

TITANS

VICTORIA SCOTT



SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Scott, Victoria (Young adult author), author.

Titans / Victoria Scott. — First edition.

pages cm

Summary: Seventeen-year-old Astrid Sullivan belongs to a family of compulsive gamblers, and now that her father has been laid off from his job in Detroit and lost all their money betting on the Titans, which are half-horse, half car, and race around impossible tracks, her family is falling apart—but when Astrid's new friends give her the chance to participate in this year's Titan races, she thinks she sees a way to win some money and keep her family together.

ISBN 978-0-545-80601-5 (hardcover)

1. Racing—Juvenile fiction. 2. Compulsive gamblers—Juvenile fiction. 3. Families—Michigan—Detroit—Juvenile fiction. 4. Inventions—Juvenile fiction. 5. Friendship—Juvenile fiction. 6. Detroit (Mich.)—Juvenile fiction. [1. Racing—Fiction. 2. Gambling—Fiction. 3. Family life—Michigan—Detroit—Fiction. 4. Inventions—Fiction. 5. Friendship—Fiction. 6. Detroit (Mich.)—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.S42936Ti 2016

813.6—dc23

[Fic]

2015012090

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, March 2016

Book design by Nina Goffi

CHAPTER ONE

Tonight, the Titans will run.

I can see their eyes glowing red from my hard-won place outside the fence. Grown men jostle me from both sides, sloshing pints of beer, hollering over one another as they place last-minute bets. The moon dips low in the sky, lured by grumbled curses and bare-knuckle fights and cigarettes pinched between dirtied fingertips.

My parents don't know I'm here. I snuck out my bedroom window with Magnolia an hour before midnight, an hour before the race would begin. Last year, I watched the machines run on a local sports channel—one of the few my family could afford. The Gambini brothers should have been thrilled. The first year and already they had cameramen and a spot in homes across Detroit.

This time, though, I won't watch from under my mother's arm, her fingers working their way through my hair. I breathe in the pungent smell of sweat and urine, and press closer against the fence. Magnolia stands beside me, her sight set on the course. She takes my hand in hers and gives it a good squeeze. I squeeze right back, and narrow my gaze to the Titans.

From inside the starting gate, the steel horses stamp the dry earth and toss their heads. I can make out the jockeys' colored jerseys and anxious hands as they work their Titans' control panels. I know from reading online that they're sending manual instructions to the horses' control centers, setting speeds and calculating lean percentages and determining how close they'll push their horses to the slay zone.

The horses are a mixture of the real things and race cars. That's why I've studied both. There isn't much to do in the suburbs of Detroit, especially when where you live is less suburb and more slum. As working conditions at my father's plant worsened, and my parents began to argue, the horses were transported into the heart of the forest that nuzzled my house. A glittering promise of hope in the form of iron bolts and smooth steel.

The starting light in the center of the track flicks on, throwing red across the dirt. The Titans lose their ever-loving minds when they see that particular shade of cherry. They may not have *real* minds, or *real* thoughts, but like any other computer they have the potential for recognition and reaction. The jockeys toe their stirrups, lean forward in their black leather seats, and grip the handlebars as their horses thrash.

I see all of this through the bars of the starting gate.

And then the light changes colors.

It blinks yellow—on and off, on and off.

Yellow.

The crowd moves in, bodies flush against my back until my nose is pushed through the chain-link fence.

Yellow.

My heart thunders in my chest so that I can feel it in my throat. Magnolia tightens her hold on my hand.

Yellow.

Finally, finally, the onlookers quiet. The absence of sound is jarring. It's the loudest thing I've ever heard—all those men breathing rapidly, eyes widening, hands clenching their bet cards.

Green!

The gates slide away. A gun fires.

And the Titans run.

They run and the world trembles beneath my feet. Steam puffs from their nostrils and their eyes cut a crimson path and their bodies clash against one another, steel on steel. As the Titans rumble past, a smile sweeps across my face. Watching them is like kissing a speeding train. Like dancing with a hurricane. The horses are terrifying and beautiful at once. They are mindless beasts, but under the stadium lights, their bodies moving down the track like ghosts, they are glorious.

I'm thirteen years old the day I first witness the Titans run.
It's the same day I watch a grown man die.