



DANTE

of the  
\*\*\* *Maury River* \*\*\*

GIGI AMATEAU

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DANTE OF  
THE  
MAURY RIVER

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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*To OTTBs and people who love them*







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*For where your treasure is,  
there your heart will be also.*

Matthew 6:21



★ CHAPTER ONE ★

## JUST BREATHE

Come on. Breathe.” Those are the first words I heard in my life. I had been foaled just ahead of spring, in a deep freeze of winter. Arrived on a night when the world outside was encased in ice and the world inside was draped in dark.

Most Thoroughbreds are born in April or May, after the snow has melted and the ground has thawed. But the truth is, birthdays don’t mean all that much to most horses.

Oh, getting here early by a few months can give a racing colt or filly a boost during that first year. Early



foals, like me, will likely be bigger, stronger, and faster than the later babies. After that, the actual date of birth matters not a hill of beans nor a field of hay. Nobody remembers, after a while, whether you were born in winter or spring or any other season, because once the New Year rolls in, we Thoroughbreds reset our birthdays to the first day of January.

For the record, I came into the world during February. February fourteenth to be exact. Way early for foaling season, but there's always an early one.

I can still recall the pause between my first breath and the next. Quite a disruption, for sure. An entire universe of wonder and beauty between breathing in and breathing out. A full-on leave-it-all-on-the-dirt meeting between inspiration and expiration.

"Breathe, breathe," the man yelled at the moment of my entry into this world. To be honest, I didn't understand a lick of what he was saying or have any inkling what meant for me to do.

I could feel his tired skin pressing against mine, and I felt his heavy breath hovering over me.

"Let's get his heart going," he said, but I couldn't figure out to who-all he might be speaking. Everything was dark.

He kneaded my chest then he jibbed and jabbed at my heart, and that hurt.

Up till then, I had only ever known the warmth

and protection of my dam, but now I felt an icy wind through the shed's thin walls and it chilled me to the bone.

I couldn't figure out what was happening, but I got this much: something was going wrong.

"Come on," the man begged, again. He crouched low and massaged my chest with his palm. Pounded on me hard. That hurt, too, but I was helpless.

The man spoke directly to me. "Twenty-five years ago I attended a delivery on a night exactly like this one. A colt. Your grandfather, Dante's Paradiso."

Marey stirred in the corner, but I was far from her in body and moving on in spirit. She whickered. "Please. Your family needs you. Don't give up. Breathe. Give me one breath."

"Breathe" made sense when Marey said it.

I took exactly one, just like Marey asked me to do. Then instead of grabbing for another, I turned around back from where I had come, searching for that sweet, lush limbo where nobody had to tell me what to do because there everything was open and natural and free. And there, I was part of everything.

Though I had a powerful yearning to stay with Marey, I had an even stronger one to leave my body behind. Even before life was fully mine, I longed to go somewhere else.

"Try," Marey whispered toward me, motionless.

I drifted away not because I didn't love her but because I felt a stronger pull beckoning.

"You are destined to follow your grandfather. Please, just try, son. Please."

She nickered softly.

Then, I expired. Let it all go.

I bounced between light and dark, cold and heat. A golden net lit up the barn and wrapped me in its folds. My spirit hovered above the foaling floor, watching the effort to revive my body below. Steam curled up from that new little black colt lying on the cold ground. Groping hands reached out to rub life into me. The man bent over my chest, but not even his sharp breath could pierce the cold pall around my heart.

\* CHAPTER TWO \*

BLOODLINES

The distant sound of a hoofbeats lured me from the cold foaling shed. Along a broad, starlit pathway that stretched out at my feet, Thoroughbreds from my bloodlines across the ages surrounded me. Upon my word and honor, I testify that I knew each one by scent and sound even though we had never met. These ancestors warmed me with their own breaths and led me through land and water and sky.

Honest to thunder, I didn't even consider staying in that hard frozen place. I stood happily among my pedigree, amid a brilliant rolling landscape far beyond the foaling barn back in Kentucky.

