

LEGEND OF THE CROWN

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Bedside Books
An imprint of American Book Publishing
P.O. Box 65624
Salt Lake City, UT 84165
www.american-book.com

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Legend of the Crown

Designed by Bo Allan, design@american-book.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 1-58982-116-5

Allred, Stephen, Legend of the Crown

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LEGEND OF THE CROWN

by

Stephen Allred

Dedication

To my daughter, Kayla, whose love for unicorns is exceeded only by my love for her.

Foreword

Author: Joy Butler

Published on: April 21, 2002

<http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/13668>

1978 still stands as the last year to see a Triple Crown winner in thoroughbred racing. The '78 season was made even more spectacular by two chestnut colts named Affirmed and Alydar. Their fierce rivalry from June 1977 to August 1978 tested the hearts of both champions, and thrilled the hearts of all racing fans. Affirmed was born February 21, 1975, at Harbor View Farm in Florida, owned by Louis and Patrice Wolfson, trained by Lazaro Barrera, and ridden by the teenaged Steve Cauthen. Alydar was born at Calumet Farm near Lexington, Kentucky, on March 23, 1975, trained by John Veitch, and ridden by Jorge Velasquez.

The two colts met at Belmont Park in 1977, in the Youthful Stakes. When Affirmed won the race and Alydar came in fifth, no one could have predicted the exciting rivalry that was to come. On July 6, 1977, they met again, in the Great American Stakes, and this time Alydar beat out Affirmed by three and one-half lengths. On August 27, at Saratoga, each horse came to the Hopeful Stakes with four wins out of five races. It was either horse's race, but this time it was Affirmed's turn to edge out Alydar, yet only by a half length.

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Their next duel took place at Belmont Park once again, in the Futurity Stakes on September 10. At the eighth pole, Alydar was ahead by a nose but Affirmed nosed him out at the wire. A month later, in the Champagne Stakes, Alydar made an explosive comeback and passed Affirmed in the stretch to win by a length and a half. However, Affirmed would not remain defeated, and on October 29, in the Laurel Futurity, the two battled through the stretch in a test of true courage, with Affirmed crossing the finish a neck ahead of Alydar. From October until May, Affirmed and Alydar went their separate ways. Affirmed raced successfully on the west coast, and Alydar had impressive wins on the east coast.

By the time the two met again, in the Kentucky Derby, the suspense had reached a fever pitch. Racing fans were divided over which champion would take the first jewel of the Triple Crown, but, by race time, Alydar was the slight favorite, with Affirmed a close second. When the starting gates burst open that May afternoon, eleven thoroughbreds thundered around a fast track, but in the stretch, nine of them were trailing Alydar, who was fast closing on Affirmed. However, his magnificent run was not quite enough, and Affirmed claimed the Roses by a length and a half. Suspense heightened in anticipation of the next Triple Crown race.

By Preakness day, Affirmed was the favorite. That May 20, at Pimlico, Affirmed and Alydar once again faced each other in a blistering stretch duel, but in the end, it was Affirmed who wore the black-eyed susans. Alydar had one last chance to upset the Triple Crown that year. Only five horses dared challenge these two in the Belmont Stakes. Throughout the race, Alydar stayed with Affirmed. Over sixty-five thousand fans cheered the duo as they pounded down the stretch nose to nose. Alydar bobbed ahead. Affirmed accepted the challenge, reaching deep within his heart to produce one more powerful surge. Affirmed edged out Alydar at the wire, by a head, to stand in the winner's circle as the eleventh Triple Crown winner. Alydar stood in his shadow by the slimmest margin ever.

The two, before retirement, met one more time in the Traverse Stakes on August 19, 1978. Affirmed, in the lead, moved toward the rail, hemming in Alydar. Alydar was forced to pull up briefly, then recovered to make a powerful drive to the wire, but it was not enough.

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Affirmed finished first. Later, in a decision that has remained controversial, stewards reversed the order of finish. The rivalry of the century had, thus, ended. Affirmed held seven wins out of ten races, yet Alydar came closer that year to a Triple Crown than any horse since. Had fate been less cruel, had Alydar been born in another year, history would have recorded another Triple Crown. As fate so craftily designed, a total of less than two lengths cost Alydar the Crown. Yet Alydar, a true champion, made Affirmed work harder for his Triple Crown than any other horse ever had, making 1978 one of the most memorable and exciting years in horse racing history.

