

BOOK ONE OF THE  
ANIMAL  
COMPANIONS

*Kicker's Story*

*By David Archibald*





*The Animal  
Companions*

# Kicker's Story

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**For My Wonderful  
Family**

# CHAPTER ONE

## *The Barn Volunteer*

As I ran downstairs, I wondered about what should I say, I wanted this so badly, it seemed to tear me apart I wanted it so much, I didn't care what I had to do to get it, I felt empty. For years, I had tried to find out anything I could in my circumstances. I had just fallen in love with them, but for years, I had kept this to myself. There was no way I could get a horse.

We only had a barely big enough backyard for our tiny play structure, and there was no way they would let me ride a horse until I turned thirteen, let alone buy one, convince them to move, or let me rent a stable at a barn for the horse, assuming I got a horse. Recently though I had had a great idea, many barns would accept a volunteer and then instead of thanking them by paying them or sometimes not

even that, they would tie in a lesson along with other students to help teach the horse and exercise them, which was perfect especially if the student loved horses as much as I do.

This solution would be something I badly wanted to talk about soon, so when my mom announced dinner by yelling to me, “Jayce, dinner,” from the kitchen I sprung down to the stairs instantly and had walked down to the very bottom in seconds. Now I paused, I needed to do this perfectly as my birthday was coming up in a month, so my mom might use that against me, and unless I did it now they would not have time to arrange it. Still I didn’t want my mom getting mad about me waiting on the stairs so I ran to the table and sat down just as we were about to start dinner.

When dinner began, the conversation turned instantly to more of adult matters, as an only child I had eventually become accused to this behavior; I never interrupted in the middle of a conversation unless I really wanted to talk about something, which luckily they had become accustomed to, though kicking and fighting the whole way. Luckily, using the it is my birthday soon card; I was able to turn the conversation back to where I wanted it to go.



First, questioned my dad, “So what do you want then”? Then adding as a quick fix to his sentence, “for your birthday.”

Next, I said, “Well I was thinking...” trailing off slowly.

Interrogatively my dad asked, “Thinking what may I ask. Though with you that could be dangerous knowing what you want,” smiling near the end to keep things light, yet still letting me know, he wanted to know what.

Hesitantly I first said, “let me finish my proposal before you interject something,” then after they had both nodded I ate a bit of the delicious homemade bread, holding up a finger to show them, I’m eating and please wait until I’m done so I won’t have be talking with my mouth full when I talk. Finally, though I felt like stalling more by having more bread I said, “I was thinking that couldn’t I ride a horse—“

“There is—“started my mom, until my dad reminded her, we said we’d let him say his proposal by gently elbowing her.

Then I continued, “As I was saying I was thinking couldn’t I ride a horse, in exchange for volunteering at a local

barn. That way it would be free, and since all horses sometimes need to be retaught the basics, some barns even give out free lessons for volunteers, I have a list of local barns that do that up in my room on my laptop I could show you later. Barns mostly do that for the exercise and training it gives the horses, all I need is your consent and you guys signing a release form,” rushing through the end so my mother couldn’t interrupt me again.

Blurting out as soon as I was done my mom retorted, “But you could get hurt and—”

Almost angrily, my dad interjected, “Regina he’s not a baby, he’s turning thirteen for Pete’s sake, and we can’t baby him anymore.”

Taken aback my mom paused and then said forcefully, “But it’s not safe.”

Countering my dad responded, “So is playing at the park.”

“That’s different though, Bob,” she said a little annoyed.

“Not really, he could fall off the climbing towers there, and the rock wall, and the climbing net thing and break his head,” he retorted.

“I won’t drive Jayce there, even if this works out,” she argued.

“Regina, you can’t stop me and Jayce from going to the barn,” he said, “Though I do think this will need more thought, later, hon, not now.”

“Fine”, said my mom bitterly, not saying a word for the rest of dinner.

Though I did feel bad, I still felt overjoyed that, at least my dad was on my side, and as I lay in bed later, after all the plates were washed, and the rest of my chores were done. I went upstairs and turned on my laptop. When I got on, I sent the open word document where the list of barns that I had told my mom and dad about at dinner were in to my parents as they had asked me to. Next, I closed the tabs in chrome that I had used to find out the info and a few other useless tabs I had opened a bit ago even before that. Finally, I ordered on our online library site around 30 books on horse

riding, each focusing on different part of it just in case. Then I opened a music file perfect for reading. I then sat down in a comfy beanbag chair and read some of the book I did have.

About an hour later, my dad came in. As he had knocked, I knew he was there and I set down my book as he entered, by now the music had ended, and I hadn't bothered to turn it back on so I didn't have to turn it off. As he entered he sat down on my chair, looked me in the eyes and said, "me and your mom are willing, in your mother's case reluctantly, to let you ride a horse and we will take up your proposal—"

Immediately I said "That's GREAT—" but then I stopped as my dad held up a hand to show me wait.

My dad then added, "We are willing, but you will have to volunteer at the barn for a day before you do anything besides the volunteer work so you can be accustomed to the horses, so we will know you will be safe."

Then after I was certain he was done, I exclaimed, "I was willing to do that in the first place. So I don't care."

"Yes I know, but your mother insisted." Your mother has arranged with a woman named Shelia, the owner of the

barn actually, to meet with you at a barn on the list you made, to help have you help her and the barn, nice job on that by the way, the list.” Standing up he then said in a sighing voice, “Well goodnight, tomorrow will be a big day for you then,” with that he left.

A few minutes after he had left, I paced around the room thinking, and then I set up my bed, and turned off the lights.

The next day my mother certainly was regretting signing me up, not just because of my safety, but because, at the crack of dawn, I woke up, bouncing off walls, like no one else, except mad men. After what seemed like nothing to me, but centuries to my mom, it came for time for the volunteer work.

As soon as we got their mother saw the woman she had arranged with the barn for me to meet. She had a short conversation, and then she drove off. After a moment of silence, she walked closer up to me.

“Welcome to the barn” she said. “What was her name,” I thought quickly though the name came to me, and with confidence I said, “You must be Shelia.”

“You must be that special child of your parents, Jayce. The one who couldn’t stop loving horses that makes you special.” Responded Shelia. Walked toward the stalls she remarked, “You sat here just in time to help put on the horses tack,” then about to fill in the ‘unknown’ definition I said, “I know what it is, its horse’s equipment.” Then seeing her surprised look I said, “I’ve read a lot of books about horses.” Recovering Shelia then started to explain the rules.

Before long, Shelia and I had readied Honeysuckle and Scout for riding. Now all we had to do was wait. A few minutes later a man came over and introduced himself. “Howdy there, you must be the new rider” he greeted me. “Howdy to you Mr. ...” I responded. Inserting the blank for me he said “I’m Mr. Blackthorn,” then holding up a hand to stop me from continuing my barrage of questions he said, “but call me John, as you’ll discover every one not just Shelia and I go our first names we all do.”

“Thanks for having me, John, Shelia,” I stated looking at each as I said their name.

“Our pleasure. We always like having new riders, especially when they are volunteering in exchange for lessons” Shelia said.

“We’ll need to show you the arena, that’s where we ride horses than we can get down to business.” John said as he reined in Scout and connected Honeysuckle to her so he could have them follow. As he pulled the reins neither horse seemed to want to come, and John had to use a chap, at least him using it to tell them to move made me assume that. As he led in the horse in to the arena he remarked, “It’s really good you came now, these horses really need the exercise.” Commenting with malicious intent Shelia remarked, “They aren’t the only ones.” I suppressed a smile of that, but then John started squabbling with Shelia. I really had to try hard not to laugh. Eventually I mostly tuned out them. I realized they could do this all day, and really didn’t mind, I was a little nervous after all. Nevertheless, with the thought of riding a horse initially I could help but smile ready for the horse ride. If I was paying for this I would have complained, but I was volunteering, so I stayed quiet. I sat down realizing that this could take a while, when a cat came in with golden fur and a regal look. It sat on a table preening like a lion.

Not wanting to scare the cat I slowly moved closer until the cat could sniff my hand. After sniffing my hand, the cat went back to washing itself nonchalantly. I started to pet

the can in a uniform, slow gentle way. Then out of the blue he, I assumed it was a he, started purring and Shelia looked up and saw me petting the cat. Walking up to me she said, "That is Lipit," continuing as he purred." John suddenly spoke up and said, "Do you want to chat, or ride."

Of course, I wanted to ride, but I was scared.

Apparently, it was obvious as Shelia said, "Don't worry, I'll have Scout just ride around in a circle using a rope, as you've no probably heard, trainers can do that." That reassuring me I walked up to the mare and began to ride.

It was nothing describable, but as I write this, I will do my best. Nothing could describe the riding something so much more strong stronger than you, able to buck you off, but ready to follow your lead at any time. As Shelia had promised, all I had to do was sit right, and since Shelia had Scout follow what she did on Honeysuckle. However, there still was a degree of control, I could tell her to go faster, slower than any statue, and so left or right earlier. On the sidelines though, there was no control with what John did, he would sometimes cheer us on, and sometimes, to push me out of my comfort zone, have Scout go to a trot, as if it was



called, all very carefully try to mess me up, and still keep me on.

That was just what I did though the feeling was of pure freedom riding Scout, accelerating, doing horse stretches and more is an experience. Only someone who has ridden a horse knows.

Once the volunteer work was over he took off the tack off the horses, and we took off our helmets, rewarding the horses with treats and made sure that the horses healthily cooled down from the exercise.

John went outside in the middle of the exercise, as he had just remembered he needed to exercise the horse in the field a bit than put them away. A sure went down the hall near the end of the stables to call my parents to have them pick me up John called saying pleadingly “Shelia, Midnight really doesn’t want to leave the field. I need your help” Shelia turned to me, sighed and said “you wait here while I help him.” Then walking towards the field she muttered something about getting things done.

I sat down waiting for them to come, but then restlessly stood up and passed by the stalls as I reached the

stall closest to the exit a horse caught my attention. I knew I shouldn't but for some reason I couldn't resist going in to check out this horse.

As I quietly entered the stall, the horse snorted and flicked away a fly with its tail. Being careful not to annoy the horse, I leaned forward. It snorted again clearly not caring what I did. I felt free then to check him out. He was a brown stallion, with good muscular limbs strong looking legs, and just the right height level, on his tail there was a little ribbon like twins. As I took a closer look, standing right behind the horse now, I noticed it was red. At the point I could hear Shelia scolding John, as though normally it seemed like they were partners, Shelia owned the barn and horses. In addition, she had to keep him in line.

