

A Permanent Position

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Yard by yard, gravel and pressed earth were slowly eaten away in an over-familiar process, each length passing in a crunch of grit and a puff of dust.

Still the road seemed to trail on without end under David's feet, curving through a landscape of farms and ranches, over dry creeks and through desiccated fields, the terrain as parched as his throat.

The young man might not have been out of place there, in the shadow of the vast letters which marked out 'Hollywoodland', but after so many days trudging through the Californian hills his clothes were gray from the dirt, his face smeared and his blond locks stained brown.

He swallowed, and felt the abrasion of fine particulate against his gullet.

David's legs gave him only a dull ache with each step now, but he made them keep striding, as he watched the sun creeping ever lower over the rolling horizon.

It was much too late to return to the city now, but even if he could his wallet was empty, and the stables around town had an ample supply of ready hands locally, with no need of a bedraggled itinerant such as he. Even travelling for so many days, even with the great games on, there was simply no work.

If he was to have a bed and a hot meal that night, the huge ranch up ahead was his last hope.

Passing gradually around the hillside, David was heartened by the place being slowly revealed.

Nestled in the shelter of tall slopes on all sides, Elysium ranch was embraced by a shawl of real forest, a lively stream running down through the open fields, cattle and horses grazing on lush, green grass.

He forged ahead, ignoring the aches and abrasions blighting his tired body, attacking the path up to the main structure with gusto.

He had a long walk.

It sat perched on a shoulder, large enough to accommodate house, outbuildings, stables and extensive grounds, looking out over the lands it commanded, sprawling for many miles below.

Clearly, the Depression had not reached Elysium.

The 'ranch' was a mansion in truth, a tastefully expensive structure of imported marble standing three floors tall, amid gardens as extravagant as they were vibrant.

It was hard to imagine such a place taking on an itinerant, a drifter unknown and unwashed, who appeared uninvited at the gates, but David had to at least make the attempt.

He rapped at the door to the lodge.

While he waited for an answer, he turned back, to survey the road he'd walked.

It was a long one, meandering up the slope, through those strikingly picturesque fields. Looking up higher, he realized that a triangle of glittering blue was visible between the distant hills; a shimmering snatch of still farther sea.

It was a shame he wouldn't be staying.

But with luck, they might at least allow him to overnight in the stable.

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The gardens at Elysium were as impressive as their setting, lush yet immaculately preened, verdant lawns surrounding a central lake fed by a full and merry brook.

Surveying all, as if in mastery, was a stout figure, standing on a small stone pedestal at the edge of the water, commanding a remarkable view out, across the landscape, to the distant ocean.

A garishly-painted young man of wood and lacquer, by the look of him, a statue of a jockey in full racing dress, his silks finely recreated by the hands of an expert crafter, his features rendered with immaculately conceived and painstakingly-preserved detail that made him seem almost alive, merely frozen in temporary stillness.

A ranch hand was attending to the creation that very moment as David passed, polishing the figure's face, and the newcomer's eye lingered on the matching blues of the art-piece, with something akin to envy.

If a mere statue could be so pampered, life at Elysium must be truly prosperous.

David would have thought the dust-bowls a mere ill dream, if not for the detritus still clinging to his clothing and skin.

Alas, those layers of grime were a clear marker of his intrusion.

With each step towards the outbuildings, escorted by the polite yet distant gatekeeper, he felt more clearly that he had nothing to offer such a place. Not when they already boasted so many staff, finely-attired grooms among them.

They were readying a beautiful white mare when he reached the stables, the high-strung creature tossing and snorting in her imperious truculence.

“What is it?” snapped the gnarled old oak of a stablemaster. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“I’m new in town,” David began, putting on the familiar motions, despite his lacking expectations. “I’m a groom, formerly head groom at a ranch back in Colorado-”

“Well this is California,” the weathered equestrian snorted back. “And no, we don’t have any need of another groom. Or a stable-boy. Or garden hand. Nor any of those other odd jobs that your ilk pester me and the poor groundskeepers over each day. You’d best be off, come morning, back whenever you came. You’ll have to make do with the stable tonight.”

