

The Brookmeade
Young Riders Series

Crown Prince Challenged

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TRAFALGAR SQUARE
North Pomfret, Vermont

CHAPTER 8

Chance Encounter

SARAH GUIDED PRINCE toward the parking area and the dark opening in the trees that marked the head of the old orchard trail. A shiver of excitement tinged with a touch of nervousness ran through her. This would be an adventure she and Prince would share, just the two of them. They were going on the old orchard trail by themselves, and that's how she wanted it. Just her and her horse. If they met wild turkeys, this time she'd be ready. She vowed that no matter what happened, she would be in the saddle when Prince got back to the barn!

Approaching the narrow trail entrance, Sarah sensed some tension in her horse. He knew where they were going, all right. With her legs she assured him that yes, they were going onto the trail. In response, he stepped onto the path and moved rapidly over the pine needles. With his head up and ears flicking in all directions, Prince took in everything around them. She felt his powerful muscles working, even at walk, moving them along at a quick pace. *He's loving this!* she thought. And, as her butterflies calmed, so was she.

The quiet of the forest was broken only when Prince snorted at a squirrel leaping from one branch to another above the trail.

When Sarah felt him hesitate, she immediately reassured him by pressing her legs firmly against his sides. "It's okay, Prince," she said softly, and he resumed his energetic walk. *So far, so good*, she thought.

Minutes later, Sarah recognized the group of trees ahead that signaled they would soon be in sight of the fallen log. She brought Prince to a halt and stroked his glossy neck. They should probably turn around at this point and head back to the farm. Jack had made it clear she was to go only a short distance the first day, and to gradually increase the length of the ride over the next few days. But Prince had been walking so fast. She'd probably gone too far already.

When she asked him to turn around on the trail, Prince braced against the bridle. He wanted to go farther! He wasn't ready to go home. Perhaps they could just jump the log ahead and then turn back. He had done it so effortlessly on their first ride, and there was no reason to think things would be any different today. Besides, she had been on this trail so many times with Lady Tate when they hadn't seen even one wild turkey. She envisioned being totally in sync with her horse as he lifted her over the jump. *Okay, Prince*, she thought. *I know what you want. Let's do it!*

Sarah shortened her reins and gathered her horse before asking him to trot. He pushed off eagerly, as if remembering the jump ahead. As they rounded the curve in the trail, the big log came into view. Prince's ears went forward, focusing on the jump, while Sarah concentrated on looking through his ears ahead to the trail in the distance. In no time, Prince was rising off the ground, carrying both of them over the downed tree and leaving it behind them. He floated along the trail in a relaxed canter, not hurrying or pulling to go faster. His gait was so smooth, so perfect. Sarah didn't want to stop! They continued cantering until they passed through

the narrow section where the low overstretched limbs had been removed by Gus and Lucas.

Sarah was in heaven! This is what she had dreamed of for so long, riding such a magnificent horse, *her own horse*, and leaving all her problems behind. Now Prince grabbed the bit as he quickened his pace and extended his stride into a gallop. As they raced by the tall thin grasses where the turkeys had been, he ran even faster. In no time, they were at the base of the ridge and beginning the climb toward the old orchard. Sarah felt the strength generated by Prince's powerful hindquarters as he galloped up the steep incline. At the same time, almost by instinct, she leaned forward and extended her arms to allow him more rein. The trail whizzed by as his gigantic strides devoured the ground. Horse and rider were moving as one! Higher and higher they climbed, and soon they were galloping through the thick, green grass of the orchard in the midst of the old apple trees.

Sarah sat back in the saddle and asked her horse to slow his pace. At first Prince resisted pressure from the reins. He shook his head, loving the run that had gotten them there and not wanting to stop. Sarah was insistent, and after a few strides he came back to her, first to trot, and then to a walk. The gallop up the steep ridge had been strenuous, and his breathing was quick, his nostrils red and dilated. She reached down to stroke his neck—it was warm and moist. She turned him to take in the view of the farm below, and in the distance, a few cottages in miniature with a glimmer of the ocean beyond. For several minutes they stood still, catching their breath and taking in the world.

Sarah felt on top of the clouds, her heart beating fast from the excitement of the ride. But the spell was broken when she checked her watch. She gulped. They needed to get back to the farm before anyone was concerned! She hoped no one was keeping track of

how long they'd been gone.

Sarah turned Prince toward the trail that would take them down the ridge. As on their last visit, she asked him to carry with his hindquarters while she tweaked the reins to keep him light in front. Prince had learned something about negotiating hills on their first ride, and now he moved down the ridge in a more balanced frame, containing his forward movement without attempting to turn sideways.