“John” she said, “you know that Midnight will only follow you for apples.”

He said, “Not sugar, sorry I forgot,” he said “But right now we have a volunteer remember” then he paused to look around and said “Actually where is he?”

“I told him to wait here,” she said anxiously “go check the stalls.”

I wished I had waited there by now but I really wanted to know what horse is this, and what is the red tag was about. I figured at this point when John came to this stall, I should just say sorry and more. So I stepped to plain view as John came to the last stall. "Come here quick, he's here" he said urgently. "Where," asked Shelia sharply. "In Kickers stall" he responded. At that, she hurried over and told me "slowly back away," as I complied all I could think is, his name is Kicker, that's odd. But obviously, they just wanted me out of the stall. As I started to leave, Kicker turned around and I couldn't resist petting him goodbye. As I did this, I could hear a gasp come out of both John and Sheila and John said, "I'll be darned, I'll be darned". As soon as I was out, I said "Sorry, I shouldn't have gone into Kicker's stall" I looked down, wondering if I we be allowed back because of this. Then John piped up saying "Sorry, sorry" as he shook his head. I was so afraid he now was going to kick me out so when he readied to say his next sentence, I was expecting the worst. What I wasn't expecting was he to say was "You know you are the only person who has ever touched Kicker without being kicked. You shouldn't be sorry. That's amazing, what you did" Still a little afraid that I had ruined my chance of riding a horse, I looked

up at both of their faces, neither seemed to want to kick me out, in fact they seemed astonished and impressed, next I hesitantly questioned, “Will I be kicked out.”

“NO,” said both Shelia and John with surprising vigor, “We need you, to heal Kicker.”

“Why me?” I wondered

“Because you’re the only one who has ever touched Kicker, without being kicked.” Responded John.

“John, that won’t help, I think he needs to know why Kicker, is well for lack of a better word, a kicker.”

“Okay fine” said John then he started the story, ”As all horses are, Kicker wasn’t born this way,” flourishing his hand at all the horses in the barn continuing he said in a serious voice, “But Kicker’s old owner didn’t know enough about horses to know that. When Kicker tried to buck him off, he tried to beat it out of the young horse; he thought that, just because Kicker was a thoroughbred, he had to be trained early on like some of the rest of the thoroughbreds. So he tried to beat it out of him. He would get a meaner bit, and hurt Kicker more and more trying to make him stop trying to buck people off, at first Kicker actually didn’t have

an name, until he finally sold him to a local barn where they also mistreated him, then they too sold him to a local barn, us. We gave him the barn name Kicker because of his habit. His real name is actually Levi but we actually went to the trouble of renaming him Kicker, so even at competitions, he's called Kicker. The name Levi traumatized him, so we had to pay 100 dollars, for that horse.” Then he added after realizing that he had missed a bit of the story “We had decided, to take him, in feed him, etcetera, being fully aware though, that as a young stallion, he had been mistreated. We wanted to help him though, still he couldn't be healed, he would kick anyone who touched him, and it took several years for him not to kick anyone who got close, alone, and even then if you pushed it he would kick, or if the person was a stranger. Like you. You should have been kicked, but Kicker likes you for some reason.”

With that information swirling in my head, I realized several crucial things. In order they were, I could have been very badly hurt, Kicker didn't kick me, and I must know why, I needed to help, Kicker, and since, Shelia and John didn't know me very well, they couldn't tell that I wanted to help them though.

Shelia obviously was anxious to have me come again so she said, “Actually we shouldn’t worry your parents. John call his parents.”

“But –” John started to disagree then after Shelia glared at him, he backed down and stated, “Fine.”

As John left Shelia sat down on a bench in front of me. Then she pleaded, “To be blunt we need you to help us, Kicker needs you.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Home Bitter Home*

With my head swirling I sat in the car. As I waited, I wondered how the argument, or rather the “debate,” as my parents insisted it was called, was going. I personally couldn’t tell the difference between a debate and an argument, and today was no exception. However, I didn’t know Shelia very well so a lot of what I figured out was not about Shelia, but still it was obvious that she was arguing with my mom about me volunteering here. From my mom’s facial expressions and fidgets I could tell that she was starting to lose the debate. Knowing my mother, she had probably tried to explain that horseback riding was not safe. But, as anyone who had ridden a horse knew that, as long as the horse was a good horse, would be safe. But that was when the tides turned. It looked as if my mom questioned Shelia why she wanted me to stay so much, as her gaze flickering to me, and if Shelia was as honest as I thought she was, she told my mom about Kicker.

My mom was obviously outraged, and she started to walk briskly to the car. Shelia though followed.

At this point I was sure how the conversation had gone, and that my assumptions were true. I slumped down in my chair, all was lost, Kicker could never be healed, and secondly, I could never ride a horse again, my mother would make sure of that. As my mother got into the driver's seat, she turned the keys, and we drove away.

Sitting in the back I mourned for my lost opportunity. My mom simply drove on, knowing that she had one the "debate," she was happy. This though was tragedy for me, let alone Kicker. He was going to be healed; he was going to be helped. But the opportunity was gone now. Though I had only seen him once, Kicker had become something I knew I needed to help. Let alone the whole wonderful barn. The ache was back. I longed once again, but no one could give me another chance anymore. It simply wasn't safe. When we got home, I stalked to my room, and waited for dinner, when the call came, and my stomach rumbled, I started to go downstairs. That would be taken as a sign of compliance, so I allowed my stomach to rumble, as I sat in my bed.



I expected to have my mom come in mad as a T. Rex, or at least my dad. But apparently they both had suspected I would do this so neither came, I waited in my room for sleep alone. Finally it came.

The next day the mood was very forlorn, as it is in small families, the mood of one person, particularly if they are in a bad mood, spreads fast. I simply ate the Danish Pancakes I had made then went to my room. As my gaze wandered in my room, as I sat on my bed, it landed on one of my horse books. Simply the sight of it made reminded me of Kicker and the barn. I turned my back, and simply thought about the unfairness. Then filled with a strange feeling of longing by being reminded of the book, all I knew I could do was get rid of the reminder. I slowly carefully, put away the books, I picked up all the scattered animal books, and put them in the library bag to return, so I would never see them again.

I should have been mad at my parents, I should have been angry, or at least tried to convince my parents to let me ride a horse again. But I couldn't bring myself to, the loss was just something I couldn't pin on anyone. Though I had eaten only minutes ago, like my dream of riding a horse, all my

energy was swept away into an chasm where nothing could ever return from. I simply lay there on my bed grieving.

I rarely have dreams, but today was an exception. Here I still could remember the loss, but I was working for it, getting to my goal. But as dreams are fake, I simply walked away from that part of my dream, instead manipulating my dream to become something much more suitable, falling into an chasm forever. As I fell I could see someone watching me, and somehow, as images flickered through my head, I knew this person had made that happen. He laughed as he talked in a quiet menacing tone, though I never saw his lips move. Though the dream was strange it all seemed as if it was logical, the memories of home, the constant reminder of the dream I never could have. Though it though, I never felt anything, I simply didn't care. But once I woke up, all of the memories of sorrow at home, and the dream I had had, all came to me in a flash.

Home had become more of a place of sorrow and bitterness now. I felt so as if I could throw up how badly my dream had been crushed. Then I actually threw up. Then and as energy was grabbed by an iron hand once again, I could not do anything but lie there again, struggling to stay awake to avoid a dream.

I still wasn't feeling good the next day, though I could eat, I decided not to after having food once at dinner the day before. Eventually once again the I went into my room, laying so that I could not see the library bag. I slept once more. As I woke, I realized that my parents where debating whether or not they should let me continue to mope around. I didn't care, they couldn't force me to stop "moping "as they called it. I simply closed my eyes again and slept once again. The next morning, I woke up so famished I had to eat. So I eat some food hours earlier than my regular time, then started up the stairs, to head to my room.

I opened the door sighed, plopped onto my bed and then started to lay back down, until I heard my mom and dad. I quickly pulled my blanket over my head, and tried to make it seem as if I was truly asleep. My dad entered first, then my mother, seeing that I was "asleep," they then left, and closed the door.

Talking quietly, my father said first, "We can't leave him like this, his want is tearing him apart."

"Then why now, not before now, has he decided to do all of this. Plus remember what happened before." Said my mom, sharply.

Exasperated my dad said, "He started now because of Kicker. Besides hasn't he always done this kind of thing, I mean he would lose himself in a book all day about horses. Besides that obviously, he knew we couldn't get a horse with such as small backyard."

At this point I expected my mom to rant on about the negatives of horse riding. But what happened next shocked me. For the first time in my life, without pursuing the matter further, my mom said sighing, "Your right."

I sat in my bed shocked, my mother always pursued the matter until either she had lost the "debate," or until she had won it. Obviously my dad was too, and he, and mom simply went back to their room to wait again.

As I sat in my room I pondered this. Why would my mother do this for me? It was a part of her, to argue, never give up until the bitter end and so much more. Then the realization that, it was because she loved me. She didn't want me to suffer. But I still slumped down, knowing that my mother had only consented to having my dad be correct. Then I fell asleep once again.

The thunder rumbled waves crashed, the wind roared, then roared again, "Jayce wake up!" suddenly I was awake, in

the real world. I could see my dad peering at me looking at me. Waiting for me. Once he knew I was awake, he practically yelled, “We are going to the barn.”

At first I was skeptical why today, it probably was a ruse, but then as I headed downstairs, I realized that this was real and I would be riding a horse again, instantly the ice cold grip upon me disappeared and I was instantly rejuvenated. I eat a second breakfast then ran for the car. As I entered, my dad got in too, turned the keys, and we drove off.

As we drove my dad caught me up to speed. Apparently they had had a long conversation, and eventually they both realized that it was unfair for both of them to not allow me to ride a horse. Though my mom had wanted to continue arguing from her perspective she eventually realized, not letting me ride a horse would be worse for me then having me ride a horse, happily. They also had called the barn, and they both where as happy as could be about me coming back, I knew now that I could heal Kicker. I finally would be able to have my dream fulfilled.

As soon as I got there, it was obvious that both John and Shelia had been waiting for me for a while. A little area for them to be ready for us had been set up, and they had a

little cooler with food in it, at least that was what I assumed was in it. As I was just exited as they were, if not more, I understood how they felt, but obviously, from my dad's whistle of impression, it surprised him, he then said, they want you to help Kicker bad. As we chose a spot to park both John and Shelia where waiting behind the car, once we got out, they both walked up to my dad, and said gratefully, "Thank you so much, Kicker needs your son Jayce, as you know Jayce, has been the only person, Kicker has ever taken a liking to, and Kicker so needs to know, we aren't his enemies."

