

**Tragedy strikes during a young foal's childhood, leaving him alone with a single parent. But a recovery leads to even him getting back up on his feet and moving past it.**

### **A Foal's Recovery**

**December 26th, 1985**

The Inferno is a Mexican-themed restaurant, catering to any and all nationalities; it is open to the public for business. The neon lighting for the sign above displays the outline of a green jalapeño pepper along with a small orange fire next to it. In the foreground in front of the two decorations is the name of the restaurant, clearly engraved in bold red neon lettering. In capital letters reads the name of the restaurant: INFERNO.

Coming into the restaurant is a female horse, a brown and white painter horse, her hooves clacking softly against the floor. She begins scouring the interior in search of someone in particular when she notices the gray and white Orlov trotter seated at one of the tables near the window. Upon seeing him, the mare waves at him to get his attention.

The gray and white Orlov trotter was minding his own business when he notices the painter horse waving at him, and he immediately waves back in return, a smile lighting up his face. He waves for her to come over and sit with him, already having in mind what he wanted to talk to her about.

Excitedly, the mare rushes over to reach the stallion, proceeding to slide into a seat across from him while beaming, happy to see him. This is the spot where they were supposed to meet, so here she is. Still, seeing him here makes her wonder out loud, "Good to see you again, Markus! How has work been treating you?"

"Mechanic business has been going fine for the past few weeks. I've Finally been earning a profit from all the hard work being put in; hard work and satisfied clients go hand-in-hand!" Markus responded while rubbing the back of his head. And then he sets his hand back down, adding, "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

Her ears flying up, Darleen blinks at the stallion, her eyes bucking in minor anticipation. She grows curious, yet wary of what Markus really wanted to discuss with her. Wary and fearing rejection, Darleen discerns anxiously, "If that's not it, then what do you want to talk to me about?"

Seconds later, the mare lowers her gaze to find Markus' hand atop hers, which slightly relaxes her. Yet when she stares back into his brown eyes, she sees his calm, relaxed expression, his relaxed grin never leaving his face. The mare relaxes while sighing inwardly, relieved.

Markus confides, "Darleen, I will admit that I've been in love with you for the past few weeks, and it's true. I do love you. But that's not it, though."

Though Darleen agrees with the stallion, she smiles in return, also admitting her feelings on the matter. "I have felt the same way about you too, Markus. Do you think things will work out between us and stay like that forever?" She has no idea that this is exactly what Markus is alluding to. But his smirk is a conclusive giveaway if picked up on.

The gray / white stallion finally decides to pop the question to her, opening up even more. "I don't think so, I know so." Then he removes his hand from Darleen and reaches into his pocket, proceeding to pull out a small black box. Markus finally makes his proposal known, offering to Darleen the prospect of becoming his mate, "Darleen, what I want to ask is this: will you make me the happiest stallion alive and marry me?"

The question comes as a complete surprise to the mare. Markus and Darleen had been dating for quite a while and now for him to ask her in marriage? This is a request that absolutely blows her away.

After covering her mouth in enlightenment, Darleen excitedly hugs Markus while accepting his proposal. "Yes! Of course I will!"

With the marriage proposal already being taken care of and knocked off the list, Markus and Darleen can finally move on with their day as newly engaged, later sharing a meal together at the restaurant.

While the two horses were eating, they started to converse more on their daily lives and on work. The gray / white stallion starts off first, questioning the mare, "So Darleen, any success in your writing lately? Any new books?"

Darleen pauses to think for a moment when she responds with a carefree shrug. "Eh, not that much success. I only did like 4 new books as of recent, but a few of my older publications have been selling. What about you, Markus?"

Markus just laughs heartily in admiration, going on to explain, "The work I've been doing was busy, but it sure is worth it! I've never had so many clients come in left and

right; just total bombardment! I barely have any time for any personal projects that I'm swamped! Can you believe it?"

The mare raises an eyebrow while pausing again. She hated to ask but her intrigue got the best of her. "How many clients do you have at the moment now?"

"Started off with 15 clients I have to get work done for; I'm down to 8 now. It's still some serious work." Markus shows a full count with his fingers at first, counting down to how many he has currently. The stallion relaxes, chuckling afterwards while assuring the mare, "I can handle it; you don't have to worry about me."

Darleen just stares at Markus in disbelief, her eyes big. They deflate a little bit upon her relaxing and she inquires, "15 clients at the start? That's a lot of work to put in! And you're down to 8 now? How are you able to work so fast? Isn't that too much for one single mechanic to handle?"

Markus just chuckled at the mare's concern, raising his hand up in a wave of dismissal. The stallion assures her, "I don't work alone; I do business in a public mechanic shop. Now, I have my own garage, but I only save that for personal projects only. Think about it; one can only go so long on their own before they need to take a break."

Darleen just listens with rapt attention, nodding her head occasionally to what Markus is relating to her. She remains silent until he finishes, taking a moment to herself to think. After some time of silent thought, Darleen pauses to assume, "So you work in a public mechanic field, huh? That's wonderful!"

"Yep! Public mechanic workshop!" Markus beams happily, feeling proud of his accomplishments. Admiring his work, he remains humble while adding, "But I'm not the only one doing most of the projects; other guys help me out too. So," the stallion gives a carefree shrug and adds, "I'm not the only one feeling an all-time sense of accomplishment."

Darleen just laughs in admiration of the stallion and his handiwork, responding "Look at you! With your awards and projects, no wonder you're so busy! Do you mind if I just drop by and take a look at your personal collection?"

"Not at all! I don't mind! You'll love what I have inside." Markus assures her. A smirk is hidden in his smile, one that Darleen does not pick up on.

Before assuming what Markus has in his personal collection, Darleen inquires, "So for your personal garage, how many vehicles do you have that are completely finished? Y'know, all shiny and polished?"

Markus holds up four fingers while mentioning, "There are 4 vehicles in my garage that are all complete." He rests his hand back down on the table while adding, "Two of them, I think you will like very much."

