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■ Chapter 11: Gail A. Eisnitz went to the state pen to talk with a former horse slaughterer who was doing time.

Steve Parrish finally entered and was directed to where I was seated.

Parrish, a compact, graceful African American in his early thirties, crossed the room with a slow, confident gait. He sat down across from me, smiled, then asked- as if he were actually interested - how I was doing. I wanted to establish a good rapport, so we talked for a while about life in general, his specifically.

He had worked in slaughterhouses ever since he was a teenager. He didn't say much about his life in Chicago's streets, the dangerous crowd he ran with- or how he'd landed in jail this time. I asked him what kind of horses were slaughtered at the plants where he'd worked. "Belgians, Arabians, little ponies- all kinds. Long as it's a horse. Stolen horses, too."

"Stolen?" I asked. Lately at my job, I'd been getting a lot of complaints about horses that had been stolen from their owners and sold to slaughterhouses. Horse theft for slaughter seemed to be on the increase.

"Guys with their own trucks, they'd steal horses and bring them for us to kill and sell," he replied. "This one guy- I know him pretty well- he told me it's good money, stealing horses. Said I got lots of experience with horses, would I like to go with him sometime and steal

some. I told him I'm not really into that."

"Where would he steal them from?" I asked.

"A lot of people own little farms they don't live on," he said, "just places where they hold horses and feed them. Pet horses, riding horses in good condition, some of them young. These guys would bring them in at night. We didn't have no night shift then. The boss needed more meat to ship to Belgium. We'd stay over after the USDA doc left, or go back in the middle of the night. The boss would have the accountant put an extra bonus on our checks, twenty dollars for each horse. We'd kill anything from thirty to forty horses at night."

"What about USDA inspections?"

"They weren't inspected."

"And the inspector wouldn't notice the extra horses in the morning?" I asked.

"Everything is moving so fast," he replied. "He'd never know."

"How many times did you do this?"

"Quite a few. Maybe ten times."

"How'd they handle the horses that couldn't walk?" I asked.

"If he's down on the truck, down in the manure, and he don't want to move," he said, "or if the horse is injured or sick or pregnant, or maybe he's done a split and can't get up- you try to pull him up by the tail. Or stick a two- by- four under him, try to pick him up. Or hit him with the shocker.

There are times we took a boning knife and stuck them in the rectum till they bleed to make them get up."

"Does this happen much?"

"A lot," he replied. "Because he's holding up progress. Plus you don't want the other horses to run all over him and trample him and bruise the meat up. So we'd take a hoist, put a chain around the horse's neck and drag him all the way to the holding pen. Or if we kick a horse and he is 2D -downed or disabled- and we can't move him, I'd slit his throat in the pens and let him bleed, cut his nerves off at the back of his neck. Because you could work with him better when he's dead.

You can bend his legs and you ain't got to worry about being kicked. You can hold him and flip him and drag him to the knocking box. Either way, as long as we can get him to the kill floor."

"What about the ones who can walk but don't want to go up to the chutes?" I asked.

"All animals fear when they're going to die," he said. "If he don't want to go, if he falls down, they beat him with pipes, kick them, hit them with pieces of wood, stick them with knives. If he still won't move, you wrap a cable around his neck and drag them in with the hoist. You drag them while they're still alive. Choke them to death."

"You've got to have something for whatever situation you're in," he continued. "You can't

spend fifteen or twenty minutes on one horse. You have to do whatever you can to get him in that box to get him skinned- fast. You can't let one horse stop you from making money." "See, the thing with a slaughterhouse, every piece of meat is valuable," Parrish said.

"Every horse is valuable. Like, a horse that dies out in the pen, maybe he's still warm. By law, that horse is supposed to be condemned, cut up, and incinerated. Instead, we put him in the freezer so the meat can be sold."

The buzzer rang. After the prisoner count, I asked Parrish how the slaughter went for horses who walked into the knocking box.

