

*Racing from Evil*—The First Page

by Sasscer Hill

After landing a two-book deal with St. Martins Press for a new series, I was surprised to learn that the first Fia McKee novel would not come out until the spring of 2017, a wait of almost two years!

I was aware that some publishers are asking their authors to write novellas and short stories to keep these writers in the public eye during the intervals between their full-length novels. A novella seemed like just the thing.

I already knew the premise: What happens to orphaned Nikki Latrelle after she flees from her pedophile stepfather through the streets of Baltimore and climbs the razor-wire fence into Pimlico Racetrack? Nikki's drawn to horses, knows how to ride, and dreams of being a jockey. But how can a runaway with no ID, no family, and no income survive?

But now, I had to write it, and that first blank page stared at me with malevolence.

When I first wrote the first two pages, they bored me to death, so I rewrote. Then I rewrote again.

Here's the final rewrite of the first page.

My name is Nikki Latrelle, and people tell me my childhood was a nightmare. That isn't true. Maybe I was fatherless, and Mom and I

didn't have much, but it was okay until she brought Stanley Rackmeyer into our home. That's when the bad stuff began.

Before that, we had some good times. When I was nine, Mom took me for my first visit to Pimlico racetrack. I was horse crazy and filled with an excitement that seemed to razz Mom as much as it did me. After rushing through the cavernous interior of the grandstand, we crossed the concrete apron outside, and pushed against the track railing. The third race was about to go off, and the post parade was approaching.

Leading the field was a dark bay with a white blaze. I'd never seen a Thoroughbred racehorse before. I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

His neck was bowed, he was on his toes, and his eyes were partially hidden by blinkers. As he came past me, he turned his head, revealing a bright, liquid eye that stared right at me. He pricked his ears, ducked his head in my direction, and nickered.

The sound pierced my heart.

My mom, Helen Latrelle, loved horses too, and she liked to bet a little. Being at the track with her was always fun. She seemed more carefree and relaxed there. After that first day, she took me to Pimlico quite often during live racing. When the action moved over to Laurel

Park racetrack in the winter, we'd take a bus out the Baltimore Washington Parkway, and watch the ponies run at Laurel.

All those times we went to the track only one bad thing ever happened. It was the day Mom gave me a five-dollar bill to buy hot dogs and sodas while she sat on a bench with her red pen and handicapped the next race.

I had the five clutched in my hand, when an older boy with white blond hair, eyebrows, and lashes swung toward me and began to walk alongside as I headed for the grill. It was on the far side of a supporting wall that divided sections of the grandstand, and as I walked past the cinder block partition, he shoved me into the wall, knocking me to the concrete floor. He snatched the bill, and turned to run.

"Hey," I yelled, "that's mine!"

He stared at me with irises almost as dark as his pupils, making his eyes appear like black holes in his pale skin. His expressionless eyes and ghost-white face frightened me, and my outrage dwindled into tears. I ran back to Mom as fast as my young legs would carry me, sobbing.

Fortunately, I never saw him again. At least, not when I went with Mom to the track.

When I first wrote this page, it was a nice little story about the pleasant memories of Nikki's childhood—the fun trips to the racetrack, her mom buying her riding clothes and arranging for her to have riding lessons. Yawn.

I was writing a suspense mystery, and there was no suspense or mystery, so I shoved “Stanley Rackmeyer” right into that first paragraph. I believe he produced foreshadowing. The reader immediately knows he's a bad guy and hopefully wonders how bad and how badly it will affect Nikki.

After the first paragraph, I return to the good things in Nikki's life for six short paragraphs. Then it's time for more intrigue with the nasty boy that shoves Nikki and steals her money. The page ends with Nikki telling the reader, “Fortunately, I never saw him again. At least, not when I went with Mom to the track.”

The reader knows this nasty young man will appear in her life again, but not when and not how. Additionally, not far into the story, Nikki's mother dies, which makes her last sentence on that page even more prophetic.



Sasscer Hill, a former Maryland racehorse breeder, trainer, and rider, uses the sport of kings as a backdrop for her mysteries. Her “vivid descriptive” prose about greed, evil, heart, and courage propelled her “Nikki Latrelle” novels to multiple award nominations, including Agatha, Macavity, and the Dr. Tony Ryan Best in Racing Literature awards.

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