Taken aback my dad said, "Does Kicker really need Jayce's help that much?"

Then Sheila told him the same, exact story as John had told me.

After taking that all in, my dad, nodded in agreement saying, "It all makes sense now."

Then my dad drove off, and I was left with Shelia and John.

"So," said Shelia, "How'd you convince your parents to let you help Kicker?"

Blushingly I said, “My parents didn’t want me to keep being... sad about Kicker.”

Seeing that I didn’t want to talk about it Shelia, John and I started to walk to the barn. Inside was just as I remembered it. I let out a sigh of relief. I was really back. I could help save Kicker. Speaking of kicker, I noticed that he wasn’t in his stall.

“Where’s Kicker?” I questioned.

“Kicker, he’s outside, as of course you know, he needs to exercise and though we can’t force him to come back in or go out, we can have him choose, today he obviously choose outside.” Said Shelia.

After a short pause I said, “I was wondering, well what will I do to help Kicker?”

“Well that’s really up to you.” Shelia said

“What do you mean, all I can do so far is touch him. I could help you guys, by showing him, that you guys can touch him., but that’s about it, besides all the books I’ve read about horses, I know next to nothing about healing horses, shouldn’t I just start the process.”

“Well that’s the problem, we don’t know how to teach him we aren’t enemies, and all we know is that we can train him, or rather you can.” Said John, then tipping his hat towards the field, “We don’t even know how to get him out of the field.”

“But don’t novice riders, usually fail at taming horses.” I argued

“That’s true, but by the time you’re a real rider, Kicker may not be interested in you anymore. So he would kick you.” John stated.

I knew he was right so I sighed and said, “It’s just my mom would kill me if she knew about kicker’s full story. My dad’s okay with that kind of stuff, but my mom would freak out about me being unsafely trying to ride a horse.”

“Do you think we should tell him” asked John glancing at her.

“Tell me what,” I asked

John still looking at Shelia waited until she nodded, and then said, “Kicker is getting depressed. Stop eating, until well you know.”

Wide eyed I looked at Shelia, “Is this true.”



I never knew one nod of the head could have such an effect, the world seemed to spiral for a couple of seconds, until determination overcame me. Let's go find Kicker. As we went into the field I instantly saw Kicker, the first step was easy, and the second step was more difficult, until when I was a few feet away it felt like wading through quicksand.

Once I finally reached Kicker. He seemed very forlorn. It was easy to see how they thought he was depressed.

"Don't startle him, okay." Whispered John. At that Kicker's head popped up, obviously startled. As he started to rear, I laughed, it was odd, but I found that I couldn't keep it in.

"Look who's talking" I remarked, and we all laughed for a second or two. Then I felt something touch me. Without looking backwards I knew it was Kicker, and it became especially evident by John and Shelia's expressions. So I slowly turned around, I heard Kicker snort, as I turned, and then once I turned backwards completely, and reached my hand out, Kicker shied away and both John and Shelia let out a baited breath, and then Kicker reared. It was all I could

do was to calm him down. Eventually I was able to touch his head.

“If you’re up to it, maybe you could try to put him away, and groom him in his stall, as lately we haven’t been grooming him much. Once he got depressed, and was kicking people who tried to groom him.,” said John.

Not taking my eyes off of Kicker, I said, “Sure, why not. Do you want to grab some treats for Kicker?”

As John headed off to get them, Shelia remarked, “An injured spirit, is worse than and any injury.”

“What do you mean by that?” I questioned.

“I meant a horse, who’s depressed, is effected more by the depression, then any injury.” Shelia responded.

I thought about that in silence. Finally after a second, I asked, “Why would Kicker get depressed now?”

Smiling dryly she said, “Haven’t you figured it out yet.”

I had figured it out. But I hoped it wasn’t true, “He’s depressed because of me, isn’t he, he’s finally seen the chance

to have his life improved, but I've mostly ignored, him.”  
Sighing I waited.

Once John had come back I started towards Kicker. I didn't know anymore how I felt about Kicker, I felt determined to help him, but I was sad that I had, though on accident depressed Kicker, and I suppose that Kicker could tell that too. So once I got closer, he only shied away, knowing that I didn't know what to do, or anything, I didn't even know how I felt about Kicker anymore.

Out of nowhere a feeling of utter despair came over me, I crumbled down to my knees, I wanted this horse, to be better, but the guilt, and the worry, all had mixed in so that the determination was diluted. I was causing half of what Kicker was going through. There was no way that I could rekindle the ashes of Kicker's goodness with this feeling inside of me. I was a junior at this, there was no way to train Kicker. He would stay a kicker forever.

As Shelia got closer to try to comfort me, John held her back though, saying, “There's nothing we can do except let him figure out what to do himself.”

“Kicker doesn’t hate, you remind him of the thing he loves, and misses.” I heard somewhere within me.

“It’s not your fault.” Said Shelia, who had come to my side, regardless of John’s suggestion.

“I know,” I choked out, “But there’s a story I have to tell you. This isn’t actually my first time riding a horse.”

At that John and Shelia both looked surprised. Continuing I said, “Before we moved, there was a little barn, they had several horses, one named Muddy, was my favorite. We had a splendid time,, we went there a lot, and rode him. But this horse was sick, not because of bad ownership, but just because, the horse was sick. The horse became delusional, and it reared, kicked, and tried to bite everyone, before, the horse seemed better as I tried to calm it down but then” I said as my voice broke, ”He finally stopped moving forever, and I had to watch as that horse, died.” Both John and Shelia looked horrified.

Then John said next something I will never forget, “Does it matter now? No matter how horrible an experience you’ve had, that doesn’t change the fact, it won’t happen again. We can prove that.”

# CHAPTER THREE

## *The Students*

I had expected a generic adult response like, “I’m sorry” or, “That’s so sad.” However, I suppose that though John’s way of doing it was a little rough, but it is something that snapped me out of it. Most people wouldn’t care for a response like that, but it helped me personally so much. If someone had said to me, I’m sorry, or that’s so sad, it simply would have made me dwell on it, and right then that was about the worst thing I could do, I was a person who did best when they were doing something.

Thinking no matter how “Good” it is, never helped me in situations like this. Nor should dwelling on the past help anyone, I felt as if this was now my next chance.

So I simply stood up wiped myself off, and said to John, “Your right.”

I took the treat he had gotten for Kicker, stood up and shoving away everything else I felt away into that empty,

endless, disgusting void, I had fallen into in my dream only a while ago, and I walked towards Kicker. I still cared about Muddy, but only caring about the happy times with him, but remembering his chocolate brown eyes I knew that to honor Muddy it would be best to help Kicker not sit around being sad.

This time when I reached out to pet Kicker He must have been able to tell that this time I was okay. He didn't shy away, and though he did try to nip my fingers, he only tried to do it because of what he had been taught. I understood that, and that seemed to convey to Kicker as he stood standing there. Suddenly he snorted and started walking away to go grab some food. Hurriedly, I gave him a bit of the treat, after gobbling it up, I could tell he wanted to get more. So I slowly steeped away. As he came closer, I gave him more of the treat; I then repeated this until we were next to the barn. Then I led him over to his stall slowly. I opened it up and he started to walk towards it. But he started to resist doing that.

He shied away from the treats, and wouldn't go near. I could tell that he didn't want to so I simply closed the gate on the stable, and gave him the rest of the treat. Kicker looked at me incredulously as I walked away. I could have sworn he was thinking, "What is this human doing?" but still

I walked away, letting him choose what to do. I knew that Kicker would only do something like that if he wanted to, not if I forced him to. But Kicker didn't realize that I had wanted him to go into the stall for himself, he needed the interaction. He thought it was another crazy thing that humans did.

Then I heard a telltale "creak" as the stall's gate opened. Surprised I looked over at Kicker and was surprised to see that he had opened the gate with his teeth and was trotting into the enclosure. First I thought "So that's how Kicker comes and goes," then I heard a whoop from John, which snapped me out of it. I felt gratified that Kicker had trusted me so much that he decided that he would go into the stall. Snapping out of it, I then hurriedly grabbed another treat and gave it to Kicker. As I knew, horses only attribute an action as good or negative seconds after the action, and only if the owner, or someone else gave them something to show them that it was good or bad.

As Kicker munched on the treat, they obviously were very surprised to get such a great response from Kicker and how I had handled the experience. It was obvious though, that taking him out of the stall would be a bad idea after he had so obediently gone into the stall. So when Shelia

and John came, Shelia simply suggested that we should do some other things with other horses. I agreed whole heartedly.

After cleaning up some stalls, or rather, mucking them up, which sounds disgusting, and though it was, I still loved it. I got to meet all eight horses. In order I saw, Kicker, then Midnight, next Buttercup, Ranger, Gingersnap, Honeysuckle, **Scout**, then finally Amber. Plus, though the mucking up was disgusting, I also was still able to have fun with the horses while I was at it. After all, the treats the barn had shouldn't go to waste.

Once we were done, we went out of the barn and to the field. I had only seen the arena before, that was in the barn, and though that was huge. I could not see the end of the lush green grass and plants.

I thought in my head "Do horses *really* need this much land to graze in?"

Then I asked, "How big is this land."

John responded saying, "Give or take 14 through 15 acres."



I was astounded, “Do...” here I thought about it I counted in my head. Then I said “Do eight horses need that many acres of land.”

John said, “Where a boarding barn and we only own Kicker, Gingersnap, and Honeysuckle. Those we’ll keep for life. But the rest of the horses come and go, so we have plenty of land just in case.”

Wondering about the hug field I asked, “How do you keep the field’s grass growing?”

John chuckled and said, “We don’t. We rely on kids like you.” Then after letting that sink in he said, “Just teasing you.”

Shelia had been so quiet she could have died, and we wouldn’t have noticed. So when she said “Though our horses like to stay in the field all day and night, Kicker is the only one who we let graze whenever, and he will get out of the way when we irrigate the field to help the grass grow. We use weed killer that won’t harm the environment to keep out weeds.”

“One last question.” I said, “How do you keep the horses from getting hurt”

“To keep horses from getting hurt in rainy weather we keep the other horses in the stable and Kicker hates the rain and will go to his stall. The fence we had built years ago keep them safe, and the other dangers, the horses know what to do, go away from it. Besides the unplannable, there are no problems with the horse’s safety,” then she paused, and obviously thinking of my mother’s worries she added, “Or human safety.”

