

A White Horse At The Black Bootleg

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Chapter 1: Black Boots

"Some mighty fine boots you got there, Miss. How about I pull them off for you?"

So drawls Buddy Armstrong hooking thick thumbs in a wide leather belt barely containing his bulging belly that hangs like a twisted water balloon.

"Not today, Mr. Armstrong," huffs Alice Finnerty, her chilled breath materializing from a feigned smile as she reigns the white horse away with a slight flick of the wrist.

"Next time then!" he commands as horse and rider disappear with the waning glow of an early December dusk, misinterpreting her polite response as interest in the son of her employer.



Arthur Armstrong, commonly called Buddy because his father was also Arthur along with at least eight generations before him, was a thirty-year-old man of many misinterpretations. He mistakenly thought that being told to keep an eye on the ranch meant he was the trusted heir to his father's fortune, when his mother just wanted to get him and his appetite out of the house. He assumed said fortune was from the trucking business that had brought Arthur senior to central Jersey, but the tractor-trailers chugging between Perth Amboy and Eastern Kentucky were really a front for a more nefarious affair. He thought that being dismissed to a diner while the trailer was unloaded was just how trucking was done in the southern Appalachians. He interpreted the ranch hands calling him Big Buddy as respect for his spare tire of a midsection. He even thought that the slabs of pie proffered by Black Bootleg waitresses or the free beers drawn by the bartender were because they liked him. The one thing Buddy did read accurately was horses, and seeing how easily the new girl handled his father's high strung show horse made him stir somewhere down below that rotundiform abdomen.

Alice was a lithe nineteen-year-old hired from a Branchburg farm as the trainer for Ajax, a rare all-white stallion that Mr. Armstrong had discovered on a run south. Winding his rig across route 60 in the autumnal gloaming of the West Virginia mountains, he'd done a double-take at a glowing ghost galloping along a fencerow on Big Sewell Mountain. His contraband load was already too far past the highland farm to stop when he realized it was a young horse instead of an albino deer. The return trip was with a wad of cash, a makeshift stable at the tail end of the trailer, and a scheme to train the bleached colt for a detergent commercial.

"Ooh baby it's cold outside," Buddy bellows as he bellies up to the stand-up bar. "How about warming me up?"

"Boilermaker?" queries the bartender, already reaching for the fifth of Fleischmann's when he catches a flash of two fingers from a tall guy in butch haircut and black leather jacket standing at the far end of the long wooden plank.

"This one's on the house," Buddy calls across the shadows of the darkening room. "What brings a city fellow out to the Black Bootleg?"

"Non e niente," answers the mysterious man downing first the shot and then a pint of Ballantine before heading for the door and calling back "let's say I'm just passing through."

"Christmas dance next Friday night," Buddy booms into a frigid gust as the door swings shut.

Chapter 2: Longeing Around

"Damn it to hell anyway, it's been over a year and Ajax can't handle a rider," groans Arthur senior with a boot up on the corral fence post. "I want that horse ready for Colgate by spring."

"Don't worry dad," reasons Buddy in a rare role reversal, "Alice has the knack and will have him saddled up in no time."

"You keep your fat hands off my trainer, mister," spits the father while keeping his eyes on the young woman leading the white stallion in a large circle by a loose leather strap. The young horse pulls and nickers like a gleeful child being swung around by their arms.

"They train quicker with the mare on hand," offers the son, ignoring the cruel accusation.

"You there, get that ride on the road," commands the father stomping off to his little office behind the barroom and turning at the door to shout back to Buddy "and you get in here!"

The Armstrongs had been horsemen from time immemorial starting with steppe ponies on the post-glacial British Isles. It was their war stallions decked out with two-person chariots that had held off the Roman armies from Scotland, culminating in Emperor Hadrian building a twenty-foot stone wall across the waist of Anglia to keep the wild Celtic tribes out of the conquered south. This unbroken line of Armstrong cavaliers was temporarily diverted by Arthur senior.