As they proceeded slowly down the steep trail, Sarah's conscience began to bother her. There was no question she had failed to comply with Jack's wishes. How could she have done that? He had helped her so much. Without Jack's support, she would never have gotten Prince in the first place. From the beginning, he had convinced her father to let her take Prince on trial, and Jack had gone the extra mile to provide help whenever she'd needed it. And yet today she had clearly disregarded his instructions.

Excuses ran through her mind. *It isn't as if I'm riding a Brookmeade schoolie*, she thought. *Prince is my horse, and I should be able to do whatever I want with him, like the other boarders do.* But deep down she knew she shouldn't have ignored Jack's advice, and the place where the turkeys had swooped out of the tall grass was still ahead of them. She clutched the reins a little tighter and scanned the trail ahead.

When they reached the bottom of the ridge where the trail leveled off, Prince suddenly stopped and twisted sharply to look to his left. His body was rigid and he snorted loudly. Sarah had been focusing on the tall grasses close to the trail, searching for signs of the turkeys, but now she turned to see what Prince was looking at in the thick woods. Standing close to one of the mammoth pine trees that grew in this section of the forest stood a massive moose! With its huge rack of antlers, it looked enormous. Prince was riv-

eted to the spot and snorted again. The moose didn't move, its eyes fixed on them.

Sarah felt a chill run down her spine. Perhaps they had invaded the moose's territory. What if it charged them? She wanted to get out of there fast! She kicked Prince hard with both legs while pulling his head around, sending him flying down the trail. After they galloped through the trail's narrow section, she twisted to look back. There was no sign of the moose in pursuit. She sat deeply in the saddle and asked Prince to slow his pace. The large log wasn't far ahead, and she didn't want to meet it at a full gallop.

Sarah was happy when Prince slowed his pace when she asked, and as the log came into view, he was back to trot. After steadying him a few strides, Sarah applied enough leg pressure so Prince knew they were committed to jumping it. He trotted to the base of the log and then lifted over it, cantering down the trail toward home. With little resistance, he came back to trot, and then willingly walked when she asked him.

"You amazing horse!" Sarah exclaimed, stroking his neck. She noticed that he was still quite warm, and a new worry flashed across her mind. No way did she want to bring him back to the farm hot and sweaty. If they ran into Jack, he would know in an instant she had done more than just walk Prince a short distance on the trail before turning back. Prince was walking at a fast clip, for now he knew he was headed back to the other horses at the farm, but he responded when she used half-halts to ask for a slower walk. Occasionally she halted him for a few moments, and frequently reached down to feel his shoulder. She was relieved that as they approached the parking area, Prince was nearly dry to her touch.

As had been the case when she left earlier, there were a lot of cars in the lot. Saturday was a busy day at Brookmeade when people who were in school or worked during the week could ride.

Earlier she and Prince had been the only ones in the sand ring, but now there were half a dozen horses there. One of them was Bismarck, and Kelly and Nicole stood at the rail watching Derek's every move. *They probably never take their eyes off him*, she thought. *I wonder how Derek likes his new bodyguards.*

Her mind came back to Jack with a jolt. What would she say when he asked her about the trail ride? She was dying to tell him how totally awesome Prince had been. She wanted him to know her horse hadn't freaked out when they encountered the big moose. But she had ignored his advice and had gone on a longer ride than she should have. He would have every reason to be upset with her. Could he understand that she and her horse had just gotten carried away? She was torn between regretting her actions and glorying in how Crown Prince had galloped up to the old orchard. It was a day she would never forget! She and her horse had been as one, his powerful strides eating up the trail as he flew up the ridge.

Sarah guided Prince directly to the barn's side door, dismounted, and led him down the aisle toward his stall. Once he was on the cross-ties, she removed his polo wraps. They had done their job—the cut on his leg had been well protected and was still firmly scabbed over. After untacking Prince and going over him with a soft brush, she led him into his stall, where he drank deeply from his water bucket before starting on his noon hay ration.

Sarah leaned on the back wall of the stall and reached for her phone. She needed to find out what was up with Kayla. Her friend answered right away. "Hi," Sarah said. "I just remembered you have a show coming up. Is it tomorrow?"

"No, the Fairmont Farms show is *next* weekend. Want to bring Prince?" she teased.

"I wish I could," Sarah said. "Maybe someday, although the way Nicole and Kelly see it, Prince should be banned from all

horse shows and group lessons for the rest of his life." She paused to change the phone to her other ear. "I've got a Kelly and Nicole update for you," she continued. "They're following Derek around this place like stalkers, and this morning they got him to go on a trail ride with them. When they got back, right in front of me Kelly asked Jack if Derek could join their class. Kelly said they should ride together because their horses don't kick and totally get along."