"There's a certain way to shoot or knock an animal," he said. "I seen them shoot them five times, hit them all in the eye. Hit them in the neck. I seen horses get shot wrong and get right back up and walk around the kill floor, kind of dazed. And they run up on them and just hit them with the knife in the neck, anywhere, and just let them suffer, walk around bleeding."

"Sometimes they can't get close enough with the knocking gun," he continued. "It didn't work right sometimes, sometimes the gun gets wet, gets blood up in it, and it don't shoot. The boss tells us, 'run and cut his throat.' I've seen my boss grab a knife and run and cut its throat."

"What about the inspector?" I asked. "Does he ever see any of this?"

"Yes"

"How do you know? Have you seen him?"

"We all on the kill floor together," he said, "we all watching this. Sometimes he'd complain about it. But you've got a lot of guys there, new, unexperienced, and they think it's a game."

"Do any of the horses regain consciousness after they're hung?"

"Some," he said. "they still be kicking, they still be alive."

"Does anyone ever get hurt?"

"People get their arms broke, get kicked- I got kicked in the nuts. People been hit by them.

And they beat the hell out of them. I've seen horses get beat with pipes."

"If the horse is kicking, how do you know it's not just a muscle reaction?"

"See, that was my department. I did it so long," he replied. "He'd cry out. Cry and kick. And he'd be choking from the blood, still blowing out air, and I'd start skinning the head."

"How long do they usually have to bleed out?" I asked.

"The sticker and the header is the same person," he said. "You move so fast you don't have time to wait till a horse bleeds out. You skin him as he bleeds. Sometimes horses' heads are still down in the blood, sucking up the same blood from some other horse. 'Cause a horse is so long, his nose is down in the blood, blowing bubbles, and he suffocates."

"See," he continued, "a job like that, is a job of cruelty. You don't have no conscience. All you think about is you making your money, you doing your job."

"Sure," I said, "but the USDA's supposed to be enforcing the law."

"But you're moving so fast," he said, "a lot of things slip past. There's times the doc might say, 'I've got to condemn that horse.' Might be part of him's bad, might be the pneumonia's traveled everywhere. I'd drag him back, and my boss would tell me to cut the hindquarters off and bring him into the cooler. This meat's supposed to be condemned, but you still cut it up and bag it."

"But don't they have to be stamped 'USDA inspected'?" I asked.

"He got the stamper," he said, "he can stamp it himself after the doc leaves."

"You're saying your boss had access to the USDA stamper?"

"'Course he's got access," he replied. "He's got access to anything in the plant. it's like this: if you a good worker, you do favors for the boss, he does favors for you. You take a condemned horse, skin him, cut him up, sell the meat in the street. We have sold horsemeat, unstamped, to people in restaurants, in their homes. We've sold it as beef."

"You've done this?" I asked. "Or heard about it from other people?"

"Heard about it, seen it, done it," he said. "Everybody want a hustle. I had a buddy who had a key to the plant. He'd go in and steal horsemeat and sell it in town as beef."

"Didn't people know he worked there? Didn't they think it was strange that he'd be- "

"Nope," he interrupted, "because they're getting a deal. He's doing them a favor, helping them save money. You mix it with beef, cook it right, people don't know the difference. I could decorate a piece of horsemeat and you'd think it's roast beef. In restaurants, people eat what you put in front of them."

Parrish looked past me and shouted something I didn't understand. Someone shouted back at him, and he nodded.

"The USDA man," I said, "did he ever stop the line?"

"If the horses are touching, one getting shit on the other because the line's clogged up, he'd slow it down a little.

"What about for live animals kicking?"

"Nope," he said. "See, certain guys get an attitude and take off on the horses. You know, you drink on the job. You go out to the liquor store on your lunch break and buy your liquor and beer, and we drink while we work. The USDA peoples drink with us. Come to our houses and party."

"But that's after work," I said. "Would they drink on the job?"

"Sure they would. Drink a beer down by the liver stand, where they check their livers and hearts."

Visiting hours were over. We stood up.