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Winnie, stop her! She'll hurt Towaco!" Hawk shouted at me as she fumbled with the gate.

Nickers, my white Arabian, reared, pawing the air, daring Victoria Hawkins's Appaloosa to set foot on *her* turf, the paddock behind our barn. Towaco hung his head and tucked his tail to his haunches.

"It's okay, Hawk," I said, trying to sound calm. But watching my powerful Arabian threaten Hawk's little Appaloosa made me feel anything but calm. I was supposed to be Winnie the Horse Gentler, not Winnie the Horse Referee.

I picked a handful of grass and vaulted over the fence just as Nickers stretched her long, muscular neck and charged poor Towaco. The Appy whinnied. Hawk screamed.

"Nickers, come!" I called.

Towaco huddled close to the barn.

It had been only five minutes since Hawk's mom dropped off the Appaloosa. It had taken Hawk a few weeks to convince her mother to leave Towaco in my care. Watching that trailer bounce up our road was the proudest moment of my life because inside rode my first customer. Hawk had chosen to move her horse out of the fancy, high-priced Stable-Mart and into my little barn because she believed I could help Towaco. Her horse would be the first of many problem horses I could gentle. I wished Mom had been alive to see it.

But my pride had evaporated fast, like water in this sweltering Ohio heat. The second I turned our guest horse into the paddock, Nickers, my sweet Arabian, had wheeled around and kicked, missing the frightened Appy by inches.

"Nickers?" I called, willing a friendly tone and holding out my handful of grass.

She came but only after craning her neck around so Towaco could get a good look at her beautiful white teeth and her angry ears, flattened back in a horse threat. Then, for good

measure, Nickers kicked out one hind leg, like a playful colt.

Towaco squealed as if Nickers had connected with her kick.

“Winnie!” Hawk yelled, as if I’d kicked her horse myself.

Nickers trotted up and nuzzled my outstretched palm, taking the scraggly grass I offered. I scratched behind her ears. “That’s a good girl,” I said, soothing her.

“Good girl?” Hawk’s voice trembled.

I turned to look at her. Victoria Hawkins comes from Native American ancestry. She’s tall and beautiful, with sleek black hair that falls straight to her waist. Unlike me—I’m short, with long, dark hair that has a mind of its own, a voice that sounds hoarse, and freckles that make people call me cute. I hate *cute*.

Usually Hawk’s calm, Quarter Horse temperament makes me look like a wild Mustang. Not today. Her cheeks flushed as red as the pet bird on her shoulder, mimicking, “*Squawk! Good girl?*”

“Not *good*. That horse is still a Wild Thing!” Hawk insisted.

That’s what people used to call my horse. But when she had become mine, I’d named her

Nickers. Nickers *is* good. She's great. And I love her so much it hurts. Getting to own my white Arabian had been more than a dream come true. It had taken a miracle. Now it was beginning to look like keeping her would take another.

My plan to pay for her upkeep was to gentle horses. People would pay me to fix their problem horses. But so far nobody knew about me. Gaining a reputation isn't easy when you're 12. But for 10 of my 12 years I lived with the best horse trainer in the world—my mom. Back in Wyoming people had come from miles around just to watch Mom talk wild horses into gentle companions.

But then Mom died in a horrible car accident, and everything changed. Dad, Lizzy, and I tried living in the *I* states—Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa—before landing in Ohio. We rented the last house in Ashland—right on the outskirts of the city limits, although Ashland's no city. The barn and pasture came with the house. We'd been here two months, and Dad had decided we'd stick with Ashland for the whole school year. But so far, except for Towaco, no problem horses had shown up. I'd tried posters, e-mail

bulletin boards, and even an ad in the paper. I needed a reputation, and I needed it fast.

“Hawk,” I said, scratching the crest of Nickers’ mane to keep her with me. “Horses go through power struggles. Nickers figures she’s the boss since she was here first. Don’t worry.”

