

It was shortly after dawn when Alec Ramsay walked into the training barn at Hopeful Farm and found the new employee man-handling Black Sand. He ran into the stall and caught the man's foot as it swung hard toward Black Sand's belly. Once he had hold of it, Alec heaved backward, upsetting the man and putting him down in the straw.

"I told you never to rough up these colts," Alec shouted angrily. "Now get out of here."

The man lay still, his jaws and eyes open, breathing heavily. "That crazy colt bit me," he said. His fingers tightened about the bridle in his hands as if he were about to swing it at Black Sand's head.

Alec moved the colt back, knowing the ex-jockey had been drinking and it would not be easy to get rid of him.

"That's still no reason to hit him," Alec said. "You're through."

The man attempted to get up, the big muscles of his shoulders bunching. "Give me another chance, Alec," he pleaded. "It won't happen again."

Alec didn't believe him. The tone of his voice was all wrong, just as his apology was meaningless. "I hired you knowing you drank," Alec said. "You knew I knew. You promised it wouldn't happen here. I said I'd give you one chance, but only one, because nobody else in the business would hire you."

"I know," the man said, his voice surly. "You don't have to give me any rundown."

"Then you know why I'm not giving you another chance," Alec said. "Get up. I'll make out your check and you can get out of here."

The man raised a hand, big and rough and grimy, asking for Alec's help in rising. He seemed unsteady; as if he couldn't make it alone.

Alec hesitated before reaching out. The ex-jockey was in his mid-forties, no taller than he but more heavily built in the shoulders and with all the strength that came from many years of racing horses. Alec decided he had to take a chance; he had to get him out of the stall where he could do no harm to the colt.

The man was in a half-crouch when their hands met. Without any warning, he swung the bridle hard. Alec deflected the steel bit but the leather reins lashed his face. Then the man's hurtling body was on top of him, hands tearing at his eyes and head. As Alec fell, he managed to swing a booted foot, catching his opponent in the knees and sending him sprawling beside him. He rolled over and chopped hard at the man's throat with the side of his hand.

The man gasped for breath, but he straightened and swung violently upward, with Alec clinging to his back. They went reeling backward to fall in the straw with Alec on the bottom.

Alec twisted, avoiding the man's elbows, which sought to batter his head and face; then he got in several swift punches of his own that knocked his opponent off him. Quickly, he scrambled to his feet and struck at the man's right wrist with the side of his hand. There was a cry of pain as the man fell back gasping, his wrist dangling brokenly.

“Enough,” he whimpered.

Alec shoved him out of the stall and followed him to the apartment on the second floor of the barn. It was a mess with empty wine and liquor bottles everywhere, dirty dishes and glasses piled high, soiled clothes and bed linen—and the man had occupied it less than a week.

“Pack up,” Alec said. “I’ll wait and take you to the hospital. You need help for more than your wrist.”

“Not me, you won’t,” the ex-jockey said. “You’re not takin’ me to no hospital. Just give me my check and I’ll get out of here.”

Later, with the man gone, Alec returned to his office and read the advertisement he had been running in all horse publications for the past six months.

WANTED: Reliable man for stable on race-horse farm. Must have professional experience handling and riding young horses. Must be of good character. Must provide references. Good wages with furnished apartment and fringe benefits. Write Hopeful Farm, Box 37, Millville, N.Y.

The advertisement had not been very successful. Alec had hired several men for the job but none had been reliable. Good help was hard to get and even more difficult to keep.

Hopeful Farm was an incorporated business with his parents and Henry Dailey, the trainer, as the principal stockholders. Officially, his own position was that of stable rider, since one could not own and ride a race horse. However, while his parents lived on the farm and his father was responsible for the hiring of local help for maintenance work, Alec was in charge of finding the professional horseman to break and school the two-year-olds. He couldn’t handle the colts himself, for he and Henry Dailey had begun a long summer of racing their great champion, the Black Stallion, in New York City. But occasionally Alec got a few days off and returned home, helping his father supervise the tremendous amount of work involved in running the farm.

