

Chapter 1

Taylor Henry clicked her tongue softly and dug her knees into Prince Albert's sides. She pressed the heels of her brown cowboy boots down into the stirrups. The black quarter horse gelding immediately moved from a walk into a smooth jog, keeping to the sides of the corral. Leaning forward in the saddle, Taylor loosened the reins a bit and signaled Prince Albert to go a little faster. "Good boy," she praised as he broke into a steady lope.

It felt so great to be riding again!

How she'd missed it!

Taylor steered Prince Albert toward Daphne Chang, who sat on the top rung of the wooden split-rail corral

fence, watching. At fifteen — tall and slender with long, silky black hair — Daphne was, so far, the only instructor giving lessons at the newly reopened horse ranch, Wildwood Stables.

For more than twenty years the once-thriving ranch had been abandoned, left to decay and splinter. Now, though, it was coming back. It was just about nine on a Saturday morning, and tradespeople had already arrived to continue the scraping, sanding, hammering, sawing, and painting they'd been working at for the previous two weeks. The dilapidated stable, corrals, and supply sheds were well on their way to being restored. Taylor recalled how, when she first came upon the place, it had reminded her of a ghost town. All that was missing were the tumbleweeds. Now she gazed at the many improvements and couldn't resist a quick shiver of pride. She had played such a big part in getting the place reopened that she felt as if it were a part of her.

Daphne smiled at Taylor and Prince Albert as they approached. "He rides like a dream," she commented, "when *you* ride him."

Taylor dismounted and took off her helmet, letting her long brown ponytail swing around her shoulders. She

did a quick knee bend to get rid of that stiff, bowed-leg feeling she always experienced after being on a horse. Brushing dust from her jeans and red shirt, she offered Prince Albert's reins to Daphne. "Want to try him?" she asked. "He's had a couple of weeks to get to know you. Maybe he won't be so spooky anymore."

Daphne eyed Prince Albert uncertainly. "Are you going to behave for me, boy?" she asked, her voice full of skepticism.

Daphne was an expert rider who preferred English, but she could ride both English and Western style. Normally, there should have been no doubt that she'd hop on Prince Albert and handle him beautifully. But Prince Albert was not behaving normally.

Taylor stroked the side of Prince Albert's smooth, muscular neck. "Be nice to Daphne," she coaxed. "She's our friend. And it's really important that you let other people ride you."

Prince Albert neighed, but Taylor couldn't tell if it meant yes or no — or anything at all — so she pretended it was a yes. "Good, I'm glad you're going to cooperate," she praised her horse. Taylor looked to Daphne. "See? He says you should come on up."

“Oh, yeah?” Daphne questioned with light laughter as she hopped down into the corral. “We’ll see about that.”

Taylor wished she could make Prince Albert understand how crucial it was that he allow people other than her to ride him. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that nothing less than his life depended on it.

Prince Albert sputtered nervously and turned toward Taylor. “It’s all right,” Taylor assured him, nodding her head.

Facing Prince Albert, Daphne breathed into his nostrils. In the wild, horses did this to get to know one another. Horse trainers and owners used the method to let their horses become familiar with them. Daphne and Taylor had agreed to have Daphne try it. Prince Albert had to meet and trust as many people as possible.

The horse seemed to be paying attention to Daphne’s breathing. Was he learning anything about her, things his keen horse sense picked up in her breath? Or was he simply memorizing her scent?

Taylor felt a flicker of jealousy as she watched Daphne try to connect with Prince Albert. She might be sharing Prince Albert with the ranch, but his heart was all hers. Taylor loved that she and Prince Albert shared a bond.

That he preferred her to anyone else was a secret source of deep happiness. It hurt a little that she would have to give up that precious exclusivity.

Taylor knew, though, that she had to squelch her instinctive possessiveness and encourage Prince Albert to befriend other humans. The gelding needed to be a school horse, one that could be used for lessons, in order to pay for his board here at Wildwood Stables. It was the arrangement Taylor had struck with Mrs. LeFleur, who had just inherited the place. If Mrs. LeFleur couldn't use Prince Albert for riding lessons, she couldn't afford to keep him there for free. And if Mrs. LeFleur wouldn't keep Prince Albert there, then Taylor couldn't keep him at all.

"Here goes nothing," Daphne remarked as she put on the helmet, adjusting the strap below her chin. Coming along Prince Albert's side, she put her foot in the stirrup and grabbed hold of the all-purpose saddle on the horse's back. At the moment she was about to pull herself up, Prince Albert took two steps sideways, away from her.

Daphne's arms windmilled as she was pitched backward.

Taylor rushed in to grab her from behind. Both of them staggered before falling backward onto the dirt.

“Albert!” Taylor scolded, using the name she’d found on his original stall before she’d changed it to Prince Albert. “That wasn’t nice!”

Daphne got to her feet first and offered Taylor a hand to get up. “What are we going to do with you, Prince Albert?” she asked, laughing as she dusted off her jeans.

Daphne’s laughter was infectious, and Taylor realized they must have looked pretty funny as they wheeled backward in the corral. But Taylor’s smile faded when she looked up and noticed Mrs. LeFleur watching them from behind the window of the main building across the way. If she’d seen the way Prince Albert was acting, Taylor was sure that Mrs. LeFleur wouldn’t see anything amusing about it.