"You've got to be kidding!" Kayla cried. "What a stupid reason for someone to join a riding class."

"Isn't Kelly a piece of work? Jack told Kelly he doesn't make up his classes based on the horses' social relationships."

Kayla was laughing so hard she couldn't speak right away. "That is priceless!" she squealed. Becoming more serious, she said, "It would be nice if those two dufuses would get off your back, but somehow I don't think you've heard the last from them."

Sarah stepped aside as Prince turned in the stall, brushing up close to her, and then put the phone back to her ear. "Here's another thing, Kayla. Promise you won't tell?"

After Kayla pledged herself to secrecy, Sarah began to describe her trail ride to the old orchard. "It was awesome! Prince was loving it!" she said. "And we had some excitement coming back. We didn't see any wild turkeys, but after we'd come down the steepest part of the ridge, there was a huge moose beside the trail."

Kayla gasped. "What did Prince do? Try to cut and run?"

"He was amazing! He just snorted, frozen to the ground. I was afraid the moose might charge us, and I knew we needed to get out of there fast. I gave Prince a kick and we left the moose in our dust. Later, when I asked Prince to come back to walk, he was perfect!"

"This all sounds great," Kayla said. "Why don't you want me to tell anyone?"

Sarah frowned to herself, then confessed. "Jack told me to go

a short distance on the trail, but we went all the way to the top. How will he feel if he finds out I ignored his instructions? When it comes to working with horses, he's pretty strict."

Kayla was quiet, thinking. Finally she said, "The trouble with stretching the truth is the cover-up never ends. You just get drawn in deeper, needing to tell more lies to keep your secret. If Jack ever found out, you'd worry he didn't trust you anymore, and the truth is, he might not. It would be better if you tell him what happened. You need to come clean, just like you decided to do with your parents when you fell off."

Sarah thought a minute. "I guess you're right, Kayla. Thanks. Hey, listen ... I gotta go. I'll call you later though."

Sarah put her phone back in her pocket and went to her horse. When Prince raised his head from his hay pile, she hugged his neck. Kayla was right. It would be best to talk to Jack right away. She swallowed the lump in her throat and headed to the office. Lindsay was sitting at the desk with a sandwich and a Coke when she walked in. "Hi, Lindsay. Is Jack around?" she asked.

"He was just here," Lindsay said. "He's got a class in the indoor this afternoon. You might find him there setting up a course."

"Thanks, Linds," Sarah said, leaving the office. She hoped Jack was alone in the indoor. What would she say? How could she keep him from being angry and disappointed in her? She walked down the aisle that led to the indoor, hesitating as she approached the gate. Jack was dragging standards and rails into place for his afternoon class. A quick scan of the arena showed that except for him, it was deserted.

I hope he won't mind being interrupted, Sarah thought, as she pushed the gate open and walked toward Jack. He stopped what he was doing when he spotted Sarah and watched her approach. His face sobered when he saw her serious expression.

"Have you good news to tell me about your ride?" he asked.

Sarah remained quiet until she got closer. "The good news is that Prince was a star today. He couldn't have gone better."

Jack smiled. "You had no problems in the woods? No wild turkeys to cause him fits?" Sarah shook her head. "Then why the long face?" Jack asked, studying her thoughtfully.

"I have something to tell you." Sarah paused and looked down at the ground. When she could bring herself to meet his eyes, she went on. "Right from the beginning, Prince was perfect. He was striding out, and we quickly got to the big log. I should have turned him around then and headed back, like you told me. But Prince wanted to go on. And I let him." Jack was quiet, listening, as a frown spread over his face.

"We jumped the log and kept on going. I didn't stop him. He was cantering so beautifully, loving it. When we got to the ridge, he galloped even faster. We went all the way to the top." Sarah paused, looking for Jack's reaction. She went on to tell him about the moose and how she had asked Prince to take off down the trail before it could charge. "Then when I asked him to stop, he did. He didn't fight me. He didn't panic. He listened." Sarah searched Jack's face for the slightest indication he understood what she was sharing—that for those minutes she and her horse had become one creature, and *that* was why she kept going.

Jack didn't reply right away, but his stern expression spoke volumes. Sarah's heart sank. Finally he spoke, his voice clipped. "It sounds like you had a thrilling ride, but it might not have turned out so well. You're fortunate the moose didn't charge you, because we're into rutting season, and a bull moose is quick to charge anything he thinks is challenging his territory. You were wise to get out of there fast. 'Tis also possible there may be negative impact from letting an unfit horse gallop up that long, steep

ridge. His muscles could tie up, which would be serious. You'll have to watch him closely for the next hour."

