

The Brookmeade  
Young Riders Series

# Crown Prince

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TRAFALGAR SQUARE  
North Pomfret, Vermont

## CHAPTER 2

# The Lesson

**THE AIRY INDOOR RIDING ARENA** was brightly lit from the afternoon sun filtering in through the skylights when Sarah led Gray Fox inside. She was relieved there was no sign yet of Jack O'Brien. The other four riders in her class were mounted and warming up their horses, all wearing helmets, riding breeches, and tall black boots.

These four teens were experienced riders, the best of the young equestrians at Brookmeade, and they took their riding seriously. They hoped to do well in competition and knew Jack O'Brien would help them achieve that goal. Sarah had felt honored when she was invited to join the class, even though she had to ride a school horse while they all owned their own mounts. Jack said she deserved to be challenged along with his top riders and shouldn't be held back. "To be sure, there's much good that comes from riding many different horses," he'd added.

Paige Vargas was riding Quarry near the ingate and came closer when Sarah entered. Quarry, an eye-catching dappled gray Thoroughbred, turned his head to Gray Fox, who pinned

his ears. Fox wasn't friendly with most horses; the barn crew was careful to turn him out with only the few he tolerated.

"You're late," Paige said. "What's up?" A few strands of blonde hair escaped from under her riding helmet as the girl with the perfect complexion and violet eyes halted her horse.

"My mother's appointment ran late, that's all," Sarah said. "I'm glad Quarry is okay now."

"We think he was just footsore after being shod last week. You know how brittle his feet are. He had a few days off and now he's fine."

Paige glanced at Sarah's mount as she asked Quarry to move off. "I'm glad it's your turn to ride Gray Fox," she called over her shoulder as Quarry broke into trot. "Be prepared to work hard!"

As Sarah walked Gray Fox to the center of the arena to mount, she saw Kayla trotting Fanny in a circle at the far end. She caught Kayla's eye and gave her a thumbs up—Kayla and Fanny looked great. Sarah knew Kayla was a little nervous about jumping Fanny today, as things hadn't gone well in their last lesson. Fanny had stopped in front of a triple bar jump, something she'd never done before.

"It was my fault, not Fanny's," Kayla admitted later. "Jack said Fanny needed more impulsion. If I'd ridden her stronger to the jump, she wouldn't have refused."

On the far side, Paige's boyfriend, Tim Dixon, was doing walk-canter-walk transitions. His horse, Rhodes Scholar, was mostly Thoroughbred except for a Cleveland Bay grandfather, which accounted for his large frame and generous bone. A rich blood bay, his only marking was a white stocking on his left hind leg. Tim sat tall in the saddle, a good-looking guy on a striking

horse. When Rhodes took a few trotting steps before cantering, Tim brought him back to walk and asked again. After a few tries, Rhodes seemed better in tune with what Tim wanted, and finally went directly into canter.

As Sarah prepared to mount Gray Fox, Rita Snyder trotted briskly by on her elegant Dutch Warmblood, Chancellor. She was spotlessly neat, wearing full seat breeches, a polo shirt monogrammed with her Pyramid Farm logo, and highly polished custom boots. "You're late!" Rita called out as she passed, without slowing to hear a response.

Chancellor was a splendid horse, standing well over sixteen hands with a gleaming jet-black coat. His head was large, like the rest of him, as were his long somewhat heavy ears. A white ring in his left eye contrasted sharply with his dark coat, and an irregular star on his forehead trailed down to a snip on his muzzle. For a big horse, he was light on his feet, and with each stride he pushed off with elegance and power, his luxurious black tail swinging from side to side. Although Chancellor could be irritable at times, Rita never complained. Instead she took every opportunity to brag about her horse.

Gray Fox raised his head to look at the spectators on the bleachers near the door. In winter the heated observation room was usually the preferred place to watch lessons, but it put viewers behind a plexiglass window. This time of year they liked the bleachers, where they could get a closer look and hear Jack's comments. After halting Gray Fox in the middle of the arena, Sarah quickly tightened the girth and adjusted the length of the stirrups before easily mounting the medium-sized gelding. Unlike some of the taller horses at Brookmeade, mounting Gray Fox

didn't require a mounting block, but his stocky frame enabled him to carry riders of all sizes. Sarah took up the reins, switched her crop to her right hand, and turned the gray gelding to join the others.

