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Yamile Saied Méndez

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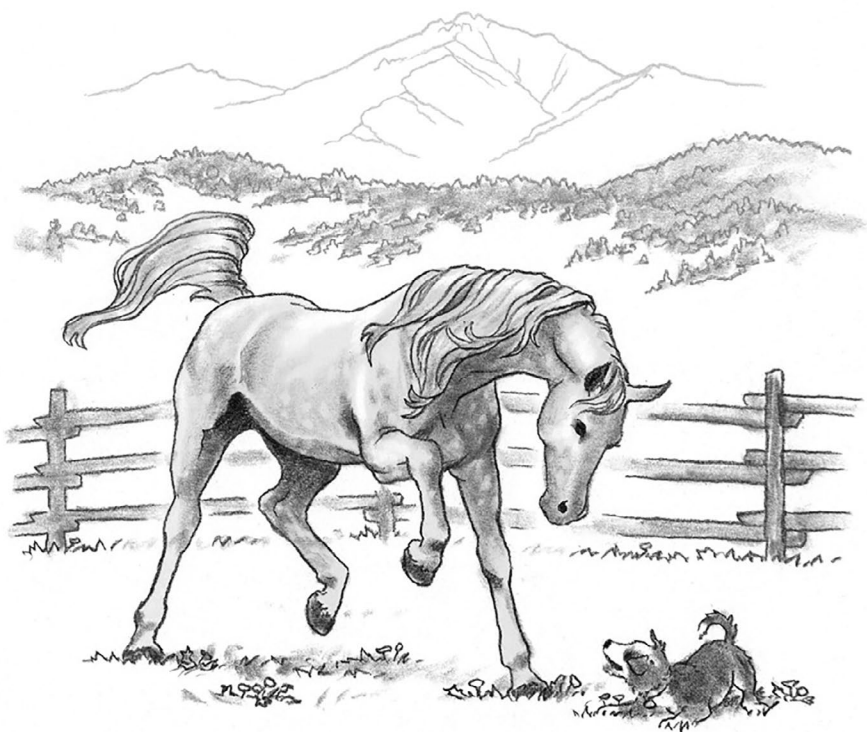
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HORSE COUNTRY

BOOK 2

Friends Like These



Yamile Saied Méndez

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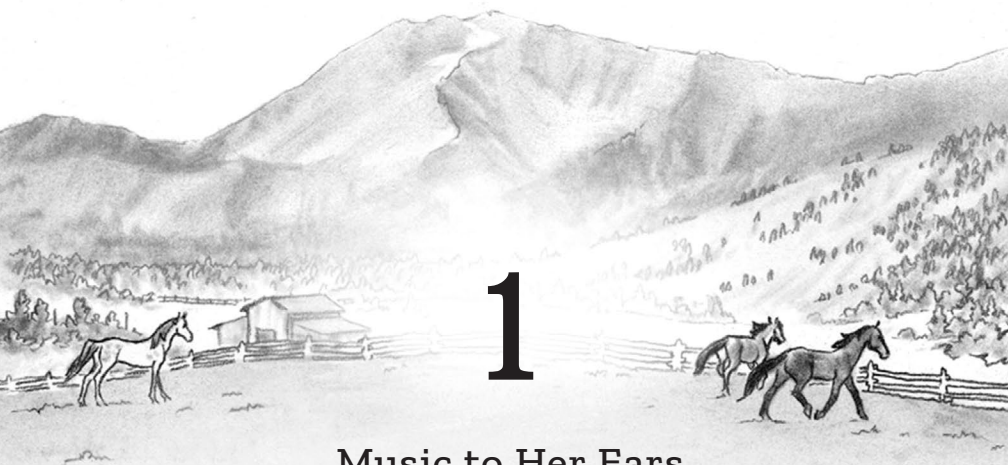
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Valentino Méndez, Liv Reynolds,
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Music to Her Ears

Carolina Aguasvivas loved the clip-clopping sound of dancing hoofbeats. It was her favorite music ever. But today, as she warmed up Shadow to get ready to ride, the tall gray horse's canter was a little off. The rhythm of his footfalls *sounded* okay, and he looked just fine as he circled Carolina at the end of a long lunge line, but his gait *felt* unbalanced. She didn't know how to explain it, and she didn't know what the matter was, but she loved a challenge. She was going to fix whatever was troubling him.

On any given day, a mixture of rock en español, country, reggaeton, and K-pop rang from the newly installed speakers in the large indoor arena. But today, Carolina had to fully

concentrate to work with the spirited, hardheaded Arabian horse, *el cabeza dura*, as she secretly called Shadow. She'd turned the music off.

"That's good, Shadow," she said.

The horse eased into a walk after a sequence of canter-trot-canthers that left them both sweaty.

Rotating slowly in the middle of the arena, Carolina closed her eyes and followed the lead rope's progression and the rhythm of Shadow's feet as he walked around her. She wanted to get the warm-up done so Kimber, the main trainer and head of the newly established Unbridled Dreams program, would let her get on the saddle already.