David slumped at the predictable response.

He had been under no delusions of spending the night in the main house – wherever they went, grubby wanderers such as he were neither trusted with nor suffered to befoul the home of the master – but he would at least have a roof and a warm bed of hay by the sound of it. Perhaps even a cooked meal, if the stablemaster was feeling generous.

Then, on the morrow, he would resume his endless trek.

“Oh, I’m sure we can find a better position than that, for such a strapping young man.”

The voice wafted over like a welcome breeze, cooling the hostile expressions of the other grooms.

“As you say, Mistress,” the stablemaster affirmed.

An oddly obsequious answer, for so gruff a man, however David understood why as the other speaker came into view.

She was not the dainty waif her words had conjured – striding forwards was a woman wholly possessed of herself, comfortable and well-accustomed to her athletic build and handsome looks. Her riding leathers were worn, the crop in her hand fitting her gloved fingers as though it too were a part of her arm.

“So, a drifter, that what you said?” she asked, flashing him a predacious smile, as she leaned down to inspect the smaller man. “Down on your luck, no-where to turn and no-body to call on?”

“Something like that,” David admitted. “But I assure you, I’m diligent in my work.”

As she turned up his chin with the tip of her crop he wondered if this strange woman saw him as a human at all, or just another beast to burden.

“Shirt off. I want to see what I’ll be getting for my money.”

That answered that question.

Still, he obeyed the order.

She gave an appreciative murmur, as he peeled off the sweaty, shedding rag, to uncover a chest glistening with perspiration, beads adhering to each well-sculpted muscle.

David flinched as her palm probed his abdomen... but not out of discomfort.

She gripped, and he felt the power in those digits, as she appraised his figure.

"Well you have the body to handle horses at least."

Her eye caught a glint from between his pecs, and she grazed her fingers up, to cup the dangling trinket.

His lucky horseshoe, the silver pendant looked small and plain in her hand.

"Name?"

"David Carson."

"Jane Bernini," spoke the beauty, "but you shall call me *Mistress*."

As she spoke, she slipped the necklace from his shoulders.

David opened his mouth to protest that, however she gave him an innocent smile.

"You don't mind if I try this on, do you? I feel like it might rather suit me."

"Of course," he answered stiffly.

It irked him a little to see that it did... until she turned her smile back towards him, and laid her hand on his chest in lieu of the decoration.

David pressed forwards against that touch as the two locked eyes, his heart racing.

There was a power to this mysterious mistress, and David could feel it overtaking him, her will and charisma subsuming all objections. It was obvious, she seemed to say, for him to desire her... for him to long to taste those full lips, or run a hand over those long, powerful legs. Just as it was obvious she desired him.

Yet there was a hint of something *dangerous* in the way that beautiful lady surveyed her prize.

"I shall enjoy this," she murmured.

Saying no more, Jane turned back to her servants, yet her eye lingered a moment on his physique, before moving over to the unimpressed stablemaster opposite.

“David here is hired. Put him up with the other grooms. He can help with mucking out and handle odd jobs for now, and if does well we’ll have him help tending the horses.”

“Yes Mistress,” the older man replied.

David might have been amused by the other’s ability not to show a hint of displeasure on his stoic features, but his jaw still lay slack, his chest pounding and his loins enflamed by her intimate attention.

“Well then, I must be off, before it’s too dark to ride. Don’t prove me wrong about you, young man.”

His new employer took her rebellious horse in hand, stilling and mounting the beast in one smooth motion, then riding her out, into the glow of the setting sun.

It was only as he watched that captivating figure receding into the reds and golds of the pastures below, that David realized he genuinely had the job.

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The following days passed quickly, a fluster of introductions, baths and orientation, as the new hand was settled in to his multitudinous tasks on the ranch.