Frustrated and impatient, Alec went to the window that overlooked the separate paddocks where the two-year-olds were grazing and playing on the best grass that could be grown. Black Sand was among them and clearly enjoying his freedom. If he could not get the man he needed, Alec decided, it would be far better to turn out the young stock until he and Henry had time to handle it.

Alec watched the horses. Some of them were unsteady on their legs, trying to find their balance, but they were all of a dazzling and powerful beauty. Their long, thick manes and fine coats—black, bay, chestnut and gray—had the gleam of wild silk in the early morning sun. Their deep shoulders and chests and muscular, arched necks breathed forth inexhaustible strength, endurance and spirit. They would be horses to reckon with on the race track, he knew. The future of Hopeful Farm rested on their young backs.

Beyond, in an adjacent field, grazed the heavy but loving mares with suckling foals at their sides. They, too, would help determine the future of Hopeful Farm.

Alec saw a car stop in the main driveway, which ran between the two fields. After a few minutes it moved forward again, only to stop once more, its driver apparently watching the horses. The car was an old model Chevrolet sedan with a torn right fender. Multi-colored flowers were painted on its gray body. Finally, it turned toward the barn, disappearing from view.

Guests weren't welcome before nine o'clock and Alec regretted not having closed the main gate. The sign at the end of the driveway pointed the way to his office and he steeled himself for the unwelcome task of receiving a visitor so early. He would be courteous but brief, he decided; otherwise, he wouldn't be able to handle it, not on top of everything else.

The girl appeared in his open doorway and said, "Good morning, Sun ... I mean, sir." She corrected herself hastily but without embarrassment.

Alec was totally unprepared for a girl visitor. "Son?" he asked bewilderedly. The girl was certainly no older than he.

"Sun," she repeated, laughing. "*S ... u ... n*. It's crazy, I know, but I always say it in the morning, and people look at me just as startled as you do. I guess it's because I feel good when the sun is out. Some days better than others, and this is one of the best." She looked out the window. "They're beautiful horses, more beautiful than I ever expected and I expected a lot."

"And when the sun isn't out?" Alec asked, surprised that he was continuing such a conversation. Her eyes were a most uncommon blue and held a piercing liveliness.

"Oh, then I pretend it is. It can be done, you know, if you just put your mind to it. You believe it's there and it is. When I was little, my father used to hold me up to the window, morning and night, sun or no sun, and he'd say, 'Good morning, Sun' and 'Good night, Sun.' "

"Then you must always feel good," Alec said, "whether the sun's out or not."

"Not *always*, not *every* day, that's impossible," she said, laughing again. "But most of the time I do. Don't you?" she asked abruptly.

Alec found that he was strangely annoyed by her question. And the way she hadn't even waited for him to answer; she had just assumed that she knew what his answer would be.

"I came to apply for the job," she said seriously. "The one you've been advertising for months in *Blood Horse*. I hope you haven't filled it."

Alec's eyes changed; there was no longer any interest in them. He didn't want anyone like this for the job. He needed professional help. He was running no school for would-be riders and starry-eyed kids. Yet he heard himself ask, "What's your name?"

"Pam," she said.

There was a serenity in her eyes that he knew was a sharp contrast to the restlessness in his own, and she seemed aware of it. "And your last name?"

"Athena," she said, watching him without moving her eyes, without blinking.

“That’s ridiculous,” he said, louder than he meant to, thereby adding to his uneasiness. “Athena was some kind of a Greek goddess. It can’t be your last name.”

“Why not?” she asked. “There’s nothing wrong with it, is there?” Her voice was very clear, even gentle. “Actually, Athena was a goddess who both protected the arts and went to battle in defense of them,” she added in quiet explanation.

“If you say so,” Alec said. She might well be of Grecian descent at that, he decided. The sunlight coming through the window shone on her with a violent light, accentuating her high, sharp cheekbones, her long-lashed blue eyes and her very tanned skin. Her blond hair was tied back in a long ponytail, exposing ears as small and delicately sculptured as her nose. She looked, despite her outspokenness, very vulnerable and sensitive.

