

THE SIX AND EIGHT

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Despite the still-bright sun, Kavanagh watched a seagull dive for some scrap left in the center grass of the racetrack and thought of how damn good the place looked at night under floodlights. It was peaceful outside facing the painted board where winners—both man and horse—were proclaimed after each race. He loved it out here when he was alone. When he could really think. Tonight, Kavanagh knew, was going to be good. It had to be. He had Charity Case lined up and that horse had never steered him wrong.

Charity Case was a beaut. A black beauty: long legs, soft coat. He always shone under the lights; his muscles bunching, nostrils flaring.

Kavanagh stubbed his Marlboro Red out on the bottom of his scuffed shoe, then left it still smoking in a divot in the cement by the double-wide glass door. He'd been sweating, and his light green polo had started showing dark pit stains and a necklace of moisture as he'd sat outside, thinking of his luck. The air conditioning prickled his skin into goose bumps as he walked back into the hall and wiped his forehead with a kerchief that he always kept stuffed in his pocket.

For a Saturday afternoon, the hall was quiet and Kavanagh surveyed the floor. On one side, near the main entrance, were small, circular bar tables with a man or two stationed at each, the day's program curled up under an arm or spread out on the table, stacks of tickets from each bet in their hands. Every pair

of eyes tracked the eight different races playing out on the screens. Kavanagh knew a few of the guys by name, but most were just acquaintances, faces to piss next to at the trough during breaks.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Johnson, the self-proclaimed war hero with the gimp leg, tottered over, his dark skin thin and papery, flaking around his eyes. Although the man would often tell Kavanagh about his time overseas, all the stories sounded too Hollywood to be true.

“You’re kiddin’ me,” Johnson said, his eyes wide. “Out for a smoke and here I thought you’d gone home early. You’re a joker, man. A real joker.”

“Just taking a break.”

“New guy tried to take your seat and I says ‘no, head on off.’ They got no respect.”

“Thanks,” Kavanagh said, and actually meant it. “Buy you a beer?”

“Can’t do just now, boss, but I sure appreciate it.”

“Well let me know the next time you’re thirsty.” Kavanagh accepted the man’s hard smack on the shoulder. From his right, a familiar pleading erupted.

“No, no, come on seven. Three’s got nothing. Get up there! Come on!” Belle moaned, angry at the at screens in front of her. Today she wore a navy blue pantsuit, almost like she was going to work, and Kavanagh supposed that she was.

Gold Rush, an Arabian the color of caramel, ripped around the far turn and down the stretch, his blue-clad jockey stiff in the saddle as they crossed the finish. Unofficial results called him the winner, with horse number seven coming in fourth.

Belle smashed her hands down on the table, spilling her Red Bull.

“Can’t do nothing right. Nothing. It’s only six bucks but God damn.”

“Next time,” Johnson said, comforting her as he hobbled past on the way to the restroom.

“Come on six outside. Come on nine, don’t break. Let’s go.” A young guy, maybe only thirty, huddled over a beer and his tickets, watching the Saratoga race on the top right. Seven, a horse by the name of Time to Fly, snuck in, placing third instead of number nine, Jimmy’s Luck. The man cursed, his tickets turning to confetti, falling on the ground before him.

Kavanagh turned to face the long lines of desks on the far side of the room, study-nooks for patrons, all pointed toward a big bank of more screens. Next to them, placed almost as a divider down the middle of the room, were the kiosks and tellers always taking bets and sometimes paying out. Each self-serve kiosk was full, and Martha, a squat, near-retired teller had a line three-deep in front of her.

A man at the front of the desks cursed and tore up his ticket.

Kavanagh didn’t let the losing bug him. It wasn’t in his blood; wasn’t in his kids’ blood. At least it wasn’t when they used to talk to him. The first time Kavanagh had come here, he’d had fewer gray streaks in his hair, fewer creases around his eyes. But even as he’d changed, dough-boy’d up in the gut, those damn desks had stayed the same. He figured the racetrack bought them on the cheap from a defunct public library or something. They had built in reading lights at the top, and on his desk C. S. LOVES R. W. had been carved by keys or a pocketknife on the back right corner. He often read the pledge like Braille when things were looking tight, but more often than not it was his good luck charm, just like Charity Case was.