His company Laurel Highland Horseless had been the first to provide commuter service in southwestern Pennsylvania until he lost all twelve buses and their depot to the bank in the stock market crash of 1929. Fortunately, he preserved a means of family salvation by taking his bus mechanic skills into the bootlegging business during prohibition. His revved up Fords could outrun the state police on the National Pike by baiting them up Summit Mountain, the westernmost of the Allegheny ridges.

Eventually the cops could identify Ace Armstrong and knew where he lived, so he did what clan leaders had done during first the Roman and then the Norman conquests. He headed for the hills, in his case the post-prohibition dry counties of eastern Kentucky where moonshine trickled with every creek flowing out of each backwoods hollow. His garage in Paintsville provided really full service - a tankful, a repair, and a clandestine ride for the family recipe.

"Did I ever tell you why we really came to Jersey?" begins Arthur, tilting back in his wooden chair.

"Yeah, yeah, I pick up loads at the New York ports and factories along the Raritan, remember?"

"Well dumbass, some Italian guy has been snooping around the ranch. We don't need no mob cutting into our side profits so don't you go spilling your guts."

"Oh dad, why would the mafia want to get into ranching?"

"Good, let's leave it at that. Now what's this about speeding up the training?"

"Alice's father was waiting in the bar to pick her up and said that high strung stallions learn to ride sooner with their mama nearby."

"Tell you what, smartass," Arthur bargains, handing over ten fading thousand dollar bills. "How about you take that converted trailer and bring us back a white mare?"

"I've never been to West Virginia. Is it hard driving across those mountains?"

"Nah, it's a straight shot from Harrisburg down route eleven, then west on sixty at Lexington over to Big Sewell. Just slap on the chains if you meet any snow on those hills."

Chapter 3: Big Sewell

"Well little buddy, Big Sewell's coming up at the other side of this town," Buddy calls to the little dog sitting up on the passenger seat of his Mack truck cruising into Rainelle, West Virginia. "You've been a real trooper since I picked you up at that truck stop, but we'll get out at the farm on top of this mountain."

The beagle puppy looks over at Buddy and gives a couple of happy whines before standing up on the arm rest to eagerly look out the passenger window.

"What the hell is he up to?" big Buddy wonders aloud as they pass a man standing beside a black Jaguar and speaking into a walkie-talkie. "Fancy car for these parts."

The Jaguar MT was a rare vehicle for any place in America in 1960. The sleek British import had a price tag to match its booming Daimler engine, making it one of the preferred vehicles for younger members of Italian crime families in the New York city area. Eager to establish economic credibility with their aging bosses, several soldatos from the Gambino and Lucchese families had been scouting out opportunities in the expanding containerization business at the ports of entry along Kill Van Kull and the Arthur Kill. Discovering the remains of prohibition-era bootlegging operations along these tidal estuaries between the Raritan and Hudson bays made container trucking a prime target for *casa nostra* expansion.

"Oh shit, hold on little buddy," groans big Buddy as they round a horseshoe bend to see two more Jags nose-to-nose and blocking the road.

There's a rock face on the right, a steep wooded bank on the left, and no time to bring the rig to a halt. *Ahhh* echoes through Buddy's head after the sound of crunching metal and glass subsides, and it takes whining from the puppy to realize he's still screaming.

"I guess that cattle guard did the job," he laughs, pulling the little dog onto his ample lap as he revs the engine up the rest of Big Sewell Mountain. "Those fuckers can take care of their own."

Chapter 4: Mistletoe

"I sent you down there with ten grand and an empty trailer," begins Arthur from behind his cluttered desk in the front bay of the old barn, "and you come back with two horses, a mutt, and a torn up front end?"

"That farmer took one look at those Grover Clevelands and made it a package deal," whines Buddy leaning into an H beam with the little beagle snapped into his western shirt. "I'm pretty much the same with this little thing that hopped up into the cab at a truck stop."

"Well that explains two out of three, but what about about my Mack?"

"I had to run some kind of fancy road block on a blind curve. It was either me and little buddy or crashing right through."

"Did you see them?"

"Four guys in dark coats and sunglasses when they caught up at the farm. The darnedest thing, though - they took one look into the empty back end and hightailed it right back the way they came."

