

**WILDWOOD STABLES**

*Stealing the Prize*

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For *Diana Gonzalez* with thanks for all her  
creative and informational contributions to this story.

# Chapter 1

Taylor Henry stroked Prince Albert's silky black muzzle as she fitted a soft snaffle-bit bridle over his head.

"The County HORSE people will be here any minute now, so you have to be on your best behavior," she reminded the all-black quarter horse gelding. "Whatever rider they want you to carry, just do it. Don't be difficult. These will be mostly first-time riders. Some of them might even be scared of horses."

Taylor quickly tied back her brown, shoulder-length hair. "It's not so bad," she added in her gentlest tone. "Other horses do it all the time."

Prince Albert sputtered, which made Taylor smile. She loved the way he always made some sound when he

was spoken to. Taylor knew he was probably just responding to her voice, but she still liked to imagine that he understood her and was replying in his own horse language. It seemed possible that a quarter horse could really do this — it was such a smart, people-friendly breed.

“Don’t argue,” she said, speaking as if Prince Albert had really objected. She clipped the reins to the ring at the side of the halter. “We’ve been over this plenty of times.”

County HORSE was Pheasant County’s therapeutic riding program. HORSE stood for Health Office Rehabilitative Services, Equestrian. The program was designed to help people with various physical and psychological disabilities by providing them with the benefits of horseback riding.

Before the ranch got the County HORSE contract, there had been only one therapeutic student at Wildwood Stables, a seven-year-old girl with autism named Dana. She and Prince Albert had competed in the Rotary Horse Show’s therapeutic riding event a few months earlier. Prince Albert’s calm, gentle performance had not only won him a ribbon as Best Therapeutic Horse, it also convinced the County HORSE people to run their program at Wildwood.

Winning the much-needed business for the ranch was Taylor's proudest accomplishment. She felt it proved that even though, at thirteen, she was the youngest and least experienced member of the all-volunteer staff, she was a valuable contributor. And — maybe even more importantly — it underscored Prince Albert's value to Wildwood Stables.

After placing a striped pad and an all-purpose saddle on Prince Albert's sturdy back and tightening the girth, Taylor moved to the stall next to his.

"How are you today, Pixie?" she greeted Prince Albert's best friend, a cream-colored Shetland pony mare. She stroked the pony's wild, fuzzy blonde mane. "Good news. You're coming out, too. We're going to need every horse available today. You and Prince Albert can stay together all through the lesson. I know you'll like that, won't you?"

Taylor began tacking up the small pony. Pixie would be useful today in more ways than one. For one thing, since the ranch had started using Pixie for pony rides, she had proven that she was patient with children. Even a crying toddler didn't seem to upset her.

"You show Prince Albert how it's done today, okay,

Pixie?” Taylor said as she tightened the girth under Pixie’s belly.

Taylor hoped the pony’s good example would inspire the gelding. She couldn’t count on that, though. So far, Prince Albert had allowed only two riders on his back: Taylor and Dana. He had let Taylor ride him from the start, and he clearly wanted to be a one-girl horse. Taylor would have adored that, too, but it simply wasn’t an option. The deal she had struck with Wildwood Stables was that Prince Albert and Pixie could be used as school and trail horses in exchange for their board. If Prince Albert didn’t cooperate with this plan, Mrs. LeFleur, who owned the struggling ranch, couldn’t afford to keep him.

Despite his royal name, *Prince* Albert needed to work for his food and shelter. Without this arrangement, Taylor’s family couldn’t pay for his upkeep, either.

And so far, Prince Albert had *not* been particularly cooperative. The one exception to this was Dana. After some initial resistance, Prince Albert had allowed the delicate girl to ride him. To Taylor, that was a huge triumph — but unfortunately it was one that hadn’t been repeated with any other riders yet.

From across the stable's wide aisle, tall and graceful Daphne Chang led her gray speckled mare, Mandy, out of the stall. With a whinny of enthusiasm, the sturdy barb-Arabian mix tossed her black mane as she took in a cool breeze wafting through the open stable door.

The ranch's sixteen-year-old riding instructor was dressed somewhat casually in black half chaps, a hooded sweatshirt, and ankle-high paddock boots. Her silky long black hair was tied back, and she held an olive green brimmed hunt cap helmet in her hand.

Daphne stopped in front of Pixie's stall, holding Mandy by a lead line. "I've saddled Cody," she said, referring to the spotted Colorado Ranger gelding that boarded at Wildwood and that the ranch had permission to use. "He's in the front corral already."

"Okay," Taylor answered. "Are we using Shafir?"

"I don't think we should," Daphne replied. "I didn't tack her up. She's still too unpredictable."

"You're probably right," Taylor agreed. Wildwood's young mare was frisky and playful, a trait Arabians were noted for, and she'd only recently been brought along far enough in her training to be ridden. "I hope we have

enough horses, though,” Taylor added, chewing her right thumbnail anxiously, a habit she found impossible to resist in stressful times.

“Are you nervous about today?” Daphne asked.

“There’s a lot to worry about,” Taylor said. “Don’t you think so?”

Daphne cocked her head to the side. “Like what?”

“I don’t know,” Taylor said. “Couldn’t a million things go wrong? There might be more students than we can handle. Someone might get hurt. And . . . and . . .”

“And Prince Albert might not let anyone on his back,” Daphne finished Taylor’s unspoken sentence.

Taylor sighed forlornly. “Yeah . . . and that.”

“That’s what you’re *really* concerned about, isn’t it?”

“I guess so,” Taylor admitted.

“Don’t worry. I think it’ll be all right.”

Taylor brightened at Daphne’s words. “You do? Why?”

Smiling, Daphne shrugged. “It’s a sunny day, much warmer than it usually is at the end of November. Wildwood has this great new business. I’m just feeling optimistic.”

“Oh,” Taylor said, disappointed. She’d hoped that Daphne had some sound equestrian information on which

to base her idea that Prince Albert would do the right thing, some wise observation taken from her impressive knowledge of horses — not just wishful thinking and a good mood!

“Think positive,” Daphne advised cheerfully, leading Mandy toward the stable’s wide opening. “Mrs. LeFleur will help, too. It’ll all be fine. See you outside.”

Taylor sighed once more. “Think positive,” she murmured as she ran the brush back through Pixie’s wild mane, echoing the words with much less conviction than Daphne had used. Taylor supposed it was good advice. Besides, what other choice did she have?

She led Pixie into the aisle, then went into Prince Albert’s stall and took him out. “Come on, you guys. It’s time.” Taylor clipped a lead line to the side strap of Prince Albert’s bridle and began to walk him out of the stable, confident that Pixie would follow wherever Prince Albert went.

As she walked them forward, Taylor heard a sound coming from the back entrance of the stable. A slim girl with long, nearly black curls stepped into the aisle. “I came to help,” said Mercedes Gonzalez, striding purposefully toward Taylor.

“I thought you weren’t supposed to be here,” Taylor said, a little surprised to see her friend.

“I know — and *you* know that I couldn’t care less,” Mercedes replied with brazen confidence.

“But what if your mother finds out?” Taylor asked.

Mercedes shrugged. “A friend of hers drove her to the bone doctor this morning. He’s in New Jersey, so she won’t be back until late this afternoon.”

Taylor frowned. “I still say you’re taking a chance.”

“That’s my decision,” Mercedes insisted. “I’ll lead Pixie out.” She came beside the pony and took hold of her reins.

“Well, anyway, I’m glad you’re here,” Taylor said. “I think we’re going to need all the help we can get today.”