

Chapter One

“Amanda? Amanda...wake up!”

I opened my eyes and saw my mom standing in the door of my room, holding a phone. It was a Saturday, a day when most normal people slept in. But, then again, I was not a normal person. My life revolved around anything and everything that was related to horses. Even if it meant getting up early.

“What?” I mumbled.

“It’s time to get up, lazy bones! You and Kate are going to the sale today, remember? That’s all you’ve been talking about for the last month.”

I sat up abruptly at the mention of “the sale.” Kate Brown, my riding instructor at Lakeview Stables, an American Saddlebred farm, and I were going to a horse sale in Jefferson City, Missouri today. She had first invited me when my parents had *finally* given the “okay” to start the long but enjoyable search for a horse of my own, though I’d been riding since I had been seven years old, a little more than eight years now.

I pawed through my closet and found a nice pair of

black jods and a tan polo shirt. As I dressed, I fantasized about the perfect horse I might find at the sale today. I didn't care what division the horse could be shown in, I just knew I wanted a Saddlebred that I could show competitively and have fun with. I knew that many horses that went through horse sales like this had behavioral or health issues, but occasionally good horses went through. I hoped one of those good horses would end up on Kate's trailer headed for Lakeview before the day was over.

I stopped fantasizing briefly to look for my riding boots that somehow had become lost in my messy room. I found them under my bed and hurried down the wrap-around staircase to have some breakfast before Kate picked me up at eight o'clock.

When I walked into the kitchen, I was greeted by my Jack Russell terrier, Luke. The little dog followed me to the tile counter top, where a half-full box of cereal sat. Pouring myself a bowl full, I sat down on one of the stools and Luke jumped into my lap.

My mom walked in wearing a bright yellow shirt and jeans. She put the box of cereal back in a cabinet and took out a different box, one containing some kind of organic cereal that I had never dared to eat for fear of the taste.

"Are you ready for the big day?" she asked, munching the nasty cereal. I gently pushed Luke off of my lap and dusted away the white hairs he had left behind.

"Yeah, I guess. I'm just afraid we won't find a horse for me. Then what will we do?"

Mom walked over to the table and sat down in the chair next to me and continued eating cereal as she said, "Don't worry; just remember what Kate told you. If you don't find anything at the sale, just keep looking. We are in no hurry to find you a horse, okay?" She added confidently, "We want to take our time and make the right decision, not hurry and get stuck with something we can't work with."

I sighed and took the empty cereal bowl to the sink, and my boots thumped on the wood floor of the kitchen with each step.

“Okay, I’m just really anxious to have my own horse,” I said, staring out the window over the sink. The rolling hills behind our house were dotted with cattle and, at the moment, covered in a thick blanket of fog.

“I know you are,” Mom said, wiping her hands with a napkin. “I was just like you when I was a kid. Just have patience. I know that’s easy for me to say, but we’ll find a horse for you.” She began writing appointments, birthdays, and other important dates on the dry erase calendar that hung on the refrigerator. I gave her a big hug.

“I’m going back up to my room to wait for Kate. C’mon Luke,” I called to the terrier.

“All right, I’ll let you know when she gets here. Oh, and if you need anything today, I might not be able to answer my phone, if you call me, because your father and I will be at the coffee shop this morning and afternoon. We gave our other employees a day off.” I nodded and headed upstairs.

For as long as I could remember, my mom and dad had owned and operated their coffee and espresso shop on Main Street as a side job. They made the best strawberry smoothies west of the Mississippi! As their main jobs, my dad managed a cattle farm, and my mom wrote for a travel magazine.

Back in my room, I grabbed a recent horse magazine from a pile of school papers on my desk, and sat down on the floor. On the cover of the magazine was a beautiful gray American Saddlebred, being shown in western pleasure. A lady about forty years old was riding the horse carrying an American Flag. She wore a shiny black shirt and chaps. When I was little, I always wanted to ride western, mainly because of the fun outfits and tack, but also to be a “cowgirl”. That, of course, was before I started riding Saddleseat when I was seven.