Preface

As the father of a seven-year-old girl, I derive a tremendous amount of pleasure in seeing her eyes light up when I am able to give her something she desires. However, there are times I am unable or simply can't afford to offer these things to her. So, when she came to me one night in the summer of 2001 and asked me to tell her a story about a unicorn, the next day I seized the opportunity to do just that, but in a way most might not ever imagine pursuing.

I sat down to write my very first novel. Inspired by her request, I came up with a wonderful idea to tell a story about a unicorn in a context never done before. I was so excited about the concept, that I had my first draft of an outline done in just a few hours. The plot seemed to flow so simply onto the page, but transforming that framework into a complete novel with over seventy-five thousand words was a far more difficult task than I could have predicted.

It was early in the project when September 11 turned all of our lives upside down for a while. I watched in horror as our nation's innocence was ripped away in a moment and we had to face the world from that day on with a threat that had never before felt so close.

When I continued to write and followed the main character, Cassie, on her journey through her loss of innocence to face the world on her own two feet, I recognized some interesting parallels as our country struggled to do the same. And as all strong characters do in the end, a way to survive and persevere was eventually attained.

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I have been so pleased with the results and cannot wait for others to relive the adventure again through their own experience of reading this story. I believe unicorn enthusiasts will find this to be a very fresh outlook on the common legend of the magical creature.

Almost every little girl at some point dreams about having a pony or horse, or even finding her very own unicorn. The fascination is as basic for them as cars are for little boys. This story was written to fulfill that fantasy, if only for a little while, for girls young and old. And for all you fathers out there that try your best to be everything for your little girl, this story is also for you.

“It takes a special horse to win the Triple Crown.”

– Steve Cauthen, the jockey who rode Affirmed in 1978

At the time of this publication, the Triple Crown has not been achieved for nearly twenty-five years.

Prologue

Cassie knelt down to the gravestone in front of her. A gentle look of sadness was on her face, and yet her sapphire blue eyes seemed to indicate that the moment upon her was not one without a sense of closure and understanding. Although still a young woman, her manner suggested a life that had been rich with wisdom and experience. In her hands, she clutched a long-stemmed red rose. Her thumb traced the sharp perimeters of the thorns within reach as she reflected silently on her life. We are born into this world trusting everyone and everything, she thought to herself. Then you start living your life and the world tries at every turn to challenge your belief in others and yourself. A small breeze blew in from the west over the green Kentucky pasture, blowing her beautiful long, blond hair as if nature itself was trying to comfort her as she placed the rose on top of the headstone and closed her eyes.

She stood up slowly and exhaled, trying to put behind her the feelings of remorse and regret. She opened her eyes and looked over at a headstone marking another grave next to the one she was standing over. There was a third grave with a carved statue of a horse adorning its placement. All three memorials were shaded by the late afternoon shadow of the timeless oak above. A large part of her past lay buried before her as she gathered with friends and family on this day to say goodbye to another. The sight of these stone links to her past steered her memories.

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She sighed and thought to herself, I was certainly no exception to the presence of pain in a person's life. By the time my mother died when I was twelve, I had convinced myself that I was alone in this world. She looked up and stared at the horizon. Looking down the hill, the shadows of the clouds were slowly rolling over the green landscape, effortlessly passing over all obstacles to attain an unknown destination beyond the limits of her vision. Another breeze climbed up the hill and reached for her hair again. She slowly removed the few strands away from her eyes and drew a look of inner confidence and peace as she recalled how her adventure had begun.

Her life growing up had twisted into such a tragedy with so much personal suffering to endure after that one horrific day. But on the fourth anniversary of her mother's death, something amazing happened that would change her perception of the world. That day had begun with a nightmare, like so many other days during those four years. The reliving of that tragic day through her dreams haunted her for years. She conjured up the image of herself as a tiny girl, much younger than the twelve-year old that had actually experienced the trauma, wandering through the events of that day, so innocent to the sudden change in her life that was about to occur. A gentle smile emerged from Cassie's thoughtful expression as the memories of that day and the years to follow played out before her.