If only Shadow would give her a chance. If only Kimber didn't insist on her students nailing the groundwork before she allowed any actual riding.

A little boy laughed and broke Carolina's concentration. And Shadow's. His steps faltered, like a record scratch.

Carolina sighed and opened her eyes.

A small audience had gathered to watch the training session: Chelsie Sánchez (Carolina's friend and the daughter of

Paradise Ranch's owner, Heather Whitby) and the Sullivan siblings, Bracken and Loretta.

The little gap-toothed boy was Carolina's reading buddy at school. Bracken took any chance he could to come to Paradise and read to the horses. Reading hadn't been his favorite before, but he'd do anything for time at the barn, even extra homework. He adored Carolina and was cheering for her.

Loretta was another story.

She stood by the door of the arena, looking at her phone. Caro was sure her nemesis was watching for a mistake so she could gloat that she was the best rider in the sixth grade.

Carolina tried to ignore her.

She had always wished for the place to be bursting with people and activities. She wouldn't go back to the lonely days of the past when she'd been the only kid at the ranch. But sometimes Caro missed being able to do as she wanted, or to fail without any witnesses around. It wasn't like she could kick Loretta out of the arena though.

Unbridled Dreams, the new riding and sponsorship

program at Paradise Ranch, had welcomed a few weekly students already. Carolina was painfully aware that if they wanted to extend the benefits of working with horses to kids who couldn't afford the lessons, then they couldn't lose any of the paying students. And Loretta was very much one of them.

The new riding program had been Carolina's and Chelsie's idea last year after they'd messed up grandly, trying to train Chelsie's new horse, Velvet, on their own. Though the two girls hadn't exactly hit it off right away, they *had* made some of the same rash decisions.

Creating this program to give back to the community was the way Chelsie and Carolina were making up for their mistakes. They both knew access to horses was both fun and *rewarding*, as Caro's mom always put it. But anything to do with them was very expensive, so Carolina and Chelsie had insisted on a sponsorship component.

That's why the program couldn't fail.

And so Carolina couldn't tell Loretta off. Anyway, she had other things to worry about. She couldn't let her guard down with Shadow. Today, he was giving her a harder time than usual.

The dappled gray Arabian was one of the most handsome horses at Paradise Ranch. Velvet, Chelsie's bay Thoroughbred, was gorgeous, and she'd always have a special place in Carolina's heart. But Shadow needed to stay busy or he became cranky.

Kimber had suggested Carolina take a lesson with him.

"Shadow has a . . . How can I say it?" Kimber had said. "A special temperament. You'll enjoy him."

Special temperament was code for opinionated and stubborn, which fit Carolina's description too. But Shadow and Chelsie got along grandly. Carolina had taken the challenge.

Now here she was.

Outside, a typical Idaho winter storm raged. But inside the arena, the temperature was high. The clash of their tempers—the horse's and the girl's—showed up from the start when Shadow reluctantly did the warm-up grounding exercises. Now, he absolutely refused to join up.

The join-up was that moment when rider and horse met in the middle, literally. The horse would step toward the rider, human and animal bonding before a riding session, once their trust in each other was established.

Carolina went through every action of the process precisely.

She was firm and direct in her commands. Although at eleven she was tiny next to the majestic horse, he needed to know she was in charge.

Shadow didn't want to accept her authority though. If only he weren't so stubborn, Carolina knew he'd enjoy their lesson too.

"Come here, Shadow." Carolina made kissing sounds to encourage him to walk up to her, but he stood at the far end of her lead near the wall and wouldn't budge.

"Let's try something different," Kimber intervened, jumping into the arena.

Carolina doubted the trainer could get him to cooperate, but she had to swallow the words. In less than a minute, Kimber had him loping around in circles, all obedient and compliant.

Irritated, Carolina tried not to roll her eyes, but prickly heat rose all the way to the tips of her ears.

"Let me try," she said, taking the lead rope from the trainer's hands.

She mimicked all of Kimber's movements and actions, like a dance she'd learned by heart.

But nothing worked. She avoided looking directly into his eyes. She tried to control her breath, and still the big stubborn Shadow remained in his spot.

"Take a step toward him," Kimber suggested from the edge of the arena.

"You can do it, Caro!" Chelsie cheered from the stands.

Carolina briefly glanced in the direction of her friend and sent her a thumbs-up. She appreciated the confidence shining in Chelsie's hazel eyes, but she wasn't going to budge.

Her favorite instructor on YouTube, Tina Hodges, suggested not to take that first step toward the horse and not to give in.

"Just a little step, Caro," Kimber urged. "Just try it."

Carolina hesitated, torn between the trainer she'd admired online and the one right in front of her, the one who was everything she one day hoped to become.

Finally, grudgingly, she stepped toward Shadow.

He took two steps back.

Carolina snorted, sounding like a horse.

Bracken laughed, but Chelsie leaned over to him. He placed a hand over his mouth. Even across the distance, Carolina saw the corners of his eyes were still crinkly with amusement.