Just then, Jack O'Brien, wearing a tweed cap and buff riding breeches with his black boots, strode into the arena. A clean-shaven man in his forties with legs somewhat bowed from years in the saddle, Jack's square jaw and snapping dark eyes set him apart even before he spoke. His black hair was liberally sprinkled with gray, and he admitted being a little long in the tooth. His competition days were over, and now he was content to teach riders and train young horses. Occasionally a problem horse was brought to Brookmeade for retraining, and Jack was also in demand to instruct at clinics organized by other stables. But he seldom took time to travel. "I'll not be doing justice to the horses and riders at Brookmeade Farm if I'm running all around the countryside helping other folks," he'd once said.

Most of Jack's students had heard the story of how he and Kathleen came to Brookmeade Farm. Chandler DeWitt was determined to have a high-caliber director head up his riding program, and he found the man he was looking for in Ireland. DeWitt had heard about a talented Irish horseman who was looking for a position, and he made a special trip to meet Jack and Kathleen O'Brien. DeWitt proposed they move to the States to take over the Brookmeade Farm riding and training program.

At one time, Jack was a member of the Irish eventing team, riding his horse, Donegal Lad. Lad had been somewhat high-strung, so dressage was not his strong suit, but he compensated

by being an incredibly athletic and bold jumper. In his prime he had never been known to stop at a cross-country obstacle, and in stadium jumping he tucked his knees high into his chest to clear huge fences. The big liver chestnut could be counted on to go fast and clear, but an unlucky fall at a water complex while competing in the Olympic Games cost them a competitive placing. Jack dislocated his shoulder in the accident, but he insisted on remounting his horse and finishing the course.

As a condition to accepting the job at Brookmeade, Jack asked to bring Donegal Lad to America to retire on the farm. DeWitt agreed to pay for the horse's transportation, and he had a stall built for him in the corner of the former carriage shed next to the O'Briens' bungalow. Lad quickly settled into his new home with his own pasture, where he was close to Jack and the broodmares. Although the horse was getting along in years, sometimes Jack could still be seen riding Lad through the old orchard high on the ridge in the early morning mist.

Lindsay and Kathleen taught the less experienced riders, but most of the students hoped their riding would improve so they could eventually ride with Jack. He could be tough, expecting riders to work hard and take their riding seriously. "This is not a class for fair-weather pleasure riders," he frequently announced. "I'm here to teach serious riders who are determined to ride as well as they can and have their horses perform as well as they can." Some who preferred an easier approach didn't like his challenging lessons. A few who bristled at his demands had gone elsewhere, but those who stayed were quick to admit that Jack's instruction made them better riders.

"And 'tis hello to everyone," Jack began in his usual boom-

ing voice with more than a trace of Irish brogue. On this day he needed to speak loudly to be heard over the drone of the nearby conveyer belt taking hay to the loft. “You’ll be forming a line behind Quarry one horse’s length distance apart. Then knot your reins in preparation for doing your stretching exercises.”

As usual when a class was starting, Jack carefully eyed the horses for any signs of lameness. He had worked with most of the riders in this group since he had taken the job at Brookmeade eighteen months earlier. He expected them to understand the importance of a slow warm-up and make time for it prior to starting a lesson or schooling session. Sarah was relieved when Jack didn’t find Gray Fox a bit stiff. The horses continued walking as the riders bent down to touch their toes on alternate sides.

After finishing the regular exercise routine, Jack asked the class to take up their reins once again and prepare to trot. Sarah applied enough leg to let Gray Fox know what was coming, and when asked, he reluctantly moved forward into the faster gait. The spurs definitely helped. Not many months before, Jack had said Sarah was riding with a steady lower leg and should learn to use a small blunt spur as the other riders did—with the exception of Paige. Quarry didn’t need to be more forward! Sarah mentioned it to her mother, and a pair of Prince of Wales spurs made a perfect birthday gift a few weeks later.

Sarah checked to be sure she was posting on the correct diagonal, and as they trotted down the long side of the arena, she looked at Gray Fox’s reflection in the mirror that ran the length of the wall. His gray coat made him stand out, although with Quarry back in action, there were two grays in today’s class. She

concentrated on her riding—heels down, hands steady, head up with her eyes looking ahead—as she put Gray Fox on the bit and asked him to move forward energetically.

The riders followed Jack's directives, sometimes circling and sometimes changing direction across the diagonal of the arena. Frequently he spoke to individuals. "Paige, sit taller in the saddle without leaning to the inside. Breathe deeply and open your shoulders." Paige's forehead furrowed in concentration as Quarry circled at one end of the arena, trotting with a steady rhythm. The girl who loved to joke and goof around with her friends was dead serious and determined when it came to riding. "Make sure you support your horse with your inside leg pushing him forward into a steady outside rein," Jack continued.