"Perhaps I can write a book on you and your mechanic business." Darleen proposes out loud. The moment just came to her out of the blue from admiration of Markus' work. Coincidentally, there is only so much that Darleen can actually write about pertaining to her future husband; even with her limited knowledge of mechanics, she still takes in something new every day from Markus.

Flattered at such an opportunity, the stallion chuckles lightly while raising his hand up. "Darleen, I'm flattered. As gracious as your offer sounds, you don't have to do it. Writing must be pretty hard for you, so I'm afraid I will have to decline your offer."

"Actually Markus, I really want to. Let me do it!" She begs in persistence, "It'll be like a sort of documentary or life story!"

Markus could see the fire in Darleen's green eyes and hear the determination in her voice. The mare is a successful writer after all, having published four books in her lifetime. She considers herself to be not that successful, though her four publications are recent, her old writings have more success in the market. Now she wants to work on a 5th new publication, this time on her future husband. There seems to be no stopping her anyway.

Not wanting to crush her spirit, Markus finally agrees to the demand, breaking off a grin aimed at her, "Okay, I accept. Once we arrive at my garage, you can write about me and my projects to your heart's content."

Accepting his confirmation, the mare nods eagerly in enthusiastic fervor, her green eyes lighting up in elation and relaxing afterwards. "I'll see how much I do with it. I'm ready, after all!"

Observing his future wife's excitement, Markus throws a joking remark at her, "Heh, I see you're ready. Where is your pen and paper? You said you are ready and don't have any pen and paper."

Darleen scoffs in return, "Oh please! What makes you believe I'm gonna waltz into a restaurant and bring a pen and paper in here? Might as well bring a typewriter then!"

Markus blinks at her out of complete surprise, his own brown eyes inflating. What is this woman thinking?! Softly and calmly, Markus explains, "Darleen, you know I was only joking, right? It was just a joke, trust me. That passion in your eyes isn't for nothing, I see."

Darleen stays silent for a moment when she nearly rolls out of her seat, beginning to crack up in laughter. She assures Markus, "Markus, I assure you no harm will be done. I am very enthusiastic about writing; very enthusiastic! I know you were only joking because who would be crazy enough to bring a heavy typewriter into a restaurant of all places? You can be pretty funny at times without all the serious business!"

"And people at my workplace call me 'melodramatic'. I'm not that boring or dry. Being a mechanic is serious business sometimes, right? Even then, after everything that's said and done, people still want to fight." Markus ranted suddenly after Darleen's consolation.

"Happens to everyone, Markus. I'm one of those people who still put up with critics who are negative not only in their reviews but also in character, too." As a sign of comfort while understandably relating her experiences to the stallion, Darleen gently takes Markus' hand in her own, giving it a gentle squeeze.

Perplexed, Markus wonders how a talented author can receive such a negative response to her work. Frowning because of what she's said, Markus asks his future wife, "How can such a beautiful, talented young writer like you acquire such a thunderstorm in your work?"

In a playful nature, Darleen stands up from her seat and balls up her right fist, proceeding to gently knock on her future husband's head; knocking on this door a couple of times, the mare withdraws back to her seat and relaxes while explaining, "Markus, no one is perfect in any shape, form, or fashion. We're all gonna have our fair share of negativity, even in the workplace. Haven't you realized that by now? Or do I need to knock on that door of yours a couple more times to make sure it rings a bell?"

"Ease up on the knocking, dollface. I'm pretty sure I got your message." Markus assures her. He raises a hand up before her to prevent any future advances that will result in her tapping his noggin again. He already knows that nothing is perfect; people make mistakes every day. But it was something he never gave much thought to until his future wife subtly pointed it out to him in her own way. Case in point - his future wife and her literature.

Though Darleen is an excellent writer in her storytelling, a few of her publications have harbored negative attention. Though she wondered about this part, becoming disappointed at first upon learning about it from a series of printed reviews, the mare did not get discouraged. Instead, she continued her literature in her own way. This has also led to her acquiring a small reputation for herself in her business.

Markus, on the other hand, is having more of a public reputation for himself in his mechanical work, but only at the garage he works at. He keeps his own garage and personal projects private, except for his future wife of course. Apart from the side projects and hobbies that both horses do, it seems their main jobs take on more publicity than their side hobbies.

Since the pair are done with their meals now, perhaps they can take their business elsewhere. While Darleen is observing the interior of the restaurant she is in, she watches Markus rise from his seat. Her ears then fly up to a request he makes in wanting to continue on with their day.

"So, want to continue this at the park and then stop by my garage?" It was a simple request laid out by Markus, one that Darleen could take with much excitement. The mare graciously accepts the offer, telling him, "Sure, I don't mind! We can find more fun activities to do there; and discuss more about each other too!"

"Well let's go then! The park isn't too far from here and we can just simply walk there!" Markus resolved. The two horses soon leave the restaurant with Markus setting his bill down, adding in a tip during his departure.

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A short walk from the restaurant to the park only consisted of two city blocks away from the place, yet here they are at the local park. At the center of said location is a small circular porcelain water fountain with water sprinkling out from around it. This is the location that Markus requested he and Darleen head to next to continue their day, a location that Darleen accepted without any delay or hesitancy.

The pair stand on a small drawbridge, gazing out at the small stream running underneath. The calm, soft atmosphere serves as a relaxing setting for both horses, this being more time to get to know each other more on their hobbies and talk more throughout the day.

While the pair stand on the drawbridge, Darleen turns her attention to Markus, a soft smile gracing her elegant face during which she begins to start off a new conversation with her future husband. "So, do you come here often?"

Markus leans on the railing a bit, softly explaining, "Not that much - actually, I take that back. I do come out here, yes. But it's mostly to relax, enjoy the weather, play some sports with my friends; what about you, Darleen? How often do you come out here?"

Darleen exhales sharply through her nose and mouth, letting out a huff in the process. Markus gives her an inquisitive look, wondering if what he's asking had offended her. Instead, she shakes her head with her smile returning.