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It was an early spring morning. The sun started to break over the horizon and chase away the morning mist that had blanketed the land. The clouds revealed their hidden colors as the light passed between and through them, leaving rays across the sky that danced with shades of night and day. As the mist lifted and unveiled the damp earth from underneath, majestic figures standing like statues emerged into sight and moved slowly across the deep, rich green grass of the pastures. These mighty thoroughbreds ignored the beauty unfolding around them as they grazed in nature's first light. As the sun warmed the air, several of the beasts seemed to be energized by the morning's progress and increased their activity. The rumble of their sprints as they paralleled the fenced barriers sounded like distant rolling thunder from a storm far away.

At the place known as Churchill Downs, the legendary home of horse racing in Louisville, Kentucky, workers were busy preparing the historic site for the year's most important day. The morning of the Kentucky Derby had arrived and Churchill Downs was being readied to host the first leg of the famous Triple Crown, a series that produced the most legendary of winners in the sport. The victor in this famed sprint would then challenge in the Preakness in Maryland and then the Belmont Stakes in New York over the next five weeks. Most contenders rarely looked beyond the first leg at this course, for without a victory here there was no chance to obtain the elusive Crown.

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Unchanged for years, the sights and sounds of past glories still resonated from this sacred place. Names like Secretariat and Affirmed echoed in the conversations of spectators that traveled every year to possibly be a witness to the sport's next page in history.

The candidates for this year's Crown stirred in anticipation within their prized stables. For each one that stood ready to run the one historic lap, there existed hundreds of nominees that never made it this far, and were ensured never to again. The opportunity to run the Derby is a rare privilege not understood by those who run the furlongs, but rather those who raise and train them to do so. It was the Holy Grail for race enthusiasts abound. If you were talented enough to win the Derby, trying to complete the Triple Crown was certainly one of the most difficult challenges in all of sports. Not only do you have to hold off the world's fastest challengers for three consecutive races, but imagine only having one opportunity in the life of your thoroughbred to accomplish that goal. Only three-year olds can attempt the series sweep. How difficult is it to win? After Affirmed won in 1978, no other horse to follow accomplished it by the turn of the century, and only a handful came close at all.

The facilities were cleaned and polished for the guests of the day. The trainers guided the powerful three-year-old athletes from their stalls to stretch their legs and get the blood pumping for the task ahead of them.

Further away from the milling of the gathering crowds were the rooms that offered solitude for the jockeys to prepare. Their eyes displayed the focus and determination of the years of training and competition they had endured to arrive on the highest stage of achievement.

At the stables, a man carried equipment to a stall that held a handsome creature. Tall and magnificent in her appearance, she turned to see the man approaching. The rust-colored filly caught the rays of the late morning sun on her neck. Her brass nameplate reflected a bright patch of sunlight onto the floor below. It displayed the name "Majesty," which seemed more of a reference to the mere presence of the animal than a simple name. That presence was not lost on the man who took great care in placing the riding gear on Majesty's massive body. As she was equipped with her gear, her anything but ordinary appearance now took on an extraordinary look of steadfast determination.

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In the jockeys' dressing rooms, a young and beautiful woman was adjusting the last few touches on her uniform as she checked herself in the mirror. It was a white outfit, trimmed with gold that outlined the stitching. Her long, black boots reached up just beneath her knees and were shined so much that you could see a slight reflection of the room within them. She was thin and of average height, but her eyes emanated a gorgeous blue, and her hair was a shiny blond that seemed to contain its own brilliance without the need for the surrounding light. She smiled in satisfaction at her reflection. An almost arrogant look of confidence surrounded her demeanor as she looked at the young, delicate girl standing at her feet. Almost a miniature of her mother, the child demonstrated beauty, grace, and innocence even at such a young age. It was like looking through a tunnel of time, staring at her daughter. She wondered what wonderful things awaited her in the future. She knelt down and reached into her bag. She retrieved a single, long-stemmed red rose from inside and handed it gently to her daughter. The girl smiled as she inhaled the rich fragrance of the red petals. The woman stood and took her daughter's hand as they walked out of the room together.

