

"Leave it to Chance is a delightful read, full of enough ups and downs to keep readers cheering for the characters and hoping for a happy ending. Watch for more great novels from Sherri Sand."

—LAURINE SNELLING, author of *Breaking Free* and The Red River of the North series

LEAVE IT TO *Chance*

❖ A NOVEL ❖



SHERRI
SAND

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transforming lives together

LEAVE IT TO CHANCE
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Chapter 1

“A horse? Mom, what am I going to do with a horse?” Just what she and the kids did *not* need. Sierra Montgomery sagged back against her old kitchen counter, where afternoon sunlight dappled the white metal cabinets across from her. She pressed the phone tight against her ear, hoping she’d heard wrong, as her four-year-old son, Trevor, ate grapes at the kitchen table.

“Miss Libby wanted you to have it. I’d think you’d be delighted, what with the kids and all. You remember Sally, Miss Libby’s daughter? Well, she just called and said it was all laid out in the will. None of their family could figure out who Sierra Lassiter Montgomery was until Sally remembered me from her mom’s church. So she called and sure enough, you were my daughter.” Sierra’s mom *tsked* into the phone. “Well, you know how Sally is.”

Sierra hadn’t the foggiest how Sally was, or even *who* she was. She barely remembered Miss Libby from her Sunday school class eons ago.

“She acted pleased that her mother gave you the horse, but I could tell she was miffed. Though what Sally Owens would do with a horse, I’d like

to know.” Her mom’s voice was tight and controlled as if they were discussing how to deal with black spot on her Old English roses.

“But I don’t want a horse. You, of all people, should know that after what happened when—” How could her mom even suggest she get a horse? Painful pictures of her childhood friend Molly floated through her mind.

“Honey, accidents like that don’t happen more than once in a lifetime. Besides, Miss Libby wouldn’t have owned a crazy horse.”

Sierra stared out the window where the school bus would soon release her most precious treasures. Her mom never had understood the resounding impact that summer day had made in her life.

“You really need to think of the kids and how much fun they’d have. It’s not like you’d ever be able to afford to buy them one.”

Sierra wished she were having this conversation with Elise rather than her mother. Her best friend would understand the danger she feared in horses, and in her humorous way come up with a sensible plan that would include *not* keeping the animal.

Her mom, on the other hand, lived life as if she were on one of those moving conveyors at the airport that people can step on to rest their feet yet keep moving toward their destination. As long as everyone kept traveling forward, she could ignore the emotional baggage dragging behind.

“I don’t understand why Miss Libby would give the horse to *me*.”

“You know how my bingo club visited the Somerset rest home every week? Well, Miss Libby’s been there for years and she always did comment on how horse crazy you were when she taught your Sunday school class.”

“Mom, that was a phase I went through when I was ten and found *National Velvet* and *Black Beauty* at the library. I haven’t seen Miss Libby since middle school.”

“Obviously you were special to Miss Libby. I’d think you might be a little more grateful.”

Deep breath, Sierra told herself. “I am grateful.” An errant grape rolled next to her toe. Trevor’s blond head was bent, intent on arranging the fruit like green soldiers around the edge of his plate. Sierra tossed the grape into the sink and considered how to respond to her mom. She was a dear, but sometimes the woman was like dry kindling on a hot day, and one little spark.... “I’m just not sure that owning a horse would be a wise move at this point in our lives.”

The front door slammed and Sierra felt the walls shudder with the thud. The 3:00 p.m. stampede through the house meant it was time to get off the phone and determine how to get rid of a horse before the kids found out about it.

Her mom sighed. “It’s too bad Sally won’t keep the horse at her place for you, but she said her husband wants the horse gone. He wants to fill the pasture with sheep.”

Sheep? A kitchen chair scraped over the linoleum as Trevor scooted back from the table and dashed for the living room. “Mommy’s got a horse! Mommy’s got a horse!” *Wonderful. Little ears, big mouth.*

Braden and Emory shot into the kitchen, bright eyes dancing in tandem. Their words tangled together in fevered excitement despite the fact that she was on the phone.