Darleen explains, "I come out here to look for topics to write about; you know, inspiration. That's why I usually come out here. That, and to just clear my head. But the writing part is a definite mark on my skill as a writer and author."

Markus simply stays silent in letting her speak, though he wonders why someone would just go to a park just to clear their mind. Stress maybe? He questions his future wife on the matter, implying, "Is there something unethical or negative that you have to just go out here for?"

Darleen shakes her head while staring at Markus, making her reply at first, but then she casts her eyes upwards in realization, "Nah, not really... apart from science of course."

At first, Markus just stares at Darleen for a bit, until he grins and turns to face her. He makes a playful tease in his question, asking her, "Science? What's gotten you so squeamish and grossed out about science? A pretty flower like you shouldn't even be drooping because of that."

Darleen smirked, flipping her hair aside. She recalls, "I'm pretty certain you've never had to dissect an animal before in science class, am I right?"

The comment, or rather accusation, on Darleen's part causes Markus' brown eyes to buck wide in terror. Feeling petrified, he steps away, taking a few paces backwards while snorting and quickly covering his face with his hands. Letting out a groan, the distressed stallion simply runs his hands over his face, withdrawing and shaking his head afterwards. He then groans, "Please don't remind me of that time! I've always hated those sorts of things!"

Darleen crosses her arms, a smirk of her own taking hold on her face. She observes Markus' agony and strolls over to him, snickering to herself. At the same time, how could she actually have known what he had done in his school years coming up?

Surprised and impressed at the same time, Darleen pokes Markus' chest, claiming, "Huh, I never knew you did dissection in science class while growing up! Look at you!"

Markus couldn't help but laugh at himself. The laughter welling up inside of him could not be suppressed and he began cracking up. Even Darleen began laughing with him, sharing and relishing the moment with him. Instead of laughing at him, she is laughing with him. Humorous as it could be, the situation actually terrified Markus, whereas Darleen seemed more level-headed about it. Who knows, the mare could be the calmer and smarter of the couple.

After about a couple minutes of full-fledged laughter, the frenzy dies down with them catching their breaths in recovery. Darleen suspects, "You probably hated science class after that and couldn't sleep a wink ever since, could you?"

Taking this more as an assumption and press rather than a teasing remark, Markus explains himself on the matter, "It's not the fact that I couldn't sleep due to being traumatized by it, but I had other classes to look forward to as well. We all gotta move on sometimes, right?" While Darleen listens attentively, she nods her head in understanding, interested and eager for him to continue.

The stallion goes on to explain himself further, "I've had other classes besides science, including P.E and art. But P.E was one of my favorites; in fact, that's how my love for sports began - with P.E! Then there was music class and health class. What about you, Darleen? What class was your favorite?"

"Out of the classes I've had while growing up, I would say that reading, math, English, science, gym, and social studies are my favorites. But if there was a specific one in that list, then I would have to go with science." Darleen analyzed in return. She turns her attention back to Markus and gives him the same question. "Hey Markus, what classes were your favorites; if you had any while growing up?"

Markus taps his chin while responding, "Hmm, out of all the classes I've had while growing up, I would say that gym, literature, music, and computers were my favorite ones... apart from reading, writing, and math of course."

In a brief moment, Darleen freezes upon hearing one of the classes being mentioned and she groans, "Nnnhhh, I completely forgot about literature class! That's the main one that kick-started my writing career along with reading and writing!"

Here at this moment, Markus decides to play dumb. Turning towards the mare, the stallion questions her, "Haven't we met before?"



In response, Darleen gives Markus a playful shove while cracking up again, not even going for his ruse. "Oh stop! All you're doing is just acting silly now!"

The stallion arches an eyebrow at the mare in return, eyeing her skeptically. But after some silence from him with her laughter dying down, Darleen is suddenly swept off her feet, being carried now by her future man.

It takes a bit for her mind to register her being lifted off the ground so suddenly. This action from Markus catches the mare completely off-guard. She turns her head up to stare at Markus and her facial expression lights up in excitement. Darleen starts laughing softly while holding onto Markus, letting herself rest in his arms; he carries her in his arms while turning around and withdrawing off the bridge, trekking towards a seating area of the park.

After settling down on a bench together, Darleen is still having a laughing fit from being carried. She's never had this happen to her before and thought it was humorous at first; she's never seen this side of Markus before. The stallion just sits with his arm around her, taking it all in casually. Even he too begins joining in, infected by his future wife and her laughing fit. Eventually, the pair soon die down and are back to their normal, quiet conversation.

"I never knew you were like this - I've never seen this side of you before." Darleen commented on admiration. She was resting herself on Markus' left side, being huddled close to him. When Markus suddenly begins laughing to himself, the mare raises herself up, regarding him with an inquisitive stare. "What are you laughing about now?"

"Oh, it's nothing really." Markus trails off at first, gathering himself together. With Darleen's undivided attention focused solely on him, the stallion goes on to explain, "Actually, come to think of it, I believe I owe you an explanation for that."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Darleen wondered while gazing at Markus, an inquisitive gleam in her eyes.

Markus just smiled, holding Darleen tighter. After a bit of silence, Markus begins to relate, "Simply put, I used to be a sports jock back in my high-school days. Attractive, strong, handsome, typical jock." Although he pauses in silence to reflect on this time in his life, he should be happy. Instead, the stallion has a scowl on his face out of disappointment. And with Darleen's silence hanging in the air, it's not long before she expresses her assumption on the matter.

The mare voices her opinion, finally, after a moment of silence. "Attractive, strong, and handsome huh? What's wrong with that? Isn't that something you should be proud of?"

Contrary to her speculation, Markus only laughs darkly in disappointment. He elaborates, "Funny you should mention that; you're right, it should be something I should be proud of, but I wasn't. In fact, I hated it; well partially, anyways?"

This causes Darleen to blink at him in wonder, her curiosity further increasing. Wanting to find out more, she wonders, "Oh? Why so?"