Outside among the stables, the activity was mounting. The girl, still holding her mother's hand, looked around in wonder at the magnificent animals that passed around her. She tugged at her mother's arm a few times to point out a horse of a particular color or all the jockeys passing by. As a child, still innocent and naïve, she did not sense the concentration and focus her mother was building inside to serve her in the coming hour.

From around a corner, they saw Majesty being escorted toward them. The man holding the reins slowly approached them.

"Good morning, Grace," he said with a cordial smile. "Good luck today." He raised the reins out to her as she reached for them.

"Thank you," she acknowledged, focusing more on Majesty as she reached out and grabbed the reins from him.

The man looked at the little girl clutching Grace's other hand. "And good luck to you as well, Cassie," he said, as he reached out with his finger and touched the end of her nose. Cassie smiled at him as she shied away from his friendly touch. She showed him the rose she was carrying and he leaned down to inhale the petals.

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“Come on, princess,” Grace said, as she grabbed her daughter’s attention away from the kind man. “You can help me get Majesty stretched out.”

The man waved goodbye as Cassie was helped up into Majesty’s saddle. Grace grabbed the reins again and led Majesty to the area of the stables where the thoroughbreds were being walked about to prepare them for the moments ahead.

Cassie took in the view of the stands where the crowds were gathering. It was a scene she had witnessed at the other tracks her mom had raced, but none before seemed to have carried the same type of congregation. The women were finely dressed and the men very stately and proper. It was an almost regal host of people, all conversing and watching the preparation before them. From a nearby area of the stands, Cassie heard a man shouting Grace’s name and waving. She turned and recognized Lord Lance Van Deberg, the man who owned Majesty and, consequently, the one for whom her mother worked. His looks were striking for his age, his hair showing silver highlights through a sea of jet-black. A well-kept goatee adorned his chin, obscured only slightly by the ever-present pipe he insisted on smoking. Cassie could still remember the pungent odor enough to still make a face upon seeing it, even from a distance where she did not have to share the same polluted air as the unfortunate ones gathered around him.

Grace acknowledged his wave with a nod as Lance raised his brass tipped cane in a gesture of good fortune. Beside him, his wife, Lady Victoria, also waved at Grace. Cassie took the opportunity to join her mother in a cordial reply. Victoria returned her gesture with a delicately blown kiss in her direction. Victoria reminded Cassie in many ways of how the evil stepmother looked in Cinderella, which she had watched a thousand times as she was growing up. She did not find her to be the same type of person, but the physical characteristics fit, right down to the pointed jaw that seemed to plant a permanent frown on her face. It appeared to be an effort for Victoria to convince the muscles in her face to produce a smile. However, Lady Victoria was her grandmother, and so Cassie pretended most of the time to like her. Lance, on the other hand, was not very pleasant to Cassie at all. Many times, he would barely acknowledge she was around. She always was thankful that he was not her real grandfather, and her mother never forced her to manu-

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facture the same kind of affection for him that Cassie may have displayed for Victoria.

Race time was approaching. Grace started to help Cassie off of Majesty. At that moment, Majesty suddenly bolted a little forward. Grace nearly dropped Cassie as she reached to regain a firm grasp on the reins. Grace walked up to Majesty and placed her hand on the horse's sturdy neck to calm her. The mighty horse shook her head a few times but then relaxed under the soothing strokes of Grace's touch. She reached for Cassie again and helped her jump to the ground.

Cassie looked up and smiled at her mom. She always felt safe and secure around her, a feeling she trusted and believed in every day. The man that had spoken with them earlier had appeared again and walked up to them.

"This gentleman is going to take you to the side of the track near the starting gate so you can watch the race," Grace said, as she leaned down slightly to speak to Cassie. "Would you like that?"

Cassie nodded her head. She noticed that the light around her mother's face had begun to change to a pale color of yellow and tan. Looking around, she realized the change was not contained only to her mother, but to everything around her. Suddenly, things were starting to move in slow motion. A slightly sick feeling was building from deep within her. She reached down to her stomach but failed to feel the sensation of her fingers against her body.