Now, some might say I'm getting a tad carried away in my imagination, but consider this: we all possess ancestral memory. Every one of us knows and remembers places, faces, words, and triumphs of spirit and flesh that we have not lived but that, somehow, we know to be true. Knowledge and memory come to us through our bloodlines. And that's a fact.

I had left my dam and my body behind, refused to take that second breath, and, in doing so, transitioned from a dim place to a brilliant one. While the vet worked to revive my body, and while my dam rested in the corner nickering quiet encouragement, I walked alongside my dam's father, my grandfather, the first Dante. Dante's Paradiso.

"Why am I here?" I asked the stallion as

"You've arrived now because the pedigree needs you," Grandfather Dante replied. "The breed needs you. This is the time for a new kind of champion but you must conquer three great tests. We're all counting on you."

"What if I fail?"

Grandfather Dante snapped his tail against my barrel. Then he touched his nose to mine, and my heart twitched. The smell of damp grass on his muzzle made me remember Marey.

The horizon in his world was swathed in emerald

and violet-gray grass. Grandfather Dante and I, both as black as night, stood together under the golden stars. “I don’t want to go back,” I confessed.

“You are precious to me,” he said, “but now you must return to Kentucky. You have important work to do for our breed. Return through the bloodlines whenever you need me.”

“But how? How do I get back to Marey, and how do I come here again?” I asked.

“Use your heart” was all he said.

“Wait! How will I know what to do?” I pleaded. “What are the three great tests?”

He nuzzled me once more, and I thought I might break open from loving my grandfather so much. Then, he was gone. The sky turned black, and I heard a whinny, then a nicker.

I opened my eyes. My nostrils closed shut, then surged open wide. Pushing, shoving, rubbing, coming from every which away.

“Open your eyes!” the same man as before yelled.

I refused.

I tried to turn back, but Grandfather Dante was gone.

“Breathe!” Marey exhaled and I breathed her in.

Before I could even attempt to stand, someone pinned me down. Others jammed my hind with needles.

I thrashed around and kicked out into a chorus of “Ow. Ouch. Wow, he’s strong.”

“Had enough?” the man asked me.

Oh, I kept kicking. Believe me, even as a new-born I was strong enough to inflict mild suffering on unfriendly hands.

“I’ll tell Mother we should call this one Dante’s Inferno.” The man half laughed. “Okay, fill him up with milk. Fill that little belly up till this guy drops off into la-la land.”

While they held me down, I whinnied for Marey, and when I did, one of them pried open my mouth.

“Outstanding work, everyone. Now, pay up. Each of you owes me twenty-five dollars. If you check the date in our live-foal pool, you’ll see that I had today, February fourteenth, as the date we’d see our first live birth.”

“What?”

“Are you for real, Doc?”

“Oh, I’m for real. Pay up.”

“You’re actually going to make us cover you?”

“Absolutely. You do realize that your employer breeds Thoroughbred racehorses, right? Betting and winning. That’s the name of the game.”

“But he hasn’t stood yet.”

“Was that the bet?”

The young woman with the bottle stroked my cheek. “Don’t worry, little guy. You’ll wake up near Mama. Shhh . . . close your eyes.”

For sure, I was born a horse in conflict, and conflicted I would stay for a mighty long time.



★ CHAPTER THREE ★

A GOOD SIGN

My expedition to the ancestral plains and back—whether real or imagined—surely did wipe me out. All my kicking and fighting; plus, the milk that got poured into me didn't exactly help to rouse me, either. When I finally came to, it was morning and Marey was standing over me, nibbling behind my ear and whispering, "Son. Son. Wake up, now."

I opened my eyes, and realizing exactly where I was and where I wasn't, I closed them again. I was desperate to be grazing in the golden field alongside Grandfather Dante. Instead, there I lay on a soft bed of shavings, the sunlight pouring in the stall window, and a cloud

of Marey's sweet breath rolling over me. Some colts would've thought they'd died and gone to heaven. I had already done exactly that, though, so I knew the difference.

"Can you stand yet?" Marey asked me. "Rise to your feet. You must be standing square, with your legs straight, and moving around when Mrs. Eden comes."

I've learned that mares love to boss other horses, people, or any living being in their vicinity. Can't help it; they're born that way. They're only trying to pass along knowledge and learning as fast as they can, because a broodmare never really knows when her foal-rearing job will end. Here one day, not the next. But that's the way of all horses.