“Where is it?” Braden’s eleven-year-old grin split his face, and his dark hair was ruffled and sweat streaked, likely from a fevered game of basketball during last recess.

She held a hand up to still the questions as her mom went on about the sheep that Sally’s husband probably did *not* need.

“We have a horse?” Nine-year-old Emory, her blonde hair still neat in its purple headband, fluttered in front of her mom, delight and hope blooming on her face.

Despite the fear of horses building deep in Sierra’s gut, her children’s

excitement was a little contagious. She wished Miss Libby had willed her a cat.

Sierra ran her hand down Emory's soft cheek and whispered. "I'll be off the phone in a minute, sweetie."

"Can we ride it?" Em looked at her with elated eyes.

Braden tossed his backpack on the table. "Where are we going to keep it?"

The kids circled her, jabbering with excited questions. Sierra rubbed her forehead with the tips of her fingers. "I gotta go, Mom. I've got to break some cowboy hearts."

The kids clamored around her, Braden taking the lead with an arm draped across her shoulder. When had he gotten so big? "Do we have a horse, Mom?" He asked the question with a lopsided grin, a foreshadow of the adolescence that had been peeking through lately. The preteen in him didn't truly believe they had a horse—he was old enough to realize the odds—but little-boy eagerness clung to his smile.

"That would be yes and a no."

"What? Mom!" he complained.

"I was given a horse, but we're not going to keep him."

Braden's arm slid off her shoulder, a scowl replacing his smile. "Why not?"

"Someone gave you a horse?" Emory ignored her brother's attitude and flashed her most persuasive grin. "Can we keep him? Please!"

Sierra smoothed her hand over the silky hair and leaned close to her daughter's face as Emory went on. "I think we should get four horses so we each have one. We could go trail riding. Cameron's mom has horses, and they go riding all the time as a family."

"We're not a *family* anymore," Braden cut in. "We stopped being a family when mom divorced dad."

A shard of pain drove into Sierra's gut. She hadn't had time to brace for that one. Braden's anger at the divorce had been building like an old steam engine lately.

"That's not fair!" Outrage darkened Emory's features. "It's not Mom's fault!"

Sarcasm colored Braden's voice. "Oh, so it's all Dad's fault?"

Sierra saw the confusion that swept over her daughter's face. She was fiercely loyal to both parents and didn't know how to defend them against each other.

Sierra spoke in a firm tone. "Braden, that's enough!"

He scowled at her again. "Whatever."

Sierra held his gaze until he glanced away.

"Guys, we're not going to play the blame game. We have plenty to be thankful for, and that's what is important."

Braden's attitude kept pouring it on. "Boy, and we have so much. Spaghetti for dinner every other night."

"So what, *Braden-Maden!*" Emory made a face and stuck her tongue out at him.

"No more fighting or you two can go to your rooms." Her kids were not perfect, but they used to like each other. Something had changed. Her gut said it was her ex-husband, Michael, but what if she was falling into the whole "blame the dad" thing herself? What if she was really the problem? Two weeks without a job had added stress and worry. Had she stopped hugging them as often in between scouring the want ads and trying to manage a home and bills?

"Mom?" There was a quaver in Trevor's soft voice.

"Yes, honey?" Sierra gave him a gentle smile.

"Can we keep the horse?"

Emory's blue gaze darted to meet hers, a plea in them. Braden sat with

his arms crossed over his chest, but his ears had pricked up.

Sierra looked at them, wanting them to understand and knowing they wouldn't. "None of us know how to handle or care for a horse, so it wouldn't be safe to keep him."

Emory's face lit up. "Cameron's mom could teach us."

"Honey, it's not that simple. We can't afford an animal that big. He probably eats as much in groceries as we do, and it would be very expensive to rent a place for him to live."

"I could mow yards." Anger at his sister forgotten, Braden turned a hopeful face to her. "We could help out."

Emory jumped onto the working bandwagon. "Yeah. I could do laundry or something for the neighbors."

Braden drilled his sister a look that said *idiot idea* but didn't say anything.

Trevor bounced in his chair, eager to be a part of keeping the horse. "I could wash cars."

"Those are great ideas, but they won't bring in quite enough, especially since it's getting too cold to mow lawns or wash cars."