She watched as Majesty was slowly escorted into the starting gates with her mother sitting proudly in the saddle. As Majesty approached the small compartment, she jolted backwards, causing Grace to slip forward a little. The thoroughbred shifted back and forth as the escorts tried to maneuver her into place. Finally, Majesty obeyed and slowly entered the starting gate.

Grace looked over at her daughter, still clutching the rose in her delicate hand and smiled. Cassie looked around again to see the crowd but the noise from the stands had stopped. The people were talking but Cassie could not hear them. They blurred away into obscurity as she turned around to face her mother again. Like looking through a bottle, she found a point where she could see her in the gate clearly, leaving the perimeters of her sight distorted. The sickening sensation had been

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replaced with the sound of a heartbeat. The pounding volume started to slowly intensify until soon it was all she could hear.

Then it happened. As if she expected it, Cassie watched as Majesty made a sharp, powerful jolt inside the gate. The sudden movement flung Grace to the front of the gate, where she lost her balance and fell in slow motion behind Majesty's bucking head and out of sight to the floor of the gates.

Majesty then lost all control, violently struggling in a complete panic, like nothing Cassie had seen from her before. Her bucking motion pounded in concert with the audible heartbeat. Cassie grabbed the fence to try to climb over it, but it now towered over her, stretching to the sky into obscurity. She watched as people started running toward the gate to help. The entire structure rocked back and forth under the powerful motions of the uncontrollable horse.

The rose slipped out of Cassie's hand. As it fell slowly to the ground, the doors were opened and Cassie was able to see the floor of the gate where her mother had fallen. The heartbeat stopped abruptly as the rose hit the ground.

"Mommy!"

Cassie opened her eyes as she jerked herself up in the bed, awakening from the nightmare that seemed, once again, too real. The horrifying images from her dream would now plague her for the next few days before any semblance of normal thoughts could overshadow their presence. It would be only a matter of time after that relief that the dream was bound to return, and the cycle would repeat. She had learned to cope with it for the past four years since that tragic day, but her fears lately were that the nightmares would never cease.

She reached up with her hands and cradled her head as she tried to recapture her normal breathing. A slight perspiration had formed on her brow that she wiped away with a rub from her fingers. Peering over at her digital clock, she read the time. Only 5:23a.m., but it seemed later. The light from an apparently bright moon was the only source of illumination that entered the room from her open window. The cool night air traveled in on soft breezes, blowing her silk curtains back and forth on the gentle waves.

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She slid over and sat on the edge of her bed, catching herself as the sudden movement caused a moment of disorientation. Exhaling a little, not wanting to start this dreaded day, she got to her feet and walked toward the window.

The soft rays of moonlight reflected off of her face. Her body was draped in a bluish glow, her nightgown blowing in tandem with her long hair. The early morning still had not invited the sounds of the pasture that would soon be heard when the sun arrived. The crickets had continued their dominance of sound throughout the night air as they sung endlessly, cloaked in darkness within a thousand hiding places.

Cassie deeply inhaled the moist air outside her window as she attempted to breathe in the same tranquility that was so prevalent on the land below her second-story bedroom. Her head sunk into her shoulders as she leaned forward in realization that such peace was not to be acquired so easily.

Turning her head to the left, she saw the picture frames that covered the top of her dresser. She reached over and grabbed a picture she kept out in front of all the rest. It was a picture of her mother, smiling directly at her as she held the frame in the dim light. She pulled the frame closer to her chest and clutched it with both hands. Closing her eyes, she hugged the picture to her heart, listening intently to the sounds of the crickets outside. She had hoped to hear a recognizable pattern of noise, which would reassure her that her thoughts were not completely isolated from the spiritual world. She opened her eyes and tried to convince herself that she heard something, anything. She looked out to the east and saw the initial light of day creeping up from the horizon. With that came the shape of a single tree taking form on a distant hill. Cassie took the picture away from her chest and gently placed it back on the top of her dresser. She then moved over to her closet and grabbed a few articles of clothing to put on.