Carolina was not amused.

“Give him a few seconds,” Kimber instructed, sounding hopeful.

Carolina sighed. She had taught herself all she knew about horses, with the occasional guidance from her dad or Tyler, one of the former ranch hands. But her dad had been too busy managing the ranch, and Tyler had left for college just a few months ago. She’d watched videos online, but she had craved having an instructor in real life.

Now here was Kimber, and Carolina was having a hard time following her instructions.

She took another step toward Shadow. The horse snorted loudly, but to her surprise and delight, this time he didn’t step back. Instead, he started walking toward her. But his attitude! He shook his mane as if to say he was doing her a favor.

Her feathers got ruffled. But fighting the urge to snap at him, she waited.

When he finally reached her, Bracken clapped, and Chelsie shushed him. “Don’t distract them.”

“Took you long enough,” Carolina said, trying to pat Shadow’s head.

The horse moved out of the way, refusing her love.

Carolina knew she shouldn’t take things personally, but she was a little hurt the horse wouldn’t love her unconditionally like all the other animals in the barn, including Velvet, did.

She tried to push her wounded ego aside and swung herself up in the saddle without having to use the mounting block.

“Nice!” Bracken said.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Loretta had put her phone down and was watching her every move.

Cheeks burning, Carolina kept her shoulders squared, head held high, hands soft on the reins. Shadow started walking and then swiftly transitioned to a trot.

One two, one two, she chanted along with his rhythm in her

mind as Shadow started moving around the arena. Still, she felt his pent-up desire to break into a run. Carolina wanted to do everything perfectly for her audience.

Loretta had switched from her trainer from Boise to Kimber just a couple of weeks ago. She'd had the honor of becoming the first official Unbridled Dreams student besides Chelsie, whose mom owned the property, and Carolina, whose dad was the general manager. They weren't supposed to compete against each other—at least not officially—but secretly, Carolina wanted to be the best equestrian at Paradise. After all, she was the one who'd lived on the property her whole life.

Loretta watched intently, her face inexpressive.

Carolina didn't trust her. Loretta had been complying with the new rules Ms. Whitby had imposed, like how every rider had to know how to muck a stall and take care of horses if they wanted to take lessons. Loretta, who'd always looked down her nose at barn chores, did as she was supposed to. Carolina hadn't heard her complain. Yet. But she knew sooner or later, Loretta would try to find a way to get out of doing chores.

“Keep your mind on the saddle,” Kimber called out.

Shadow’s trotting had slowed down to a lazy walk.

“Use your aids,” Kimber reminded her.

“Let’s go, Shadow.” Carolina pressed her outside leg against his girth. He was a big animal, but he should obey her prompt to speed up. He always obeyed Chelsie. Besides, he liked running fast without a rider on his back. Carolina had seen him racing Velvet in the paddock as if they were playing a game.

But he definitely had a mind of his own.

He didn’t obey the first command, so Carolina insisted.

He remained stubbornly walking.

“Use your weight,” Chelsie called at her.

Ay! Things must have been looking sad for Chelsie to chime in when she’d scolded Bracken for distracting Carolina before.

Carolina sat deeper in the saddle, using her weight as her friend had suggested.

Nothing.

She made kissing sounds and shook the reins.

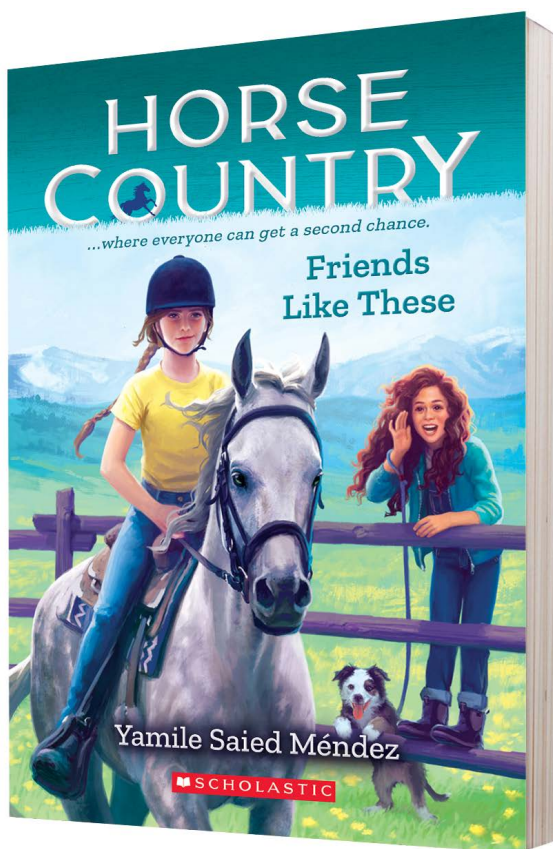
Still, he walked.

Loretta chuckled.

Carolina glanced quickly in her direction.

In that moment, Shadow took off. But it wasn't the trot Carolina was expecting. It was a full-on gallop.

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