Markus goes on to explain, "Part of me loved it, part of me hated it. I loved it because I was at the top of my game and the most popular guy in the school and the team; I hated it because everyone believed I was a celebrity. Not only that, but there were also the numerous offers I had to date other women just for the heck of it. I wasn't interested, so I turned all of it down." The stallion holds up a thumbs-up only to pull a slow 180 and turn it into a thumbs-down to emphasize his point, all while an unimpressive scowl covers his face. This revelation that Markus casually admitted to his future wife shows absolutely no remorse on his part for what he's done. He wasn't counting on Darleen's reaction, since he trusted her and she trusted him in return. Yet the reaction his future wife has is simply priceless for the most part, and a little bit of a head-scratch.

Darleen suddenly begins giggling a few seconds prior to Markus finishing his revelation. This draws an inquisitive stare from Markus, making him wonder what exactly is making his future wife suffer from a case of the giggles.

After a bit when her laughter finally dies down, Markus finally asks, "Darleen, what is so funny to the point where you are laughing out of control?"

Darleen speaks out, "What I find funny is that you were okay with it while at the same time you hated it! I can already picture you in my mind with a grumpy look! That much I will say!"

Markus sighed, "Charming, but it's true. I didn't like it one bit. But part of me enjoyed it though; call me crazy but it's the truth about me."

"Interesting theory. You still look the same as before when you were in high school." Darleen commented on his form, attempting a compliment. Markus just pats her side and nuzzles her softly, claiming, "I still got it even after all these years!"

"Oh yeah? Show me!" The mare challenges, unaware of the incoming surprise she will be receiving.

Accepting her challenge, a dark, yet playful chuckle emanates from Markus. He releases Darleen and stands up, turning to face her while slowly curling his right arm to make a muscle. This is done to show his strength in front of her and hopefully make her stand up in admiration. This actually doesn't work since Darleen just remains planted on the bench, observing him keenly. But when the stallion literally rips his shirt off and throws it to the ground, that gets her attention.

Impressed with the muscle before her, Darleen comments, "Wow! I can see why you were a chick magnet; you're buff and hot!"

Markus smirks at her, crossing his arms over his now bare chest. He insinuates, "There's more what that came from but first, I want to see how strong you are. All you need to do is just throw a punch." Unfortunately, little does Markus realize one minor flaw in his challenge towards his future wife; that is, her complete innocence in the matter and how eager she is to prove herself to him.

"Okay!" Immediately accepting the challenge, Darleen stands up and immediately throws an attack at Markus' gut, only it wasn't a punch, but a kick instead!

**\*BAM!\***

A single kick from a horse is enough to crack a bone at least, given the angle and intensity of the kick. In Markus' case, his body is surprisingly durable. Years of training and hard work has left him with a sculpted body, leaving him able to take as much damage as possible. But upon receiving a hard kick to his six pack, the stallion still ends up doubling over from the force and impact.

"Ooogghhh! I said 'throw a punch' Darleen, not 'kick me'! Argh, those hooves are bricks! Ack...!" Even though Markus is a muscular stallion, it takes just one single kick from the mare to knock the wind out of him, leaving him to catch his breath and recover. Yet to Darleen, she took this innocently as fun and games... until she notices the long-term impact and aftermath.

Darleen actually objects, "Come on Markus, my kick wasn't that strong." Coming to his aid, the mare grabs Markus, holding him by his left shoulder to help him up and that is when she notices a bruise on his abs. That is when she gets a surprised expression on her face.

Markus snorts in return, "Strong enough! I swear, if someone made you mad, you'd literally shatter them in an instant!"

The mare objects with a soft smile, "It takes a lot to make me angry. So, I'm pretty patient. So, what else do you have in mind for me? Or to show me, rather?" This was done to completely change the subject.

Grinning, Markus puts his strength to good use. After collecting his ripped shirt, he places the pieces along his right shoulder. And before Darleen can even ascertain what's going on, she quickly finds herself being lifted up again by her future husband, being slung over his left shoulder. She is then carried away by Markus, who simply declares, "Let's go home, shall we?"

During this time, Darleen hangs limp in Markus' hold, having been caught off-guard again, only to begin squirming a bit while crying out, "Hey, let me go!"

Markus only laughs while walking off, carrying the mare against his shoulder. He declares, "You are going home with me and I will show you around my home."

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### **March 22nd, 1993**

It has been nearly three months since Markus and Darleen tied the knot in marriage together and now they are resting together. While Markus lies awake with Darleen in his arms, Darleen stirs a little upon awakening. Opening her green eyes fully, Darleen is greeted with the form of her husband before her and she plops her head down on him, smiling brightly.

"Good morning, Darleen. Sleep well?" Hearing the soft voice of her husband, Darleen nuzzles him gently. Her response comes back, "Yep, and I'm ready to get our day started. What about you, handsome?"

Markus' response is simple and short, "Yes I am. I'm ready too."

While the two shuffle and begin getting out of bed, Darleen comments, "You know, those cars of yours in your garage; I really like that white Ford Mustang GT you have. It reminds me of one of those Australian Ford Falcons."

"You mean the Foxbody Mustang I own personally?" Markus clarifies while shooting his wife an inquisitive stare.

"Yeah, that one! Though it does remind me of the fourth-generation Ford Falcon, I believe." Darleen commented in wonder. Markus didn't agree with her. Instead, he just shakes his head and turns to face her.

"Honey, I believe you are mistaken. The Foxbody Mustang bears no resemblance to the Ford Falcon; the XD, that is. You must have had something different in mind." Markus explained to her. Though he appears unimpressed by her comparison and assumption, he couldn't hold back the smirk dominating his features.

At first, Darleen remains silent while listening to him, gaining a surprised expression on her face at first. However, she then steps closer and taps him on the nose. Unable to hold back a giggle, the female painter horse laughs to herself, earning a skeptical stare and an arched eyebrow in return from the Orlov trotter.

"Hmm? What's so funny, Darleen? Was it something I said?" Markus wondered while eyeing her quizzically. His smirk left him, replaced with a serious expression.