"Tim, Rhodes is traveling too fast and too strong," Jack called. "Try circling at the other end of the arena and use half-halts to slow the pace. Slow your posting to encourage him to slow his trot, and try to relax."

Several times he addressed Sarah, telling her Gray Fox needed more impulsion. When it was time for individual work at the canter, Sarah was reminded how much effort riding Gray Fox required. She held the reins taut while communicating with her legs and seat to prepare for the faster gait. But when she gave the signal to canter with her outside leg, Gray Fox only trotted forward. "Bring him back to walk, and don't be afraid to use your spurs and your crop behind your leg if it's needed. You *must* get his attention. Now insist he goes forward," Jack said.

On the next try, Sarah asked for canter with a strong and deliberate motion. Gray Fox must have felt the spur, because he responded by jerking his head down and trying to buck. Sarah

instinctively sat back so she wouldn't be thrown out of the saddle, and used the reins to bring his head back up.

"I guess old Fox isn't used to being ridden with spurs," Jack called. "Try that again, and remember to use just enough spur so he understands what you're asking, but not so much he overreacts." On the next attempt, Gray Fox seemed to have learned his lesson. With a swish of his silver tail to show his irritation, he responded to a more subtle leg action by smoothly springing forward into the three-beat gait. Sarah was happy when Jack commented, "Excellent! Much better."

As usual, Chancellor needed little correction from Rita, who got only praise from Jack when her horse immediately broke into a well-balanced canter. It was obvious the horse had received years of excellent training long before Rita's father purchased him. "Brilliant!" Jack called out as Chancellor cantered past.

When their flatwork was finished, and they were allowed to let their horses walk on a long rein, Gray Fox gratefully stretched his head and neck down. It had been a long canter session for him, and Sarah leaned down to stroke his neck as a reward for his hard work. But her throat tightened when Jack announced, "'Tis a grand afternoon. We'll use the outside hunt course for our work over fences." Sarah was afraid Gray Fox might be emboldened to try more of his usual tricks out in the open.

One by one the riders followed Jack from the arena into the bright sunlight, heading to the grassy, unfenced hunt course dotted with a number of brightly painted jumps. Near the entrance to the indoor arena a crew continued to toss hay bales onto the loudly whirring conveyor belt. Quarry and Fanny sidestepped nervously past the machine, not liking the noisy contraption, but

Chancellor and Rhodes were more interested in the hunt course beyond. Gray Fox snorted as he passed, looking warily at the moving belt.

Before Jack let the class focus on the hunt course, he led them to a cross-rail followed two strides later by a low post-and-rail vertical fence. "We'll do a short warm-up over these fences," he said. "Beginning with Rita, spread out at least four horse's lengths between you to form a large circle. When I signal to pick up trot, you'll follow Rita through the low combination. Continue cantering on the circle until you've all jumped it three times." The simple exercise provided a good warm-up before jumping higher fences, posing little challenge to the horses and riders in the group, and soon they were back at walk, gathering in a spot near Jack just off the hunt course.

Many of the striped poles, standards, and the gray roll top on the hunt course had recently been painted. The brush box had also gotten a coat of white paint and was filled with fresh evergreen boughs. The course looked tidy and inviting, the grass a bright green from the rain of the day before. After Jack had adjusted the height of the poles on some of the jumps, he explained the short course they'd be jumping.

"You'll first balance your horse by cantering a circle at this end. Since we've been working on it, let's make the transition to canter from walk. Start with the brush box. Then it's five strides to the in-and-out, six to the roll-top, and finally four strides to the red striped oxer." Jack turned to study the combination. When his gaze shifted back to them, he said, "The in-and-out is a long one stride, so it's good impulsion your horses will be needing on the approach. And remember that the striding will work only if

you ride a straight line with a steady pace into each fence." He paused to survey the riders. "You're up first, Tim."

Tim was rewarded for his earlier work practicing canter transitions, as after walking Rhodes Scholar away from the class, the horse neatly sprang into the gait directly from walk. Circling once, Tim guided the bay to a straight path to the brush box. Rhodes got into it perfectly, soared over, and continued to jump well until he approached the final fence. Tim overshot the direct line to the oxer, and when he attempted to straighten Rhodes, he pulled too hard on the reins. Now his horse had to jump the oxer at an angle, and Rhodes seemed unsure how to compensate.