I began riding mainly because of my mom's influence; she had shown Morgan horses competitively during her childhood. Lucky for me, when she decided to return to the horse business after a long hiatus, I was only seven, the perfect age to begin riding lessons. I had been riding with Kate at Lakeview Stables ever since that fateful afternoon when I'd hopped eagerly onto a bomb-proof Saddlebred lesson horse, and let out a guttural "Giddy-up!"

I smiled at the horse called *Silver Treasure* that was on the magazine cover, and began flipping through the glossy pages. After awhile, Luke bounded up the stairs and nosed my bedroom door open. He jumped up on my bed and made himself at home, buried under a fluffy blue pillow. Luke, too, had a connection to Saddlebreds. My parents bought him for me when I was ten at the Lexington Junior League Horse Show.

The doorbell rang thirty minutes later. I hurried downstairs with Luke at my heels.

"Amanda!" my mom called as I jumped off the last step and hurried over to her and Kate, who was standing just inside the door.

"Hey Kate!" I called, as I pulled my long brown hair into a neat pony tail.

"Hi, Amanda. Ready to go?" she asked.

I held up my index finger and ran into the living room to get my purse that was waiting for me on the couch, and returned to the entryway.

"Now I am," I replied.

"Great! Well, Mrs. Ryan, off we go to horse shop. I'll try to call if we see anything interesting," Kate said with the ever-confident tone in her voice.

"I'll try to answer if I'm not busy. Good luck!" called my mom, holding Luke tightly in her arms so he wouldn't chase us outside. He wiggled and squirmed anyway.

We waved goodbye as we climbed into Kate's big white truck. It immediately started to rain. The truck turned onto

the lonely State Road CC, and Kate and I began the hour-and-a-half long drive to Jefferson City for the sale.

Kate turned onto the highway and for a moment, turned down the volume of the radio. "So Amanda, I want to know what division you would like to show in. Pleasure? Three-gaited? Equitation? Five-gaited?" I drew a deep breath and twisted the strap of my purse between my fingers.

"I really don't know, Kate. I guess I just want to show in anything, really," I said with a laugh. She nodded and turned the radio back up. The rest of the drive was silent, except for the low buzz of the radio. I fell asleep for an hour and woke up when Kate stopped for gas.

"Want to go get some drinks for us?" she asked, handing me a twenty dollar bill. I unfastened my seatbelt and took the twenty.

"Sure! What do you want?"

"Hmm...better go with a coffee. I need to stay awake today," she chuckled.

I grinned and walked into the little gas station. I returned with a black coffee, a diet soda for myself, and a package of mints.

"Are we there yet?" I asked, carefully handing Kate the foam cup and climbing back into the truck.

"About twenty more minutes," she paused to blow on the hot drink in her hand. "What? Are you excited or something?"

I blushed and replied, "Yes, just a little."

Kate set the coffee in the cup holder and revved the truck engine. We were back on the road in no time.

We soon turned off of the highway at the entrance to the facility where the auction was to be held. My heart beat faster as I saw dozens of clean, white trailers lined up next to each other. We drove down a lane that ran between the clean, white barns. I saw several horses anxiously prancing in the cool morning air as they were led in the direction of the arena.

Kate found a parking space next to two small side doors and we hurried inside.

My eyes widened inside the arena. Tables and chairs lined one side of the large building, while the other had a wide strip of dirt for the horses. Colorful drapes were hung across a wall below a stand where three men sat talking. I guessed they were the auctioneers. People came from every direction, talking to one another, pointing to pages in sale books and eating complimentary donuts. I followed Kate to a table with a stack of sale books. She handed one to me.

“Start reading,” she told me with a grin. I glanced up at her, and then began flipping through the pages.

“Let’s find a table,” she said, as she began down the row of tables. I nearly tripped three times because I was staring at the sale book in front of me instead of where I was going. Kate chose an empty table near the end of the straightaway where the horses would go. I sat down clumsily without taking my eyes off of the book.

“See anything good?” she asked, looking over my shoulder. I turned back to a page that my finger held.