The early morning air was quite typical for a day in early May outside the city of Lexington, Kentucky. The fragrance of budding plants soaking up the morning dew and the sounds of the chorus of insects were so much more intense before sunrise. With the sense of sight so diminished, the less dominant senses of smell and hearing were able to fully capture the environment surrounding Cassie as she walked to the

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stables a short distance from the back of the house. Once inside, she walked down the row of stalls housing the thoroughbreds. The gentle creatures were a common sight among the pastures over the past four years. They spent all their time finding the next spot to graze among the available acres until it was time to retire to this nightly abode. It was an old, drafty place that creaked under even mild winds and had more than its fair share of unwanted occupants in the rafters and dark corners. At night, the surroundings could even be described as spooky, but they never seemed to bother the equine inhabitants. Cassie shuffled her feet, repositioning the clumps of straw that lay scattered on the dirt floor. The unmistakable scent of animals overpowered the morning air that Cassie was beginning to find comfort in. She strolled down near the end with her eyes fixed on the last stall. Several of the tenants were alerted to her presence and began moving around. They hung their massive heads over the gates in anticipation of their first meal of the day, snorting and breathing heavily in the early morning air. The end stall remained quiet and still. She stood for a moment, her eyes revealing a troubled feeling. It was a kind of potent frustration that appeared to consume her. Not stepping any closer to the end stall, she detoured to an adjacent stall and opened the gate to bring out a horse that had been nodding his head up and down occasionally since she had arrived. She grabbed the riding gear on the floor in front of the stall and outfitted the anxious thoroughbred for a morning ride.

After taking a few moments to properly equip her eager partner, Cassie climbed up into the saddle and grabbed the reins. She circled the great beast around to get one more look at the dark stall that had remained silent during her entire stay. She snapped the reins again and kicked her feet to urge the horse forward and out of the stables.

As the horse cleared the threshold and was permitted to pick up speed, Cassie maneuvered him through the fence and into the grazing pasture that dominated the bulk of the property around the farm. From the outset, there appeared to be no boundaries to the size of the field. On the distant horizons, areas of the extreme perimeter could be seen along the tree line to her left and right. Directly ahead were several small hills. The break of dawn was now fast approaching as the eastern sky filled with pinkish-orange highlights among the thin clouds that had assembled near the approaching sun. Cassie could hear her horse

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breathing as she continued to press him on to full speed. The wind was blowing steadily past her ears. The morning air still had a chill in it, but it was fast disappearing as the sun's approach chased away the last remnants of the night.

She crossed over a small hill and another hill rose ahead of her with one large oak tree perched at the top. Cassie adjusted her course slightly to guide the stallion straight to that location. As she drew nearer, the shape of a headstone could be made out at the base of the tree. She insisted on more speed from the animal, but it could not give her any more. Within moments, she arrived and brought the tired steed to a halt under the tree.

With the rush of air removed from her ears, the sounds of nature returned to the forefront. Two birds were singing their morning duet in the tree above her. Cassie kept her focus on the headstone in front of her as she dismounted her horse and reached into the saddlebag.

Cassie removed her hand from the bag, holding a long-stemmed red rose between her fingers. She held it in front of her chest as she slowly walked up to the headstone. She knelt before the grave and the birds, possibly sensing the reverence beneath them, ceased their song and allowed Cassie her moment of silence. The headstone read GRACE FERGUSON 1959-1995. She closed her eyes as the world around her seemed to come to a stop. She drifted away to the fond memories of her mother. She remembered all the special times they had enjoyed together. The way her mother would sing a song to her every night when she was a little girl. The notes still echoed in her mind. The song would arise in her memory sometimes at night before she fell asleep. There were also times when she would be just drifting off that her mother's gentle and kind face would hover over her, making her feel safe and warm. The thought of never seeing her mother again was more than she could bear at times. It was those desperate moments that brought the nightmares, and last night was a desperate time. The dreaded anticipation of this day had haunted her every hour before she finally fell asleep last night. The nightmare replayed as it often did. She always saw herself in it as a much younger girl than she actually was at the time, standing helplessly by as the events unfolded before her. Although she was twelve when the tragedy occurred, her dreams never represented that fact. Perhaps it was how she viewed the world at that time, naïve

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and innocent to the pain that was out there waiting for her in the world. Until that tragic moment, she had never given a thought to life's unpredictability. Afterwards, it was the only certainty she knew.

As she opened her eyes, she took the rose and placed it upon the headstone. The sun in the distance broke the horizon. Morning had arrived over the tranquil landscape. The rays found her eyes as she gave one last look at her mother's resting place. She rose and turned away.