"You done good, son, and that big Appaloosa ought to hold the both of you for the parade. Now go shoot down some mistletoe from that old oak by the back trail."

"Thanks dad, we'll go saddle him up," Buddy smiles, pushing off the beam and starting to pull open the creaky wooden bay door when called back.

"Just don't you go blabbing to any new customers, and keep that twenty-two of yours handy."

The Black Bootleg Kerstfeest was a tradition carried on from the previous owners who had continued what they had inherited when the farm was purchased from an old Dutch family. It kicked off with a Black Peter parade of decked out horses and their riders from the main road and along the fence-lined pastures into the large stable. The nearby barn was decorated with wreaths and strings of lights, and strands of the parasitic aphrodisiac plant *Phoradendron leucarpum* were hung from the double-doored main entry into the center aisle, an Armstrong

addition to the otherwise Netherlands winterfest. An open bar beside a hay-strewn dance floor assured a crowd for the band that would be set up under the back gables.

That particular year would feature a new doo-wop group called the Watchung Four from nearby Bound Brook. Hoping to make it big in the New York music scene, they had begged, borrowed, and stolen to dress to the nines for their first out-of-town gig - starched white shirts, skinny black ties and slacks, and matching canali jackets. The four high school seniors arrived with their equipment stuffed into an uncle's black Cadillac just behind Buddy with his wicker basket of mistletoe.

"We bagged us some big ones," laughs Buddy from the barn door, holding up the full basket in one hand and his shotgun in the other as the little dog gives two stout barks from his position tucked into Buddy's suede vest.

"Give it here and I'll string it up," calls the bartender, giving the excited beagle a pat on the head when Buddy ambles over to the bar. "The line up is in half an hour."

"Time enough for refreshment," Buddy answers, leaning the gun against a wooden plank serving as a bar leg.

"Buon Natale!" calls a sharply coiffed guy swinging open the barn door and setting off a chain reaction.

"What the...," cries Buddy bending over for the shotgun.

Out spills the little beagle, scrambling for the barn door. Over tips the shotgun, knocking into the uneven floorboards. *Blast* reverberates the gun, pelleting the bay wall boards.

"Mafankulo!" shouts someone from the bay office.

Back leaps the man at the barn door, knocking into three other guys in identical outfits. Up bucks the white horse, spooked while passing by the front of the barn. Off gallops horse and rider, a black-haired woman in a striking white outfit hanging on for dear life. *Caw-caw-caw* calls a big black bird from the ridge beam of the pent roof into the soft first swirl of flakes that signal a looming snowstorm.

Chapter 5: Zwarte Piet

"Ride with me, Bud," calls Arthur as he reins his prize Arabian up to the front of the lineup and huge snowflakes plop onto his felt hat.

"Sorry about that blast, dad," apologizes Buddy trotting over on the spotted stud with the little dog perched with paws up on the pommel. "I thought those Italian kids at the door were...."

"Never mind about that," interrupts the elder Armstrong as a flugelhorn plays Once In Royal David's City and they jog their horses side-by-side to start the procession. "I've got some news about the ranch."

"Gee dad, I knew you might pass it on someday. I'm about as ready as I'll ever be."

"Well son, you can stay on as manager," Arthur begins, tipping his Stetson to a grey-haired man standing in a long wool overcoat in front of a sleek black car nearly hidden by a dusting of white, "but I've sold out, lock, stock, and barrels to Mister Gambino."

Unbeknownst to the present generations, selling out was an old Armstrong trick. A Scottish ancestor had done so to an English lord in an early seventeenth century land grab that saw the dispersal of the Liddesdale clan to Ireland, Australia, and America. Two centuries later a colonial Armstrong again sided with the British and lost the family holdings in New Jersey, resulting in another dispersal, this time to the wilds of western Pennsylvania. The perpetrators called it compromise to save the family wealth or, in some cases, their very necks. Others would say they were traitors deserving of their exile, and our Buddy was entering this latter camp.