“I know” I said.

Those words stopped the conversation. Shelia wasn’t accusing me of not knowing it was safe of course, but I had no more questions, in addition there was no more stuff to do with helping horses for today.

Because there was nothing left to do, I decided to go and call my parents to pick me up, as we were done early, almost 2 hours early. But as I stood up to call my parents using the phone the barn had, John said, almost like a statement, “So you don’t want the lesson?”

Befuddled I said, “Wasn’t the stuff in the field the lesson. Last time I came, I rode Honeysuckle as the lesson, and you showed me technique in the field.”

John said laughingly, “Those two ‘lessons’ were nothing but little things for the horses. The real lessons are with other people who pay for lessons. Your mom and dad didn’t want you to do the lesson before, though.”

I suddenly felt nervous and thoughts flooded though my head like, “Am I good enough?” and, “I don’t know, they must be ten times better than me.”

John, not realizing my doubts, said, continuing, “All of the rest of the students ride their own horses, but you’ll use Honeysuckle, like last time.”

Shelia glared at John, and said “Are you really that ignorant, you’re making him feel worse.”

Then with John’s blank look, she said, “Never mind.” Then she started to turn, half way she said under her breath, “Yeesh, can’t anyone be empathetic nowadays?” Shelia then was facing me, and Shelia said, “Don’t worry, though the riders know equestrian stuff, you know horse riding stuff too. You’ve read about it for years after all.”

Then I said, “There is no way book could teach you the etiquette, let alone the aids and cues a specific horse learns,” as I looked down.

“Over the years—” Shelia begun, until she rethought the phrasing, “When horse riders come along, new horse riders to learn, I have never seen them be disrespectful. And you, of all people will get their respect, you touched Kicker.”

Looking up, I felt curiosity start to overcome fear, and I said, “What are their names.”

Shelia thought about it and said, “Well there’s Maya, Makayla, me, John, Blake, Isaac, and Evelyn, but I have no idea if all of them are coming, or just a few, none of them ever say.” At the end she sighed, obviously she would have preferred them to all tell her if they would be coming, it would save her a lot of work. Then, she started walking towards Honeysuckle and Scout’s stalls. John, and I followed.

Since they were on the same side of the barn we didn’t have to exit outside and come back on the other side, as going through the arena was not recommended, making it a short walk. Gingersnap snorted as we passed her, then came Scout and Honeysuckle. Ironically neither of them reacted as much as Gingersnap, and we would be riding them, not Gingersnap. I was quickly taught how to lead the horses out of the stall (after putting on the gear, connect the rope to the horse’s tack, then say walk on, and pull left or right to go left

or right, than once at location say whoa to stop. Never lead two horses until you know them well. For a single horse you don't know lead from the left side.) Then I tied the rope to Scout said, "Walk on" as told, and led him to the gate slowly. I refused to pull to hard, as I saw it, so sometimes he wouldn't follow. Finally we were at the arena, I said "Whoa," then tied the rope to a coat hanger like circle. John also did that with scout, and then we went back, and got more horses, this time without Shelia helping me. This time she took a horse.

Now that we were done, all eight horses gathered, we waited. I was slouched against the wall of the arena wall, when the first student came. He was (description), and I immediately un-slouched not bored anymore. Then I asked quietly, "Who is he?"

Whispering back, John leaned over towards me and said, "That's Blake, his family owns Midnight."

As Blake got closer, I made sure he still should not be able to hear us, and I said, "So he owns the naughty horse." With a smile.

John replied very seriously, “Aren’t all horses like naughty?”

“Well it seems as if the caretaker of the horses take after them,” Shelia said sourly, then ruining it with a small smile.

Once Blake had come up to John, Shelia, and I, he looked at John and Shelia, than looking at me, he said, “They could do that all day.” He said knowingly.

Thinking just the same thing, I remarked, “I figured.”

Nothing else to really talk about, he just stood there waiting. A few times, I tried to question him about things like his horse, and though he wasn’t rude, he only replied in short sentences. Eventually after asking him about Midnight, I too ran out of things to say, and both Blake and I waited. Finally, after about 30 minutes later, as I spotted a boy coming, I remarked, “Are you always early.”

Then Blake, obviously not wanting to seem like a goody two shoes, said, “Nah, I just live close, and my parents wanted me to be able to see Midnight before the lesson, not that that happened though, he was already here.” Keeping

this to myself of course, I thought, “28 words for one reply, that’s the most he’s going to say for one reply ever? Really!”

Then I snapped out of my thoughts as the boy came closer. (Description) made him look very talkative. As he came and started talking, I could tell my assumption had been correct. All his words came in a flurry, and all his words kind of stuck together, like someone had glued together his words, So when he said, “Hi I’m Isaac, nice to meet you, what’s your name, mine’s Isaac like I said.” It took me a second to process, it and by then he was already blabbing on about something to do with horses. I had been wishing that I would be able to talk to someone, but not like this. Blake hadn’t been fun to talk to but, it seemed like a wave of endless water. He was like the exact opposite of Blake; in fact, they looked almost opposite too. And from the snippets of what I heard, it seemed that Ranger was the opposite of Midnight, well behaved, and smart. A stop in his talking made me look up, He now looked totally calm. He looked a little sheepish, and obviously was embarrassed. He looked up and said, “Sorry about that.” Very confused I just looked at him, he had been talking like a mad man and now he was completely normal.

Seeing my confusion, Isaac blushed and said, “I have a mild compulsive talking disorder, normally I can control it, but not when I’ve met someone new or something interesting is happening.” Then he looked down. I had no idea what to say, but at least that explained his crazy talking.

I understood that it would be embarrassing, so I searched for something to say, then I said, “It’s fine; you can’t control things like that about yourself.” Looking a lot happier after I said I understood, Isaac looked up, and started talking about his condition.

“Compulsive talking is where, if you have a major case, you can never easily stop talking. I have a minor case, but I still have trouble like what I just did all the time. Most people don’t understand so thanks for understanding.” Isaac said.

Knowing that I wouldn’t be fun to talk about the stuff that is weird about you, I struck up a new conversation, “How long have you been riding?” I asked.

“About 3 years now, but most everyone else came later than that, say 2 years later.” Isaac said swiftly.



“Well today is going to be one of my first times on a horse, any tips.” I asked. Isaac was about to respond, but suddenly I realized I hadn’t given him my name yet. I decided to cut him short and said, “I forgot to tell you earlier, my name’s Jayce.”

Isaac nodded unfazed by me interrupting him, and I realized he must get that a lot. He then said, “Nice to meet you too.” The conversation-changed tracks again as he started giving me tips. Most of the basic one’s I knew, but the things they did specifically per horse changed, and he taught me how to know how to ride a cold blooded, calm horse, compared to a warm blooded, generally crazy horse. Then he proceeded to give examples, Kicker, Midnight, Scout, and Honeysuckle, where all those crazy horse’s Buttercup, Ranger, Amber, and Gingersnap, all where calm, cold blooded horses.

Then a question that must have been on my tongue subconsciously came out, “What are their breeds?”

Isaac thought for a moment than said, “Ranger’s a Clydesdale, Midnight’s Friesian, Scout’s Percheron; Amber’s a Cleveland bay, Gingersnap is a Kaimanawa horse—”

Here he stopped as I started to talk, “A what?”

“A Kaimanawa horse, Kai-na-mo-wa” He responded, I nodded my head and he continued, “— Scout,” he then paused and mumbled, “No I already said that one”, then louder he said “Um, one sec” here he paused to think again. Finally ready again, he said, “Buttercup is a Colorado Ranger” Laughing he said next, “Maybe she should be named Ranger” then pausing, to laugh, I laughed along, then he said, “Though it is a bit of a boy name.” I tried not to laugh, but then it just came out, I already knew that and hearing it stated like that seriously just made me laugh.

I also knew that this was a boarding barn. And that many of the horses were owned by other people, and wondered who owned witch horses so I questioned, “Who owns the horses.”

Isaac responded, and said, “Kicker, Scout, and Honeysuckle are the owned by John and Shelia, well not really Kicker as he’s a little... Wild” here he paused thinking obviously about Kicker. Then he snapped out, and said, “Maya owns Buttercup, I own Ranger, Blake owns Midnight, and Evelyn owns Amber.”

Isaac then grinned and I said, “What.”

He just shook his head, I was getting a little mad, and was going to demand him to tell me what before I looked behind myself, feeling someone's presence. It was a girl who (description). She obviously didn't know we had seen her, so turned back to Isaac and asked him, "Who is that."

I was mostly sure what the answer was going to be before Isaac whispered "Evelyn." I had been right.

After seeing John and Shelia arguing, she rolled her eyes and walked up to Isaac. "What are they arguing about this time?" She said

Isaac shrugged and gestured to me and said, "Ask Jayce he's the one who would know."

Evelyn looked at me, and said icily, as if it was my fault the answer was taking so long, "So what are they arguing about."

I said simply, "Who's most like their 'naughty' horse."

Evelyn seemed to get the gist and sat on the bench waiting.

Isaac turned back to me, "She's in a bad mood."

Not trying to be offending, as she still could probably hear snippets of what we were saying, I diplomatically said, “She seemed nice.”

Isaac looked at Evelyn again, and said quietly, “Amber hasn’t been so... nice to their family, she acts as if John and Shelia are her owners, and it’s a real struggle for Evelyn and her family, she can’t bring Amber home, but she wants to have Amber know that she’s her owner.”

All I could say was, “Oh.”

The conversation than changed and we talked about horses, until another girl came. This time I didn’t notice the new girl until she was almost in front of us. Unlike Evelyn, This girl, was in a better mood. So I introduced myself. “Hello, I’m a new student at the barn. My name is Jayce”

“Mine’s Maya. Where’s the new horse, she said, peering into the arena.” She said

Isaac answered for me, for which I was grateful, “He’s a volunteer, who found our ad that we put online.” Then looking at me he said, ‘Right?’ I nodded

Maya looked a little disappointed, until Buttercup nudged her with her head. Maya turned around and cooed at

Buttercup, than stroked her, opened the door and went into the arena. John heard it, looked up, and said, exasperated, “Get out of the arena please. How many times I have to tell you that?”