"You just don't want to keep the horse, Mom," Braden said. "I get it. End of story."

"Honey, I'd love for you to have a horse, but when I was young I had a friend—"

Emory spoke in a helpful tone. "We know. Grandma told us about the accident."

They knew? Wasn't the story hers to share? "When did Grandma tell you?"

Braden's voice took on a breezy air. "I don't know. A while ago. Come on, Mom. We're not going to do something dumb like your friend did."

Defensiveness rose inside. "She didn't do anything *dumb*. It was the horse that—"

“So because something bad happened to one person, your kids can never do anything fun for the rest of their lives.”

Sierra gave him a look. “Or you learn from your mistakes and help your kids to do the same.”

Braden rolled his eyes at her.

Worry drew lines across her daughter’s forehead. “Are you going to sell him?”

“Yes, Em. So we’re not going to discuss this anymore. You and Braden have homework to do.” At the chorus of groans she held her hands up. “Okay, I guess I’ll have to eat Grandma’s apple pie all by myself.”

Braden grabbed his backpack and slowly dragged it across the floor toward the stairs, annoyance in his voice. “We’re going.” Emory trotted past him up the stairs.

Trevor remained behind, one arm wrapped around her thigh. “I don’t have any homework.”

She squatted and pulled him in for a hug. “Nope, you sure don’t, bud.”

He leaned back. “Do I get a horse?”

Sierra distracted him by inching her fingers up his ribs. “What, Trev?”

He tried to talk around his giggles. “Do I get—Mom!” Her fingers found the tickle spots under his arms and he laughed, his eyes squinted shut and mouth opened wide. She found all his giggle spots, then turned on *Sesame Street* as the second distraction. Good old Bert and Ernie.

Now what? She had roughly forty-five minutes to figure out how she was going to get rid of a horse and not be a complete zero in her kids’ eyes.

She eyed the phone and made her next move. Five minutes later a white Mazda whipped into her driveway. Sierra hurried out the front door waving her arms to stop Elise before she could start her ritual honking for the kids.

Wide eyed, her platinum blonde friend stared, one long plum-colored nail hovering above the “ooga” horn on the dash. “What?”

“I don’t want the kids to know you’re here.”

Wicked delight spread across her perfectly made-up face. Light plum shadow matched her nails. Tomorrow, both eye shadow and nails could be green. “Let me guess! Mr. Pellum asked you out!”

“Nooooo!” Mr. Pellum was a teacher Sierra and Elise had had a crush on in seventh grade.

“Ummm ... you robbed a bank and need me to watch the kids while you fly to Tahiti?”

Sierra gave her a mock-serious look. “Done?”

Elise tilted her head. “Can I get out of the car?”

Sierra glanced toward the house. All was still silent. “Yes, you may.”

Deadpan, Elise nodded and opened the door. “Then I’m done for now.” Her plump body, swathed in a creamy suit with a purple scarf draped across one shoulder, rose gracefully from the small two-seater.

Sierra closed the door for her, then leaned against it. Elise had a way of removing the extraneous and reducing a problem down to the bare essentials. “Elise, I’m in a predicament.”

“Hon, I’ve been trying to tell you that for years.”

Sierra shook her head. “I don’t think you could have seen this one coming even with your crystal ball.”

Elise gave her the *spinster teacher* look through narrowed eyes. “I don’t think I like the implications of that.”

Sierra held her hands out. “You are the queen of mind-reading, according to my children.”

Elise chuckled. “It’s a good thing I was just headed out for a latte break when you called. Now what’s the big emergency?” She owned a high-end clothing store for plus-sized women in downtown Eugene.

“A horse.”

Elise glanced around as if one or two might be lurking behind a tree.

“A herd of them or just one?”

“One. Full-sized. Living and breathing.”

“I believe I’m missing some pieces here. Is it moving in with you? Holding one of the children hostage? What?”

Sierra breathed out a slight chuckle and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. “You’re not going to believe this, but I inherited it.”

Her friend’s eyes grew wide, emphasizing the lushly mascaraed lashes. “Like someone died and gave you their horse?”

