



WILDWOOD STABLES

Taking the Leap

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SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
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ISBN 978-0-545-23092-6

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12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

11 12 13 14 15 16/0

Printed in the U.S.A.
First printing, February 2011

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Chapter 1

Pay attention to your diagonals,” Keith Hobbes reminded thirteen-year-old Taylor Henry as she trotted around the indoor ring at Ross River Ranch. The renowned riding instructor stood in the center of the ring with his arms folded, watching. He was dressed as always in a black T-shirt, tan breeches, and polished tall black boots. He pushed back his brimmed cap, revealing tufts of white hair.

Taylor struggled to recall what Keith had taught her about diagonals. Although she was a confident Western rider, she was new to English riding. What was it he’d

taught her during their last session? Slowing to a walk, Taylor tried to remember.

When she was traveling clockwise in a ring, as she was at that moment, she should be rising out of her stirrups while the horse's front outside leg swung forward.

Was she on the correct diagonal now? Taylor wasn't sure.

Taylor picked up a sitting trot once again. She checked the shoulder of the mare she was riding. Serafina, a black quarter horse with a white blaze, belonged to Ross River Ranch. The horse's leg was back when she rose out of the saddle, which wasn't what Taylor — or Keith Hobbes — wanted.

To get onto the correct diagonal, Taylor would have to change position. But how?

Then she remembered what Keith had told her to do. To get her posting into the correct sit-rise-sit rhythm, she sat for an extra beat and then rose into the post as soon as Serafina's shoulder went back.

"That's it!" Keith encouraged her. "Good girl!"

Taylor beamed at her instructor, proud of earning his approval. She had so much respect for Keith, who was a

retired United States Equestrian Federation judge, an A circuit competitor, and a former Olympic dressage team trainer. Winning these free lessons was one of the best things that had ever happened to her. On her own, she could never have afforded to train with him.

A lithe, willowy girl with long, silky black hair entered the spectator area outside the ring. Taylor recognized her immediately. Smiling, she waved.

Daphne Chang was the sixteen-year-old riding instructor over at Wildwood Stables. She boarded her gray speckled mare, Mandy, across the aisle from Taylor's black quarter horse gelding, Prince Albert, and Pixie, the palomino Shetland pony mare. Taylor had acquired Prince Albert and Pixie in a rescue and now worked for their board at the newly opened rustic ranch.

Daphne returned Taylor's wave but didn't smile as Taylor would have expected her to. Taylor's brow furrowed in worried confusion. What was wrong with Daphne?

"Okay, Taylor, that's enough for today. You can walk out and relax," Keith called as he approached Daphne with a friendly smile. "Nice job."

"Thanks!" Taylor hadn't realized Daphne knew Keith,

but remembered that Daphne had boarded Mandy at Ross River before she brought the Arabian-barb mix over to Wildwood. That was probably how she knew the trainer.

Taylor slowed Serafina to a walk to let her cool down before bringing her back to be groomed by the ranch's stable hands. Ross River Ranch was so different from Wildwood Stables, where all the riders did their own grooming and tacking. Everything was luxurious at Ross River.

Trying not to be too obvious, Taylor cut her eyes over to where Daphne sat with Keith. They were in a deep discussion. Then they both stood and shook hands.

Keith left, exiting to the outside. Daphne stood and waited as Taylor approached, still riding Serafina at a walk.

"What was that about?" Taylor asked.

"Keith asked me to be his assistant," Daphne revealed, not meeting Taylor's eyes.

"That's great!" Taylor cried. "That's wonderful. Congratulations! There's no one better than Keith. You'll learn so much. Not that you need to."

“Are you kidding?” Daphne replied. “I’ll learn so much about training and instructing. To work with Keith Hobbes is the chance of a lifetime.”

“Will he pay a lot?” Taylor asked.

“The pay is excellent, plus Mandy will get free board.”

Taylor blinked, not quite understanding. “Board? You already board her at Wildwood.”

“But this would be free, and it’s so much nicer here.”

“Are you saying you would leave Wildwood Stables?”

“It’s a great opportunity,” Daphne replied, and Taylor thought she heard a defensive note in her friend’s voice.

“You would still give lessons at Wildwood, wouldn’t you?” Taylor asked, growing concerned.

“I might not be able to,” Daphne said, looking away.

A knot of anxiety began to grow in Taylor’s stomach. “What are we going to do? We won’t have any instructors!” she exclaimed.

Daphne looked back at Taylor, guilt in her eyes. “I’ll try to help you guys find a new one, but” — she paused and took a deep breath, and with a self-assuring nod finished — “but I am definitely taking this position.”

Taylor nodded back, tight-lipped. Before Taylor could think of something to say, Daphne looked away and mumbled, "I'm sorry. I'll see you later." She strode off toward the office, leaving Taylor still on Serafina, in the ring.

Taking a steadying breath, Taylor dismounted and led Serafina to the barn. Her mind raced with possible solutions. Was it in Wildwood's budget to hire another trainer? Without an instructor, would they lose a lot of business from lessons?

Around the corner of the barn, in the round pen, was a man in a wheelchair speaking to another man. The standing man, who wore jeans and a blue shirt, held on to a lead rope, while an anxious-looking bay pranced back and forth on the other end.

Taylor's eyebrows shot up in surprise when the horse reared and began to dart in circles around the circular pen. The man in the blue shirt started forward after the bay, only to be stopped by a halting gesture from the man in the wheelchair. Taylor recognized the wheelchair-bound man as Jim LeFleur, the son of Mrs. LeFleur, owner of Wildwood Stables.