"Have you told Alice?" Buddy asks, holding onto the little dog with one big hand and grasping the reins in the other.

"Haven't seen her since your stunt back at the barn," defends his father as a ruckus of *caws* erupts from the woods behind the barn, "but she doesn't have to know."

"I'll tell her," Buddy growls, shoving the yelping beagle over and squeezing his legs together to send the big horse into a snowy gallop for the back trail.

Chapter 6: The Watchung Four

"Hold it right there, mister!" commands Buddy in a booming voice from his towering steed, stopping a man in a black leather jacket in his snowy tracks down a steep bank straight for Alice Finnerty backed against the wide trunk of an old oak tree.

"My old man owns this place now," the guy laughs, resuming his creep toward the Black Bootleg's terrified trainer.

"He doesn't own her," Buddy scowls, sliding down off the Appaloosa with surprising speed for a big man.

The hard leather bottoms of his boots hit the slick snow, propelling the prodigal son on his prodigious backside right into the blind-sided asshole, tumbling them both in a snowy heap at Alice's feet.

"Ah, that guy from the bar two weeks ago," he growls from atop his supine adversary.

"Yeah, the next drink is on me," wheezes the smaller man pinned down into the cold wet snow.

"If you stay away from her," Buddy bargains, catching Alice's eye and pointing with his head toward the waiting horse.

"Deal," coughs the defeated mafioso as his bulky nemesis eases back and the young woman leaps over them, scampers up the little hill, and takes the reins of the patiently waiting stallion.

"No deal, but we can work it out over that drink."

Calories, after all, are the way to a hungry person's heart, and the empty ones and slow buzz of alcohol are a particularly satisfying Kerstfeest when one is alone. In this particular year, however, Buddy Armstrong was better armed against the temptations of Christmas at the Black Bootleg. His beagle puppy, now officially named Little Buddy, had given him both a bed mate and a reason to get up every morning to let the little thing out to pee.

Meanwhile back in Manhattan, the elder Gambino was plotting his way out of the rat race. Snow was in the air in New York, only the white powder he was contemplating melted in the

nose, not on the grimy streets. A retirement compound in the Okeechobee swamp would be his dual investment in his own demise and the family future.

"Now where were we?" begins Buddy with a snifter of eggnog in one hand and a double shot of Fleischmann's in the other as the Bound Brook boys croon *It's a blue world without you*.

"We could use a security guard at our Florida hangar," counters his new colleague in the league of lost first sons as the song continues *The sea, the sky, my heart and I, we're all an indigo hue*.

"Now that's the best proposition I've had all day," laughs big Buddy raising a glass to clink on his new deal.

Reff reff barks Little Buddy poking his freckly snout up out of the suede vest as the plaintive song ends with *Without you it's a blue blue world*.

Chapter 7: Stronger Than Dirt

"We came here to ride and that big colt needs his best horsewoman," begins Buddy from the studio office chair.

"Our stunt rider's already suited up so she should just pass him the reins," counters the producer sitting behind his desk with arms crossed.

"Alice Finnerty is the only driver Ajax has ever had," continues Buddy standing up to his full six-foot-three frame. "So no rider, no commercial for this horse."

"It's just this, Buddy," the producer reasons, leaning onto the desk and looking over his glass frames. "The liability's too great for an amateur."

"Liability, schmiability," Buddy laughs. "We'll see what Mr. Gambino has to say about that."

"Now hold your horses, Mr. Armstrong," the manager sighs, plopping back into his chair and reaching for the phone. "Bring this indispensable trainer of yours to dressing room number three."

The Colgate-Palmolive household division in Piscataway, New Jersey was preparing to launch a line of laundry detergents in 1960. Needing a symbol to go along with the Ajax slogan "Stronger than dirt!", the board of directors decided to co-opt the mascot of nearby Rutgers University by bleaching out the scarlet knight. A board member whose daughter took riding lessons at the Black Bootleg offered to contact the ranch, and Arthur Armstrong had seized the chance to capitalize on his wife's love of horses.