Maya seemed sad, when she came out, but then continued to stroke Buttercup from the outside of the arena. Happy as could be. I saw Evelyn looking at her, no Maya’s horse and her, with longing, probably wishing that she was petting Amber the same way Evelyn was petting Buttercup. Then she must have seen me looking at her, so she looked away and continued waiting.

I said then, “That was strange.”

Isaac, thinking I was talking about Maya, he said, “Nah that’s normal for her.”

We continued chatting for a bit, until Makayla came, I knew that she had to be, as she was the last person. She had (Description.) She hadn’t quite noticed me until I said, “Hi, My name is Jayce, I’m volunteering here.”

Unlike most people, she didn’t jump, and she answered in stride saying, “Hello, Nice to meet you, my name

is Makayla.” Then for the third time that day someone asked, “What are John and Shelia arguing about this time.”

I said, “If they are still arguing about the same thing as they were in the beginning, they are arguing about who is more like the horse they own.”

Makayla, merely said, “Thanks” with a slight smile. Isaac started to follow her as she walked away, I did too though I was confused. Evelyn perked up a little to hear. Maya even stopped petting Buttercup, after of course whispering to her something.

I still didn’t understand why everyone was so interested in what Makayla was going to do, but I knew that if all those wildly differently people were interested, I probably would be interested too.

As soon as Makayla tapped John’s shoulder, his face fell, play time was over. Shelia could see Makayla too, and they both seemed disappointed, Makayla then simply said, “You’re both, wild, crazy, and as good at keeping time as a horse. We’re late for the lesson.”

John chuckled saying, “How do you always know what to say, let alone what were even talking about.”

Makayla shrugged, smiled and probably would have said, “I have my ways”, had it not been that, if she had said that, someone, probably Blake would say “Jayce told her.”

John was obviously used to this, and he said, “Well since everyone’s here it’s time for the lesson.”

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *The special bond*

As the lesson started, I mounted Scout, after seeing everyone else mount his or her horse. Then everyone, but me had their horse go straight to the right to the side of the arena. I had to almost parallel park Scout. I blushed as I finally got in the line at the end. John came by then, inspected the horses. No one had done anything wrong luckily though, so he simply had each of us go into sections of the arena. Four segments were set up, each one went from the back of the arena to the front, so each person could go forward in a line until the end of the arena, turn and then go back where an invisible line marked halfway, while the other rider rode their horse on the other side.

Blake and Maya worked okay, Makayla and Isaac worked out fine, Shelia and Evelyn worked out great. But John and I almost crashed every time we passed on opposite sides of the segment. All because of me too. By the end of the simple exercise, my face was completely red from



embarrassment. John didn't get mad at me for almost crashing into him so much, for which I was grateful for, but I was still very sheepish whenever I looked at him. I had failed miserably at a simple task.

Finally, the task was over. John simply halted his horse, and slowly everyone else did too. He then called everyone to the front of the arena. He then separated us by level. I was alone, Isaac was with Makayla and Blake, Evelyn was with Maya everyone then started to practice what he or she knew. John and Shelia would then give them little tips on how to do things like push harder there and more. Then me, since I was knew, they would teach me the etiquette, and how to become accustomed to riding horses. By the end, I was mostly confident that I could learn more. So, for the last thirty minutes, we decided to freely ride the horses in the arena. Since I was the slowest, I was in the front of everyone. It must have been quite boring for everyone else going so slow, but for me slow was actually quite fast. Finally, I decided that I would put the trot to the test, I simply said, "Trot," and Scout started trotting, I steered him around and around the arena, now the rest of the riders didn't look bored anymore. They too had their horses go to a trot; Scout

though still was going the fastest. I couldn't help myself, and I whooped. That's when something that I will never forget, a whiney, a creak and a horse cantering near greeted me, I almost fell off of scout, and Isaac actually did fall off of his horse, and immediately all the horses stopped without us doing anything.

Once Kicker was at the gate, he whinnied then reared, obviously wanting in. I slowly walked up to him, and the rest of the students held their breath, Isaac even tried to warn me about Kicker as he got off the ground. But John hushed him. I opened the gate and stepped aside, Kicker then got in and waited, at first I didn't understand what he wanted until he reared again then waited for me to get it. I realized he wanted to ride.

Where would I get tack for Kicker though? Then I quickly measured Scout and Kicker. Scout was a little bigger than Kicker, but I could easily tighten it, so I took off the tack from Scout, and brought it towards Kicker. He didn't rear or anything so I set the tack on Kicker's back, At the same time I accidentally brushed against Kicker's mane, and a chorus of gasps followed, because of both things. I suddenly felt a little subconscious, but I simply shoved it away, and tightened the tack on Kicker, it must have pinched a bit,

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because Kicker shied away for a second, I had barely any idea what to do, and I suddenly wanted Shelia and John to help. Sadly, though, neither of them could help.

Eventually I was able to put on the tack without hurting Kicker, I then grabbed a stool, and got onto Kicker's back. Everyone was staring. As soon as I positioned myself, I gently pulled the reins towards the left, and Kicker turned left, which drew gasps from everyone. I smiled. John quickly ran off, and then Shelia did too. For a bit then I just sat there thinking how to teach him the forward signal, if just I had a treat. That's when John came back with a box of treats, I took an offered one, and I squeezed my legs at a point that automatically made horses want to go forward, Kicker complied, and I fed him the treat, and Kicker snorted pleased. I had no idea how to teach him how to put his head down, as horses are supposed to do that while riding, but I wasn't going to push Kicker's head down. So I just rode Kicker the way it was, giving him treats once in a while for good jobs. Eventually Shelia came back with a camera. I didn't really want it pictures or videos taken, but luckily Kicker and I made a spotless performance. Eventually I was glad for it as when Isaac accidentally touched Kicker, I could

have sworn he was going to faint, and his expression was hilarious, and all Kicker did was halt so he wouldn't run him over. By the end the students probably would have found it a lot more sensible if I was using some kind of magic.

Once I was done, I had halted Kicker, I had been able to show him reins pulled means stop. Most of these things weren't too hard. But, as soon as I got off Kicker, everyone clapped, and even Evelyn didn't look bored or sad, and they all looked excited. From then on that day, I was treated almost like a hero as I took off the tack. Normally I would have put away all the horses tack but today they all decided to put away their own horses tack. Isaac even took the heavy tack I had taken off from Kicker happily; Isaac had also even had to try to get to put away the tack. Eventually I had just given it to him, so he would go away, as his compulsive talking had come back. As John gave me one more treat to give to Kicker, he whispered in my ear, "See I told you." I smiled at that but said nothing.

As the lesson was over, I had a bunch of kids following me bugging me about how'd I been able to do that and more. I didn't really mind. Eventually I was reminded of a question I had had, and I asked, "Where's Lipit?"

“Oh you’ve seen him already?” Blake responded then curious, “Are you that good with all animals.”

I simply responded, “I just like animals.”

Blake seemed a little crestfallen, like he wanted to know how to become good with animals. He then responded, “Well Lipit normally is on the other side of the barn.” He pointed the opposite direction that he had originally been. I then decided to go find Lipit. Eventually I found him. He Arched his back and hissed at Blake so much, that he left, and just in time, as it was time for him to leave, eventually, all the students where gone besides me, I was going to get a phone, and call my mom, until Shelia and John came in.

As soon as Shelia saw whom I was petting, she laughed and remarked, “This is the same way I met you.”

She then sat down and John started to talk. “You have a special bond with Kicker.”

I knew they’d know I wasn’t bragging so I said, “I know that.”

Shelia then took a turn and informed me, “No what we mean, is a bond that should have taken years to get with a normal horse alone.”

At this point I was basically thinking wow, really, and so much more, and it was most certainly obvious to Shelia and John.

John then said, “We have a theory why Kicker decided now why to trust someone. Do you want to hear it?” After I nodded my head, John told me his theory by telling me, “Arabian horses, like Kicker normally bond with a human early on, and are very friendly towards everyone. But because he was mistreated that got suppressed and built up, and Kicker didn’t really have a bond with anyone. But you must remind him of something good that happened to Kicker, and he likes you.”

This all revealed a lot of things and both John and Shelia could tell so they simply waited. I didn’t respond, and I just stood up thinking about what this meant. I then went into the other section of the barn, picked up the phone, and asked for someone to come pick me up. As I waited both John and Shelia made themselves scarce.

As soon as my family's car came, and my dad, my dad remarked, "So how was the lesson."

I remarked excitedly, "You should have seen it. I got to..." here I thought about whether or not I should say anything about Kicker. I didn't want him to ban me from helping Kicker. But for better or worse, I had to tell him some time whether I wanted to or not, and now was the time to if any. So mustered up my courage and said, "You know Kicker?"

My dad had no idea where this was going and I hesitated I could still get out of this, but I didn't want to lie to my dad, or rather conceal what happened that day, so I reluctantly responded, "Well today while I was riding Scout, Kicker came into the barn's arena,"

My dad was obviously confused, why would I be reluctant to say something like that, it was great news, not horrible news or anything. I wished now that I didn't have to tell him, if mom had freaked over me seeing Kicker, how would she respond to me riding Kicker, slowly I said, "Well Kicker wanted me to... ride him, and I took Scout's tack off, and put it on Kicker's back, and rode him."

I couldn't tell what he was thinking and I slowly looked away, Then my dad startled me by musing, "Well I guess it would have happened sometime."

I had no idea what he meant by it in the sentence, but I gave him a second to answer, but he didn't so I questioned, "What do you mean by that."

He tried to get out of saying, "Nothing, nothing."

However, I wouldn't let him, and I asked a little more angry this time, "What."

He sighed and said, "After Muddy died, we figured that there were three possibilities, one is that you would avoid horses forever, two you would decide to try and find out all about Muddy, and remember him fondly, and three you would partner up with another horse. Now it's time to choose witch one."

After that it was simply silence, and I stood up to go to the car, until I paused and said, "How badly do you think Mom will react to this."

He just sighed, and responded, "I don't know."



# CHAPTER FIVE

## *Birthday*

Once we got home, we just ended up going back. My mom was so upset about the news, that she insisted we go back and sort it out. John and Shelia, weren't really surprised, either when my mom came up to them and started ranting. They even were ready for her.

John said, before my mom could say anything, "We mean Jayce no harm, and we can prove it."

My mom, no matter how mad she was, understood good arguments, let the opponent throw their best at you, prove them wrong, then use your arguments, or switch roles, and win. So when Shelia tried to talk to my mom, she allowed her to. Shelia said, as she brought out a piece of paper, "This is the release form your husband signed." Then she proceeded to rip it up. My mom was stunned into silence; witch is something I had never seen before. Shelia had one

more thing to say, “This is only legal, unbinding, if you’ll accept the release form being destroyed.”