Darleen can see that Markus isn't playing around, so she explains, "It's nothing on your part. It's just I'm stuck with a car geek who knows way more than me and is better with cars; that's all." Seeing his eyebrows raise in surprise, the mare giggles again, brushing her comment off with a wave of dismissal. "I'm joking, Markus. Can't you take a hint?"

A moment of silence for a brief time and Markus merely shakes his head, ascertaining, "For a moment there, I wasn't sure if you were joking or not. It sounded as though you seemed disappointed or something."

Darleen rolls her eyes and scoffs, giving the stallion a light fist to the chest. She remarks, "Oh please, I am joking, Markus! If I wasn't, you think I'd be happy and cheerful? No, I would be disappointed and depressed! Of course I'm happy I'm with a mechanic for a husband; most importantly, I am with *you*, Markus! That's all that matters!"

Markus wasn't expecting the soft impact to his chest and when the mare grabs him in a tight hug, he is taken aback at first, just staring at her. But he comes around and embraces her, resting his hands on her waist. He smooches his wife on her nose and implies, "You're right, Darleen. I love you too. How about we take a ride around the countryside and go out to eat?"

This time, Darleen teases her husband in return. "Trying to bribe me into eating out, huh? I've already thought of something we both can do together."

"Like what, actually? Enlighten me!" The stallion awaits his wife's response on the matter.

"Well, I figured that since we're both keeping physically fit and active, we can go for a jog or a walk and then stop somewhere to eat. We both are off for the rest of the week, so that leaves up plenty of time to do whatever." Darleen rationalized.

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**April 27th, 2003**

Markus and Darleen stand on the sidelines, watching a young foal swing up and down on a makeshift swing set; that foal is their 4-year-old son, Jormsie. The newest addition to the family, Jormsie was born in 1999, and both Markus and Darleen were overjoyed.

Excited laughter comes from the 4-year-old foal while he swings up and down on the set, holding on while swinging and kicking his legs out. It is clear he is having the time of his life on the swing, and while his parents gaze on, they can feel nothing but pride, admiration, and love for each other and their son. In fact, this is the same park that the married pair had gone to before they had gotten married. Only difference is the few new additions to the place, such as the swing set the foal is riding on, along with an adjacent playground nearby and a gated entrance.

Darleen reminisces on the time she and Markus came here and she begins laughing to herself. Her husband notices her and wonders, "What's thrown you into a laughing fit?"

"Oh-ho no, it's not that, baby. It's just, I remember this park as if it was yesterday; of course we were younger back then. This was after you proposed to me inside the Inferno." Darleen hinted at where she was going with this, relying on Markus' memory to figure out the rest.

"Are you referring to that moment where I literally carried you home? Because I remember something else happening that day too." Markus got right to the point, but he also had something to share while impressed with his wife.

While Darleen is about to answer, she blinks in curiosity, wondering about her husband's side of the matter. "Oh really? What is it that you want to tell me about?"

Markus replies, "Well, this was actually during another time back in the park, but on a different day; I learned of your writing through a local bookstore and I happened to

purchase one of your novels. Needless to say, I kept it down to this day, but a couple of days after I literally carried you home, I had a surprise to show you."

"What? One of my novels you wanted to show me?" Darleen guessed, smirking at him. "I still remember that. I can't believe it's lasted this long; you still have it."

"Yep, I still got it!" Markus chuckles proudly. He trails his brown eyes over to see his son galloping towards them and he kneels down to grab him, scooping little Jormsie into his arms.

Jormsie clings tightly to his father after being lifted up and placed atop the adult stallion, resting on his shoulders. While atop his father's shoulders, he laughs cheerfully while also reaching out for his mother, Darleen.

Darleen also reaches out for Jormsie, leading Markus to lean forward slightly for her to reach him. But the moment she grabs hold of him, he grabs hold of his mother's nose and squeezes...

**\*HONK!\***

"Eek! That's a little too hard! And the last time you squeezed our noses like that, mine almost started bleeding!" Darleen warns her son. Markus just chuckled at the display, this time keeping his son atop his shoulders. The stallion remains relaxed and amused, claiming, "When you think about it, it's all fun and games while he is like this, Darleen. But as our son grows older, he'll learn better."

Right as Markus says this, Jormsie plays with his father's nose and ears, worsening the little terror on the stallion father. Darleen watches, her tail swishing in amusement. While Markus snorts and exhales through his nose, the mare comments, "Kinda ironic that you mentioned that while seconds later, you're the victim of his cute little torture terror. It's pretty funny, actually!"

Suddenly, Markus holds Jormsie's legs, prompting the tiny foal to stare down at his father. His own russet eyes gleaming, Jormsie squeaks, "Where are we going, dad?"

Smiling at his own son, Markus casually replies in a simple undertone, "Nowhere." And while holding his son's legs, Markus takes a running stance and gets ready for liftoff. Before this, he tells Jormsie, "Better hang on so you don't fall off!"

Immediately, Jormsie wraps his arms around Markus' neck area to hang on and the stallion takes off at a full sprint, dashing down the park. This leaves Darleen watching

the two disappear while standing on the sidelines, leaving her to follow them at a distance.

After tiring himself out, Markus is now lying on his back with arms spread out, but exhausted though he may be, the stallion father uses this time to do some skygazing with his son. Innocent little Jormsie is also lying on his back next to his father, gazing up at the sky. Watching the clouds roll by with his father, the duo attempt to pick out different shapes they may see, or certain ones that closely resemble everyday items and shapes.

It took Darleen a short time to meet the two at their new location; the mare had disappeared for a bit to grab a few snacks for herself and her family. But before she could share these with her family, the mare mother had one more request to make.

"Okay you two, how about a family picture before we move on?" She suggested plainly to them.

Immediately, Jormsie jumps up and dashes towards his mother, excited at the idea of a family picture together. Even Markus agrees to it also, finding no problems with it. "Eh, why not? I see no harm in it."