“What about this one?” I suggested, pointing to a page with a picture of a chestnut gelding with a white star and two white stockings. His name was something in Italian, “*Il Re*” and his picture was at the Devon Horse Show.

“Three-gaited,” Kate read. “He looks nice.” She read on; “This gelding is an absolute joy to work with. He is offered for sale as his owner is off to college. Would be perfect for an amateur or junior exhibitor, and is fully equitaded.”

“Wow! He sounds perfect!” I exclaimed. She sighed and continued flipping through the pages.

“I don’t know. Let’s not get all excited about the first one we see. Besides, that one is probably way out of our price range. I think I saw him win at the American Royal a few years ago.”

Suddenly, an announcer began to speak. As he welcomed

everyone to the sale, the murmur of the crowd gradually subsided.

“We will start with hip number one, *Enchantment At Dusk*, a three-year-old gaited mare by...”

I tuned out the announcer, as Kate watched the horses intently. I studied the sale book, carefully reading each horse’s profile. I skimmed over a page that did not have pictures. I looked closer and noticed that the horse didn’t even have a name, and was just titled “Lot No. 40.” My eyes narrowed as I read the details on the horse. *“This young gelding does not have any papers. He has a history of violent behavior and would only be suitable for a professional. Has many bad habits including; cribbing, pawing, kicking, rearing, bucking, bolting, weaving, and spinning; is currently lame.”*

After reading that terrible description, I started to tear up. “Kate,” I murmured, my voice cracking. “Look at this one.”

She saw the sad expression on my face, and she took the book from me and began reading. When she finished she shook her head sympathetically and set the book down.

“Amanda, that isn’t the type of horse you want,” she said. A tear slid down my cheek, and she put her hand on my shoulder and turned to face me.

“But he’s so young! We could change him—,” I began, but Kate tightened her lips and sighed. “We’ll watch him go through. I’m not making any promises, though. And sit on your hands, okay?” I sat back and watched each horse, but the whole time I was thinking of Lot No. 40.

Three horses before No. 40, a beat up looking stallion came in the ring, head low in submission. His coat was dusty and his legs wobbled when he walked. The poor horse looked as if he’d been through a war and had lost. My heart melted when he let out a belligerent neigh and tried to buck. The auctioneer started the bid at one hundred dollars, and only

one person raised a hand. For a moment I admired the tall, blonde, wiry man for saving the horse, but Kate soon set me straight.

“That’s a kill buyer.”

I nearly fell out of my chair. “A what?” I asked, hoping that I’d heard her wrong.

“A kill buyer, Amanda,” she paused as the auctioneer slammed down the gavel and belted out a loud “SOLD!” and pointing to the tall man again, Kate continued, “That stallion is going to the slaughterhouse.” She sniffed and bit her bottom lip.

“Oh my—,” I whispered as the old stallion walked slowly and painfully out of the gate.

I sat in pure shock as the next two horses went through. I glared at the kill buyer, who sat three tables away, sipping a beer. His hair was slicked back and he talked loudly with two other men. He looked over at me, and a smirk flashed across his conceited face. I turned away and soon a realization hit me.

“Kate! What if that kill buyer tries to buy number 40?”

She stared at me blankly, shrugged, and began to speak, but was interrupted by the announcer. “Next is Lot No. 40, a young gelding with no papers. He has a history of violent behavior and would only be suitable for a professional. Has many bad habits including; cribbing, pawing, kicking, rearing, bucking, bolting, weaving, and spinning; is currently lame. Starting bid is one hundred dollars.”

The liver chestnut gelding was led in by a thin, gangly man who jerked on the lead rope fiercely. The horse’s head was gorgeous, with no markings other than a faint white star. His neck arched beautifully and he picked his knees up robotically, when he wasn’t trying to buck and pull away from the handler. He was simply magnificent!

The auctioneer started his chant. I gawked when the kill buyer raised his hand.

“Kate! Please, we have to do something!” I cried. She shook her head but stood up at the same time. I jumped up and gave her a hug just as the auctioneer called, “I have two hundred fifty.”