The other riders gasped when at the last second Rhodes left out a stride and launched into a giant leap over the jump. Out of sync with his horse, Tim was thrown back and yanked the reins sharply in the air. The pain Rhodes felt when the bit pulled hard against his mouth caused him to throw his head high in the air upon landing and bolt forward. It took Tim several strides to bring his horse back under control.

"You can all see how important 'tis to ride a straight line to the fence," Jack said. "The last thing we want to do when jumping is to get left behind and grab our horses in the mouth. But except for the last fence, your ride was nicely done, to be sure. You didn't turn quickly enough after the roll top, so you didn't have enough room for a good approach to the oxer. I'd like you to do the course again."

Tim once more started his course with a circle before the first jump. Rhodes seemed unsure and cautious at first, but Tim rode him straight into all the fences, helping restore his horse's con-

fidence. Rhodes finished with a beautiful jump over the oxer. "Well done, Tim," Jack said.

Paige was next, and as usual Quarry was a little quick to his fences. He was excited at the prospect of jumping, and that excitement translated into speed. He wanted to get the jump behind him, the sooner the better. "Sit quietly," Jack called. "Keep your eyes up and look beyond the fence. He just needs more assurance that he can do it, and it will help him a great deal if he senses you're quiet and confident. If he persists in rushing the fence, then circle once in front of it." Paige continued on and was very pleased with her horse and herself when on the last two jumps Quarry settled down.

Kayla was next, and she looked worried as she asked Fanny for canter to begin the course. Sarah knew Kayla desperately wanted to avoid the problems she'd had with her horse the week before. As Kayla circled Fanny in front of the first fence, Jack called out, "Kayla, you appear tense. That won't help your mare. She's going well. She can do this course with ease, to be sure. Try to relax and let her know you're confident."

Kayla made a point to turn her head to look at each fence well in advance, and she pressed her legs on Fanny's sides as they approached. Fanny moved forward at a steady pace and pushed off easily to jump each obstacle, all taken from a straight and accurate line. When the oxer loomed ominously ahead, Kayla sat deep in the saddle while squeezing her legs harder to make sure Fanny knew they were committed. Fanny rewarded her with a beautiful round jump from just the right spot. Kayla was happy and relieved when Jack clapped his hands. "Brilliant, Kayla!"

When it was Rita's turn, she oozed her usual confidence as she turned Chancellor toward the hunt course. "Let's show them how it's done, Chance," she said loud enough for the others to hear as her horse moved off in long rhythmic trot strides. Rita brought him back to walk for the canter transition, and after he obediently picked up canter on the correct lead, she rode a perfectly straight line into each jump with all the right striding. Jack complimented Rita for a first-rate ride when she had finished. "Nicely done, Rita. I expect you'll be doing well when you compete him this year."

Rita trotted back to the group, a look of supreme satisfaction on her face. Sarah watched, her resentment feeding a slow burn. She couldn't help being irritated by Rita's cocky attitude. *Just because she has a to-die-for horse, does she have to look so totally smug?*

Sarah was the last to go. She walked Gray Fox onto the hunt course and was relieved when he smoothly picked up canter when asked, willingly moving forward. "A bit more impulsion, Sarah," Jack called out. "Gray Fox will have trouble jumping the fences unless he's moving with more energy." Sarah closed her calves, being careful not to press hard with her spurs, and Gray Fox responded by increasing the pace. Coming out of the circle, she turned her head to look at the first jump. The gray gelding's ears pricked forward as he also focused on the jump ahead, but as it loomed closer, Sarah felt him hesitate slightly. Again she squeezed her legs to urge him on, and Gray Fox responded with renewed energy. As the horse rose into the air to clear the jump, Sarah's body went forward in unison with him.

On landing, they made a right-hand turn to the in-and-out.

Gray Fox wasn't blessed with a long stride, but he managed to jump the combination in good form. Sarah again felt him lose energy as they approached the roll top, and she closed her legs firmly, moving him forward. He finished with a straight line and a good jumping effort over the oxer. "Very good, Sarah," Jack said. "You kept your lower leg steady over the fences, something that's surely important when you're wearing spurs. Your lines were accurate, and you moved Gray Fox forward when you needed to."

