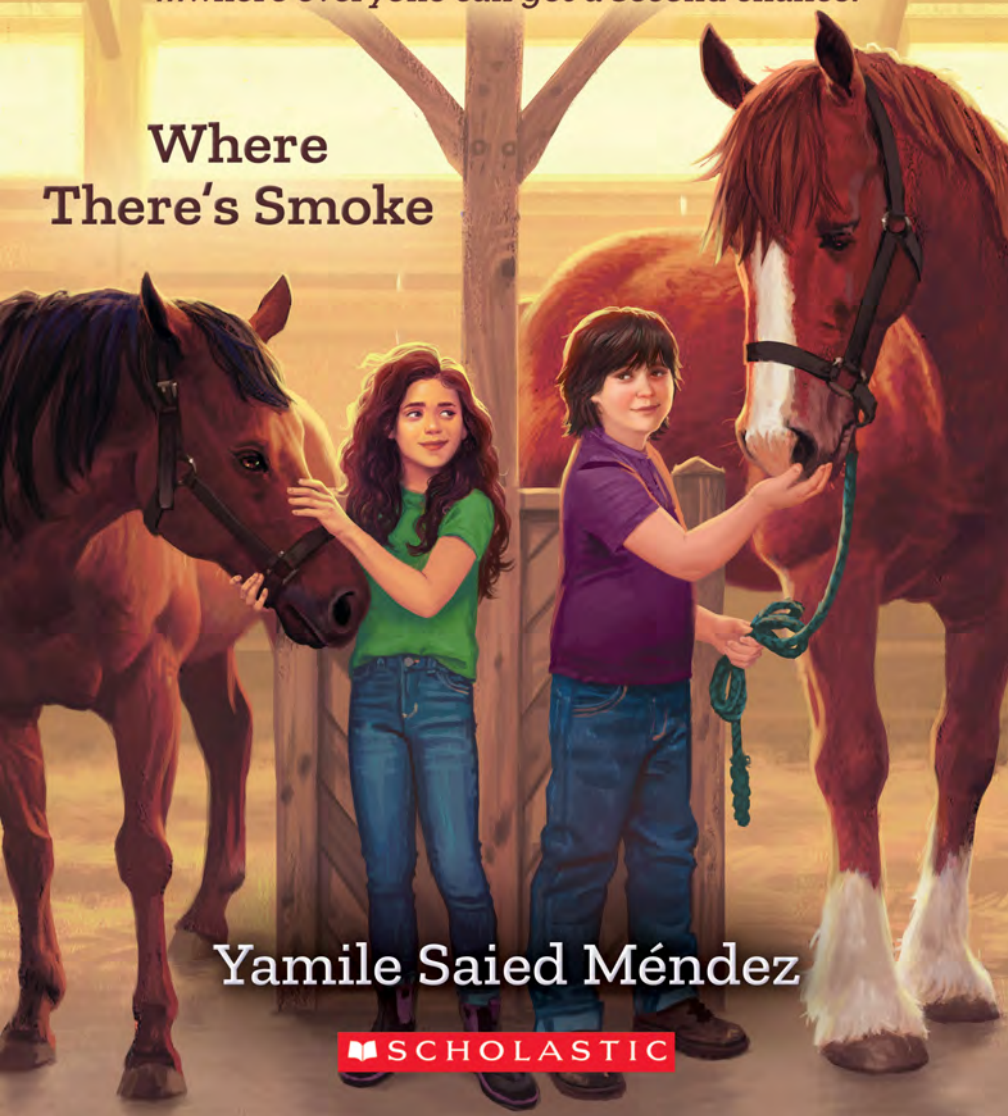


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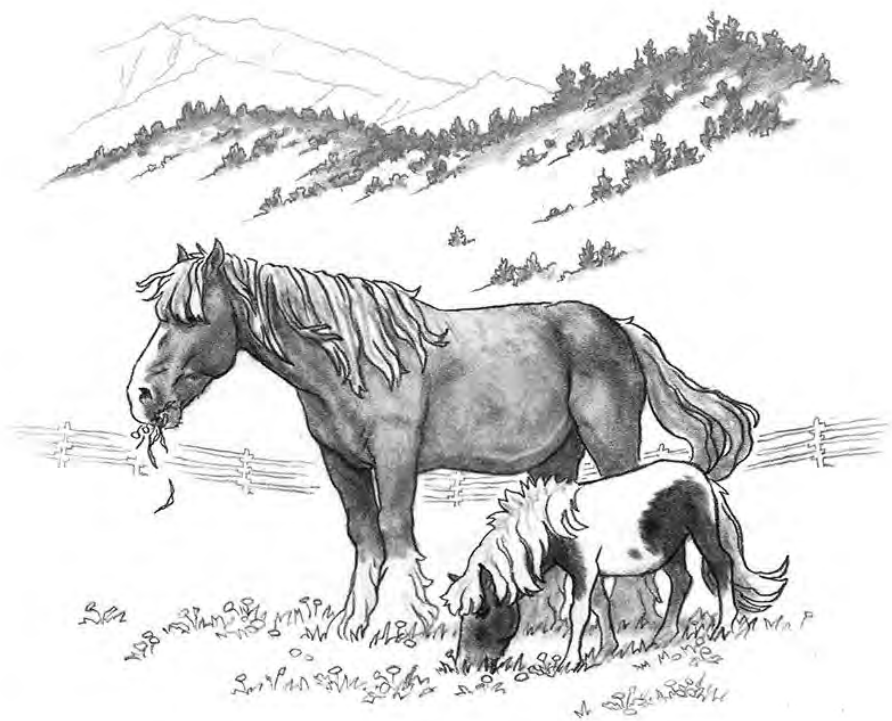
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BOOK 3