“Hey Sweetie,” Martha said as Kavanagh walked up to her, his hand already reaching for his wallet. Her “Sweetie” was a title men aimed for. They’d take turns trying to charm the old girl, asking after her kids or her husband, hoping she might slip them an extra fiver if they won. Kavanagh didn’t buy the rumor, but that didn’t mean he didn’t try, too. Five bucks had a way to grease certain wheels. And that’s what he needed: a slick ride with his landlord.

“Charles Town,” Kavanagh said, his bet sweet as candy on his tongue.

“One Daily Double on six and eight.” He pulled a ten out of his pocket and Martha gave him change.

“Feeling lucky tonight, huh?” Her front tooth was brown from nicotine, but somehow it made her look pretty.

“Eight is my horse, Martha, my love,” he said, and took the square piece of paper that could yield so much or become worthless in seconds, and turned away without another word, crossing the floor to his desk.

Kavanagh pulled the chair out and eased his body down, wincing as his knees popped and a sharp pain, new as of last week, shot up the left side of his back. He pulled his pack of cigs out of his shirt pocket, placed it on the left back of the desk and leaned into the chair, his ticket held like a stub in his fingers.

He scanned the screens, greens flashing to black, and shots of million-dollar horse flesh. All the TVs were on mute, but he knew what the announcers were saying. He settled on watching the Charles Town channel, where the racers were lining up at the gate. Duke’s Crown, number six, looked good and Kavanagh hoped he’d clobber the lot of them. If Duke didn’t pull this out, his Daily Double wouldn’t mean shit, even if Charity Case won the next race. He needed both horses to win their respective back-to-back races to claim his money. And it would be good money. A couple hundred at least.

“You and that damn horse,” Belle said, sidling up to him, checking out the ticket in his hand. Her mall-counter perfume made his eyes water, and as she snuggled close, he caught a glimpse of cleavage. “He’s not supposed to even place, you know. Fifteen-to-one odds don’t look good.” She tapped her open program. The words and stats filled the pages until they were almost black. “Duke might get this one, but my money’s on Stroke of Genius taking the win next race.”

“That’s why you win ten, twenty bucks at a time. Never any big cash.”

“That’s why I got a home still called a home,” Belle said, her attempt at a cheap shot, but Kavanagh let the comment slide. Her home was a mold-infested

trailer close enough to walk to. And he knew. The one time he'd gone there, he'd been sneezing before he could even get his pants off.

"I've got it, so don't you worry," he said, settling back, ignoring the hand she'd placed on his knee. "Duke'll win and then Charity will. Easiest money I ever made."

"Suit yourself," she said, before leaving to join the unsettled mass by the standing tables.

Kavanagh cracked his knuckles as the horses stamped and snorted at the gate, the jockey's saying whatever prayers they knew. The announcers would be stoking the crowd for the coming race, listing the lineup, calling out the riders. As the seconds counted down and all bets closed, Kavanagh always cracked his right hand then his left. Waiting.

He leaned back.

The race kicked off and Kavanagh didn't move. Didn't hardly breathe as the scattered sea of bodies around him started to groan and cajole the horses hundreds of miles away. Duke started in the lead pack but Island Summer, a white stallion, had shot off like a gun and was staying close to the front, hugging the turns so that no one could get through.

"Here they go. Here they go." Johnson had reappeared behind him, and Kavanagh could smell medicinal-grade soap on his skin as the man repeated his mantra. "Let's go four. Let's go four." Number four—Island Summer—was looking good, and the paper in Kavanagh's fingers began to feel brittle, the ink trying to flake onto the desk, to wriggle into the crevices of C. S. LOVES R. W., to become meaningless.

"Don't do this to me," Johnson cried as six—Duke's Crown—pushed forward and gained the lead, his yellow-vested jockey working feverishly to keep that big, beautiful horse a half a length in front. A length in front. And in a flash—for that's all each race was—Duke's Crown had crossed the finish line and claimed victory. Kavanagh raised the ticket to his lips and kissed it.

Magic. He'd felt it as he'd stood outside, thinking of his luck, hadn't he? He knew tonight would be all his. Viktor could kiss his ass when he handed him a stack of bills tomorrow.