In bossiness, Marey was no different from any other mother. Every time she opened her muzzle it seemed like she aimed to set me straight with some dire, critical wisdom about something I'd need to know sooner or later.

I only wish I had listened.

"Up, up, up," Marey said.

Exhausted from being born, checking out, then coming back, the truth is, I didn't much want to stand. But, from the way Marey was nudging at me, I didn't figure I had much choice, either.

Shoot, I figured if I couldn't go back to the brilliant green fields to graze and run with Grandfather Dante,

I was as happy as a snail right where I was. The sun washed softly over me, and tiny flecks of dust and shavings swirled in the air around me, almost like stars.

“Who is Mrs. Eden?” I played for time.

“The fine horsewoman who runs Edensway Farm, our home. She cares for all of us. She’s the one who bred your grandfather, my father, Dante’s Paradiso.”

My dam lectured on about my being an Edensway foal. “The whole world is yours, all waiting to see how the grandson of Dante’s Paradiso will go. How far? How fast? And how high? To get anywhere, however, you must first stand. Now.”

Marey was the boss of me, so I got to my feet.

Somehow, I managed to push myself up onto all fours, right as the matriarch herself entered the barn.

“Good morning, everyone! Thank you for your efforts last night.” She greeted the interns and staff in the foaling barn. Unbelievably, she actually thanked them for the mounds of pain they had inflicted on me. “I hear from Doctor Tom that you saved the colt’s life. Thank you. Thank you all.”

She came closer, and instinctively, I backed myself into a corner. With not so much as a knock or a greeting or a peek, she burst into the stall and held her hand out toward me. “Come on. Stand beside me.”

Funny thing is, half of me wanted to obey without

question. But the other half won. I shook out my mane. Wobbly though I was, I pawed the floor. A warning.

*Go over there so they can hold me down, again?* I thought. *Force another cold, hard tube down my throat?* Never would I let that happen again.

“Well, look at you,” Mrs. Eden said. “My gracious, holding a grudge? A beautiful attitude it is, too. I’m thrilled as can be to live to see this day.” She reached her hand toward my cheek like she owned me. I reckon she did. I snaked my head left and right. The fine horse lady just stood there waiting for me to stop flailing.

“There, there. You’re fine,” she said. “No more worries. The worst is over. By far.”

Then Doctor Tom showed up, and so I reared up.

No lie to say I wanted revenge on that one. Not only had he poked and prodded and beat my heart to life when I was perfectly happy elsewhere, he had ordered a whole group of his underlings to force-feed me till I passed out. The man couldn’t be trusted. I wedged myself into the corner, looking for protection.

“See what I mean, Mother? Mean as a snake.”

“And gorgeous. Who does he look like, Tom?”

“You know who. Spitting image of Dante’s Paradiso.”

All their attention made me nervous, but my dam stood right next to me, nickering and nuzzling me.

Mrs. Eden spoke again. "Come on, little one. Let me see you. You're a gorgeous boy. That I can tell."

Marey stepped toward the lady, and she urged me to follow along beside her.

"Good boy," Mrs. Eden cooed. "My son, Tom, here, is the one you ought to worry about, not me."

"Gee, thanks a lot," Doctor Tom said. "He and I got off to a swell start last night."

Then Mrs. Eden stepped directly into my space, but before I could warn her away, she tickled my chin right where it itched. Then she rubbed my itchy-twitchy nose in exactly the same way that my dam had been all morning. And so, for a moment, I closed my eyes.

"Mister, my son saved your life last night. Did you know that? You left us for a few good minutes, but your doctor wouldn't give up. Partly because he wanted to win the live-foal pool, but mostly for me."

"For you and for me Mother. I know how you loved Dante's Paradiso. He's the first horse I remember. I loved him, too."

A little bitty person came running into my stall. I tried to pull away from Mrs. Eden's hold, but she was as strong as a fence.

"Hi, Ya-Ya!" the child said. "No school today because of the storm. I can help in the barn!"

