

Chapter 1

Taylor Henry rode bareback across the cornflower-strewn field of tall grass on a glistening Arabian stallion. Clutching the creature's glossy black mane, she leaned forward, gripping with her knees and thigh muscles, in a smooth rhythm with the ebony horse beneath her.

The last yellow rays of sun streaked the gathering purple-pink of the sky. The golden lines seemed as though they were trying to write her a message. In fact, she was starting to see letters forming. What did they say? She could almost make it out.

“CARE TO SHARE THAT WITH THE REST OF THE CLASS, TAYLOR?”

Taylor was pitched forward over the head of the

stallion and landed with a thud in her seat at Pheasant Valley Middle School.

Looking down sharply, she stared at the sketch she'd been so absorbed in drawing. The field of breeze-wafted flowers was there, and so were the sunset and the majestic, racing Arabian. But all their vividness had faded back to number-two pencil gray the moment she'd been abruptly tossed out of the scene.

Looking up at her frowning teacher, she began to twirl her long brown ponytail nervously. "It's just something I was drawing," she told Mr. Romano.

Her eighth-grade social studies teacher strode down the aisle toward her. Mr. Romano was probably one of the cooler teachers at Pheasant Valley Middle School, but Taylor knew from experience that daydreamers annoyed him.

Mr. Romano lifted the sketch and quickly examined it. "Not bad," was his surprisingly mild comment. "Are you a horse enthusiast?"

"You could definitely say that."

"Is this your horse?" he asked.

Before Taylor could admit that the animal was the horse of her dreams — but only her dreams — a snort of

derision erupted from across the classroom. “As if!” Plum Mason scoffed.

Taylor narrowed her eyes in the girl’s direction. Plum ignored her, but the uneasy way she fussed with her sparkling diamond stud earring proved that she’d caught the look. Fluffing her long, curly blonde hair, Plum shifted in her seat. “I mean . . . a horse costs a lot of money,” she explained sweetly to Mr. Romano. “Even *I* don’t have one.”

“And if the princess doesn’t have a horse, no one else can have one, either,” taunted a lanky blond boy slumped in his chair, legs sprawled into the aisle.

“Shut up, Jake!” Plum bristled hotly. “You’re an idiot!”

Delighted that he’d ruffled her, Jake Richards grinned. “Poor Plum. Daddy won’t buy her a pony.”

Plum sneered at him. “Loser!”

“Hey! Hey!” Mr. Romano intervened forcefully. “Let’s not be calling names.”

“Well, he *is*,” Plum mumbled.

The buzzer for the end of last class sounded, and Taylor’s shoulders sagged with relief. Plum and Jake’s fight had gotten her off the hook.

“Your reports are due Monday. The differences between the old and new periods of the ancient Egyptian empire,” Mr. Romano shouted to the departing class. “Typed! Double-spaced!”

He handed Taylor back her sketch. “So? *Is* this your horse?”

Taylor laughed lightly but with a note of sadness. “I wish it were, but no. We could never afford a horse, especially now that . . .” She looked away, wishing she could roll back her last three words. It wasn’t something she wanted to talk about.

He waited for her to continue. “Now that what?” he prompted after another moment passed.

“Nothing. It’s just that a horse is way too expensive, is all. Plum was right about that.”

He nodded. “But you like horses?”

“I’m crazy about them,” Taylor confirmed. “All animals, really, but most of all horses. I have horse posters in my room. I read horse books. I even order horse catalogs and go online to their websites just to look at all the cool gear. Kind of weird, I know.”

“And you like to draw them,” Mr. Romano added.

Little red flags marked *uh-oh* popped up in Taylor’s

brain. He was heading the conversation back to what she was in trouble for doing.

Taylor looked away sheepishly and nodded.

“During my class,” he continued.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “Ancient Egypt is very interesting and all, but it just seems like . . . a really long time ago.”

“So it doesn’t hold your attention?” he inquired.

“Not as much as horses,” she said truthfully.

Mr. Romano stroked his chin. “Okay, here’s your penalty for daydreaming in my class. Horses were introduced to ancient Egypt around 1700 B.C. They were used mostly for chariots by the military. I want an additional two pages about horses in ancient Egypt.”

“Two *typed* pages?” Taylor squeaked in objection. “That’s a lot.”

He nodded. “Well, maybe it will help you keep your mind on class next time.”

A heavysset boy with short-cropped, white-blond hair stuck his head into the classroom. “Taylor, you’re going to miss the bus!” said Travis Ryan, Taylor’s best friend.