The other grooms understood well that his presence was at the pleasure of the *Mistress*, and so made no open objections, nor burdened him unduly, but even the lady Jane herself expected a vigorous day of work from each of her employees. As such his first week saw David on his feet from dawn to dusk, mucking out stables, carrying bales and polishing saddles.

There were other miscellaneous chores to be done too, which all seemed to fall to him, but David gave no objection, whether he was mending fences, trimming hedges, or even tending to that odd statue, which stood out by the lake.

That last had a strange, almost ceremonial air to it.

The Mistress was often visible at the windows of the house as he was carefully cleaning and polishing the wooden man, but she never approached him as he worked. Nor did any of the other staff – indeed they seemed to give the jockey a wide berth in general.

Fortunately, come the close of his first fortnight, David’s work had been deemed more than adequate, and he had been permitted to return to his real field of expertise, tending directly to the fine array of animals the Lady Jane stabled.

It felt good to be back at the work he knew... even if he still had to groom that unsettling wooden apparition too.

The plaque beneath its boots declared it to be 'in loving memory' of the departed Mister Bernini, yet at times it seemed more a *living* memory, so lifelike was the model.

It had a way of drawing David's eye, as he was walking between the stables and the barns, and would often appear almost to be turning its head slightly, looking back at him from the corners of his vision.

But naturally it was quite inert.

Still, a sense of unease and anticipation lingered in his mind, as he began his third week at the ranch.

Not thanks to that odd model, but due to the persistent whispers which seemed to follow him about the valley, and the question which lay at the heart of the multitudinous claims.

The Mistress had been so openly taken by him, and she a widower – or so all assumed, with the Master been missing some ten years now.

She was still young, still vital and powerful... *fertile* even, in more than just figure.

It was the received wisdom then, that David was her new preoccupation.

The lady herself did nothing to dissipate such rumors.

She had kept hold of his lucky horseshoe, the pendant still hanging about her neck each day, and on her visits to the stable her flirtations were bold and frequent. Her hands were as like to take *him* by the reins as her mount, those commanding touches expertly teasing, *driving* the man into a breathless heat with practiced ease.

He was not without his effects on her either – subtler, more refined though they were, the signs showed through, in the color that spread on her cheeks, and the light which glimmered in her exquisite green gaze.

Near as green at the envy writ plain on the faces of so many of his peers.

He might have tolerated that, even laughed it off with the other grooms, were their accusations actually *true*.

Yet *false* claims stung all the more for the lie, the refusal of the others to believe his denials an affront to his honesty as well as his abilities. In truth the lady had done no more than admire him thus far – it was his work which had won him advancement. Conversely, David could see how their own shortcomings were all which held them back.

Their own inferior knowledge and abilities were where the blame ought fall.

Assured of his righteousness, David resolved to focus entirely on his own affairs, and ignore the rest of the grooms, as he did the clucking of so many hens outside the stable.

So it was that the rift between David and the other hands only widened, even as the weeks passed into months.

To the others it was obvious that the former drifter preferred to remain un-rooted; a tumbleweed caught only momentarily in the crook of those soft, lush hills.

For David himself, his situation felt surreal. His disconnection from the workers at the ranch deepened each day, fermenting into a queer sense of unreality, coming upon him in bouts.

At night he rested in a separate room over the stables, away from the other men, yet peaceful as his accommodations were, his sleep was fitful and broken.

Lady Jane was in his dreams each night, radiant and seductive in finery she would never have worn awake, and her hands gripped him, kneaded and shaped his skin, even as they teased him to a piquant, heady longing.

He could feel her touch and hear her whispers, even *taste* her lips on his, yet in those moments of imagined intimacy, he never moved.

It was forbidden.

David would never be granted that which he so desired.

Ever she would gaze upon him fondly, yet withdraw.

Her kisses would instead grace the horseshoe about her neck, as she faded back into the aether of his mind.