My face fell when the kill buyer stood up and bid for four hundred dollars. I turned back to Kate. She inhaled deeply and raised her hand for five hundred. The kill buyer glared angrily at us and raised his hand for five hundred fifty dollars. Kate glared back but didn’t move.

“Please, Kate. Please!” I whispered just loud enough for her to hear. She continued to glare at the man. Her jaw tightened.

“Going once!” The announcer called.

My heart beat faster. The horse neighed and, I swear, he looked straight at me. Kate stood like a statue.

“Going twice!”

She snapped out of her trance. “Six hundred!” she shouted. The kill buyer flashed another angry stare and then sat down.

“Going once, going twice,” the auctioneer paused again, “SOLD for six hundred dollars to the girl in the blue shirt!” Kate sat down slowly.

“Thank you Kate! Oh, thank you for buying that horse!” I exclaimed as we watched the horse drag its handler out of the ring.

She stood up. “Well, now that he is ours, we might as well go see him,” she said as we walked out of the arena and followed the horse back to its barn.

I called my mom as we walked. She didn’t answer, so I left a message. I hoped she wouldn’t be mad that Kate had bought a horse that I probably wouldn’t be able to show.

“Hey, Mom! It’s me, Amanda. I just wanted to tell you that Kate did buy a horse, but, well, it’s just not exactly the type of horse we were looking for. We didn’t really see anything that would work for me, but we just *had* to save this

horse! You see, he is really young, and the ad said that he kicks, bucks, rears, and everything, but the kill buyer almost got him. But Kate bid six hundred dollars on him and won, so he won't be going to the slaughterhouse! Well, I just wanted to tell you...he's a really pretty gelding, when he's not running off..."

I stopped when the horse we were following, the horse that Kate had just bought, reared straight up and knocked his handler down. My jaw dropped and I looked at Kate. She looked the same and exhaled deeply. "Oh boy," she said to herself.

To finish the message, I said, "W-well that's about it, Mom, hope you aren't mad. Call when you have a chance, bye!"

"You'd just better hope he doesn't tear up my trailer," Kate said sharply.

I hoped she wasn't mad at me for pushing her to bid on the horse. We approached two men who held the gelding back as he fought against them. They looked up at us in surprise.

"So you're the ones that bought this thing?" one of the men asked with a sly laugh.

"Y-yes, we are. I'm Kate Brown, and this is—."

He shook his head and started shouting as the horse became more riled up.

"All right, all right, just tell me where your trailer is and get this animal out of here!"

Kate frowned and approached the horse. He snorted and backed away nervously.

"That won't be necessary. I'll take him from here," she said confidently.

The two men stared at each other, and then Kate, with blank and confused expressions on their faces.

"Fine, lady. You want him; you can have him. But don't blame me if you get hurt," he said roughly, shoving the lead rope into her hand.

She held out a hand to the horse. He sniffed it cautiously and snorted again.

“Easy, boy,” she said softly.

The men walked off in the direction of the barns, shaking their heads and laughing. I walked up behind Kate.

“Poor boy, it’s okay, we’ve got you now,” I said gently.

Kate glanced over her shoulder at me. “I want you to stay back until he calms down, Amanda.”

Kate put her hand on the horse’s neck and stroked it gently. He bobbed his beautiful, large head up and down. I reluctantly backed away.

“Go open the trailer,” she told me.

I hurried ahead back towards the entrance of the arena and unhooked the latch on the back of the trailer. I slowly pulled down the ramp. When I looked up, the horse was walking patiently at Kate’s side, only shying at a passing car.

Suddenly, the door to the arena swung open and the kill buyer strutted out. The gelding scooted away from the sound of the creaky door, and Kate tightened her grip on the lead shank.

“Whoa, boy,” she said softly. The horse seemed to be calmed by her voice.

I turned to glare at the kill buyer. But he wasn’t looking at Kate or me; he looked at the horse with an irate expression. As Kate began to lead the horse up the ramp, he shook his head and walked off.

At first, the liver chestnut gelding balked and refused to walk up the ramp to the trailer.