Hawk glared at Nickers. “I do not like it.” Her words came out separated, each one hard as ice. If Hawk were a horse, she’d be an Andalusian, a noble breed from Spain. Andalusians are classy, strikingly beautiful, but you can’t be too sure where you stand with them. I thought Hawk and I had a pretty good friendship going, but she still acted different around her old friends. I wondered how it would all work when school started.

I glanced toward the house and spotted Lizzy, my younger sister, halfway up the oak tree.

“Hawk, why don’t you hang out with Lizzy. I’ll ride some of the orneriness out of Nickers. By the time we get back, she’ll be good. Okay?”

“*Okay! Okay!*” squawked Hawk’s chattering lory, named Peter, after an old actor Peter Lorre, who used to play in scary or gangster movies.

“Maybe Peter and I should stay with Towaco.” Hawk reached over the gate, trying to

get her horse to come. But Towaco wouldn't budge from his safe spot by the barn.

"One hour, Hawk," I reasoned. "Let him get used to the pasture on his own."

Hawk stared at the pasture as if it were booby-trapped. Finally she said, "One hour."

As soon as Hawk left, I dashed to the barn for the hackamore, a bitless bridle I'd been using with Nickers, who resented the bit. In seconds I'd slipped on the leather hackamore and adjusted the rawhide loop that fits like a halter around Nickers' muzzle and behind her ears. As I led Nickers out of the pasture, she nuzzled the back of my neck and nickered with a low, rattling sound that never fails to melt my heart.

"I know, Nickers," I said, swinging up on her bareback. "You didn't mean any harm. But you have to be nice to Towaco. We need Hawk's money to buy your oats. And I need the reputation. Besides, he's a nice Appaloosa once you get to know him."

I'd gotten to know Towaco when I'd worked earlier in the summer at Spidells' Stable-Mart, mucking out stalls. The Spidells run their stable like they run everything else they own in Ashland—A-Mart, Pet-Mart, Pizza-Mart. Towaco

had meant no more to them than their pepperoni pizza. The gelding had developed bad habits while locked up in their stalls day and night—balking, chewing on stall wood, not coming when called. After Hawk had seen my work with Wild Thing, she had trusted me enough to finally, after weeks of arguing, convince her parents to switch Towaco to my barn. I couldn't let them down—not Hawk, and not Towaco.

Nickers quivered beneath me as we entered the field bordering our pasture. Her long, white mane blew in the warm breeze, tickling my face when I leaned forward to hug her neck. It was my last day of freedom before starting seventh grade at Ashland Middle School. I'd determined to make a name for myself no matter what it took. I wanted to stay in Ashland.

When Mom died, it felt like the hub of our family wheel had dropped out, leaving nothing but spokes with no place to go. Dad had sold our ranch in Wyoming, along with all the horses Mom had trained. The only things he kept were Lizzy and me, and sometimes I'd wondered why he kept us. Mom had been the one who kept tabs on us while Dad did his business deals. Now that he was the only parent—of two girls

no less—sometimes it felt like he just didn't know what to do with us. So he didn't try. Lately things were getting better between Dad and me, since we'd finally talked about Mom's death, but we had a long way to go.

Nickers and I skimmed the border of our pasture, trees blurring by, my skin cooling in the breeze we created. Above us, geese honked as we splashed through a creek and into the pines. The sun played hide-and-seek, finger-combing the woods as if searching for Nickers and me.

As Nickers pranced through the soft pine needles, I imagined all of God's creatures watching my horse and telling the Creator what a great job he did on that white Arabian. The trail leveled off, and the scent of clover overtook the smell of pine. "Canter!" I whispered. Nickers responded so immediately I had to tighten my leg grip to stay on. Arabians have only 17 ribs, compared to 18 in other breeds, but they can outlast almost any other horse, covering 100 miles a day in endurance riding. Nickers could have kept galloping until nightfall.

We burst into a clearing, the sun shining white-hot, blinding me. Two rabbits skittered in front of us. Nickers shied, jolting to the left.

She'd calmed down a lot since I'd owned her and worked her for the past month, but she still had some rough edges.

"Whoa," I muttered, squinting until my eyes got used to the light.

