jorge interjected quickly.

“You’re more than welcome to, but that won’t help. The best thing you can all do for her right now is head home and take care of yourselves.”

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“If we don’t get this baby out now, we’re going to lose them both,” Rachel yelled over her shoulder at the watchman’s cell phone. The mare was panting irregularly, eyelids half closed.

“Rachel I’m driving as fast as I can but these are curvy roads,” the vet’s calming tone replied through the speaker. “Tell me everything you can.”

“The membrane is red. Just a red bag. Nothing is coming.”

“You’ll need to manually rupture the membrane or the foal will suffocate.”

“Okay, then what?”

“Manually encourage the passage of the foal.”

“You make it sound so...eloquent,” Rachel replied, sliding her right arm nearly up to her elbow inside Regal Affair. “I feel a single leg...and a nose stuck in the canal.”

“You will need to reposition the foal. Rachel, keep going. What else do you feel? A knee or a shoulder?”

“A—a knee!”

“Okay, good! The carpus is stuck on the pelvic brim with the cannon turned back.”

“English please,” Rachel called exasperatedly over her shoulder.

“The knee is a speed bump in the bottleneck. Grab the knee with one hand, the leg with another, and pull with all your might.”

“So much for doing this one handed.” Rachel dove in

with the other arm and grabbed both limbs. “Nnnrrrrrhhh!” Rachel leaned back, pulling with all her might. There was no movement. She huffed, flipping her loose hair away from her face with a head jerk. She pulled again, digging into the floor with her heels. “Come on, baby...budge!”

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After everyone shook hands with the doctor and thanked him, he turned and left.

Victor cleared his throat. “Before you all go, I think there is something that needs to be said. I would rather you find out from me directly instead of the Form.” He paused.

It looked to Jorge that the words were difficult to say.

“I’ve decided to retire.”

“Wha—?” Jorge jerked to Robert, but the trainer kept his emotions hidden underneath his glasses. Not even his lips gave anything away. He twisted back to Victor. “No way. You can’t retire. That’s crazy talk.”

Victor merely shook his head.

“Just because I shot down the Red Baron doesn’t mean he can’t fly again.”

“It’s been a long time coming,” Victor replied. “Today was the final call.”

Jorge stood in stunned silence as Robert turned and offered his hand to Victor. They shook. “Victor, you have always been a class act. You’ve done the sport a world of good. It’s been an honor.”

“Thanks. And I’ve always appreciated how you let me ride my race and always respected my opinion. Not every trainer is willing to hear what I have to say.” Victor turned to Jorge and offered his hand.

“No-pah.” Jorge tucked his hands under his arms and turned his head away. “If I shake it, then that will make it final, and then you won’t come back.”

“Jorge,” Robert toned. “Shake his hand. Or you will end up regretting it later.”

“Awww, *fine*.”

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Rachel pulled as Regal Affair pushed. Bit by bit the foal came until the knee-like wedge cleared the hump of bone. The foal slid slowly out to the chest. Huffing, Rachel stood back, her arms covered in amber-hued allantoic fluid. She paused, waiting to see if Regal Affair would finish the delivery on her own. “Doctor, Affair is spent. I don’t think she can do this.”

“But you can Rachel. You’ll need to finish for her. Keep pulling the foal towards her hocks. Once out, rupture the second membrane, and move the foal towards Affair so it can see her.”

Rachel followed the instructions. As the foal picked up its head and shook off the excess fluids, it took one look at Regal Affair before letting out a terrible screech. It started to wiggle and thrash uncontrollably.

“What’s that sound?” the doctor asked, sounding fully alarmed for the first time.

“I don’t know,” Rachel called back, eyes wide. “Something is seriously wrong with the foal!”

“Hold on. I’m in the driveway. I’m almost there! Keep the foal down so it can’t injure itself or Affair!”

Rachel fell to her knees and put her hands on the foal as it bucked and squirmed like an oiled worm, screeching repeatedly. Regal Affair lay as passive as a puppy dog,

too exhausted to respond. The watchman turned and ran out of the barn, flashlight in hand, to guide the veterinarian in. Moments later, Doctor Harris rushed in, carrying a tackle box of supplies in each hand. He dropped down beside Rachel, hands rapidly flipping latches loose, digging through the boxes.

“What’s wrong?” Rachel asked, biting her inner lip to keep from crying on the spot.

“Not sure,” Harris replied, slipping on gloves. He started to check the foal, feeling it down. “Could be a dislocation from the delivery.”

“I’m not that strong,” Rachel whimpered as the foal continued its stomach churning cries of distress.

Harris turned to face Rachel, grim concern in his swarthy features. “If I can’t figure out the problem, we may have to put it down. I don’t want to see it suffer.” The foal paused in its squirming, its cries becoming more like whines.

“I—I understand,” Rachel replied as the first tear ran down her cheek. “But please, do whatever you can to save it first.”

“You know I will,” the doctor replied as he continued his examination.

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Rachel stood somberly at the kitchen sink, washing her hands and forearms for the third time. She turned to the coffee pot and poured two mugs, then proceeded into the dining room. Doctor Harris sat across from Brian who still appeared half-asleep. Rachel set a mug in front of each.