“Amanda, open the door wider. And when he goes in stand back; I don’t want you to get kicked,” Kate said sternly. I nodded and obeyed.

The second time, Kate coaxed and coaxed the horse and he still would not enter the trailer. She circled him around, and just as she was about to lead him up the ramp a third time, she stopped and turned to look at his stomach.

“Amanda, grab that hay net out of the front of the trailer,” Kate called.

I was already on my way around the front of the truck. I hurried to get the hay net out of the storage area and tied it securely to a hook inside the trailer.

“Come on, buddy, I know you want that hay,” Kate told the horse, whose ears flicked back and forth curiously.

He stepped one hoof lightly onto the ramp and snorted. He looked up and saw the hay again and then simply walked forward as if he’d been doing it all his life. Once he reached the last slot of the three-horse slant, he began greedily munching hay. Kate clipped the chain to his halter and locked him in.

“Well, that was easy,” I said, helping her lift up the ramp.

“Yeah,” she replied, locking the door. We jumped back in the truck and fastened our seatbelts.

“You know, I don’t think he’s such a bad horse. He just needs a little patience and work. Amanda, maybe you were right,” she said, winking at me.

I grinned. “Hey, I just know a good horse when I see one!”

We laughed as we pulled out of the barn area. “What do you think my mom will say?” I asked.

Kate shrugged and looked at her rear view mirror. “I don’t know, but I don’t think she’ll be mad once she meets that horse. Like I said, he’s not half as bad as that ad said he was.”

I smiled and sat back in the seat. What a morning, I thought to myself. I shut my eyes and quickly fell asleep before we even pulled onto the highway.

I woke up about a half hour later when Kate’s phone rang. It turned out to be a wrong number, but Kate took advantage of me being awake to ask me some questions.

“So, when are you going to come out and ride Zac?”

Zac was a bay Morgan who I took lessons on and had

shown in equitation for the past few years. Kate owned him, but it felt like he was my own, because I had ridden him since I had shown in the equitation division.

“Well, after I finish the tons and tons of homework my teachers gave me, I can probably come out tomorrow. If that is okay with you,” I replied.

“All right, how about 9:30 tomorrow morning?” she paused and grinned, “After your homework’s done.”

“Ugh. All right, fine; tomorrow at 9:30 after homework.” I hated homework; it was always getting in the way of my “horse life.”

“Tomorrow you can ride and then we can spend some time with the new guy,” Kate added, meaning the horse we had just rescued.

“Cool,” I replied.

Kate drove me home after the new horse was settled back at Lakeview Stables. I had homework to do, as well as a soccer game later that evening. No one else was home when we arrived except for Luke, who came running when I opened the door.

“See you tomorrow!” I called to Kate. She waved and headed back to her place.

Sighing, I closed the door and went up to my room. Luke followed me, as usual.

“I’m tired, buddy. Will you do my homework for me?” I said to the little dog. He tipped his head to the side and gave a low growl, and gnawed on his purple dinosaur chew toy.

“I bet you’d understand algebra better than me,” I told him, as I gathered a pile of papers off my desk. It was hard to concentrate when I thought about what I had done today. *I helped save a Saddlebred’s life!* I thought as I struggled to focus on math homework. *If it hadn’t been for me, that horse would be on his way to the slaughterhouse with that other stallion!* It still puzzled me why anyone could just throw away a life. The horse we had rescued was so alive, so animated.

Even though I'd only dealt with him for less than an hour, I had quickly grown attached to the new horse.

Several hours later, I finished my homework, and quickly dressed for the soccer game. My parents and I ate dinner and headed off to my game. In the car, my mind drifted away from soccer and back to horses. I should have been concentrating on what position I would play, but I couldn't get Lot No. 40 out of my head. I reread the ad's description in my mind: This young gelding does not have any papers. He has a history of violent behavior and would only be suitable for a professional. Has many bad habits including; cribbing, pawing, kicking, rearing, bucking, bolting, weaving, and spinning; is currently lame.

Yeah, right.