Nickers stopped, snorted, and nodded. Crows cawed through the trees. Squirrels chased each other in treetops.

*Thanks for making all of this, Lord,* I prayed.

After Mom died, I'd gone almost two years without praying, or at least not praying much. It felt good to be on speaking terms with God again.

I leaned back and felt Nickers relax. Usually I don't let a horse graze while I'm riding because she'll get the bad habit of trying to eat during rides. But Nickers was still getting used to the no-bit bridle. I didn't have to worry about grass stains clinging to a bit, reminding her of the great taste of green and tempting her to try to graze. So I let out the rein, allowing my horse a last day's treat of summer grazing.

Nickers began pulling up tufts of clover and chomping them down.

I glanced around the open field. When I looked behind me, I saw that Nickers had

snagged a branch during our ride. A stick, about a foot long, lay tangled in her silky tail. I tried to reach it but couldn't.

Nickers was content to munch meadow grass, so I threw one leg over until I sat sideways on her back. I leaned and stretched for the stick. My fingers touched it, but I couldn't grab on.

"Just keep eating, Nickers." I swung my right leg across her rump until I was sitting backwards on the mare. Leaning all the way down on her rump, I pulled her tail up with one hand and grabbed the stick with the other. "Got it!"

A whinny sounded from the woods. Nickers heard it too. She stopped grazing. A distant, uneven snort grew louder and louder. Nickers' head bobbed up. I felt her flanks tense.

"Easy, girl," I muttered. Her tail swished so that I had to hold on to it with both hands. "Wait a minute now."

A squeal pierced the clearing, swallowed by the sound of thundering hooves and human shouts as loud as the Fourth of July fireworks. In an explosion of hooves and legs, a reddish-brown, or bay, horse burst from the woods into the meadow. The rider let out a whoop, kicking his mount with both stirrups.

"Stop!" I cried, trying to wave one hand and hold on to Nickers' tail with the other. Nickers twitched. She sidestepped.

"Stay back!" I shouted, as the bay sped toward us and Nickers grew more antsy.

The rider was two horses' lengths from us when he jerked back the reins, sending his horse into a skidding stop, haunches nearly dragging the grass. Dust swirled around the bay Quarter Horse gelding, who tossed his head and struggled for balance.

*Phew!* I let out breath I didn't know I'd been holding. How could I have been so stupid to sit on my horse backwards, even for a second?

Nickers lifted one hoof after the other, as if the ground were on fire, but I felt her urge to bolt fade.

The bay's rider pulled off his helmet. He looked about my age, but football-player big with short brown hair. Shielding his eyes in a one-handed salute, he squinted. "You're supposed to face the other way, aren't you?" he shouted.

I could see the dimples in his cheeks from trying not to laugh. His horse looked so nervous the white star on his forehead twitched.

It wasn't funny. "And *you're* supposed to look where you're—"

But before I could finish, a shout rang out from the woods. Then came the *thuh-DUMP*, *thuh-DUMP* of a horse in dead gallop.

Into the clearing flew a palomino Quarter Horse, pale gold and nice-looking, but it had nowhere near the conformation, or balanced build, of the bay.

The bay's rider muttered, "Oh no."

The palomino galloped toward us. "Yo, Grant!" shouted the rider. "I'm going to beat you this time, loser!"

Nickers stirred.

The one called Grant, the bay's rider, slapped on his helmet. His horse, eager to join the race, strained against the reins and chomped the bit.

"Easy, Eager Star," I pleaded, giving the bay a name, hoping it would help.

"Gotta go!" Grant shouted, his legs stretching away from the bay's belly, prepared to deliver a kick.

"No!" I cried. "Don't—!"

Nickers' muscles tensed, bunching together like a coiled spring. I gripped her tail. "Please! You can't—!"

Eager Star circled in place as the palomino galloped past.

*"Nobody beats me!"* Grant screamed. He brought his legs down hard, digging spurs into his horse's sides. The bay reared and dropped into an instant gallop.

That did it. Nickers shot forward as if fired from a cannon. And I was in for the fastest ride of my life—backwards.