“Brian, I’m sorry I woke you, but I wanted your thoughts on this.”

"It's okay, Honey," he said as he picked up the cup and took a sip.

"Doctor?" Rachel gestured that he repeat what he told her earlier in the foaling barn.

Harris released a long sigh, looking displeased to be in a quandary. "Quite frankly, I'm not sure what is wrong with your new filly. She looks okay, but looks can be deceiving. I gave her a mild tranquilizer for the time being. She's comfortable, but my prognosis is guarded."

"So what are our options?" Brian asked, looking more at Rachel than Harris. He was the farm's bookkeeper. Rachel could see the mental calculator powering up.

"If you want to do everything possible, mother and foal need to be transported this morning down to Apple Valley Equine for further examination, testing, and stabilization if necessary. Then to San Luis Rey Equine Hospital if it's the worst case."

Brian looked to the doctor. "What is the worst case?"

Harris rolled his palms upwards. "At this point, I can't really say."

"What are we talking here, dollars and cents?"

"Five? Ten thousand?"

Brian took a deep breath, turning to Rachel, lowering his voice. "Rachel." He gave her the tone she never liked to hear. He drummed his fingers and shook his head slowly as he mouthed the word 'no.'

Rachel's countenance melted into pain. "But, Brian, please. She's a grey, just like I dreamed she would be." She hated begging, but she knew if she could get him by the heart, it would always win out over the brain.

"Rachel, Sweetie, we can't afford ten thousand. Do you know how much hay that would buy?"

"But she's special."

"I'm sure she is, but if we do this, what about the others? Starve the herd to save the one?"

"More donations will come in soon. You know how it is after Christmas. People are still in shock from the credit card statement."

Brian shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, not this time, Rachel. There's not enough reserve. Not unless you can find us ten thousand dollars right now." He pressed an index finger against the tabletop at the word 'now.' After a heartfelt stare, he turned to the doctor. "My apologies if this sounds cruel."

"No, I understand. It's a big financial nut to crack."

Uncontrolled tears ran down Rachel's cheeks. She did not wipe them away, leaving them there so Brian could see them. "Doctor, what are her chances?"

"That she will live? Fair. That she will race?" He paused, looking down into the cup of coffee. "I know how you sell your foals to take care of the retirees, but this one will just be a burden. She's starting off on day one with a huge handicap. I doubt she will even make the minimum bid at auction."

Rachel looked him straight in the eye, hands clasped in her lap as if in prayer. "Would you spend the money?"

The good doctor smiled uncomfortably. "I can't make that decision for you."

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Moonlight played across the partial images of hooves in flight, a dream of multicolored silks commingled with smiling faces and gleaming trophies. Robert sat at his

desk chair, tilted as far back against the window seat of his home office as the chair would allow. A bottle of Woodford Reserve nestled between his legs. He studied the images from afar, every one of his stakes victories as a trainer covering three sides of the room in a collage of fond memories. This was his inner sanctum, the place he retreated to when the sport threw him an emotional curve ball.

Unscrewing the lid to the bottle, Robert lifted the rim to his nose and took in a deep breath of the strong scent. Kentucky Bourbon was the necessary foundation to the Mint Julep, the drink of the Derby. Good bourbon was as important to the Julep as water was to blood. Excessive alcohol, though, had cost him too much in life already. He took another deep draw of the aroma then replaced the cap.

His thoughts focused mostly upon Anna, whose safety Abigail had entrusted to him. Instead of doing what he had promised, he let the girl get on the back of a muscled locomotive and pile drive herself into the ground at full steam. Not only that, but the Red Baron was blaming himself for the event, an accident that may have never happened had Anna not been in the race. Or what if she just was on a different horse? All the could haves, should haves, and would haves stabbed deep and repeatedly into Robert's psyche.

Maybe just a sip.

Robert unscrewed the cap and took another inhalation. Just one sip. Just for tonight.

"I'm sorry, Gail," Robert murmured softly. He placed the bottle to his lips just as 'The Call to the Post' rang from his pants pocket. Letting out a pained exhale, Robert lowered the bottle and answered the phone.

"Hi, Rachel." Robert did his best to sound as if nothing was out of the norm.

"Hi, Robert. I'm sorry to call you this early in the morning."

Something was wrong; he could hear it in her voice. "I was up." Robert paused, remembering how his sister recently kept going on about a foal dream she had. "So was today the day?"

"Yes, it was."

"You don't sound very happy."

"No, I'm not. There are complications, and my grey, she's really in a bad spot right now."

"It came out grey liked you dreamed?" That was hard to believe.

"Yes, Robert, she's my grey, the one, and she's going to die unless I do something."

He could hear the panic in Rachel's voice. Robert leaned forward, putting the bottle on the floor, ready to jump into action. "What can I do for you?"

"I need to borrow ten thousand."

He halted. "Ten thousand dollars? That's—"

"—please, Robert. Please!"

Robert drew a deep breath. His sister needed him. So much had happened today, so much he had no control over. At least there was one person he would not let down. He reached down, took the bottle of bourbon in one hand, and screwed on the cap tightly.

"Okay. Tell me where to send the check."