Finally, my mom found her voice and said, almost timidly, “That’s fine.” Shelia tried not to smile, but as my mom turned away to go back to the car, she let out a smile, and I noticed. I didn’t mind though.

My mom was uncharacteristically quiet as she drove us back home. Once we were home and driving in, she said, “I’m so blind aren’t I.”

I didn’t have anything to say to that, but my mom still had more. She continued, almost crying, “I’ve been so selfish, you’ve been hurting all these years, and you, unselfishly, kept it to yourself. And I try and crush those dreams instantly.”

I searched for the words, racking my head, and I luckily found them, “I know you love me mom, and what you’ve been doing has all been for my best interests, from your point of view.”

Then both my mom and I went to our rooms to do stuff, and my dad was left to do the cooking. I looked at the calendar, and realized that I hadn’t been paying attention

these past few days, and my birthday was this Friday, 5 days counting today and my birthday. Friday the 10<sup>th</sup> of July.

For the few next days, the whole environment of the house had changed. My mom and dad were getting along because my mom wasn't so against horses anymore, and they were supporting me. It also was near my birthday so my parents were readying for that.

There wasn't much to do, but somehow, I survived all the way to Thursday night. And I headed upstairs and went to bed. Then next morning, I made sure to stay in extra-long, if my parents were not ready, it would spoil many things.

When I went downstairs, after waiting a while. I found that A treat I call sticky rolls, had been prepared for me, and that my parents had decorated the whole downstairs.

My parents then noticed me, and then offered me a piece of the sticky rolls. I of course accepted. I sat down, had a bite, and then said, "This is delicious." After we had had breakfast, my parents eagerly brought out presents. The first present was candy witch I thanked my parents for after eating it. Then my parents had me open All the other presents, until there was none left, I loved them all. They had done a

marvelous job. But they weren't done yet though, My dad brought out a book, carefully concealing the title and handed it to me, he said apologizing, "I couldn't package it." Once I looked at the title, I realized that it was a horse training book. I was stunned. But my dad could tell that I was happy.

He yawned, and said next, "Well off to the lesson." I thought I saw him smile, but I assumed I had seen wrong, because of his serious look. Once we were at the barn I walked in, I wasn't mobbed by the student, so I thought that they must not be there, probably because they didn't know it was my birthday, so I started to walk towards the arena, but my dad said quickly, "I want to meet Lipit, could you show, me where he is. I shrugged and brought him to the other side of the barn. I could easily see Lipit and said there he is. I turned around to face my dad, but he was focused on something else. As I followed his gaze I could see Kicker's stall, he asked then asked "Is that Kicker"?

I was going to nod, but suddenly the whole room was swarmed with people shouting or singing happy birthday, my calculating dad smiled and took his spot next to John and Shelia, John was holding the cake, and as I blew out the cake, I couldn't help but laugh a little.

As John started to cut the cake, I said “Dad” with switching high and low pitch and laughter infused, “Why’d you tell them.” Dad just grinned and whispered, “I didn’t, your mom did.” Then he whispered, again, “Anyways, you weren’t going to get a party with friends otherwise.”

As I eat a piece of the cake, I realized, that most people weren’t this lucky. And that was before John brought out a very special present. Just looking at it told me that it was nothing regular. When I opened the present, my belief was proved. Inside I saw a horse’s saddle, and a note saying the rest is in the tack storage area. I knew that it was Kicker’s size. I didn’t understand why I was getting it for a present. With John’s smile, I understood that he knew that I would get to the conclusion eventually. So I thought again, I knew Kicker would need to have tack for riding, or rather his owner would, his owner. That’s when the conclusion came to me. I would be the owner of Kicker. I thought there was no way this audacious conclusion but when I looked up shocked all Shelia did was nod, and John said, “Hope you don’t mind us keeping Kicker as a boarding horse at the barn.” I was shocked, and since my dad obviously knew beforehand, mom had to have too. That meant simply that I owned Kicker.

I didn't know what to say. I was so shocked I was speechless, but the crowd there for my birthday must have understood that I was speechless because I was so happy since they all just smiled.

Eventually all the cake was eaten up and we decided to start the lesson, today I wouldn't be doing volunteer work because of my birthday, before or after the lesson. I still was giddy over Kicker, but I knew that I would have to get him out of the stalls, and bouncing off the walls at the same time would have made it a lot harder. So I calmed down to a small degree, and came up to Kicker's stall. I showed him the saddle, and he seemed to understand what I wanted to do. I opened the stall's gate, and he came up to me and snorted at the saddle. I gently put it on top of Kicker, and it was obvious that he already could feel the difference. As I tightened it there was no sign of him being hurt by the saddle. I'd have to ask how John knew the right size for Kicker. I then went to the tack storage area, and grabbed the lead rope in the area with the name Kicker in it, I also took the bridle, and helmet. I paused then to think about how much that must have cost, I thought I read somewhere good starter tack, and this certainly was, was about 500 hundred dollars, which was crazy. Sure this year I hadn't got as much stuff for my

birthday, but I knew I wanted to pay John and Shelia back. I put this to the side though and gently put the new bridle in, and led him to the arena.

On the way to the arena, as Kicker just followed me, and the lead rope was really just for show, I was able to think. I wondered how Kicker knew that the bridle and bits weren't evil, or rather where had he been taught that, I then had two things to ask John about now.

I brought up Kicker to the arena, and once he was brought in, everyone cheered, I felt my dad's hand on my shoulder, and he then turned me a direction on the outside of the arena. I was shocked to see my mom, with a camera outside the arena; she would have had to have left only a few minutes after us to have gotten here so quickly. This day had no predictability, but to every degree, I didn't mind, in fact I was very happy how this birthday was turning out. I was dying to ask John why Kicker understood some of the basic stuff, but he was starting up the lesson, so I waited.

Once he came to me, still wary of Kicker, he carefully maneuvered out of Kicker's way and showed me a few things I could easily teach Kicker. He then handed me a few treats to put on the pack that the tack had come with. Before he

left, I said, “John.” He looked up and waited for me to say what I wanted to say, I gratefully said, “Thank you so much, for everything.”

John said something next that puzzled me, he said, “No thank you.” He left then, and I just sat there on Kicker for a bit, until I remembered my mom and dad where watching and I pressed my legs together, to have Kicker move forward. I made sure that my stance was correct; you have to put your weight in certain spots, and as a bonus, it made you look regal on top of almost any horse. At least that was my opinion. In addition, apparently it was my parents too, because they whistled in admiration, and my mom snapped off a few pictures of me on Kicker.

By the end of the lesson, the burst you always have after something like what just happened to me started to dissipate a little, and something even better came, the love of horses, and riding. Sadly then it was then the lesson was over, we had to dismount our horses and put them away. As we did this all, John seemed to be avoiding me, but maybe it was just my imagination. This slightly bugged me, especially, because I had a few questions for him, but, he had done so much for me today that I didn’t bug him about that.



Once Kicker was put away and fed, there was one last surprise for me. I thought that what they had done for me was enough, but they pulled me out to the field, and I found that outside they had one last thing to show me. John brought out six tickets like things, and then let me see what it said on them. It said very simply pre novice equestrian competition on the top, I didn't bother to read the rest, as that would have required more will power than I had in me. My whole world was spinning, and I thought to myself, "they really thought that I could go into a pre novice equestrian competition?"

Shelia got the pleasure of saying what these were for, "We were going to give them out later in the year, but we decided with your birthday, it would be best to have you get it today. It's a tradition we do every year."

All I could say was, "Thank you, thank you so much, thank you so much for everything."

## CHAPTER SIX

### *The Flight of Blame*

Once everyone else was gone, once again, my parents were doing something else, while I waited, but this time they were only a few feet away, taking pictures of the barn. While we were taking pictures, I noticed John, I realized now would be about the only time I could talk to John alone, so I hurriedly got permission to leave and talk to John, and then I left and followed him. Once I finally right behind him, he sighed, and turned around, and said, “I figured you’d hunt me down ever since I gave you the tack. You had questions, how’d I known Kicker’s tack size, and all that.”

I nodded and said, “It doesn’t seem as if you’re pleased that I have questions. I mean of course I’m grateful for the tack and stuff, it’s an amazing.” I was a little afraid, that John was thinking that what he hadn’t given me was great, but luckily, for me that wasn’t it, having questions would have been a sure way of, ask question or look spoiled,

if John thought I was spoiled. That was luckily, not what John had in mind.

John then just said, “no it’s not about you Jayce, it’s about the barn, we haven’t told you the whole truth, the barn that mistreated Kicker...” he hesitated, and waited a while until he finally mustered up the courage to say the next words, “The barn that Kicker was originally at, was our barn.”

I just stared at him, and he must have felt unconfutable, and I said, “But neither you nor Shelia would ever do something like that.”

He just nodded for a bit until he said, “I’m not trying to make excuses, but no we wouldn’t ever, in fact where the reason the old owner of the barn resigned, was because we showed him what it was doing to Kicker. We never personally mistreated Kicker, but we didn’t heal Kicker and he never really trusted us enough to ever let us do what you do. Really I don’t blame him, we were workers at the stable for a while until the mistreating stopped, after all, and horses remember those kinds of things for a long time, almost forever.”

“So like I said, “No thank you” I’ve been carrying a burden about Kicker for a long time” John said, and it was easy to believe him.

I then felt skeptical that he should have been holding this inside of him for so long, and I said, “Haven’t you done so many things for Kicker. For example I couldn’t even ride him easily, let alone train him.”

John sighed as if he had tried to go by this way of thinking before, and he replied, “Blame has a way of being a part of all of us, who have you met who was perfect, and had never shared a part of the blame for something. I could have been nicer to Kicker, but I simply used words to try and help him. And as they always said, actions speak louder than words.”

I was silent for a bit, and then retorted to John’s way of thinking, “Well then I hold some of the blame, I couldn’t get my parents to let me ride a horse for years, all the while Kicker was getting worse.”

John just looked at me then said slowly, “You should be a lawyer.”

I understood that he was still feeling guilty but didn't blame himself as much so I said jokingly, "Nah lawyers convince people that bad people aren't bad people."

John laughed a little and said, "See, I told you I had more to thank you for, than you had for me to thank me for."