As Gray Fox trotted along the driveway back to the other horses, Sarah noticed Chandler and Dorothy DeWitt standing by the stable entrance. Mr. DeWitt, a tall man with a thick head of white hair and a neatly trimmed mustache, was intently observing the lesson through steel-framed glasses over his steel-gray eyes. Mrs. DeWitt was leading their five-year-old granddaughter, Grace, on the chestnut pony Pretty Penny. Grace's face looked tiny in her riding helmet, with her straw colored braids hanging to her shoulders. Even on the small pony saddle, her short legs barely extended below the saddle flaps. Sarah wasn't sure how long the DeWitts had been watching, but she was glad Gray Fox had performed well. That would account for the Jack Russells being at the barn. Mrs. DeWitt waved and cheered her with "Good job, Sarah!" as she rode by.

It was time for the hay crew to return to the north field for another load of hay, and at that moment Gus Kelso, the barn manager, tried to start up the tractor. "Dang," he muttered when it sputtered and died. On the second try the engine caught, and the aging tractor began moving along the roadway. Gray Fox stopped and planted his feet as the tractor neared, raising his

head to get a better look at the scary green machine chugging toward him. Sarah stroked his neck to reassure him while she asked him to move forward.

Suddenly, just as the tractor was passing by, its engine back-fired with a thunderous crack, belching a giant plume of black smoke. Throwing his head skyward, Gray Fox reared high, the force of his movement snapping his leather martingale. Rising far above the ground on his hind legs, he seemed to linger in the air as if waiting for Sarah to slip from his back. Her crop fell from her hand as she frantically grabbed his mane to stay in the saddle, praying he wouldn't go over backward.

After what seemed like an eternity, the horse began his descent. When he hit the ground, he spun on his hind legs and bolted in the opposite direction. He accelerated to a full gallop, with Sarah clinging to his mane, trying desperately to stay on. Heading for the entry road, Gray Fox ran like a racehorse out of the starting gate, his long tail streaming straight out behind. Sarah heard shouts, but they were muffled by the roar of the wind in her ears.

Down the road they plunged, with Gray Fox seeming to gallop faster with every stride. Sarah let go of his mane to pull back on the reins as hard as she could, but there was no change in his breakneck pace. If only she'd worn her riding gloves, she'd have a better grip! She remembered the ruts in the road and a terrible thought came to her. What if the horse stepped in one of the holes? Going this fast, he would certainly injure himself. Perhaps he would fall, and even break a leg. She had to stop him! Sarah felt her heart pounding as she started to panic. Again she pulled back hard on the reins, but with only the mild snaffle bit

in his mouth and his martingale broken, Gray Fox lifted his head to defy the rein action.

They flashed past the O'Briens' bungalow with no slackening in the horse's speed. Sarah was bent low in the saddle, Gray Fox's mane whipping in her face. The broodmares were startled by the thundering hooves and took flight to the far end of the field, with their tails up and their foals running fast by their sides. As the bridge came into view, Gray Fox continued to run at full tilt. He might lose his footing on the wooden planks! Sarah pulled hard on the reins again, but to no avail. She grasped his mane tightly as the horse flew across the bridge with no slackening of his pace. At this speed, they would soon reach Ridge Road. If she couldn't stop Gray Fox by then, he would run blindly out onto the road and maybe be hit by a car. Perhaps one was approaching, coming up over the hill right now!

Sarah tried desperately to remember anything she might have read or heard over the years about how to stop a runaway horse. And then it came to her. When Paige was having a problem with Quarry going too fast on a cross-country school, Jack had taught them a way to slow down an out-of-control horse: the pulley rein. She'd never had an occasion to use it, but she remembered what Jack had told them.

While tightening her grip on the left rein, she draw her right rein back and slightly over the horse's neck toward the other rein. Once in place, she mustered all her strength to pull the reins as hard as she could. Gray Fox tried to resist, but even with his head in the air, there was no way he could avoid the effective technique. Sarah pulled hard again, and this time she felt his speed lessen slightly. She pulled even harder with her right rein, and at

last the gray gelding resignedly slowed his pace. He seemed to surrender. In a few more strides, just as the farm sign and Ridge Road came into view, Gray Fox was under her control.

As Gray Fox came grudgingly back to trot and then to walk, Sarah suddenly felt utterly exhausted. She steered the horse to the side of the road where he came to a stop. He stood with his head lowered, his coat drenched with sweat. His flanks heaved in rhythm with his rapid breathing as he gasped for air. Sarah fell forward with her arms around Gray Fox's lathered neck. She closed her eyes, her breaths coming as fast as his. Time stood still for horse and rider.