Sarah looked at Jack in alarm. In disregarding his instructions, she might have hurt her horse. She hung her head, unable to meet his gaze. "Prince was so good. And now I feel awful, not just because I might have hurt him, but because I didn't listen to you. I guess I've let you down."

"Your horse's care should always come first," Jack said, all business. "Make sure he has plenty of water and cut his grain in half tonight. Hand-walk him when you get back to his stall. If you notice any stiffness to his walk, or if the muscles in his hindquarters feel hard to the touch, call me at once. 'Tis a vet he'll be needing and fast."

Jack went back to setting up the jump, but paused to make one final comment. "I am disappointed in you, Sarah, because I thought you took your horse's training more seriously. But I do appreciate your being forthright and honest. From now on, *you* need to make the decisions, not your horse. Use your head and don't take chances on a whim of the moment."

Sarah rushed back to Prince's stall and immediately attached the lead shank to his halter and walked him to the courtyard. Thankfully he seemed fine. A wave of relief passed over her. On the way back to Crown Prince's stall, they passed Gus in the midst of cleaning Wichita's stall. Sarah halted her horse in front of the open door.

"Hi Gus." She waited for the craggy older man to pause in his work. When Gus turned her way, Sarah said, "Prince had a pretty demanding workout, and Jack says there's a chance he might tie up. He seems fine right now, but Jack told me to cut tonight's grain in half. I'm going to walk him again later to see if he's okay. I just thought you should know."

Gus jammed the manure fork into the bedding and glowered at her. “You rode him too hard again! When are you going to learn anything?” Sarah hung her head and walked away, not surprised at Gus’s reaction. But she’d *had* to tell him. This way, when she left for the night, he’d be sure to keep checking on her horse. Once Prince was back in his stall, she went directly to the feed room, unlocked the heavy door, and removed half the grain ration she’d dished into his pail for the night feed. He would know he’d been shortchanged, but it couldn’t be helped. After she had walked him again a short time later, she thought about heading for home. Prince seemed perfectly fine, thank goodness, with no change in his walk or the muscles in his hindquarters.

As Sarah swung onto her bicycle and started up the farm road, she thought about the important business on her to-do list at home. She needed to tackle the essay Ms. Dunlop had assigned—it was due Monday morning—but more importantly, she wanted to tell her mother how good Prince had been on the trail ride, of course leaving out the part how she’d ignored Jack’s instructions. When she turned into the driveway, Sarah was glad to see her mother’s SUV in the garage. The Creamery was still open on weekends, which meant her father and Abby were still at work. Sarah found her mother reading in the family room.

Mrs. Wagner closed her paperback when Sarah came to sit beside her on the plaid loveseat. “How was your day at Brookmeade?” her mother asked.

Sarah took a deep breath before starting. “Mom, you don’t have to worry anymore about how Prince is going to behave in the woods. We went by ourselves on the old orchard trail, and he was amazing. And guess what! While we were on the trail, we met a bull moose, a big one with huge antlers. Prince just stood there, staring at him. I was afraid the moose might charge, so I asked

Prince to get out of there fast. He did, but then he came right back to me when I asked him to walk. He didn't make one mistake the whole ride. He's such a totally fantastic horse!"

"I'm glad to hear that," Mrs. Wagner said, putting her book down on the table. "And now you're also going to tell me a flock of wild turkeys flew up in front of you, and Prince chose that moment to take a quick nap. Right?" She looked at Sarah pointedly, waiting for an answer.

Sarah's heart sank. Every good thing that happened on the trail that day wasn't going to make any difference to her mother. It all boiled down to turkeys. "Actually, we didn't see any turkeys," Sarah admitted.

As she always did when making a serious point, Mrs. Wagner spoke evenly, not in a rush. "Then we both know that the jury is still out on the safety question, isn't it? I'm happy things went so well today, but you have to know I'm still concerned about you riding that big horse. And your father is, too." Mrs. Wagner picked up her book when Sarah got up to leave. "Thanks for sharing your day. I hope you'll have many more good rides on Crown Prince."

Sarah went to her room, pulled out her desk chair, and turned on her laptop. As it booted up, she tried to think of ideas for the essay that was due in English class, but her mind was blank. Her eyes scanned the posters of the great race mares, Rachel Alexandra and Zenyatta, on the wall near her desk. She closed her eyes and relived Prince's incredible gallop up to the old orchard. Even if her mother wasn't impressed, it had been an unbelievable day for her and her horse. Suddenly she knew. Of course. She'd write about her day's adventure with Crown Prince!