I then got a little into the argument, I now understood how John and Shelia could argue all day, then I said, "Well I wouldn't even be helping Kicker if it wasn't for you and Shelia."

We talked a little more, until John got called away by Shelia to do something, I then went back to my mom and dad, and I waited. Eventually it was time to go, but before leaving, I made sure that my parents got to actually meet Lipit.

I had a nag somewhere in the back of my head but I chose to ignore it, what harm could a simple nag do? Only after I had gotten home, had the nag surfaced fully in my head, and I realized that my and I both had forgotten something, we hadn't turned Kicker out of his stalls and let him in the field. "Oh well" I thought to myself, after all

Kicker knew how to get out of their himself, that wouldn't change anything would it?

But days later, when we went back to the barn to ride Kicker, I found that Kicker had thought that he had to stay in the stall, and no one had had him exercise for days. I groaned, and opened the stall, I felt horrible about how obedient Kicker had been, I had shown him that being in the stall was a good thing and now he was cooped up. I knew that it wouldn't do much to make Kicker be unhealthy, but Kicker had been cooped up, bored out of his mind for several days, all because of me.

At least I had come early, as usual, and I was able to release him to the field. Once he was gone, I then mucked up his stall, gave him fresh hay, it still was weird being Kicker's owner. I had to do what I normally did, and a few other things, apparently my parents had signed an agreement form with them on how Kicker would be treated, and I would be doing everything for Kicker. At the time it seemed like a good idea to my parents and me, but now I was starting to have doubts, I still liked kicker a lot, but I wasn't sure that I could handle being a horse owner, after all . I knew that it was a rare person to be able to ride a horse like Kicker. Eventually, I just started working on other things for Kicker, assuming

that the nag would go away, but then I realized what had been nagging me, John had never really answered my questions. Hopefully he wouldn't find it annoying, but I needed to corner him again and get more direct answers, somehow John had managed not to admit very much, but make it seem as if he had answered the meaning of life.

After I had mucked up the rest of the horses stalls, I decided that now was as good as any time to corner John, as, most likely I wouldn't get any better time than the present, so I started towards the area I thought that John would be, but before I actually got there, I ran into John. I started by saying, "Hey john."

He looked up saw me, and said evasively, "Hi Jayce"

I normally would have let him gather his thoughts to be ready for me questioning him, but I didn't want him to slip out of it like he did a few days ago. So I said to him, "Why's Kicker partially broke, it normally takes years for a experienced horse person to break a horse, and from what I've heard, no one's even touched Kicker for more than a few seconds without being kicked."

John sighed, and said, nothing, I tried saying various things to get him to speak to me, but I couldn't so I was just going to leave him alone, until he spoke up, not looking at me, "Years ago while the barn was still owned by the malicious owner of Kicker, he gave us the day off. Then had countless horse 'experts' come 'help' sadly they told him to be harsher on Kicker, and by the end of the day, though he had succeeded in breaking Kicker into his saddle and bit, he also broke Kicker emotionally. Once we came back the next day, and saw Kicker just lying there on the ground, gasping for breath, we ran to our boss's office, and informed him about Kicker. We didn't realize that he had been the one who did it, but as soon as we told him about, Kicker Shelia could tell, and made him tell us what he had done." John then laughed un-humorlessly, "She always has been convincing." He then took a deep breath and shook as little.

I could tell now, easily that he felt guilty, but I couldn't figure out what to do to let him know that I didn't blame him. I just sat there for a bit, until an idea came to me, I sprang up, and ran around the barn, eventually I found Shelia and told her to come. Then I went back to where John was, his composure was back up by then, and I told them to wait there. Then I left to go to the tack storage, I found the tack for Kicker, went to



Kicker's stall then discreetly walked him closer to them, and to make sure it was a surprise to them before Kicker came into view, I mounted Kicker then had him go forward quickly. The instant I got in front of them, they both looked exactly how, I'd imagined it, very confused. Eventually their expression morphed into a look of understanding. I got off Kicker, and they just looked at him, until Kicker finally moved his head forward until, if they just moved their hand forward a little they would be touching Kicker. For a bit they just sat there, transfixed. Until Kicker moved so that his chocolate warm eyes were looking at them, asking them to trust him, slowly Shelia started to move her hand forward, until they could brush his head if she just stretched her fingers, Shelia must have been having doubts, because she just sat there. Until John slowly put his hand forward to and then whispered something I couldn't hear, and John touched Kicker, finally Shelia did too. Kicker whinnied and looked approvingly, at them until they started to pet him. Kicker snorted once more and then lifted up his hand he started to move his head towards them, until he flicked his tail at a fly just in front of John and Sheila, then the fly flew behind John and Shelia, and though he stared at the fly, he didn't try and flick them.

Even after I left, as they would tell me later, they pet Kicker for a couple of hours, and Kicker never did get that fly. Their blame had fled. In fact it was never there nagging them, “It’s your fault”, for as almost all good people do, they self-imposed blame on themselves.

As the rest of the day came, I realized that I was a hypocrite to some extent. I had shown John and Shelia, that the blame they had self-imposed upon themselves was not something that was their fault, but I still wasn’t allowing myself forgiveness for the things I hadn’t done, not trying to help Kicker soon enough, and not letting myself pursue my dreams, before I almost couldn’t. I remembered something I had heard before, it was roughly, “Forgiveness for past decisions is one of the hardest things to do, and one of the most important.”

Throughout the day, I realized that if I just forgave myself, maybe the world would not suddenly all agree that world peace was the best option, but at least it would let me do what I wanted. As I went to bed, the last revelation came. I need a goal. A hard goal or even something simple will not be fulfilled. So I sat in my bed, and then thought of my goal. I then went to the laptop and turned it on, opened up Microsoft Word than started typing. I then printed the newly finished document I grabbed a pen, and signed my name on the document; I smiled

in satisfaction, then posted the paper on my bedroom wall. Now I was legally obliged. I now had to break Kicker and help him onto the path to recovery.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *If Only...*

The night after signing the contract, I knew that the contract wouldn't hold any power over me, unless I let everyone know about it, then it would truly have a hold over me. So the next day I decided to tell several people what I had done. First, once I woke up, I found that my parents weren't home, I mentally shrugged my shoulders, and went back upstairs to read some books. Once my parents came

back, I noticed that they had a bag full of stuff. I figured that it was some library books, and I was right, to some extent. Once I had taken all the books out of bag, and brought them to my room, I needed some books on breaking horses, I found that my parents hadn't even moved from the spot they were at. I didn't think anything about it until a few moments later when my parents pulled out a package from within the bag.

It had to have been wedged in a very discreet place, as I hadn't noticed it before. My parents where the bipolar to discreet though. As they beckoned me to open the package, I could tell that they were very excited about what was in the package, a lot. So I was expecting a lot as I opened the package. But once I opened it appeared to just be a little grubby journal sized book. My parents were waiting so I opened it, and saw the little 'journal' was an all-purpose guide for training horses, by now I was extremely excited, but though I wanted badly just to go upstairs and read the whole book, I then hugged my mom and hugged my dad, then thank.

Before I went t my room they mentioned that the book that they had given me was the last of all of them,

apparently everyone had gotten one, for some unknown reason.

Giddy I went upstairs to read the book the rest of the day I trapped myself inside my room, my parents didn't mind luckily. I read my new book, until I realized that I hadn't told them about the contract I had signed, I figured, nonchalantly, that I could just show it to them later that day without it affecting anything, but the timing of it being given wouldn't really matter. So I just read the journal through, cover to cover. As I was approaching the end I could tell why everyone wanted it so badly, after all it had exclusive info about horses from a previous Olympic gold medalist. Finally, once I finished it I understood fully why everyone, wanted it so badly, free tickets to go to a competition where the gold medalist would have other equestrian people come up if they wanted to challenge him.

Mom, when she saw the reason everyone had bought the book, she went away to go to her computer, at first I thought she wasn't interested, and had gone back to just do something on her computer, until she came back laughing a bit. I then asked, "So is the deal valid? Can we go for free?"

She laughed a little more, until she said, “Yeah, it’s true.” She then started laughing again, until my dad came. He obviously was confused about what we were doing, but before he could speak, my mom showed him the deal, saying, “Look at this.”

He looked at it, and then looked up and said, “Are you joking?”

“Nah” we both said in chorus. “It’s a real thing.”

My mom thought about it then added, “I looked it up apparently, since the author of the book is an Olympic gold medalist in all three equestrian sports, he’s got sponsors trying to get his book known, and this is one of the ways to do so.”

“We should go” I said, mostly joking.

They both looked at the ticket for a bit, then my dad spoke up and said, “Well since it’s free, it couldn’t hurt to go. It’s not as if you’re going to try and beat the guy.”

Mom looked a little hesitant. But as we looked at her, I could see her swaying. She put her head in her arms, then looked up shook her head slowly, “Looks as if I’m outnumbered.”

I grinned and looked at my dad and mom. “You won’t regret it.”

That evening, for it was that night, we all went to the arena. All of the horses there, were very athletic looking. They all were something that I could stare at all day, but as usual my parents would have been bored out of their minds, had I decided to just do that all evening. My dad must have suspected that they would have tried to get us to pay money, or have us have to do something with a horse, as he hadn’t brought money. I was disappointed, but I recovered fine. Later that day we went to the arena, as we had arrived early, we got okay seating, but as expected, the arena was completely full of people by the time the competition was to begin.

All of the events were spectacular, and though, as expected no one out did the gold medalist, it was a night full of wonderful events, spectacular scene, and so much more. I was sure, that before that night, my parents would have said they understood my obsession with horses, but after seeing this dressage event, and seeing their reaction to it, only now would I have believed them had they said they understood.

Perhaps though, I should have known that later there would be something, something that would even it out. Of course I didn't know at the time, but if only...

The next day was normal by normal aspects, but of course that was a broad, range, as the only constant in this world is change. Change though did not really happen to me that day, and actually that made it almost odd in it's own aspect, the only strange thing that happened that day was my parents leaving for a couple of hours for shopping, normally they want me along, and even when they're getting things for me for my birthday, they have me come along, and pull one of those things that parents do to keep their kids from knowing. If only I could have seen what had been happening at the barn. I would have immediately rushed over there and put a stop to it, but instead, I spent all day oblivious.

The next day, right before the time for us to leave, John came to our house. I at first didn't know it was John, so I did nothing, but keep on playing the game I had been playing. My dad answered the door and said, "Hello there. Here for Jayce?" At that comment, my curiosity tugged at me, but I wanted to save the game at minimum, so I kept on playing. I couldn't hear whatever John said next, but by my



dads next words, I could probably figure out what he had said  
"Regina, Jayce come here now! Kicker's been hurt!"

