

MYSTERY HORSE AT OAK LANE STABLE

by Kerri A. Lukasavitz

1. Saturday Morning

From down the hall, the kitchen wall clock cuckoo-cuckooed eight times as I sat and waited for what seemed, like, forever at the bottom of the stairs in our old bungalow house. I sighed.

The day I had been waiting for my whole entire life was finally here, and Mom and Dad slept late?

I had on an old pair of tan jodhpurs that were getting too small for me. The suede knee patch on my right pant's leg was coming off. I picked at a long, loose thread that was along the patch's edge, but all that did was make the patch come off some more.

Maybe Mom could sew it back on, or maybe I could finally get new riding breeches that fit me.

Dexter, my black cat with four white paws, played with the drawstring from the hood of my favorite purple sweatshirt that I was taking with me, that is, if we'd ever go. The sweatshirt lay in a lump on the oak floor near my striped stocking feet.

"It's going to be a super-duper day if they'd ever get up." I said to Dexter as I reached down and scratched him with both hands. I wiped off his shed fur on the front of my lucky T-shirt—the light blue one with the jumping horse iron-on decal on the front. It was tight and

faded-out, but I loved it anyway. I smoothed the front decal twice with my right palm for double the luck.

I finally heard footsteps walk across the creaky floorboards above me.

“Dad!” I yelled as I jumped to my feet. “Are you ready? Are we going soon?”

Mom appeared at the top of the steps, wearing her new yellow bathrobe and slippers. She finished braiding her long, dark hair, like mine, and tossed it over her left shoulder. She came down the carpeted stairs toward me.

“Cassie, why are you shouting?” she asked. She gently touched the top of my head as she stepped around me and made her way toward the kitchen. “I need some coffee. Do you want me to make you some breakfast before you go?”

“I already ate some cereal,” I lied. I couldn't eat now if I tried. “Is Dad up? Is he ready to go?” I tagged along behind her.

She plugged in the electric coffee percolator. “Your dad's getting dressed. He'll be down shortly. Are you sure you've had enough to—”

“Mom, I said I already ate.” I lied again and sat down at the kitchen table across from her. I wadded up my purple sweatshirt in my lap and jittered my right leg.

“I know you're excited, but can you stop wiggling your leg?” Mom said. “It's making the table shake.”

I stopped jittering.

Mom picked out a strip of yellow paint samples stashed on her side of the table, next to a stack of wallpaper books she put there last night. She held up the sunny paint color to the wall to see if she liked it. She was redecorating the kitchen.

“Do you want some orange juice?” she asked after a few minutes. The smell of fresh coffee filled the room. She got up to pour herself a cup. “I can get you a glass if—”

“Mom ... I'm fine.” I sat back against my chair and flopped my arms down by my sides.

“Don't forget Grandma Leona is coming for supper tonight.” Mom sat down and opened one of the thick wallpaper books. After she thumbed through it, she thumped it shut and then grabbed another one from the top of the stack next to her.

“I can tell her all about my new ... ” I shot straight up.

Dad yawned as he walked into the kitchen.

I bolted out of the chair and ran up to him. “Dad! Are you ready? Can we go?”

“Hey, Cass, in a little while,” he said after he hugged me and went to get a cup from the cabinet. “I need some coffee first.”

I sank back into my chair. He sat down next to Mom, took her hand, and squeezed it. She smiled at him. They acted all lovey-dovey a lot lately.

Gross.

Dad started taking teeny-tiny sips of his coffee. First, he looked at Mom and then at me. I was pretty sure he was teasing me, but wasn't certain.

“I talked with Margaret at the grocery store yesterday,” Mom said. “Said her husband lost his job last week. They didn't know how they were going to pay the bills if he doesn't find work right away.”

“That's terrible,” Dad said after he took another sip of coffee. “There are so many people without jobs. I wish this economy would turn around soon.”

“We're so fortunate you got the promotion at work,” Mom said as she reached across the table and squeezed Dad's hand. “We know what it's like to try and make ends meet.”

Dad nodded and sipped his coffee.

I thumped my right heel against the chair's bottom rail.

Can we go now?

“Is the newspaper here?” Dad asked. “I want to see if there’s anything about President Ford ending the Vietnam War.”

My shoulders slumped. I slid down further in my seat. I looked at him.

Paper? Dad was going to read the paper? How much longer did I have to wait?

“Just kidding.” He smiled and winked at Mom. “I can read it later. Ready?”

I got up so fast my chair tipped over. The clattering noise scared Dexter, who ran out of the kitchen. I picked up the chair and pushed it back under the table.

“Cassandra Marychna Lena Piotrowski, that's a new chair!” Mom said. She only called me that when she meant business. “Ed, make sure you are sensible about this. Nothing too big or too wild or anything she can't handle. I don't want her getting hurt.” She looked over the chair to make sure I didn't put any scratches on it.

