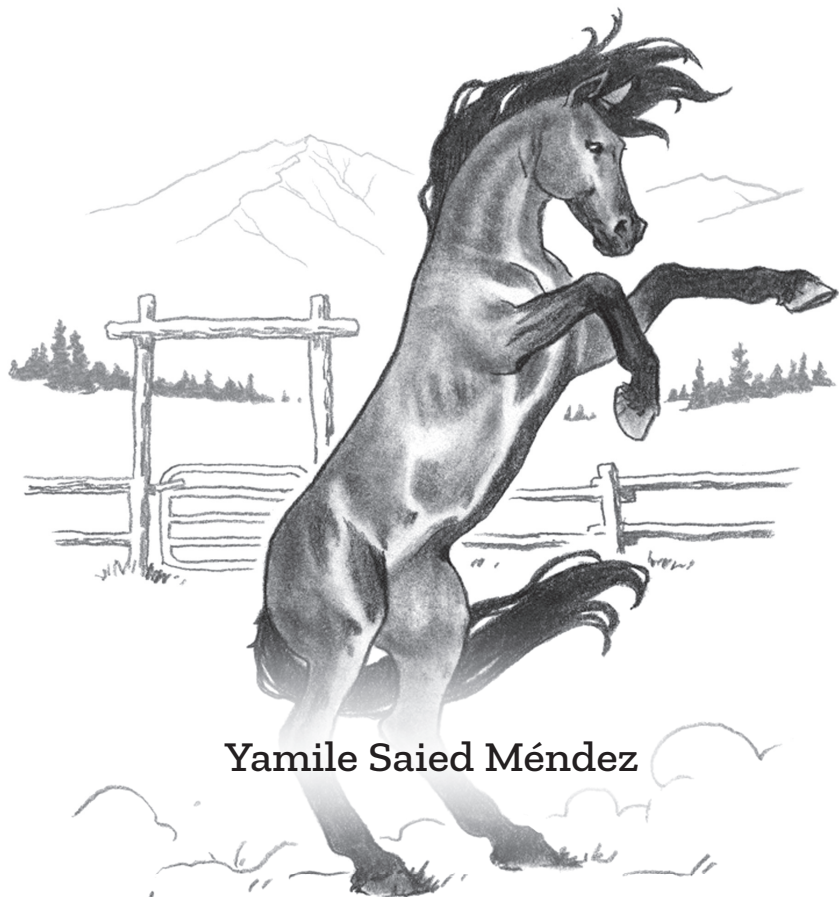


HORSE COUNTRY

BOOK 1

Can't Be Tamed



Yamile Saied Méndez

Scholastic Inc.

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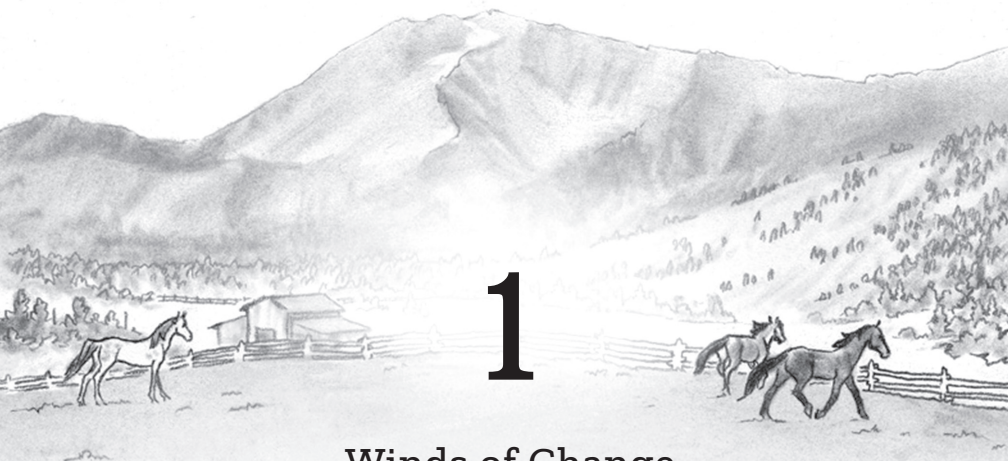
ISBN 978-1-338-74946-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 22 23 24 25 26

Printed in the U.S.A. 40

First printing 2022

Book design by Stephanie Yang



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Winds of Change

For some people, home smells like a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies or like laundry softener. For Carolina Aguasvivas, home smelled like fresh hay and turned earth and that warm muskiness that only comes from a barn full of contented horses.

This early morning, on her way to the little barn to start the day's chores, the air also carried a hint of woodsmoke.

She did a double take when she realized the sign over the road that read *Orchard Farms* had been taken down. The poles and the frame stood like open arms waiting for the new sign. She wondered what name the new owner, Ms. Whitby, would choose for the property.

It had to be a special name because this was a special place.

Orchard Farms had been established just outside Paradise city limits almost two hundred years ago by old Mr. Bert Parry's great-grandparents. The Parrys were long gone. Carolina's dad, the ranch manager, kept everything running. The Aguasvivas lived in the caretaker cottage, which sat at the top of the hill next to an ancient apple orchard. Visitors to the ranch had to pass by her house first, which meant she always felt in the know. It was the only home she could remember, and she loved everything about it.