Forgetting the game I closed the lid of the laptop, then ran down the stairs as fast as I could. I probably should have felt winded, but I didn't pause to think about it. Adrenaline ran through my system, and I felt as if I could run all the way to the barn in minutes. I fidgeted wanting to move, to do something, and the seconds it took my mom to reach us felt like hours.

Gasping for breath, she had ran too, she said, "What is it?!"

"The horses got attacked by a wolf yesterday, and Kicker got hurt." needing to hear nothing else, we ran to our car. John got in his, and we went to the barn as fast as we could without getting arrested. My adrenaline never stopped flowing. Eventually I had to know in those excruciating moments and I whispered, "Will Kicker be okay?"

My dad took a while to say anything, but fixating on the horizon, finally he said, "I don't know." I just looked at him hoping that he would add something like, "If we'll be able to have Kicker pretend to be hurt in time" but it never

came. I held back a sob, doing everything I could to invoke luck I could think of.

That day, Kronos the god of time must of decided to do his best to make me miserable, for every second felt like a life longer, every minute felt like a year, and somehow the worst parts of all of it seemed to last forever.

After a minute, I decided that I would run as soon as we got close, the next I decided that I would jump out of the car a couple of minutes sooner to allow myself a head start, the next I was ready to jump out then, but somehow I kept my sanity.

Still as soon as we approached the barn, I opened the door, and once my dad had slowed down enough, I jumped out, hurting my feet a little, then running, and running even faster than before to Kicker's stall. I could hear my parents following me with the first aid kit, I heard the slam of the door; John getting out of his car, then a shouted cry "Wait!" I needed to go now though, and ran even faster. The instant I got there, I understood the warning. He had wanted me prepared for what was to happen.

I saw a figure on the ground laying next to Kicker, a bloody wound reaching from his neck all the way to right

below the spot I would normally sit on Kicker. As I hesitantly came closer, I realized that it was Shelia. She must have known I had approached, I had made ruckus getting there, but she didn't seem to care. She lay with her head on Kicker's mane, crying. Seeing Kicker like that made all of my adrenaline from the want to see him rush away, and I was left with my exhausted, burned, tortured lungs. I wheezed badly for a couple of seconds, and would have gone on for minutes, had I not forced myself to look at Kicker. He had lost a lot of blood, and seemed to stare right through me as I wasn't there, I stifled a cry, and just stood there. Minutes later, wheezing, John came first, he came up to me and put his hand on me, no words were required.

Kicker had already been sedated, and wrapping the wound was a simple and quick enough task, but I stood there by Kicker's side for hours, even after Shelia left, and my parents went to the car to wait, I sat by Kicker's side. Why did it have to be me? Why did the wolf have to attack Kicker like that? Why? The last I said out loud, not meaning to, and its feeble sound hung suspended there in the silence.

I sat there for the rest of the day, twice food was offered, I refused. By nine my parents were worried that I wouldn't leave, and I would have, had John not come in.

As usual, I turned into a mute as soon as I heard someone come in, I didn't want to hear why I had to go home, I wanted to help, to heal Kicker, though perhaps not in the way that my parents and I had originally thought we would. Or rather how it was turning out to be, me. But John wouldn't let me look away into space, he kept on bobbing in front of my field of vision, and eventually I closed my eyes and sat on the ground waiting for him to leave. He sat there for a bit then sighed. "Look, as much as we both want to stay by Kicker's side all day, it won't help Kicker in the least."

I wanted to shout, "I don't want to abandon Kicker!" but of course John would only react on that and heave out my unwillingness to talk in a heartbeat. I stayed quiet. John obviously didn't want to stay the next part, but he said it anyways, "Look this will only harm you, Kicker will need you tomorrow, but now while he's been sedated, and can't even tell what's happening. I talked with your parents and they will let you watch, and help Kicker while the vet treats his wounds for infection."

I looked at John, and I realized how stupid I had been. This wouldn't help Kicker at all, he didn't need me now, but later. I spoke only one word, "Okay," but it was as if I had lit the fuse for some dynamite, and I was whisked away before I could change my mind.

The next day I slept in until twelve, my parents couldn't really blame me for that anyways, after all I had stayed up until six in the morning. I was glad though that I had been able to wake up. I had to leave in an hour if I wanted to be by Kicker's side the next day, not snoring in my room. As usual, I had my breakfast, and did all of those things I regularly did. But today was not a normal day. In an hour I would be overseeing a vet operation on a horse, let alone the fact that I owned the horse and he might die because of one stupid wolf.

I ate breakfast, lunch, whatever you want to call it, then got into our family's car, waited for my parents then had them get there as fast as they could. I knew we would be about half an hour early, but I really wanted to see Kicker before all of what would be happening, happened, and my parents obviously had questions about the procedure.

As soon as we got there, we got out, and went quickly towards Kicker's stall. Once there we found that both John and Shelia were already there they were trying to put Kicker onto a stretcher, both were having difficulties putting him properly on there, I could understand why, horses weighed hundreds of pounds sometimes. Plus, there were only two of them trying to lift up a horse all by themselves, an almost impossible task to say the least. But they were trying and that counted for something. They didn't realize that we had gotten there, but as soon as they felt Kicker budge, because of our combined strength, they definitely realized.

As we heaved Kicker onto the stretcher, John grunted with effort and said, "Many hands don't make light or easy work necessarily"

We had a little laugh at that, until, I accidentally got a lot of the weight of Kicker, "Ow!" I said as the weight rested on my shoe. Immediately they lifted it up higher, and I reached again for it, this time limping a little as we headed towards the trailer the barn owned.

As soon as we got there, I ran to the door and opened it, as planned, then they put the stretcher in the "Thanks for

the help. It's a good thing you came now, otherwise we never would have been able to transport him" said John, as he placed down Kicker.

"We just want Kicker to live," I said.

John looked at me for a while, until he finally said, "Look Kicker, though he is your horse, you don't have to do this"

I in turn looked at him, did he really expect me to abandon Kicker? I turned away not answering him. He sighed and started making Kicker as comfortable as possible. Then we waited, I didn't really why we were waiting, we needed to help Kicker as soon as possible. I even complained a couple of times, "why are we waiting." Finally, far after my patience had far exceeded its limit, I saw a car down the road, with three more trailing behind it. At first I didn't realize who they were, until I noticed Makayla in the first car. I then realized that all of them had come to help. My anger with John immediately vanished. I had been so silly, he just wanted to help Kicker, as everyone here did apparently.

There was another surprise in store for me, they had come mainly for Kicker, it hurt a little, but I was still happy

they had come, if not for me. It was never said their reason to come, but it was obvious regardless of what they said. They fawned over Kicker, not at all afraid to touch him, and why would they, he was sedated after all.

Later, once we all got into John's car who could, there were three other seats, I sat in shotgun, Isaac sat behind John, and Maya sat behind me. Everyone else was with Makayla's mom, or with Shelia. Everyone in the truck was quiet for a moment, until Isaac spoke up. "Kicker's the reason no other horse got hurt, they all were grazing, and it was lucky I was there, I had come to see ranger , but before I got him out of the field, this huge wolf came out of some bushes, and tried to get to Buttercup. But Kicker reared up and smashed his hooves onto the wolf's face, he wasn't injured somehow, and now he was mad."

Here John interjected "Isaac ran off to find me, he knew that he couldn't do anything besides that, by the time we got back there, Kicker had driven off the wolf, but he was injured, we bandaged him up, got an vet to come, and then you know the rest."

Trying to look on the bright side, I said, "Well at least Isaac compulsive talking hasn't come up."



Not fooled at the change of subject, still John responded, “The reason it took so long to get to Kicker was because Isaac was babbling on and on actually.”

Isaac blushed, and somehow, we all found that funny, even Isaac, and a greatly needed laughter boomed in the truck.

Once after what seemed like a year, we spotted the vet, the two cars parked, and we heaved Kicker out into the vet's. Though he was still heavy, this time he was much lighter, and since we were parked so close we didn't have to carry him as far. Once we were inside, we set Kicker onto the large cart they had prepared for Kicker. They then slid Kicker into one of the many rooms where they were caring for animals. Luckily, the vet who came in next to take care of him didn't shoo us away, she was obviously used to a large number of people waiting for an analysis of how the animal was. When the vet took off the bandages, I finally realized how extensive his injuries were. Just below where I would put his saddle on was covered with a long gaping gash, and his wrapped up leg was covered in dry blood.

After poking and prodding him a little more, he looked seriously at John, my heart sank, and I started to feel

weak in the legs, would Kicker die? If he lived I knew that I could be able to accept it, even if he was so maimed, that he couldn't be ridden, or even stand. I knew I would do anything to keep Kicker alive, I would mow lawns, work endless hours, research everything I could find out about medicine that might help Kicker, I would pay for any operation that would help kicker, even in the slightest, I couldn't let what happened to Muddy happen to Kicker. With a jolt I realized that I hadn't thought about Muddy's tragic death for a while, and I didn't feel ashamed, if Muddy was there he would be encouraging me to help Kicker, and pursue my dreams, not sit in a corner all day. But I also felt a little bad, I was dishonoring Muddy by forgetting about him, I couldn't let go of that. I struggled with that for what seemed a decade, until a voice seemed to whisper in my ear, "Forget about me, go on with your life, help other people, stop diseases that took my life take others." And suddenly a feeling of peace enveloped me in a bubble. All of this happened in seconds, and I was shocked at the speed of my thoughts, I had always been a quick thinker, but that fast level of thought was practically superhuman.

Then the vet spoke, "Your horse should be dead." immediately something in my stomach seemed to jump, that

meant that most likely, soon Kicker would be dying. Then the doctor continued saying, “He has several broken bones in his front left leg, he also has several wounds that will need to be stitched up.”

After taking that in, my mom said, “How much will it be to keep Kicker alive?”

The vet sighed, as if he hated breaking bad news to people. “50,000”

Then my dad asked quietly, but calmly, “And how much to put him to sleep?”

I barely noticed the vet’s answer of “400” I was so focused on what my dad had said. Putting Kicker to sleep was not an option.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Endless Sleep*

Later that day, after I had been brainstorming countless ways to raise money for Kicker, I still hadn't talked to my dad all day, not even when I had needed to edit some posters that I would put up around the neighborhood that day