Always and inevitably.

Yet she did not leave him alone.

A strange figure was there, even after she was gone. A presence somehow motionless yet compelling, calling silently to him through slumber, as if whispering in his sleeping ear.

At times it seemed as though he was outside, awake and walking, under a sky swirling and overflowing with stars.

He would glide down to the lake, and stand there, looking out across the valleys. Posing just beside that strange statue, in a stance not dissimilar to the jockey himself. Yet when he tried to turn, to look for that disquieting figure, his body remained still. His arms stayed at his sides, his legs solid, *rooted* in place.

Fixed atop that strangely familiar plinth.

Only now the plaque read '*David*'.

The dream passed quickly, when he awoke each morning.

Yet at times he felt as though he were still sleeping, even in the middle of those baking summer days, his body sluggish and stiff.

When his mind wandered, it erred ever towards that tranquil waterfront.

When his feet strayed, they veered for that strange spot, home to that uncomfortably human sculpture.

In those moments, his hands felt strangely stiff, fingers clumsy and sluggish.

His skin seemed rigid, resisting his movement.

His body *throbbed*, taut and hard, as he fumbled through his duties, loins burning and head thumping.

Those feelings, that surreal *solidity* of his body, came and went with those moments of unreality... yet both lingered longer each time.

Some days, David could hardly bend his fingers.

Each night, more skilled hands than his own tended to his body. Caressing and kissing across his skin, pressing the sheets close about him. Gripping, *squeezing* that aching mound of his sex, all packed together under the covers, into an odd, impotent bulge of dire sensuality.

And ever the dream would end the same, with David standing on that pedestal immobile, looking out across the lake.

Each morning he woke tangled and bound, caught up in sheets soaked through with sweat, his body tingling and stiff in all the wrong places. His hands would fumble then, with his pleading member, yet stiff as he was, his erection felt wrong, *too* hard by far, clumsy fingers slipping off a phallus which was somehow... diminished each time. From a fine stallionhood, he was somehow *shrinking*, all the while suffering that incomprehensible denial, until there was too little even to take in that unbending hand.

David couldn't hold himself to masturbate.

The harder he tried each morning, the less his body seemed to comply. His cock was sensitive, eager even, yet it grew none, even as the blood engorged his loins. His sex was a mere bump now, in the bulging mound of the sheets, a ball of hard-knotted tension, which seemed to pulse with his desire, even as it denied him his pleasure.

It was impossible, he knew.

His member was still there – where else could it be? He was simply overworked. Stressed and pent-up, his muscles too fatigued to heed him.

So David told himself, as he struggled into his clothing each day, eyes skipping over that ever-less-phallic form between his legs.

Instead of pursuing pleasure, virtue lay in toil.

He threw himself into his work all the more.

A cruel irony it was indeed, that his hands betrayed him so, even there.

It began with grooming the mane of Lady Jane's prized mare.

His fingers couldn't seem to close around the brush, and he dropped it repeatedly, or got it caught in those long, stiff hairs, until finally the stablemaster snatched the tool away, and sent him about his other business.

He was not allowed to groom the horses again, after that.

His hands no longer exerted the skillful, practiced touch which had earned him his place.

Over the following days more of his duties were taken up by others, until, inevitably, David found that only one chore remained to him.

Polishing the jockey statue.

Confused and disturbed as he was, that task did nothing to ease his worries.

It was a trivial role, beneath his talents, yet even the simple act of gripping a cloth to rub against the wooden figure posed a real difficulty now, what had once been the labor of minutes made into a task taking up hours each day.

The work was made all the more onerous by the subject of his endeavors.

The jockey was too realistic.

His face too *alive* somehow, pupils seeming to glint, even to follow David's hands as they moved.

In those moments of greatest unreality, when the groom moved as if in a dream, the jockey seemed even to move with him.

To lean and flex, wooden structure bending, head turning and features twitching.