As she climbed back on her horse, the birds returned to their song and Cassie could not help but feel that the world was still pushing her to continue her life, even though at times she found it difficult to do so. She turned around and directed her horse back toward the house.

Richard Ferguson walked slowly down the stairs of his home and toward the kitchen. He had a soft expression with his short hair and thick, stubbly facial hair that would have formed an attractive beard if he ever allowed it to grow out. He stumbled down the hall, looking still tired from the sleep. He was not very tall, but maintained the solid build expected from a man who tended a farm every day. His plaid pajamas looked old and worn, not reflecting the general care that would be customary with a woman's presence. This was not surprising since no woman had been around for some time. His hair was ruffled about, and he walked with a slight correction at times as he fought off the effects from a hard night's sleep.

Cassie was sitting at the small four-chaired table in the corner eating her breakfast as he entered the kitchen. She had fixed herself an omelet and appeared to have left the mess in the sink for someone else to clean up. Richard shook his head slightly as he walked over to the counter, knowing who that designated cleaner always turned out to be. At least she had brewed a fresh batch of coffee, but probably because she just wanted some herself. If she had consumed the entire pot prior to his awakening, he would not have been surprised. He shrugged a little, trying to chase away the negative thoughts, as he poured a cup for himself. Biting his tongue had become a well-practiced art over the last few years.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, looking down at his coffee cup, wondering if the cup he was drinking from was clean or not. Dismissing the thought, he realized Cassie had failed to answer him. Normally,

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he might believe a person had just not heard him. He had played these games far too long to entertain such naïve possibilities now.

Richard grabbed a spoon and stirred some sugar into his coffee. “Have you fed the horses this morning?” he asked, as he continued to stir. Here was a ludicrous question. The only reason he felt like posing it was the fact that she appeared to have been up for a while and it would be nice to think that she could have spent that time contributing to the care of the house. He shook his head at the mere idea and wondered why he had even asked. Why should he have believed it, especially today?

Still, she had not answered. He knew where this was leading. It happened so often that it had come to be a surprise if they didn’t start an argument soon after their first words of the day. Richard turned around with his coffee cup in hand and stared at Cassie. Her eyes were focused away from him. He sighed once, just loud enough for her to hear, and then he recalled briefly the little girl who he used to know. It seemed like such a long time ago.

“Cass?”

She stopped eating this time and looked at him with a glare. Her blue eyes stared at him with a cold, icy look that he still was uncomfortable receiving from his daughter. She nodded in response to his inquiry. At this point, he was not exactly sure which question she was answering. Deciding she was responding to the one about feeding the horses, his next question would almost certainly solicit a harsher response.

“All of them?” he asked, with a hesitation that he certainly did not intend, but hearing the question repeated in his head, he knew how it sounded. Cassie continued her stare. The response he had been dreading was yet to surface. Would she decide not to get into it today? Too much to hope for, he thought.

Cassie picked up her plate and carried it as she rose from her chair. Richard watched her cross the room and head over to the sink. Deciding not to push her for more answers, Richard changed his approach. He knew what today was and forced himself not to trigger any arguments this morning. He leaned over the counter next to her as she arrived at the sink.

“Cass, I know how you feel—”

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The slamming of her dish into the sink cut off his sentence. "You have no idea how I feel, Richard," she replied, placing a very sarcastic tone on his name when she uttered it. The word "daddy" was something he had not heard for many years. In fact, he had resigned himself to never hearing it from her again. That did not mean he did not sorely miss it.

"Cass, you can't continue to blame everyone, including yourself, for the way things are," he said softly, trying not to anger her anymore than she already was. "I miss her too, but—"

"You miss her!" she said, cutting him off again and pounding her left fist onto the counter. "You miss her? What exactly do you miss?" she asked, slightly shaking her head, her lips closed tightly with the answers she already knew and could hardly wait to give for him. "The yelling? The crying? Because that is all I seem to remember between you two!"

"Well, that's not all there was."

Cassie swung away from him in disbelief for a moment and then turned back and took a quick step at him. "I have accepted the fact that I am forced to live here with you now that she is gone, but that does not mean I will choose to forget what you did. You left us."