Where There's Smoke



Yamile Saied Méndez

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To my nieces twice over:
Aurora Joy Bellingham, Caroline Bellingham,
and Zahara Aurora Amira Saied





1 A New Dance

There's really nothing like being greeted by the soft sounds of sleepy, yet hungry, horses—even on a cold early March morning. But when Carolina and Vida tiptoed into the little barn, only silence welcomed them. Although it was freezing, Jaime, the new stable boy, had obviously already been around to clean up and move the horses to the pasture.

Carolina was glad the barn routine was on schedule, because today was special. Rockwell Richards, the new student—and first boy—at Unbridled Dreams, was starting the program.

It was still too early for his lesson, so the girls had decided to practice their dance for the sixth-grade farewell at school. The end-of-year festival was in May, still months away, but Carolina needed help.

Lots of help.

They were looking for a CD they'd left here the night before.

It took Carolina's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dimness of the barn. But she didn't worry. She might not recognize the cut on the palm of her right hand (maybe it was from breaking through the ice on the horses' water buckets last night?), but she knew every corner of this place where she spent most of her time.

She carefully navigated around the icy patches on the ground.

"Ay!" Vida exclaimed, her arms swinging around like the windmills up the road.

Metal clattered on concrete.

"What happened?" Caro asked.

"I just slipped on the ice! And then tripped over this bucket." Vida was hugging the post next to one of the stalls. "Who leaves stuff in the middle of the main hallway?"

"Oops, that must have been Jaime . . . Sorry. He also must have swept up all the hay! I scattered some last night to stop the water from freezing on the concrete like this." Caro's dad

knew all the ranch life hacks and had taught her this winter trick.

She should've warned her friend there might be ice though. At least the bucket was empty.

"I'll tell him later," Carolina said. "Your cousin still has a lot to learn." She picked up the bucket and put it back in the corner where it belonged.

Jaime was Vida's cousin on her mom's side.

"Why are we in the dark, Caro?" Vida sighed.

"Just flip the light switch, Vee."

Vida had spent the night at Carolina's family's cottage at the top of the hill, and she wasn't a morning person. She got grumpy when she didn't get her beauty sleep.

They shouldn't have stayed up watching movies so late into the night, but then what fun was a sleepover without a mini spa, movies and popcorn, and confessions with the lights off?

Not that Carolina had anything to confess. Vida already knew everything there was to know about her.

"I can't find the switch . . . Luna, stop trying to trip me again," Vida said to the gray tabby cat at her feet. "Argh! She scratched me!"

“Pull the dangling cord.” Caro tried not to smile.

But the amusement evaporated when the light came on and she headed toward the boom box near the door.

The CD wasn’t there.

Luna had left Vida alone and gone back to munching on the remaining wet food in her dish. She was perfectly capable of catching her own food, especially now that the critters were coming out of a long hibernation. But she stayed at the barn instead of venturing out to the mountains because at Paradise she was well taken care of.

Luna acted like she was the master of the whole property. Carolina could understand the cat, in a way.

She wasn’t the owner of the property either—that would be Heather Whitby, her friend Chelsie’s mom—but Paradise had been her home ever since she could remember. She loved this place with her whole heart.

“Achoo!” Vida sneezed.

“Bless you!” a voice said from the entrance.

“Thanks, Chels,” Vida said, taking a tissue from the newcomer’s hand.

“You’re still here?” Caro whipped around to look at her friend, surprised.

Chelsie Sánchez was dressed in her brand-new riding outfit: snug beige pants, a navy jacket, and black paddock boots she’d spent the previous afternoon shining until they gleamed. The blue and clear crystals of the stock pin she wore on her lapel cast little rainbows all around her when the early morning light hit it. It was a special one her dad, Milo Sánchez, the famous polo player and horse trainer, had sent her. He lived in Argentina, but he and Chelsie spoke on the phone every day.

He’d said that sleep was the most important component in preparing for any event. That’s why Chelsie hadn’t joined the sleepover. Today was the first dressage competition for Chelsie and Velvet, her beautiful dark bay Thoroughbred.

“Kimber and my mom are loading Velvet onto the trailer right now. I came to say bye and give you this.”

She handed Carolina the Velvet Lilly CD she’d been looking for.

“I took it home last night. My screen time on my phone

was up, and this album helps me relax. This morning, I realized you'll need it to practice."

Carolina was relieved she hadn't lost the CD, but the feeling quickly turned into jitters.

"I don't want to do the dance," Carolina muttered.