Yet the voice was what truly chilled him.

It never spoke while David was looking, of course.

A statue couldn't speak to begin with.

Yet the words must come from somewhere, spoken as they were, in mere murmurs, into the back of his mind.

They called to him, in those times of untethered stupor, as if seducing him ever to return, to take his place on that plinth.

Perhaps... to *exchange* place, with that impossible being.

But that was nonsense.

The statue was no more a man than David was a wooden jockey. He had a good thing at the ranch, as he reminded himself – the favor of the Mistress, and a generous pay, even now, while he was unwell.

He had simply to rest and wait out this odd fever of the brain. In a few weeks he'd be back to his full powers, showing up all the other grooms again. Perhaps in time he would even be promoted, chosen by Lady Jane to *run* her stable, once that irascible old oak had finally grown too decrepit and rotted away.

Such flights of fancy were instrumental, in denying the proof of his own ears, and the sensations of his own flesh.

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Denial could not last forever, of course.

Addled as his mind felt, David knew this was more than fatigue.

His dreams of intimacy continued each night, yet as the Lady Jane left him, panting and pleading for more, they took on a darker reality.

Paralysis and pleasure mingled in his mind, until finally the fright would start him awake again, ever wet with sweat, at times even dirtied somehow, with earth and leaves from the gardens.

Until one night, when it wasn't Jane who came to him.

It was the jockey.

David screamed, yet the sound died on still lips.

Eyes snapped open. Rather than laying, caught up in a snare of sheets, he found himself standing, not in his familiar room at all.

Instead he was outside, clad only in a nightshirt and leggings, standing under the eerie calm of the moon's light.

In that irreality of silver the stable and gardens felt like a mere picture, painted and frozen, not a breath of animal or air disturbing even one strand of grass. No lights burned in the windows, and no figures moved in the shadow – vital and hectic as the ranch was in day, now he could scarce imagine a soul in those silent structures.

It was as though some unknowable power had cast a spell over the whole valley.

For what felt like an age, nothing stirred, anywhere.

David would have to break the stillness himself.

Yet it was as he resolved to do so, that he saw it.

A *motion* among the trees.

It was out near the lake, a shape... what could almost have been a *figure*, glimpsed only for a moment.

David was moving before he knew it, before he had thought at all, his feet carrying him forwards.

He should perhaps have called out. For all he knew, it could have been a robber, or rustlers, aiming to take the horses as well as the cattle.

Yet David knew it wasn't.

He knew, though he knew not how.

He dared not make a sound as he penetrated that too-familiar trail, trespassing down, towards the water... where it was waiting.

Gazing up from the motionless lake, he saw it.

*The eye.*

His heart stopped.

Unblinking, enormous, it stared from the depths of that quicksilver pool, peering into him, *through* him, as that being, that *presence* overtook all thought in his head. This was something beyond him, something painfully great and terrible, outside of all knowing and reason, and yet... it *knew* him.

Unseen, imperceptible, a ripple waved out from the bank, and the mirror of the waters dissolved.

The reflected moon shimmered, a mere haze atop the lake once more.

David wilted as the tension left him, almost laughing aloud.

After so intense a fright, the sound didn't come, but the relief was enough.

His fears had been for nothing, after all.

Even that lonely lakeside spot, so close to the detestable, unsettling statue, seemed welcoming now.

Warm and familiar even.

David turned, to wave an amicable 'goodnight' to the wooden figure.

The Jockey was gone.

Even the plinth, that low mound of stone on which it stood, had vanished.

The groom gaped, as he searched about with his eyes for some sign of either.

It should have been right where he was standing, in that prided place that dwelled so unsettlingly on his mind.

The very spot his legs unerringly turned to.

David looked down, slowly, towards the ground about his feet.

He stood atop a small stone pedestal at the edge of the water, commanding a remarkable view out, across the landscape, to the distant ocean.

The plaque beneath was inscribed simply:

*David*