The three horses meet together and gather for the family picture; Darleen on the left, Markus on the right, and little Jormsie atop his father again. Little did anyone realize that this would be the final memory of the Orlov stallion.

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### **June 21st, 2005**

It has been nearly a year since her husband passed away. As far as the female painter horse is concerned, one year isn't enough for her to cope with the sudden loss of her husband. Markus' passing was too soon and sudden. He was fine in perfect condition, and then his health suddenly began taking a drastic turn.

Darleen sighs while lying on her mattress, alone. Ever since Markus' passing, she's been feeling drained and depressed. She has no one to greet her or see her every time she wakes up, no one to welcome her, no one to come home to now. But Darleen knew she couldn't just mope around forever; she is left with her only son, who is now her sole responsibility. Even then, the mother still had to stay strong. She had to do it not only for herself, but also because Markus assured her to stay strong and just be herself - this is before he passed away. That encouragement has stayed



with Darleen ever since, but sometimes, those moments are hard to follow through on.

While lying restless on the mattress, Darleen lazily trails her brown eyes over to the nightstand ahead of her; while staring, she catches sight of a familiar photo. She raises up and moves in to grab the picture frame, beginning to study it more accurately.

The picture is the family photo that Darleen herself conditioned her camera to take two years ago, with her, her husband Markus, and their excited son Jormsie stationed atop his father. It is the final picture taken that shows Markus with them. This very picture is the one that she treasures the most and she begins to deflate.

Darleen lets out a heavy sigh upon resting her eyes on the photograph. Not only does it bring back so many memories of her and her husband but it is also the final memory she has of him before his death. She also has her son to take into consideration too. Upon turning her head over her shoulder, Darleen could only imagine what her son must be going through right now.

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### **July 23rd, 2016**

"Hey Mom, can we keep him? Please???" Although Jormsie had it hard in dealing with his father's death, the male painter horse, now an adolescent, is moving on with dealing with the loss. Being an energetic, playful painter horse has left Jormsie and his mother in somewhat high spirits. But growing up has been a challenge, though.

While preschool and middle school were both a breeze and somewhat challenging later on, Jormsie is now into high school where he is facing more challenges of his own. And a couple of these challenges are hitting close to home; well, one of them is. The other one is a little bit more personal.

Puberty came and went, leaving Jormsie's mother to explain to him what it's all about. The second part is his growing fascination with animals, so much that he wants to have a pet. This actually happens one day while the adolescent horse is walking on his way home from school.

It was like any other normal day after school. Jormsie had just gotten out of school and was on his way home, just minding his own business. He was just walking home like he normally does. But then he feels something soft brush against his leg, causing him to pause and investigate. "Huh?"

Jormsie casts his brown eyes down to investigate when he receives the surprise of his life; snuggling and rubbing against his leg is a stray cat! The feline itself is a dark gray / white Norwegian Forest Cat! The cat's eyes are also another stunning feature, its eyes being olive green in color. The stray feline just looks up at Jormsie while going in a back-and-forth manner with its attention, rubbing against him at one point and then looking up at him the next moment.

Jormsie's soft laughter coincides with the fluffy cat while he reaches down to pet it caressing it gently on its head. A soft meow comes from the cat once it moves ahead of the adolescent and flops down before him, rolling onto the concrete and exposing its belly. But instead of giving it a belly rub, Jormsie gathers the cat up into his arms, picking it up.

Cradling the cat in his arms, Jormsie continues walking home when he stops and grabs hold of the cat, setting it down to study it more closely. What the adolescent horse is treated to visually makes his brown eyes widen in complete surprise!

This fluffy Norwegian Forest Cat is gray and white just like Jormsie's own father! The only difference is the white markings on the cat itself.

The cat's gray and white coloring does remind Jormsie of his father but the coloring on this kitty is quite different; though gray is its dominant color, the cat has white paws, a white neck, a white belly, and a white tail tip. The rest of it is gray.

"Whoa! This cat looks just like my dad; it has the same coloration as him!" Inspecting the Norwegian Forest Cat, Jormsie sets the feline down before him while bending down to pet it again. However, the moment the adolescent starts walking away again is the moment the cat follows him, tagging along from behind.

At first, Jormsie thought nothing of it but further along his journey, he hears a meow behind him and pauses, mid-stride. Before he can even investigate, the horse is staring down at the same cat again.

"Huh?" This leaves Jormsie in a state of surprise and admiration. Not only is this cat following him but the way it is acting towards him, rubbing against him and meowing and staring up at him occasionally; this cat has claimed Jormsie as its own.

The rest of the journey continues with the cat following Jormsie all the way to his home. And throughout the rest of his trip home, Jormsie just allowed the cat to follow him completely. His mother will certainly be surprised with the new addition her son will be arriving with.

Upon arriving inside and stepping into the front door of his apartment, Jormsie calls out, "Mom, I'm home!!!"

Immediately following this is a shout from further inside the house. "Okay, honey! I'm coming!"

Darleen was in the kitchen at the time, finishing up washing a glass cup when she stepped out of the kitchen to investigate. While she is eager to see her son, she also picks up giggling and meowing noises. Her ears fly up to the noises and she stops dead in her tracks, her brown eyes widening in surprise and excitement.

"Oh my gosh; Jormsie, you brought home a cat?!" Initially, shock is the first thing evident in Darleen's voice. This later changed to excitement from watching her son play with the cat. Watching him interact with the cat makes Darleen laugh to herself in amusement. But when the mare takes a closer look to investigate, her heart skips a beat with her breath catching in her throat.

"S-son, look at this cat!" Darleen breathes, unable to contain her emotions, "This cat has the same exact coloration as your father!"

"I was saying the same thing while on my way home, Mom! Mom, do you think we can keep him, and maybe name him after Dad?"

So much was happening at once; to Darleen, seeing this cat just brings back memories of her husband. Different flashbacks to the times when he was alive and they were younger, all the memories they had together, even during the brief period that Markus was present in Jormsie's life. But after snapping back to the present, she shakes her head to snap out of her daze, clearing her mind. This time, her ears fly up to her son calling her due to her spacing out and staying silent.

