



# A Lifetime of Love

By Sarah K. Andrew

**A**libar is twenty-nine and I am thirty. We have been together most of our lives, and although my life has changed much since we met, he has always been Alibar, my sidekick and friend.

He has led me on my life's trail. My passion for equine photography started with him as my first subject. My work is all about admiring and celebrating horses, but it also forces me to understand their fragility and how few lead a life like Alibar's. I know how special it is that I have had him for so long, and I sense that he, too, understands this in his own way.

I met Alibar when he was ten years old and I was eleven.

I was a typical horseless, horse-crazy little girl, raised on a steady diet of riding lessons, Sam Savitt drawings, and Breyer model horses. My mother and grandmother encouraged me with stories of moonlight trail rides and chapters of *National Velvet*. I named my mom's canaries after the lesson ponies I had ridden. When I was not riding, I was setting up elaborate jumper courses for the neighborhood dogs. My bicycle was a chestnut thoroughbred mare named Foxy. My teachers begged me to stop writing

book reports about the Black Stallion series.

The night before I met Alibar, I slept with my bridle in my bed, dreaming of a horse who was as fast as the wind and could jump the moon. My mother's friend, Diane, had invited us to come see her horse. Alibhai's Alibar was a registered appaloosa with no spots, sickle hocks, a bull neck, and a frizzy tuft of hair where a forelock should be. Diane bought Alibar when he was a weanling, and she nicknamed him Baby Brat for his headstrong nature and tendency to run off with his riders.

My grandmother was in the market for a dressage horse, but Alibar wasn't right. No one was looking to buy him, so I rode him for the rest of the summer. When I returned to school, my projects and papers were all about Alibar. I wrote about him in Latin class, photographed his nose for a school publication, drew pictures of him in art class, and even based my science project on the equine center of gravity.

In the end, it became clear that we belonged together, and so it was.

Alibar is the fastest horse I've ever ridden. When we gallop, tears stream from my eyes and the wind screams in my ears. We raced many horses over the years and never were beaten. His speed, combined with his catty agility, gave him fantastic jumping ability. His natural impulsion made jumping a thrill. We started by trotting over homemade jump poles and then graduated to cross-rails with truck tires, traffic cones, and cinder blocks as standards. Then I fashioned verticals and oxers out of the same materials. We rode on hunter paces and successfully competed in local horse shows.

Alibar was fifteen and I was sixteen when I broke my collarbone.

One February afternoon, we were taking a spin around the soccer field when he slid on the grass. Beneath a deep layer of grass and mud, the ground was frozen, and his feet simply lost their grip. He scrambled to stay upright, but landed on his left side, with me still in the saddle. We slid about fifteen feet. Alibar quickly rolled upright off my leg and was already standing as I got to my feet. I carefully checked his legs and felt his sides for injuries. He was shaken but fine. My own arm was dangling, the collarbone broken. I hooked my arm into my jacket sleeve and held it with my other arm, leaving Alibar's reins free. Over the soccer field, down the sand pits, and through the neighborhood, he dutifully walked by my side all the way back to the barn.

Alibar was twenty-two and I was twenty-three when he started having problems with his feet.

I was afraid I'd lose my riding partner, so I decided to take the opportunity to reschool him and retrain myself as a rider. I pulled out my dressage books, and we started anew. I reevaluated my riding and spent a lot of time refining my legs, seat, and hands. As I improved my skills, Alibar no longer pulled on my hands or needed a severe bit. His canter became light and springy.

Alibar was twenty-seven and I was twenty-eight when we competed in our first horse show after a nine-year hiatus. He performed gamely, and I was proud to show off his blue ribbons back at the barn.

And now we are here, the current juncture of our lives.

He is still teaching, and I am still learning. He is toothless, sometimes silly. He will mug for doughnuts and still kicks up his

heels on a breezy spring day. He loves to learn tricks and picks them up quickly.

He is the only horse I have ever owned, and although I now photograph horses far more famous—Kentucky Derby winners and top eventing horses, world-class dressage stallions, and horses worth millions—he is still my favorite subject when I look through my lens.

Alibar is twenty-nine and I am thirty. I know there won't be many more years for him and I try not to think about it much. He is my horse, my one horse, and I've never outgrown him. His life is nearly over, and mine is just entering its prime.

But he has carried me this far and I know he will carry me forever.