“Don't worry, I trust Stan Hoffman,” Dad said. “He's been the manager of Oak Lane Stable for over 25 years and knows his stuff. I'm sure the places he's lined up for us today will have decent horses for Cassie to look at and ride.”

“Just make sure.” She looked up at Dad as he bent down and kissed her on the lips.

Oh, super-duper-gross!

I ran out onto the back porch to put on my brown paddock boots as fast as I could. I sat on the floor and put the right one on. I started to lace it up—

Snap!

The lace broke again. This was the third time in a week it broke. I tied another knot and looked down at the cracked leather boots. I needed new ones. Dexter came to see what I was doing and wanted to play with the laces, but I wouldn't let him this time. I pushed him away.

“Come on, Dad!” I opened the screen door and let it close behind me with a bang.

“Don't slam the door!” Mom shouted from the kitchen.

I raced out into the yard toward Dad's new 1975 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. Dad laughed when he got to the glassy midnight blue car. “It's a good thing the stable is only a few miles from here. What would I do with you if it was further away?”

“I can't help it.” I buckled the front seat's lap belt. “I've waited for this day for, like, forever.”

“Well, I wouldn't say it's been forever.” He backed the car away from the garage, put it in gear, and drove down our gravel driveway. “You've been able to help out at the stable, and you've had riding lessons for the past few years.”

“It's not the same.” I looked down and played with my purple sweatshirt's zipper.

“I know you've always wanted your own horse, Cass, but it's been hard for us,” Dad said as he turned on the car's AM radio. “I'm lucky I got the promotion, especially with the economy the way it is. I had to pay for the mortgage and for groceries and the dentist and the—”

“Okay, Dad, I get it.” I sat up straighter.

We drove through the Southeastern Wisconsin countryside where we lived. Black and white spotted Holstein dairy cows grazed outside in hilly pastures. Farmers drove tractors on the road as they pulled field equipment behind them, on their way to cultivate crops they had planted. We passed farmhouses with rich red milking barns and deep cobalt blue silos where generations of families had lived and worked the land.

The road curved around and through steep hillsides covered with maple, elm, and oak trees. Our neighbors waved to us if they were out in their yards and saw us driving by. My two best friends, Ingrid Svendson and Allison Greene, lived close by, just down the road from our house, but no one was home as we sped past.

And there were two small farms that had a few horses outside in pastures that I could look at on my way to and from Oak Lane Stable. Where we lived wasn't like the horse country in Kentucky or Virginia or New York, with their fancy estates that I saw in my horse books, but at least everyone was friendly.

"Where are we going to look for horses?" I asked, turning toward Dad.

"Stan's arranged some meetings with several owners in the area." Dad adjusted the radio's volume knob. Elton John's newest hit, *Philadelphia Freedom*, finished playing and America's song, *A Horse With No Name*, came on next. "He's lined up three places for us this morning."

I sang along to the song in my head. I still played with my sweatshirt zipper. I grabbed the door's armrest and sat up straight. The stable's large sign, installed by the side of the road and at the end of the blacktop driveway, came into view. It read,

Oak Lane Stable

Hunters - Jumpers

Lessons - Training - Boarding - Sales

My chest tingled whenever I saw the entrance.

Hello, over one hundred acres of pure horse heaven!

"Will I get to ride?" I wiggled around in my seat.

"I suppose so, if the horse is decent enough for you," Dad said. "Stan's got a good eye for this. He'll let us know if one horse is better than another."

Dad turned into the long driveway lined with leafing-out oak trees and drove toward the barns. White fenced-in pastures ran along both sides of the drive. On my left, turned-out horses swished flies and grazed on the dew-covered grass that sparkled in the morning sunlight. To my right, Joe McLaine, Oak Lane Stable's professional rider, trained one of the show jumpers, Night Hawk, over the cross-country course. The course's solid jumps were tough to ride. Only experienced riders and horses were allowed to use it. Those of us who weren't old enough to ride the course used a riding path on the left sides of the jumps but only if no one was training the show horses.

Just think if Night Hawk was MY new horse and we were riding over the cross-country course. His long strides would cover the ground as we'd approach the next fence. I'd settle my seat deeper into the saddle, tighten my knees and lower legs, and push my weight further down into my heels. I'd check my reins to make contact with his mouth. Then, with a powerful push from his hindquarters, we'd soar over the jump, land safely on the other side, and gallop off to the next obstacle—

"Looks like Mrs. O'Mally is coming down for a visit." Dad's voice startled me.

Mrs. O'Mally, the owner of the stable, was almost as tall as Dad. She wore a full set of riding clothes and was old like Grandma Leona. She walked toward the barn along a brick pathway lined with low bushes and brightly-colored spring flowers. The path went all the way from her mansion's front steps to the brick pattern at the stable's main entrance doors.