One down, Kavanagh thought. Now it was up to Charity to take him home.

"What a joke. A joke!" Johnson left in a harrumph, off to the bar to get that beer, Kavanagh guessed. He let the man go and stayed seated, watching the other screens as the track got set up for the next race.

He flattened his ticket against the pale wood, and studied the letters and lines that would be scanned soon. He pictured Martha as she handed over the wad of cash, felt the warmth that winning always gave him. Even when he used to come home to a dark house, to a wife who had locked him out of his own bedroom, to a kitchen with bills stacked ten, twenty high, he'd still feel that pride when he was flush. Despite the shit at home, he'd still feel jittery, like his body was electric when he'd walk in, so much so that he'd have to pour himself three fingers of Jack just to settle down.

His place was still dark now, but out of choice. There was a difference, and Kavanagh liked it that way, even if the rent was three times what a dump like his should cost.

"Man. Hey, man," a big guy in a black tracksuit said from next to Kavanagh, his fist extended. "Give me a number."

Kavanagh didn't raise his fist to meet the man's, so the guy dropped his own to touch just one of their knuckles together.

"No, no I've got nothing for you," Kavanagh said, turning to face the screens, trying to shut out this man who had fallen to asking strangers for his luck. Who had probably lost so many times that now he just wanted someone else to blame.

"You got a lucky face. You do. Pick a number for me." The man uncurled his fingers and ran them over his bald head. His smile was wide and toothy,

overeager, and he bounced on the balls of his feet.

Kavanagh hated this game. You should just pick your horse on your own and live with it, even if you lost. No one had picked Charity for him. “Can’t do, man. Ask someone else.”

The guy’s eyes went wide as though he didn’t believe this stranger couldn’t just pick a number, one through nine. That he couldn’t just choose a track. That he wouldn’t just give him the combination of words and numbers that would fill up his pockets, or at least buy him a drink. He scrunched up his mouth and turned away, off to find someone else.

Kavanagh turned back to scanning his screens. As he watched Charity Case’s track get ready for the next race, race five of the night, his fingers twitched in anticipation. A young guy beside him pumped his fist in the air, cursing happily as a race at Del Mar finished. Kavanagh was pleased for him—it was always nice when others won, too—then turned back to his own screen.

A win would get him settled with rent for the week. No hassles from Viktor each night as he walked in, no unfriendly notes—threats of eviction shoved under the gap of his door. The sleaze guaranteed that another week of no payment equaled the street. Screw that.

No, Charity was his hope. Charity was his luck.

And then he was there—his ace in the hole: Charity Case. That damn horse got more beautiful each time he raced. Last month he’d won Kavanagh two hundred bucks. A few months before that, nearly one-fifty. As the race geared up, Kavanagh reached forward, took a fresh cig out of the pack and placed it behind his ear as an early celebration.

On races like this, he wished for sound. He wanted to hear the pounding of hooves on the packed track, the cheering from the stands. He wanted the jolt of surprise as the grating bell rang and the gate doors flew open. Many times he’d walked through the nearby glass doors and watched a race from here. He could smell the sweat as bodies crowded in, cheering and screaming and begging as

their horses thundered by. The scent of dirt and manure light on the evening breeze. He loved race day on his home turf.

And then they were off.

Charity Case started in a strong fourth, up near the leading pack. Under the lights his coat shone as he worked hard. At the quarter post, he passed two horses, which put him with the leaders, and Kavanagh sat forward, his fingers seeking out the jagged ridges of the desk. A woman seated down front by the screens shouted encouragement as Charity, number eight, passed the second place horse, number five.

It went so fast, this flying, jockeys' knees tight to the horses' sides, urging them forward.

For the last lap, Kavanagh's head started floating and suddenly, as though filled with helium, he was standing. "Eight. Steady. You got it, eight. Take—get the lead, you got it." The words flowed like tongues from him, a garble of half-sentences, a prayer to the flimsy piece of paper stuck in his sweating fingers as Charity raced, stride after long stride. He could almost hear the hooves pounding around the final turn as eight edged up to nearly take the lead.

He almost staggered from the headiness of watching them pound across the finish line.