It turned out that this would be the last opportunity for any horseplay at the ranch. The Gambino crime family was in it for the looming black market in container shipping, and a legitimate trucking company was enough of a front for that. The Branchburg farm was prime acreage in the exploding central Jersey real estate market as urban flight from New York, Newark, and Plainfield accelerated along with the civil rights movement. The grasslands would soon be sectioned off into subdivisions, with a token transfer of tax-deductible wetland frontage to the non-profit Midland School for children with developmental disabilities. The scourge of land ownership for profit initiated by the Roman occupation of the British Isles was about to once again displace the descendants of the border-reiver Armstrong clan.

"You should have seen the look on that producer's face," laughs Buddy as he steers the horse trailer into a narrow lane of the Holland Tunnel.

"What nerve to think that Ajax would seat any old rider," Alice agrees from the passenger seat with Little Buddy nestled on her lap and sighing with each clatter from the periodic seams in the asphalt.

"Well Miss Alice, we're back in Jersey," he observes as they pass the vertical stripe marking the state border midway under the Hudson River. "You can stop holding your breath."

"Good to be out of those city streets," she exhales. "It's always dark under those skyscrapers, and the taxi drivers are just crazy."

"Yeah, I'll take a big rig and the open road any day," he smiles as they pull onto route twenty-two westbound. "In fact, I'm taking this one with a few of the horses down to Florida next week."

"What's going to happen to Ajax?" she asks while looking toward him with a wrinkled forehead and wide eyes.

"Don't you worry about your horse," he assures her while shifting up to third gear and picking up speed along the Watchung foothills. "I'll work something out for our stunning white stallion."

Chapter 8: Hialeah

"You can let go of those armrests now," laughs Buddy into the bluing sky after they've reaching cruising altitude.

"Whew," exhales Alice as an orange glow to their left streaks the eastern horizon over the Delaware Bay. "That crosswind at the Manville airport nearly tipped this little Cessna."

"You get used to it," reasons her friend as he reaches for sunglasses. "This little plane they gave me turns a two day drive into a half day."

"We'll just see about that," she laughs to his insinuation that they'd be making this flight together again. "Now tell me about Ajax."

The history of smuggling around the world is peppered with displaced people finding a way back to wealth. Whether it was opium in the Orient, rum in the colonies, or moonshine in the Appalachians, the traffickers had reasons to operate outside societal norms.

In the case of the Armstrong family and other reiver clans at the Scottish border, resisting first the Romans and then the Normans meant finding the means to trade for metals needed for swords, shields, and chariots. Displaced to America with the consolidation of England in 1600, the reivers turned first to rum running and then to whiskey bootlegging to hold onto meager family lands. The transition to cocaine and air-trafficking in the second half of the twentieth century was a dangerous elevation of a way of life originally fueled by the colonization of the western world.

"I like it when you talk dirty with me," chuckles Arthur Armstrong the tenth before glimpsing Alice's glower and sobering up. "He's all set up as an outrider pony down there."

"Why would you do that?" she exclaims, turning toward him with wrinkled forehead and pursed lips. "You know Ajax doesn't respond to just any driver."

"It won't be just any driver if you'll take the job," Buddy continues, levering the control yoke left toward the open ocean to steer clear of monitored airspace around Washington D.C..

"Me?" she whispers, her face smoothing out as her mouth hangs open.

"I had to pull some strings, but yeah, the Hialeah outrider gets room, board, a salary, and a commission for all the big races."

"It's so far from anyone I know," she begins, already seeing a new life in south Florida.

"Lake Okeechobee is just an hour away, and I hit the track twice a week."

"What is it that you're doing down there?"

"I'm the hangar manager, so I keep an eye on the place and work on the planes."

"My, my, Mr. Airplane Mechanic, you are a man of many talents."

"These little piston engines aren't so different from the trucks and buses I've been around my whole life."

"But what are all those planes used for?"

"Mostly moving the family back and forth, snowbirds that they are."

"I'll have to see the stall and paddock," she equivocates, choosing to ignore the wink he thinks is hidden behind his sunglasses, "and you'll have to bring this little dog."