“Do you want to know the rest?” she asked, moving away from the window to stand in front of him.

He realized only then how truly small she was. Her forehead barely came to his chest. “The rest of what?”

She laughed. “Well, why I feel I could fill the job. You see, I’ve been around horses all my life. I had my first pony almost before I could walk. Her name was Peek-a-Boo, a little chestnut Shetland mare with a long golden mane that covered her eyes. She used to peer at me through it, so I thought Peek-a-Boo was a good name for her. When she had her first foal, I was going to call him I-See-You but he turned out to be so fast that I named him Flash instead.

“Later, I was given my first horse. She was an Arabian mare and I named her Tena, short for Athena. I still have her and she’s beautiful and a mother several times over. But when we were young together I’d ride her for miles and miles along the beach. She loved the sand and she’d lie in it, just like a person sunbathing. She loved swimming, too, and often we’d herd schools of fish that came close to shore. We’d move into them just like a cowboy herding cattle, cutting one group from another. It was lots of fun for us.

“That all happened in Florida, where my home is,” she added quietly.

“Florida?” Alec repeated. “You’re from Florida?”

“Yes, but I don’t stay there much any more. It’s as if an alarm clock goes off in my head, telling me it’s time to leave and *do* things. There’s not too much time, you know.”

“Not too much time,” Alec repeated. “For what?”

“For living, for being young like us,” she replied, her candid eyes searching Alec’s.

Alec ran a hand through his red hair and went back to his desk. He was finding it difficult to say what had to be said and for him this was very unusual. Ordinarily, he was capable of taking charge of most anything to which he set his hand and mind. He had trained himself to control his life.

“I really don’t need you,” he said abruptly. “I mean I’m in need of *professional* help. It’s not that I want to be unkind, but I hear from so many young people like yourself.”

“I suppose so,” she said. “There must be thousands who’d like to work here and ride your horses.”

“Hundreds, anyway,” Alec answered. Her smile and eyes were making him uncomfortable again. “I can’t do anything about hiring them.”

“No, I suppose not. Horse-crazy kids just have to go it alone, scheming and dreaming. Professional horsemen like yourself can’t take the time and responsibility to train them.”

“Very few kids would stay with it,” he said defensively. “It’s hard and often dirty work, much more than they realize from books and movies. The time spent training them is lost. Few—if any—would remain.”

“I know,” she said. “I’d go, too, after a while; that is, even if you did hire me.”

“You would?” Alec asked, surprised. “But you sounded so dedicated ...”

“To horses, yes. I’ll always love them and want to be around them, but there’s that clock I told you about, the one in my head. You’ll find it in the heads of lots of kids, if not in your own.”

“I suppose so,” he said.

“It doesn’t mean I couldn’t be of *temporary* help to you,” she said quickly. “I’ve helped other professional horsemen, so maybe I’m more professional than you think. I’ve worked trotters and pacers at Ben White Raceway in Orlando, Florida, and ridden and jumped thoroughbreds all the way north to here. I could help you ... I mean until you found your professional help.”

In her face, Alec saw an unusual amount of strength and eagerness. “I don’t know,” he said, realizing that if he hired her, even temporarily, Henry would be enraged. The old trainer had no use for girls around barns. He would see only her femininity, and her honest candor would infuriate him. And yet, if she could handle the horses, would it not give him the time he needed to find a reliable professional horseman?

Moments of uneasy silence passed for Alec. Her eyes, staring so intently into his, forced him to look deep into himself. He no longer thought *young*, he decided. He had become an old man before being a young one. He insisted upon professional help even though he’d begun as the rankest kind of an amateur himself. He spoke critically of would-be riders and starry-eyed kids, but he’d been one himself not so long ago. Had he completely forgotten what it was like to be young?

Alec met her gaze. Perhaps, if he made a sincere attempt to listen to her, he might learn what was going on with people his own age. It would be a welcome change.

“I’d like to see you ride,” he said. “Then I’ll decide.”