"Well, good, Melody." Mrs. Eden offered her cheek

toward the child. "Kiss, please." Straightaway, the girl kissed her grandmother, then me.

"Daddy, is this the foal you told me about at breakfast? You were right. He looks like the painting of Dante in Ya-Ya's study and the statue in the driveway."

"Yes, indeed. This guy acts more like Dante's Inferno than Dante's Paradiso though. Ya-Ya's trying to make friends with him. Think you could help? He seems to like you."

I did like Melody already. She was smaller than the other people and newer. She sparkled when she saw me, and she smelled sweet, like nothing I had known before.

Melody turned her back to me and pulled a shimmery-shiny something out of her pocket. I had to see exactly what the girl was fiddling with, so I walked right up to her shoulder and peered over.

"He's curious," said Mrs. Eden. "That's a good sign. He's interested in Melody's chewing gum wrapper."

Doctor Tom made a face. "Oh, he's got a spirit of inquiry, no doubt. Got it in spades."

Mrs. Eden smacked him lightly with the back of her hand. Had she popped him good and hard, I'd have made her my friend for life.

"You know what I mean, Tom? He's bright. He's paying attention. He's confident; the look of eagles, I'd say."

“Uh-huh, and his legs are crooked,” said Doctor Tom. “Oh, joy. More money.”

I had angled my head to the right to keep watch over these new people. Mrs. Eden’s eyes traveled down my chest to my legs. I thought of trying to kick her, only as a warning. To make it known, if I hadn’t already, that I didn’t really care to be messed with. Not even by a fine old horsewoman.

I remembered what the helpers said the night before while I was kicking them. “Strong. Powerful. Fiery.” Nobody had said “crooked.”

I twitched my stifle just a smidgen, testing the lady, for sure.

Mrs. Eden eyeballed me. “Don’t even think about it, mister.”

Her sharp tone delivered its own quick kick, so I danced around but figured I’d best keep my feet to myself. All four of them.

“He may look like Paradiso, but I foresee trouble. That’s my prediction for this one,” said Doctor Tom.

“Nonsense. Paradiso was a spirited colt as well,” the Edensway matriarch retorted. “Both of them fierce. You know, you’re right about the name, though, Tom. We’ll call him Dante’s Inferno.”

Mrs. Eden crouched on one leg to get a look at mine. I could knock her over. Easy peasy, I thought. Then my

dam nibbled at my neck to distract me. “Stand still,” Marey urged me. “They’re almost done.”

The horsewoman’s hands traveled up and down my cannon bone. “I see what you mean. Genes. I’m beginning to think that every blasted colt and filly from his sire, Prince Firenze, shows crooked legs. Let’s remember that for the future.”

Melody asked, “Ya-Ya, is it bad that his legs are a tiny bit crooked?”

“Oh, a good deal more than a tiny bit. Still, that’s a flaw of fashion more than function.” Mrs. Eden held out her hand, reaching for Melody’s help in standing. She slipped her fingers in her pocket, pulled out a mint, and opened her palm to Marey. “Thank you, Beatrice, for bringing us Little Dante.”

Doctor Tom sure was determined to pester me. He refused to let it go about how my legs looked. “Mother, is it even a question? A stooge could see that those legs aren’t even close to honest. We’ll send him to the clinic. Let them decide whether to scrape or screw. He’ll come back straight.”

“Of course, that’s what we’ll do, if nature won’t fix itself in a week or two. He’s our top prospect for September. We’re under a microscope with this first foal out of Beatrice. Yes, we’ll fix his legs when the time comes, but I don’t have to like it.”



She reached the stall door, then said to me before leaving, “We’re all rooting for you. The good Lord knows racing could use a star like your grandfather. And I’m counting on you, so we’ll do whatever it takes, my friend. If success means surgery for you, then so be it.”

★ CHAPTER FOUR ★

THE TRIPLE CROWN

I was beginning to understand that everybody at Edensway Farm was counting on me to do *something*. I had yet to comprehend exactly what that something might be.

After Mrs. Eden, Melody, and Doctor Tom left, I swallowed hard and looked up at my dam. “What is everyone counting on me for? I’m just a colt, Marey.”