Taylor knew that Jim LeFleur had been an avid rider before a terrible jumping accident that had left him paralyzed from the waist down. Taylor wondered what he was doing in there, and if it was even safe for him to be that close to a rearing horse. Filled with a burning curiosity, she crept closer, still holding on to Serafina.

“Just let him go, Rob. Let him make a few laps and get out some energy before trying anything else,” Jim LeFleur advised the man who was standing. Rob, who Taylor gathered was the standing man, nodded and watched as the horse ran circles around the metal pole walls of the pen.

“Good. *Now* you can put the lunge line on him. Slowly now, don’t make any sudden movements,” Jim continued to instruct, “and don’t look him in the eyes. Remember, he’s a prey animal, and eye contact is a predatory move to him. We want to seem friendly and nonthreatening, not like we’re going to eat him.”

Rob nodded once again and approached the horse, moving very slowly. When he reached the now slightly sweaty bay, he stroked his neck with the lunge line, showing the horse he meant no harm. Reaching forward,

he clipped the line under the horse's chin. Rob paused and looked to Jim for further instruction. Jim nodded to him and said, "Nice. Now get him working on the rail."

Taylor had been so engrossed with watching the men train the horse that she jumped when she felt a hot puff of breath on her neck. Whipping around, she saw Serafina, who had been nibbling on the back of her jacket. Serafina jumped back a bit, as startled by Taylor's sudden movement as Taylor had been by the horse's.

Taylor chuckled and petted Serafina's soft nose. "Let's get you back to the barn so you can rest, hmm?" she said. As Taylor continued her walk back to the barn she wondered about Jim's situation with his mother and Devon Ross. Taylor knew that he no longer interacted with Mrs. LeFleur, and he called Devon Ross "Aunt Devon." Taylor was also aware that Devon Ross and Mrs. LeFleur were cousins who were not on good terms. Why did Jim work for the often icy Devon Ross instead of his own mother, who was so welcoming? What had happened in their past to make those relationships so strained?

Glancing over her shoulder to the round pen, Taylor marveled at how confident Jim still was with horses. Despite being in a wheelchair, he clearly knew what he was doing and worked with the confidence of an experienced rider. He'd obviously had enough belief in his ability to continue his work with horses after the accident. He seemed to truly have a gift and a passion for horses. If only Taylor could find someone who had an equally strong gift and passion for teaching riding lessons to replace Daphne!

Walking into the high-ceilinged, spacious, clean Ross River stables, Taylor greeted a neatly dressed man in polished paddock boots and a white polo shirt embroidered with the ranch's logo. He looked to be in his forties, but he was only a little taller than Taylor. "Hi, Enrique. How are you today?"

"Very well, thank you. Did you have a good lesson?" Enrique asked. He had a slight Spanish accent and a friendly, weathered face.

Taylor nodded. "Keith is so great," she replied.

Enrique extended a rough, leathery hand to take

Serafina's reins from Taylor. As always, Taylor noticed that he smelled of soap and hay. He smiled at her once more, clipped Serafina to the cross ties, and walked into a room down the aisle, on the left.

Enrique was such a nice, gentlemanly man, and so kind to the horses. Taylor realized that she would miss him once her lessons here ended, which would be soon. She only had one left. Ross River Ranch really was a nice place, even though Taylor's heart would always belong to Wildwood Stables. In a way she could see why Daphne would want to board Mandy here.

Taylor cut her thought short. No. Daphne was part of Wildwood. That's where she and Mandy belonged. After Daphne thought about it some more, she would realize she just couldn't leave Wildwood. And if she didn't realize it on her own, Taylor would have to find a way to convince her.

In one of the stalls, Taylor noticed a light gray, nearly white horse she'd never seen there before. She was sure of it because she would certainly have remembered a horse like this one. It was huge — easily seventeen hands high — with massively broad withers and a thick neck!

And yet for such a big horse, its legs were surprisingly short.

Enrique came by, holding his grooming box so he could brush down Serafina. He stopped and smiled at Taylor's awestruck expression. "That's a French horse," he told her. "A Percheron. Would you believe the big fellow has Arabian blood in him?"

Taylor stepped closer to the horse. "I can't see it," she admitted.

"When he walks you can see it in his gait. He walks like an Arabian," Enrique told her.

Taylor thought of Shafir, the playful young Arabian mare that lived at Wildwood Stables. She pictured the fine-boned chestnut horse's free-flowing, delicate stride. There was no way Taylor could picture this massive animal moving with such grace.

"He moves so well. That's what makes him good at pulling heavy things," Enrique added.

"He's a draft horse?" Taylor asked.

"Of course he's a draft," Enrique cried with a good-natured laugh. "Look at the size of him! He's a giant. Mrs. Ross just bought him."

Taylor read the engraved nameplate outside the Percheron's stall: JACQUES. Taylor laughed. "Of course he'd be named Jacques. He's French!"

"Vive la France!" Enrique joked.

"Why does Mrs. Ross need a draft horse?" Taylor asked. Whenever she'd seen Mrs. Ross riding, she was on a gorgeous Thoroughbred. "What does she need to pull?"

"She doesn't have to pull anything, but why not?" Enrique countered. "He's a beauty. Mrs. Ross loves beautiful horses, and she has the fortune to buy what she loves."

Enrique moved on down the aisle toward Serafina. His words still played in Taylor's head: *Mrs. Ross has the fortune to buy what she loves.*

Had Devon Ross bought her nephew's love — somehow taken his affection from Mrs. LeFleur? Was that why Mrs. LeFleur could never forgive her cousin?