Sierra nodded, raising her brows. “And the kids want to keep him.”

Furrows emerged across Elise’s forehead. “Who is the idiot that told them about the horse?”

Sierra tilted her head with a look that only best friends could give each other.

Elise’s perfectly painted lips smirked. “Moving along, then. Why don’t you keep it? The kids would love it. Heaven knows they deserve it.” She clapped her hands together. “Oh, oh! They could get into 4-H, and Braden could learn to barrel race. That kid would think he’d won the jackpot. Emory and Trevor could get a pig or some of those show roosters.”

Sierra let the idea machine wind down. “I don’t think so.”

“Angora rabbits?”

“No farm animals.”

Elise’s mouth perked into humorous pout. “Sierra, you’re such a spoilsport. Those kids need a pet.”

“A hamster is a pet. A horse is not.”

Diva Elise took the stage, hands on her ample hips. “Don’t tell me you didn’t want a horse growing up. Remember, I was the one who had to sit and watch *National Velvet* with you time ad nauseam. You’ve said yourself that Braden needs something to take his mind off the problems he’s having at school and with his dad.”

Guilt, a wheelbarrow load of it, dumped on Sierra. "You are supposed to be helping me, Elise, not making it worse. I want to get rid of this horse and ..." her eyes dodged away from her friend, "... you know."

"Mmm-hmm. And still look like Super Mom in your children's eyes."

Sierra nodded, but couldn't find the nerve to say *yes*.

"Sierra Montgomery, those children have been to heck and back in the last couple years and you're willing to deny them the pleasure of owning their own *free* horse because ... because of what?"

Sierra stared at the ground for a moment, feeling a tangle of emotions rise within. She let her eyes rest on Elise's and said quietly, "Fear? Terror? Hysteria?"

A look of puzzlement, then understanding settled on Elise's face, smoothing away the annoyance. "Molly."

Sierra nodded. "I won't put my children in that kind of danger."

Elise leaned forward and grabbed Sierra's hands, holding them tight. "Oh, hon. That was a long time ago. Don't let your life be ruled by the what-ifs. There's a lot of living left to do. And your kids need to see you taking life by storm, taking chances, not hiding in the shadows."

"That's easy for you to say. You were voted most likely to parachute off the Empire State Building."

Elise gave her a cheeky grin, both dimples winking at her. "We could do it tandem!"

"If you see me jump off the Empire State Building you'll know my lobotomy was successful, because there is no way in this lifetime you'll catch this body leaving good sense behind!" Sierra heard the words come from her own mouth and stared at her friend in wonder. "Oh, my gosh. That was so my mom."

"It was bound to happen, hon."

Was she serious? "You think I'm turning into her?" Sierra brought a

hand to her throat and quickly dropped it. How many times had she seen her mom use the same gesture?

Elise laughed. "You need to stop fretting and just *live*. We all turn out like our mothers in some respect."

"All except you. You're nothing like Vivian."

"Other than the drinking, smoking, and carousing, I'm exactly like her."

Sierra lifted a brow. Her mom had rarely let her go to Elise's house when they were growing up—and for good reason.

Elise struck a pose like a fashion model. "Okay, I'm the anti-Vivian." She gave Sierra a soft smile. "All funnin' aside, I really think you should keep the horse."

"I'm not keeping the horse. And even if I wanted to, I couldn't." Sierra took a settling breath and stared at the tree over Elise's shoulder.

"Michael still hasn't paid?"

Elise knew more about her finances than her mom did. "He paid, but the check bounced again. So now he's two months behind in child support."

"Have you heard if Pollan's is rehiring?"

"They're not." Jarrett's, the local grocery store where she worked for the three years since the divorce had been recently bought out by Pollan's. They had laid off the majority of the checkers with the possibility of rehiring some.

Elise cringed as if she was bracing herself for a blow. "And the unemployment fiasco?"

Sierra shut her eyes. "Mr. Jarrett did not pay into our unemployment insurance, so there is no benefit for us to draw from. Yes, it was illegal, and yes he will pay, but it may take months, if not years, for various lawyers and judges to beat it out of him." She gave Elise a tired smile. "That's the version minus all the legalese."