"Mom? Mom! ..." Jormsie's cries towards his mother go unanswered at first until she finally picks up on it, having heard him calling out for her. Finally, Darleen picks up on him, focusing her attention on her son and the new surprise.

"What?" Blinking at her son, Darleen assures Jormsie, "I'm fine for now; just had some flashbacks, is all." When the adolescent just stares at her in questionable silence, the mare explains, "Jormsie, take a good look at the cat again and tell me what you think of it."

The idea of him taking another inspection of the cat seems preposterous to Jormsie. He objects to his mother, "Mom, I've looked at this cat plenty of times and if there is

one thing that stands out about it, the coloring on it looks just like Dad!" Little does he realize this is exactly what his mother is hinting at until he finally blurts it out in his protest.

Darleen just smiled sweetly at him, her face softening. She then explains, "Son, the way this cat looks, it's almost as if it was another version of Markus. It has the same colors as your dad."

"But that's exactly what I picked up on when I noticed it the first time! It looks almost like Dad, but the markings on it are different!" Jormsie points out in return.

The two horses remain silent temporarily while Darleen joins in with Jormsie during their interaction with the cat. Just then, Jormsie gathers a thought in his mind and expresses this to his mother.

"Hey Mom, do you think we can name this cat after my Dad? It does have the same coloration as him." This is Jormsie's simple idea, a request that he thought about just now. And it seems that his mother is delighted upon hearing it.

"Honestly, that sounds like a very good idea to do that. It'll serve as a sort of reminder for both of us!" While Darleen is overjoyed at the prospect, Jormsie is indecisive at first, wondering whether or not to go along with it. But after a bit of time considering the decision, the young horse finally decides to follow through on it.

After some consideration, Jormsie follows through with his idea. "Okay then, 'Markus' it is!"

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### **December 17th, 2016**

A few months down the line after getting settled in, Darleen and Jormsie began working together to provide for their new household pet. But there was a lot of work to do to ensure the cat stays with them. Because Markus is a stray cat, there is no way to know if he has been microchipped for any ownership status in the past, so the two horses decide to visit a veterinarian to find out what they can do about him.

At the moment, the duo are on their way to the local veterinarian with Markus in the back of their BMW M5 (E39). The gray / white Norwegian Forest Cat is jailed inside of a carrier that Darleen purchased a couple of weeks ago, the cell being white in color.

During the current drive, Darleen expresses her opinion on the matter regarding their new feline friend. "I'm still surprised at how he just wandered up to you and began brushing himself against you. Most cats don't do that sort of thing."

Jormsie agrees with her, claiming, "Yeah, you're right about that. It's rare to have one do that. This one just snuck up behind me, in a sense. I mean, he just came out of nowhere! I'm just walking along and I feel something rubbing against my leg; I look down and I find this cat directly on me! I mean, how rare is that?"

"Very rare, I may add." Darleen answered in response. Pausing at a red light, the female painter horse checks the built-in GPS in the car while trailing her eyes back to the road ahead of her, waiting for the green light. And while waiting, she adds, "I'm happy about keeping him but taking care of him is gonna be a lot of work."

"Well, once we get our new friend a health bill, we should be in the clear." Jormsie giggled in return. However, his mother fails to pick up on the joke.

"Health bill?! Jormsie, are you mad!? We just scraped enough to provide some basic necessities for Markus but his vet bills are through the roof!" Darleen cries out in alarm. Her son's laughing beside her doesn't seem to make things better for her until he explains, "Mom, I'm joking! Vet bills cost a lot, true, but if we pool our resources together, we can make this work! You still have your writing career and I'm just barely getting into mine as a pet groomer! We can keep him!"

"Oh, tell me something useful now!" Darleen had to hold back her laughter at this one. At first, she thought her son was deathly serious but he wasn't; he was only joking around to lighten up the mood. This is what Jormsie points out to his mother, "Look where I got my sense of humor from."

This time, Darleen doesn't hold back her laughter. She breaks into a laughing fit while teasing her son in return, "You don't seem like the serious type as your father was! You have nothing of him in you!"

"Of course I do, Mom! I may not look exactly like him or act like him fully but I have him in me." Jormsie goes along with her teasing remark, laughing with her.

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## **Present Day**

Sitting on a park bench inside the local zoo, Jormsie sets his eyes ahead of him on one of the enclosures. Now an adult, Jormsie has his own job now as an animal caretaker for the local zoo. At the moment, however, he is on break.

At 23 years of age, Jormsie is still a young adult himself, though he has his own full-time job as an animal caretaker. But at the moment, the adult painter horse is on a coffee break of his own, seated on a bench of the local zoo he is working at.

Exhaling softly, Jormsie focuses his hazel eyes on a few birds ahead of him. A few of these birds were common sparrows while others were cardinals, crows, and other types of birds. While observing the birds, the adult horse suddenly acquires an idea.

His hazel eyes widening in excitement, Jormsie reaches into a brown paper bag he brought with him and takes out a few slices of bread he has stashed inside. Breaking these apart, he begins tossing these two the ground in hopes of feeding the birds while on his break. It doesn't come immediately, so he waits.

The sound of birds chirping are also a reminder of Jormsie's workload and the atmosphere he is in. Being an avian caretaker is fairly easy, yet sometimes challenging.

While observing the birds before him, Jormsie takes notice of a few geese landing down to partake of the bread he's just thrown to the ground. Then some seagulls and other birds were added into the mix. While watching, the painter horse pulls out his phone and snaps a picture before making a brief recording of what's going on before him. Then after that's finished, along with his break, Jormsie packs up his stuff and proceeds to leave to finish off the rest of his shift at the zoo.

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Finishing his shift in satisfaction, Jormsie turns into the driveway, maneuvering his Sapphire Blue colored BMW M2 into the garage. While in the process of parking his F87, Jormsie is about to turn off his car when he notices something to his right covered in tarp. "Huh?"