Her troop of seven little dogs chased each other around her feet. Mrs. O'Mally had told me they were Jack Russell terriers. The terriers all had navy and light gray dog coats on (they matched the stable's colors). She suddenly stopped them and bent down. She pointed a finger at

two of the dogs. It looked like they were biting each other's coats. She fixed the problem, and they walked on. I hoped I'd still be riding when I was as ancient as she was.

When we reached the pale gray main barn trimmed in dark navy, Dad found a spot to park among the other cars. We got out. Horses whinnied. An occasional hoof kicked a stall wall. Someone shouted inside the stable. Several women riders talked to each other as they came out of the open barn door with their saddled horses. Once mounted, they rode over to a small group of boarders who walked their horses in the front ring where the hunt course was set up. They waited to start their usual Saturday morning lesson with Claire Ferguson, Oak Lane Stable's riding instructor.

"I'll find Stan." Dad walked toward the open arched doorway of the barn. "Morning, Mrs. O'Mally. I see you've brought the hounds with you."

Mrs. O'Mally and the seven terriers were nearly to the stable. The terriers played around her feet. Two of them ran up to me. They were cute.

"Good morning, Ed," Mrs. O'Mally said. "I have to bring them along. They get into trouble if I leave them unattended in the house. They've already ruined one of my best oriental rugs by chewing off all of the fringe."

"Sorry to hear that. Well, I have to find Stan. Have a good morning." Dad walked into the barn.

"Hi," I said to Mrs. O'Mally. I patted the heads of the two terriers. They seemed to like it.

She smiled at me. "Hi, Cassie. I understand you have a big day today. Stan told me you're going to look for a horse. Remember, make sure it suits you perfectly. You don't want to make any mistakes with such a big investment."

"I'll remember," I said. "Are you going to ride this morning?"

“Yes, after I find out from Joe how Night Hawk schooled this morning. Have to run, dear. Good luck with your horse hunting.” She gave a short whistle, and the terriers gathered around her feet. She and the troop walked off to meet up with Joe, who was still riding Night Hawk on the cross-country course.

I leaned against the car and watched the riders in the front ring. I took a deep breath. Mowed grass mixed in with the oat straw and woodsy smell of stall shavings. Fresh hay mingled with sweaty horses. Tack leather merged with citrusy fly spray. Heaven!

I heard the clomping of shod hooves. I turned to see a girl my age, slightly shorter than me, appear in the open barn door. Her neat blond braid ran down the front of her tucked-in polo shirt and nearly ended at the thin black belt buckled around the waist of her pale beige breeches. Her tall, highly-polished black boots had a pair of smooth-nobbed silver spurs strapped onto each ankle. She held her black velvet riding helmet in her left hand.

I clenched my teeth.

Great. Lisa.

Lisa Schmidt, my classmate and riding rival since 5th grade, led her showy chestnut horse, Go The Distance, outside. After she tightened the girth and pulled down the stirrup irons, she used the outside mounting block to swing up onto her horse.

Maybe she won't see me. Maybe she'll go over to the other riders and leave me alone.

I wasn't so lucky.

“Hi, Cassie,” Lisa said with phony niceness as she rode toward me. “Are you going to ride today? Oh ... that's right ... you only get to ride one of the school horses for your lesson.”

“I'm not having a lesson this morning.” I didn't want to tell her, but it slipped out. “My dad is going to buy a horse for me today.”

“You're getting a horse?” Her eyes widened first, then she squinted. “Get real.”

“Stan's helping us look for one.” I looked up at her and folded my arms across my chest.

Lisa looked down at me from the back of her horse. She rolled her eyes, pulled on her right rein, and pressed her horse with her heels. As she rode off toward the ring, she turned her head and said over her left shoulder, “Can't wait to see what you get. Probably some runt pony or a dorky donkey or a ... ”

I couldn't hear her last words. Lisa had turned to watch where she was going. She walked up to another girl rider, who was sitting on her horse near the open gate. They both looked at me, giggled, and then rode into the front ring.

“Cass, let's go.” Dad and Stan had walked out of the barn.

I made a face at Lisa she didn't see, turned away from the ring, and ran over to them. “Hi, Stan.”

“Hi, Cassie,” Stan said. “Ready?”

“You bet I am!” I walked next to them.

We went over to the stable's old truck and got in. I wiggled around to find a comfortable spot on the lumpy seat between Dad and Stan. By the end of the day, I'd have my own horse.

Books by Kerri Lukasavitz (www.kerrilukasavitz.com):

Mystery Horse at Oak Lane Stable (Book 1)

Gray Horse at Oak Lane Stable (Book 2)

Dark Horse at Oak Lane Stable (Book 3) - Coming soon!

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