"So the layoffs are final, no unemployment bennies, and you're out of a job."

“Momentarily. The résumé has been dusted off and polished.” She gave a wry grin.

“I wish I could hire you at Deluxe Couture, but I promised Nora full-time work. And besides, your cute little buns would drive my clientele away.”

Sierra waved a hand over her jeans and sweatshirt. “Your clientele would outshine me any day.”

“You sell yourself far too short.” Elise glanced at the hefty rhinestone-encrusted watch on her wrist. “Anything else I can do for you? Help the kids with their homework? Babysit while you sweep some tall, dark, handsome man off his feet?”

Sierra laughed. “And where is this dream man going to come from?”

Elise gave a breezy wave of her hand and opened the car door. “Oh, he’ll turn up. You’re too cute to stay single. I actually have someone in mind. Pavo Marcello. He’s a new sales rep from one of my favorite lines. I’ll see if he’s free Friday night. You aren’t doing anything, are you?”

“Hold on!” Sierra stepped in front of the car door to keep her friend from leaving. “First, I’m not looking. Second, given my history, I’m not the best judge of character. I’ve already struck out once in the man department.” She pointed to her face with both index fingers. “Not anxious to try again. Third, you just told me I’m turning into my mom, which makes me definitely not dating material.”

A twist of Elise’s lips signaled a thought. “You know, now that I think about it, I believe he has a boyfriend.” She shook her head and lowered herself into the car. “We’ll keep looking. I’m sure Sir Knight will turn up.”

Sierra shut the car door and grinned down at her friend. “And what about finding *your* knight?”

Elise gave her a bright smile. “Mr. Pellum is already taken. You really need to find a way to keep that horse; it’ll be your first noble sacrifice.”

“First?”

The little car backed up, and Elise spoke over the windshield. “The others don’t count.”

Sierra stared at the retreating car. There was no way she was keeping that horse.

After dinner, Sierra crept into Braden’s room. He sat on the bed intent on the Game Boy in his lap, the tinny sound of hard rock bleeding out of his earphones. She waved a hand and he glanced up. She waited and with a look of preteen exasperation he finally pulled the headphones to his shoulders.

“What, Mom?”

“I just wanted to say good night.”

“Good night.” His hands started to readjust the music back into position.

“I looked at your homework.”

“You got into my backpack? Isn’t that like against the law or something? You’re always telling us not to get into *your* stuff.”

She crossed her arms. Frustration and worry gnawed at her. “You lied to me about doing your assignment. Why, honey?”

He ignored her and started playing his Game Boy.

She took one step and snatched the game from his hands.

“Hey!”

“I want some respect when I talk to you, Braden.”

His chin sank toward his chest, his gaze fixed on his bed, his voice low. “I didn’t want to do it.”

She sat next to him, her voice soft. “Is it too hard?”

He shrugged. “It gives me a headache when I work on it.”

“Braden, if you need help, I’d be happy to work with you after school.”

He stared at his knees and picked at a loose string of cotton on his pajama bottoms.

“I got a phone call from Mrs. Hamison today.”

His body came alert, though he didn’t look at her.

“She said you’re flunking most of your subjects, and she hasn’t seen any homework from you since school started a month ago.”

He glanced up, his jaw belligerent, but with fear in his eyes.

“What’s going on? I know school isn’t easy, but you’ve never given up before.”

“Middle school’s harder.”

She wanted to touch him, to brush the hair off his forehead and snuggle him close the way she used to when he was small. Back when a hug and a treat shared over the kitchen table was enough to bring the sparkle back to her son. “She thinks we should have your vision tested.”

“Why?”

“She’s noticed some things in class and thinks it might be helpful.”

He shrugged again. “Can I have my game back?”

“You lied to me, son. Again.”

“*Sor-ry.*”

“You break trust every time you choose to be dishonest. Is that what you want?”

His voice was sullen and he stared at his comforter. “No.”

She touched his leg. “What’s bothering you, honey?”

“I dunno. Can I have my game back?”

She stood up. There was a time for talking and this obviously wasn’t it. “You can have it tomorrow.”

But would tomorrow be any different?