The moment Jormsie shuffles inside his car to unlock his seat belt and exit his M2...

**\*BEEEEEEPPP!\***

...his arm connects with horn while in the process of exiting, sending a light blaring noise throughout the garage. This startles him, but only briefly. Likely, this noise will attract his mother's attention as well.

"....oops...." Once Jormsie exits his F87, closing the door behind him, he eyeballs the tarp-covered object across from him; curiosity is gnawing at him with each passing moment where he switches his hazel eyes back and forth between the garage stairs leading to the house and the object before him. Eventually, Jormsie makes his way over to the tarp-covered object, letting his own curiosity eat him up.

Jormsie is silent, though curious. He observes the tarp, tracing the outlines in the shape with his hazel eyes while studying the shape of the figure. After quite some observation, Jormsie finally steps forward again, this time to see what is hiding underneath the material.

Upon fully removing the tarp, Jormsie's hazel eyes inflate in wonder and intrigue. Before him now is a classic American muscle car: a silver first-generation Ford Mustang Coupe!

"Whoa! Could this be one of Dad's former projects? It looks completely mint!" Jormsie's eyes sparkle in wonder and admiration upon laying eyes on the classic muscle car. His mind was just begging him to test drive it. But he needed to consult a certain someone first about test driving a classic car such as this one.

Immediately, Jormsie retreats from the classic car, rushing towards the house to inform his mother of what he's just found. While rushing inside the front entrance to the main house, Jormsie calls out, "Ma!!! I'm here now!!! I found something in the garage!!!"

"I'll be right with you in a sec! Give me a moment!" His mother is farther inside, currently occupied with something for the time being. From her response, it seems as though she is finishing something up so she can join him. For now, Jormsie stands by the vestibule between the garage and front door, waiting for his mother to arrive. Little did he anticipate another arrival coming to meet him.

While waiting for his mother to join him, the stallion's ears go up to the sound of a soft meow; directing his hazel eyes downward, Jormsie kneels down in eager excitement to see Markus walking towards him, speeding up to a trot and jumping at him. While he holds his arms out, Jormsie catches and hugs his Norwegian Forest Cat companion, cradling him in his arms. Finally, after a brief period of waiting, Darleen finally emerges, coming to meet him.

"So, how was your shift, son?" Darleen asks casually. Her usual soft smile is on her face, yet due to Jormsie's findings, she has a curious expression mixed with her smile.

"Pretty good, Mom. Still loving it ever since I started working there." Jormsie responds elated while cradling the cat in his arms. He later sets Markus down, watching the Norwegian Forest Cat move over to Darleen while rubbing against her legs.

While Darleen softly pushes the cat away using her foot, the mare gives the cat a look of disapproval and focuses her gaze back on her son, intent on finding out what he's discovered. So to get to the bottom of the matter, Darleen questions him, "So Jormsie, what did you find in the garage?"

"I can show you better than I can tell you." Jormsie leads his mother along while disappearing to the garage. But while the duo make their way inside the garage, Darleen is suddenly hit with feelings of nostalgia from the sudden memories flooding her mind. And when she notices his M2 and the silver Mustang across from it, her eyes buck upon pausing. "No way! This... this... this is..."

"Mom?" Though Jormsie likely had no idea of his mother's reaction, he could assume this was one of his father's finished projects from what his mother told him, only he didn't know why it was covered like that.

"Son, your father was a gifted mechanic. This silver Ford Mustang was only just one of his many projects. He should have more in here if I'm not mistaken." Darleen revealed while aimlessly wandering away, or so it seemed to her son.

Jormsie observes his mother leaving, only to flip on a light switch near the stairs that brings forth a yellow tinted light above, fully illuminating the entire garage. Now more cars are visible to the two horses, though these are also covered in tarp. At least four more unknown cars are revealed with the light now on, all of them covered by tarp.

Intrigued by these, although taking notice of them as well, Jormsie grows intrigued by the rest of these mysterious projects. "Whoa! Mom, what are the rest of these?"

Turning to face her son, Darleen sweeps an arm around the garage while declaring, "Son, these are more of your father's projects; they were completed well before he passed. There were more in here when he sold most of them for profit. He only kept a select few for personal use."

Curious about them all, Jormsie wanders up to one of them that was located near the garage door to the left. This one he finally pulls the tarp away from, and he gawks in surprise, exclaiming, "OH MY GOSH! What is this!???"



"That, my dear son, is what your father explained to me. It is a Foxbody Mustang. This particular vehicle is a project that actually started out as a new vehicle he purchased from a car lot and later worked on. It sure is a beautiful, yet awkward sight to behold." Darleen explained upon strolling over to meet him.

"This is the same car that is shown in Need For Speed: Payback! Oh my gosh!" Jormsie can barely contain his excitement upon feasting his hazel eyes on the third-generation Mustang GT. The muscle car itself is actually in its 1990 model year in Crystal White body paint, and just the appearance of this car alone is what's begging Jormsie or Darleen to drive it; Jormsie, directly.

Jormsie turns to his mother while bouncing, feeling exactly the same for a kid in a candy store. Claspings his hands together, Jormsie squeals out, "Can I drive it? Can I? Can I?? Can I?? Can I? Can I??!"

Observing her son's bouncing and his inner foal activating, Darleen couldn't help but giggle at him. Even while Jormsie is an adult now, she still finds this very entertaining and amusing. Agreeing to his request, Darleen offers him one condition, "Sure! But I will be riding shotgun, and so will Markus. Keep that in mind, son."

"Thanks Mom! Now where is the car key?" While Jormsie is delighted to leap into the driver's seat, he realizes he can't do anything without the car key. His mother turns to head back, telling him, "The key is in the house. I'm bringing Markus down too for the ride-along."

Watching his mother leave, Jormsie leans against the driver side of the Foxbody Mustang, a huge excited grin plastered on his face. He may not have realized it when he was younger, but he can already see his love for cars growing more and more. And finally, he has the chance to test drive an icon of his father's.