“Son, here at Edensway, there’s no such thing as *just* a colt or just a filly. Our people made their fortune from breeding Thoroughbreds to race. My father, Dante’s Paradiso, is still the most famous racehorse in the world,

even though he is gone now. Twenty-two years ago this June, he won the Triple Crown of racing, and no horse has done so since, nor beaten his times on those tracks.”

“What is the Triple Crown?” I asked her.

“The greatest sporting event of all time, consisting of three races.”

“Three tests? Three great tests?”

“Tests? Why, yes, that’s a way to think of it. A jockey and a horse race together. Sometimes, running so fast and hard that they court the grave. Sometimes, death is the real victor of the day. Three races, run in May and June every year. Each track presenting a different question: Are you fast? Are you powerful? Can you endure?”

“And Grandfather Dante, was he fast and powerful?”

“Everyone, the whole world over, agrees that he was!”

“And did he endure?”

“Like no other horse before or after! He had an enormous heart. And I suspect you do, too. Since such things come from one’s mother.”

“Marey, why are you so nice to Doctor Tom and Mrs. Eden when they always bother us?”

Marey pulled some hay from the fresh flake beside her. While she pondered her answer, I nuzzled close under her, right where her downy winter coat smelled like milk.

Finally, she answered me. “The Edens are our

family, that's why. Mrs. Eden remembers my sire. So does her son, Doctor Tom. They miss him because they loved him very much, and he loved them, too. Just like we do."

"I only like the little girl. She's nice."

"Shhh . . . you mustn't say that. You're only here because of them."

"Well, I do love you. And Grandfather Dante."

"You mean you love hearing about him."

I shook my mane hard. "No, *him*."

"You can't possibly love a horse you don't know. Not many people and even fewer horses remember my father. I myself was a yearling when he foundered. I recall once when he was led past the yearling barn. He stopped and turned to look right at me. I lived in the same stall—the one reserved for the top foal—that he had lived in. A tradition you'll certainly continue. Anyway, that day he nickered at me as he passed by. I cherish that memory."

*Of course* I had met Grandfather! Hadn't Marey ever visited the ancestors, like I had?

"But I did meet Grandfather Dante and all the rest of the ancestors."

"Is that so?" Marey asked. Marey was the first mare to confound me, but she was not the last.

"Yes, on the night I was born. First, I heard Doctor Tom telling me to breathe. And then, I got up, walked

across some stars, and met Grandfather Dante in a field. He let me graze beside him, and he nickered in my ear, too.”

Marey tilted her head to get a closer look at me. She nuzzled my neck. “My tired colt. Take some milk, curl up, and get some rest.”

I was getting pretty riled up that everyone around me was always trying to get me to drink milk and go to sleep. Nothing doing till I convinced Marey to believe me. I met her gaze and shook my mane hard this time. “Really, it happened the way I told you!”

She nodded and let out a sigh. “True, you didn’t breathe for a very long time last night. I thought—I thought I had lost you. Doctor Tom gave you a shot of Adrenalin to jolt your system. I could only hear what was going on around me. What you experienced was most likely a hallucination. A kind of dream. I’m sorry, darling, but you didn’t leave the barn. I know, I was praying over you the whole time.”

When she tried to wrap her neck around mine, I pushed her away.

She whickered. “Good glory, you’ve had a busy day. The air is getting cold in here for a newborn.” Marey pulled some shavings into a big pile. “Come on, my February boy, I’ll keep you warm.”

The bedding sure did look inviting, I admit. The harder I tried to stay awake, the drowsier I got. But I

wouldn't lie down. I needed to make my point. I surprised myself, and Marey, too, with how hard I stomped my foot.

Marey stepped back. "Calm down. You're head-strong like him. I believe you experienced *something*, little racehorse, but I don't know what."

There was no purpose in fighting my dam or the sleep that was coming on strong. I moved closer to her and flopped right down, near enough to soak in the warmth from her body and deep enough that the winter wind stalking the cracks in our stall couldn't catch me.

Though I'd have to wait two years to run my first race, my mind was already racing with thoughts of conquering the three great tests and becoming a champion like Grandfather Dante.

# Dante of the Maury River

Gigi Amateau

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