The ticket with his wager was cool against his lips as Kavanagh kissed it. Unofficial results called eight, *his* Charity, the winner. He hadn't won by much, not by much at all, but damn it he had won. The woman down front was nodding her head in fast assent as she tallied her winnings.

When the official results came in and it was confirmed number eight—Charity Case—had won, Kavanagh was up and to Martha's kiosk before his head stopped floating.

The money she handed him was heavy in his hand, and despite the fact that she'd counted it out on top of her kiosk, he fanned it out for quick re-counting before folding it up, wrinkled twenties and a stiff ten, and put the whole

thing in his pocket.

Rent. He'd made rent. He'd known his old horse could do it. Charity was his luck.

The crowd in the room paid no attention to his triumph. Johnson was hunched over a beer at the bar, watching the screens there, and everyone else was doing the same at their respective spots. Paper tickets littered the tables and ground, stuffed in the wastebaskets by the self-serve kiosks. He'd wanted to keep his winning ticket, but the money in his pocket was far better.

He pushed open the double glass doors. Outside, the air fought to stifle him, but Kavanagh didn't mind. He breathed deep and then lit his victory cigarette, looking out over the racetrack in front of him. In the early evening light it was beautiful, with tall flags flapping in the bare breeze. He imagined Charity Case roaring around the turns, and wished that he could see his horse in person.

"You and that damn horse," Belle said, stepping out from behind a cement pole. Her cig was smoked down to the nub, and she flicked the butt off to the side. "How much you win off him?" She walked closer, her cheap lilac scent masking the smoke.

"Another week," Kavanagh said and smiled, blowing the smoke out in a satisfied puff. Sweat prickled against his skin as he surveyed the coming dusk, as he took in the track. A bead rolled down his forehead as he felt Belle beside him, the soft fleshiness of her arm pressed against him, sticking to him.

The money weighed heavy in his pocket and in his mind. No, losing didn't get to him, but winning sure did. Winning and the feel of breasts in his hands, and skin against skin. He sucked hard on his cig and looked over at Belle, at the limp curls dangling from her bun. She'd been okay that time, minus the mold.

He held his smoke down to her, and she inhaled, wrapping her unlipsticked lips around the yellow filter. She smiled back as she exhaled, and then snaked her hand into Kavanagh's front pocket.

“You won rent, huh?” she said, massaging him. “Not bad.”

“Eight’s my horse.” He watched the track again as he started to grow hard beneath her hand.

A balding man pushed through the glass doors, sending them both wide. “Bullshit,” he said, his face red and a cig already halfway to his lips. “This is bull. Shit. Bullshit.” He had pulled his phone out of his pocket and was scrolling through screen after screen, the blue light casting his face in long, pale lines as he smoked and paced.

Belle’s hand had never stopped moving, but Kavanagh put his fingers lightly around her wrist and pulled it out. The man’s anger had soured his hard on, if not his high, and suddenly, her cloying scent was too much. He pulled on the cig, willing it to burn down faster.

“Thought we were celebrating,” she said from behind him, rubbing her thumb against the palm of her hand that had stroked him.

“We are,” Kavanagh said, and held up his cig to her with two fingers. Through the doors, voices raised in supplication and protest twined together, pulling like gentle teeth on his earlobe. His money felt light now, too light to hand to Viktor. He’d be left with a fiver, maybe ten. A man couldn’t live on that.

The fabric of her pantsuit rustled as Belle shifted position, hunching slightly from his rebuttal. She’d be fine, he knew, just fine going back in. She’d forget the feel of him in her hand once she had another ticket to replace it.

He thought about walking her around to the part of the building used for community events and farmers markets, of putting her against the wall and really celebrating, but the calls and shouts and murmured prayers inside reached out to him. He dropped the half-smoked cig on the ground, not even bothering to stub it out this time, and turned toward the building. The angry man had sat down on a worn wooden bench, his knee jiggling in a furious rhythm.

“Where are you going?” Belle asked, not taking a step to follow him, but just half-turning in the dusky light. In shadow she still looked young.

“I need rent for next week, too,” Kavanagh said, before pulling open the doors and heading back in. From every side the flashes of television screens, the shots of horses galloping full speed touched him, stroked his arm and pushed him toward the kiosks. Toward Martha.

He’d already pulled the stiff ten from his wallet by the time he’d reached the counter.