

Chapter 1

Leaning forward in her saddle, Taylor Henry focused between the ears of her black horse. He was loping along at a good, even clip. She and Prince Albert were moving together with a smoothness that made Taylor feel as if they had melded into one fantastical creature — a slim thirteen-year-old girl in jeans and a sweatshirt, her brown ponytail flying beneath a black helmet, magically merged with a powerful quarter horse gelding.

They were going pretty fast. Did she dare to go faster?
To gallop?

How she longed to!

But she was nervous.

The rolling hills in the pasture behind Wildwood Stables were still green. October was holding fast to the last of summer's warmth, though the surrounding woods brimmed with orange, red, and yellow leaves. The gloriousness of the day, with its robin's egg-colored sky and cotton ball clouds, filled Taylor with a spirited daring.

A quick glance over her shoulder told Taylor that Pixie — the cream Shetland pony, with a matching wild, frazzled mane — was watching them as she grazed several yards away. As long as Pixie's friend, Prince Albert, stayed in sight, the small pony was content.

Taylor rose from the saddle, squeezing Prince Albert's sides tight with her thighs and knees, and got into two-point position, legs straight with her body balanced above the saddle.

Was she steady enough to gallop?

Taylor kept going, holding the two-point position. Before long, a quiver began in Taylor's knees. Her calf muscles burned with fatigue from holding herself upright.

Involuntarily, Taylor's upper body drifted left. She righted herself, using all her abdominal strength.

No, Taylor decided, sitting back down in the saddle. She wasn't confident she had the strength or balance to control Prince Albert if he was going any faster.

Before Taylor could fully experience her disappointment in her own riding ability, a teenage girl appeared in the pasture on a speckled gray. The horse was a mixed-breed mare, part barb and part quarter horse; a bit thick-bodied, with perky, high ears and a lush black mane and tail.

Daphne Chang rode toward Taylor with the graceful ease that marked her as an expert horsewoman. Daphne slowed her horse, Mandy, beside Taylor and Prince Albert. "Hi, Taylor. How come you're here on a Sunday? I thought Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were the days you worked."

"I've decided to come at least one day every weekend from now on. I don't like Prince Albert and Pixie to be shut up in their stalls all that time between Friday and Monday."

"You should have called me. I would have turned them out in the pasture for you."

"Thanks, but I don't mind," Taylor said. "I like riding Prince Albert."

“You shouldn’t be out here by yourself,” Daphne chided mildly. “If you fell, who would know you needed help?”

“I came early. No one else was around to ride with,” Taylor explained.

“Do you have your cell phone with you, at least?”

Taylor patted the phone in her back jeans pocket. “Yes! Besides, Prince Albert isn’t going to throw me. He’s the most steady, gentle guy in the world, aren’t you, boy?”

“Even so,” Daphne insisted. “You shouldn’t go off alone like that.”

“I guess not,” Taylor allowed. She decided not to admit that she’d been about to attempt a gallop — a move that would have made her chances of falling pretty high, gentle horse or no. She was suddenly glad she’d thought better of it.

The girls rode together, their horses side by side, across the dandelion-strewn pasture. Pixie trotted up to join them and fell into step beside Prince Albert.

“The place is looking good, isn’t it?” Taylor said to Daphne.

“Really good,” Daphne agreed, “especially when you remember what a mess it was to start with.”

The once thriving Wildwood Stables had been closed for many years, its wooden buildings and fences left to splinter and rot, until the current owner, Bernice LeFleur, inherited it. Taylor had had a part in convincing Mrs. LeFleur not to sell the place but to reopen it. It was part of the reason Taylor felt so deeply connected to Wildwood Stables.

The fact that Mrs. LeFleur opened the ranch and agreed to let Pixie and Prince Albert board there was, in Taylor's opinion, practically a miracle. Taylor had acquired the horse and pony in a rescue after they'd been abandoned by their owners. In exchange for Taylor's agreement to work at Wildwood three days a week and to let the ranch use Prince Albert and Pixie for lessons and trail rides, Mrs. LeFleur would pick up the expense of their food, vet care, and board. If Mrs. LeFleur hadn't made this generous arrangement, Taylor would never have had the money to keep Pixie and Prince Albert.

There was a problem, though.

In the month since Taylor had owned Prince Albert, she and the horse had formed an intense bond that Taylor cherished. The drawback to the deep and obvious love Prince Albert held for Taylor was that he wouldn't let

anyone else ride him. Prince Albert needed to be a school horse that could take on the riders who would come to Wildwood Stables for lessons. He couldn't afford to be a one-girl horse.

Mrs. LeFleur was on a tight budget — she'd exhausted most of her money fixing up the ranch — so if she couldn't use Prince Albert for lessons, then she couldn't keep him. And if Mrs. LeFleur couldn't keep him, Taylor couldn't keep him on her own, either.

At a walking gait, the girls rode the horses toward the pasture fence. Taylor admired the way Daphne could unlatch the pasture fence, ride through, and then relatch it without getting down off Mandy. "You have to show me how to do that," she said to Daphne.

"I will," the older girl replied. "When are you going to let me teach you to ride English style?"

"I don't know. I've only ever ridden Western. I'm comfortable with it."

"You want to learn to jump, don't you? Jumping is only in English."

"You're right. I do want to jump," Taylor admitted.

As they rode down the slope leading from the pasture, the girls walked their horses past the large, fenced

paddock with several outbuildings and storage sheds right behind it. Ahead of them was the main building, which housed the ranch's office, the tack room, and the stables, six indoor and six outdoor box stalls. In front of the main building was a round corral; on its right was another paddock.

Taylor's eyes narrowed as she realized there was a girl with long blonde hair in the corral, leading a chestnut Arabian mare with a white blaze down its muzzle. "I can't believe Plum's here already," Taylor muttered darkly. "I hope she doesn't think she's going to ride Shafir."