All day yesterday her friends had been trying to teach her the choreography. It was easy, they said. One problem was that Carolina didn't have a single dancing bone in her body. She'd tried to get out of it by offering to usher people in or help backstage.

Miss Cline, the movement teacher (which is what they now called PE at their school), would not even hear of it.

"It's the last event of your elementary school years. No sixth grader of mine will be backstage. You can't miss the group picture." She had pointed at the wall by the library that displayed every sixth-grade class since the school had been established in the 1980s.

Carolina had been worried ever since. All her friends, even Chelsie, had some background in dance, but Carolina had always been too busy riding to add dance lessons. Anyway, she had two left feet.

Chelsie and Vida promised they would help her. Even Gisella Bassi, the previous Unbridled Dreams scholarship student, gave her some pointers.

The other problem, perhaps the main one, was that Carolina's archnemeses, Tessa Wilson and Loretta Sullivan, were also in sixth grade. When they were at the barn, they usually ignored each other. But those girls thought they ruled the school. If Carolina made them look bad, she'd never hear the end of it.

Carolina couldn't stop thinking and stressing about performing in front of not only the school but the whole town. Parents, grandparents, and even people who had no kids at the school would attend the event that traditionally marked the start of summer.

If only she could perform on a horse, then she wouldn't have stressed about it!

"Come on," Chelsie said. "I told you it won't be hard at all. Don't you trust me?"

They'd already gone through this conversation so many times, Carolina didn't want to get Chelsie started.

"I do, but . . . Okay, you're right: I have to at least try. I'll

practice with Vida later, okay?” She looked at her friend who sneezed again.

“Sowwy about dat! Alleg-gy season is heyah with a foth,” Vida mumbled, blowing her nose with a tissue. She balled it up and threw it to the garbage pail in the corner of the barn. The paper hit the rim of the can and bounced to the side. Carolina stifled a giggle as she tried to interpret Vida’s words.

“Almost!” said Chelsie.

Promptly, Carolina picked up the tissue with the broom and the dustpan.

“I would’ve done that,” Vida said. “Sowwy!”

“It’s okay. I just don’t want Boo or Twinkletoes to find it and eat it. Those two are living recycling machines.”

Boo was Carolina’s new dog. He’d been at the ranch for only a few months. He was training to be a working farm dog, trailblazing on rides and herding the horses when needed. But lately, he’d been eating anything and everything he found. Dr. Rooney, the vet, said he must be going through a growth spurt.

Twinkletoes—Twinks for short—was the mini donkey who taught by bad example.

“Twinks got into the old apples yesterday just before

you arrived,” Carolina continued. “Let me tell you: It wasn’t pretty.” She grimaced and waved a hand in front of her nose as if she could still smell the cloud of gases the donkey had left behind him.

Vida made a disgusted face, no doubt regretting her decision to come into the little barn. “Gross,” she said.

Chelsie laughed, making her way to the boom box that once upon a time had belonged to Caro’s dad. “Okay, before I go, show me the sequence from the choreo we went over yesterday.”

Carolina froze like a possum. “I don’t remember,” she muttered.

Chelsie would have none of it.

“We’ll do it together. Come on.”

As if they’d already planned it, Vida pressed play. The familiar K-pop song rang against the walls and without a cue that Carolina could recognize, her friends broke into a perfectly synchronized series of movements. She just watched them in awe. They looked so graceful and perfect. How?

Carolina was going to ruin the whole thing. She just knew it.

But she had promised she’d try.

She started to imitate their movements.

“One two, three, four,” she whispered under her breath, trying to follow the rhythm.

It was like a slow canter.

In that moment, she locked eyes with Vida.

“Count in your mind,” Vida reminded her.

A second later, Chelsie added, “Don’t stick your tongue out!”

“Oops,” Caro said, and pulled her tongue back in her mouth.

But now she had lost the rhythm of the song. She waited for the beat and continued pretending she was posting a trot: one two, one two.

Her movements were stiff and mechanical. Everyone in the audience would think she was a robot! She could just see Loretta and Tessa laughing at her.

“You’re offbeat, Caro,” Chelsie called out. “Focus!”

Carolina focused on crossing her legs the way Vida was showing her, but she turned her body the wrong way and lost her balance. Now she was the one who looked like a windmill, but she was too far from anything solid she could hold on to.

Chelsie ran to catch her fall but arrived a second too late.

Luckily, there was a clean pile of hay her dad had brought down from the loft the night before. Carolina let herself fall

with as much grace as an orca landing on her side on the shallow beach. Good thing the horses were out in the pasture already, or she'd have lost all credibility in front of them.

For a second the only sounds came from the boom box and something else she didn't recognize—a mix of hiccups and a high-pitched meow.

“Is that an animal?” she asked, searching in the hay in case she'd just smooshed a family of mice. It wouldn't be the first time critters made their homes in the barn during the winter. That's why spring cleaning was so important.

But it wasn't mice. Or any other critter. Vida was wheezing and Chelsie was hiccupping from trying not to laugh.

Carolina thought they looked so funny that she let out one of her belly laughs, rolling on the ground now that she was already there.

In that moment, someone unexpectedly slid open the door.

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