"I understand that," he replied, finding it more and more difficult to be sympathetic as she continued to attack. "But you can choose to give somebody a chance to make it up to you. I think I deserve that much."

"Deserve!" she replied. Richard could sense that he had chosen the wrong word. "Do you think I care about what you deserve?" she continued, as tears began to well up in her eyes. "What I deserve is to have a mother today. And since I have to do without that, you will forgive me if I am not too concerned about disappointing you in what you think you deserve."

Richard remained quiet. There was no sense in trying to make her see his point. It was all too obvious that the addition of another year had not diminished her feelings of loss about her mother, or the feelings of disgust he got from her. He was getting tired of hoping for a better relationship to emerge between them. She would have to unload her own pain before trying to begin something with him. Another year had passed and she still insisted on hanging on to the hurt. By now, the misery must be too familiar, and possibly comfortable, from her per-

Chapter One

spective. It appeared impossible to convince her to put the past behind her and start living again.

Cassie wiped away the tear that had escaped, and she composed herself and tried to reel in her emotions. "I have to go to school," she said, as she turned to walk out of the kitchen.

"Cass, I'm sorry." Richard thought about following her, but decided better of it, hoping for some acknowledgement that she might forgive his apparent insensitivity to this day. There was none.

Richard listened as the front door opened and closed. He turned and buried his head into his right hand, pushing his hair backwards and exhaling the tension that had been escalating over the past few minutes. He took a sip of his coffee and peered out of the kitchen window to the stables in the backyard. That's when he realized he had never gotten a real answer to his question about the horses.

Richard entered the stables, grabbing a bag of oats that was leaning on the wall just inside the door. He surveyed the stalls and noticed that the horses had indeed been fed this morning. It gave him some satisfaction to know that despite how Cassie felt about him, her sense of duty and responsibility toward the animals overcame any impulses she may have had to defy him. A trait she got from her mother, no doubt. He smiled at the recollection of the times Grace would exhibit similar characteristics. One time in particular stuck in his mind. Grace had driven all night from New York to be able to attend Cassie's kindergarten graduation. It was the day before a big race. She was so tired that she slept through most of the performances. Still, she would have never forgiven herself if she had not been there. The lengths she would go to satisfy her own peace of mind and others were beyond belief. She was one of the most giving people he had ever known. Richard's smile turned to an expression of sadness and regret. How could he have let his life with her turn so completely upside down?

As he walked to the end of the building, he noticed the empty container in front of the last stall. Shaking his head, he took the oats from the bag with his hand and scooped a large portion into the container. As he did so, he saw a large figure approach from the back of the stall in the shadows. Richard gently backed away and allowed the weak animal to begin its morning feed.

Legend of the Crown

Majesty had changed so much since that day four years ago. Her legs did not have the same look of power that had many in the racing community convinced that she was a prized filly capable of winning major races. Today she had trouble just walking, especially with the added weight of the mysterious pregnancy that continued to baffle Richard. Seeing her near full term, the confusion still spun in his head. The doctors had told him that she was incapable of conceiving. The tumors that had plagued her body for the past several years saw to that very early on. Not to mention the fact that there appeared to be very few opportunities for Majesty to mate with his other thoroughbreds. Yet his eyes constantly reminded him of these untruths. She was pregnant and due to give birth in just a few weeks.

Richard watched as Majesty continued to eat. It saddened him to watch this once powerful horse fall victim to the diseases that were overcoming her. He could only hope she would last long enough to deliver the new life inside of her.

Richard slowly reached out his hand and placed it on Majesty's forehead. Forgiveness is something that had come very slowly over time for what Majesty had done on that fateful day. It was a kind of forgiveness that Richard did not expect Cassie to express for the instrument of her mothers' death. He had never taken the opportunity to forgive Grace for what had happened between them, and that was a regret that he felt he could no longer repeat in his life. Majesty was a testament to that commitment.

Richard rubbed her head a few times and then turned to walk away. Majesty appeared to remain oblivious to Richard's presence the whole time. When Richard neared the threshold of the stables, he heard Majesty give a low snorting sound, which Richard took as a polite "thank you."