Her two-minute walk from home down to the ranch led her straight past the main house at the bottom of the hill. The mansion, as people called it, had been vacant for years. The town kids even said it was haunted. Mr. Parry hadn't visited the ranch in a long time, and he had finally sold it to Ms. Whitby.

The property was so large, Carolina couldn't see the whole thing from where she stood. Besides the cottage and the house, there were two barns, an indoor arena, three practice rings, and the pastures surrounding the property like a blanket.

The Idaho White Cloud Mountains ruled majestically in the background. This far into August, it was technically still summer, but the valley already glittered with frost.

The rumble of a white pickup truck's engine broke the sounds of songbirds as it passed her on the lane. A ribbon of steam rose from the exhaust when it stopped in the parking lot. Carolina stood on tiptoes to see if it was Ms. Whitby and her daughter. Excitement made her heart beat like a drum as her sturdy boots crunched on the gravel.

But at the sight of the two girls heading inside the big barn, her excitement fizzled out. Even from a distance, she recognized Loretta Sullivan and Tessa Wilson in their fancy matching riding outfits. The girls were in her grade—they were all starting sixth in a couple of weeks—but they weren't friends with her. Not anymore. Loretta glanced toward Carolina. She tossed her dark red ponytail over her shoulder and whispered something that made Tessa laugh.

Immediately, Carolina's defenses rose like a wall. She wished her best friend, Vida, were here with her. She missed her so much! Even if Vida didn't ride, she made things better when

Loretta and Tessa were around. A few more days, and Vida would be back from her family's yearly trip to the Philippines. Carolina couldn't wait. Especially if those two girls were going to be spending more time than usual at the ranch.

Winter season showing events were coming up. She had seen the signs pinned to the big barn bulletin board. Most likely Loretta and Tessa were here for lessons with their exclusive—and expensive—instructor. He came all the way from Boise. Those girls had never mucked a stall, and Carolina didn't care how great they looked riding; her dad had always said true horsemanship included all the horses' care.

And yet, jealousy prickled Carolina's heart. She didn't care about shows, but she too wanted to train with an instructor. A real-life one.

Carolina had the horse care part down: She mucked stalls, exercised the horses and fed them, and did any random jobs in exchange for riding time. Not with the fancy Boise instructor though. Not with the expensive show horses that boarded in the big barn, either. Even being the ranch manager's daughter couldn't give her that kind of benefit.

Horses cost a lot of money. And horse sports even more.

Between riding clothes, fees, the travel, the time away from the stables . . . It was a lot.

But riding the ponies or class horses that had remained after the riding clinic closed a couple of years ago was better than not riding at all. Which was the problem: The more time she spent with horses, the more obsessed she became.

One day when she had enough money, Carolina would ride whenever she wanted to. And not just any horse. No, it would be her heart horse, her forever friend. She would have a saddle with her initials and a proper riding outfit—

A horse neighed inside the little barn, bringing her back to the present. She smiled with anticipation, and jealousy tossed aside, she ran the last yards to her favorite place in the world.

The gate handle was cold as she pulled it down. The barn door slid open.

She took a deep breath and chanted, “Good morning, my loves!”

When the light switched on automatically, four heads poked over their stall doors.

“Nice to see you, Leilani, Bella, Pepino, and Twinkletoes!” she greeted them, walking along the main hallway of the barn.

The horses and the donkey nodded.

Horses come in a variety of breeds and sizes, and they’re very different from donkeys. But they all have one thing in common: They just want affection. She patted them without hesitation. She loved the mossy softness of their noses, the coarse strength of their swishing tails, and the power they radiated—even Pepino, the gentlest horse that ever lived.

“Did you have a good night, Bella?” Carolina asked the painted miniature horse, who was the oldest and the smallest of the pack. She only reached up to Carolina’s waist, but she had the biggest personality on the whole property.

Bella neighed regally, and behind her, Twinkletoes, the mini donkey, seemed to roll his eyes at the diva. Almost all horses needed their own space, but the two minis shared the biggest box stall. Twinkletoes was the same size as Bella, but a dusty gray color, with big friendly ears.

“How are you, Twinks?” she asked. “Did you have a good sleep?” She plucked sprigs of hay out of his tangled mane.

“After I clean your stall, I’ll give you a good brush down so you can look your best for Ms. Whitby!”

Carolina’s dad had wanted everything to look *immaculate* for her arrival.

Carolina had scrubbed the stalls the night before, but work at the barn was never-ending. It was the same routine day in, day out. She wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Meow,” a scratchy voice greeted her from the rafters.

“Oh, Your Majesty!” Carolina said, dipping into a curtsy. “I’m sorry, I hadn’t seen you.”

Luna, the tabby barn cat, blinked at her, then turned her gaze toward the entrance. She darted to hide behind the bales of hay stacked all the way to the ceiling.

Carolina heard footsteps.

“Oh, it’s you! My favorite daughter!” Papi said. “I thought Bella had decided to finally start speaking her mind and boss us all around.”

Carolina laughed. She ran back to the entrance to hug him.

Her dad put down the two pails he was carrying and hugged her back. “Hmmm, your hair smells of sunshine already!”

“You, on the other hand, smell like . . .” She sniffed his denim jacket. “Woodsmoke? What were you doing?”

“Earlier this morning we made a bonfire to send Tyler off.” There was a mixture of sadness and pride in his voice.

A couple of years ago, Tyler had been one of the town’s troublemakers. But Papi believed in second chances, so he took the boy under his wing. He’d gone through a similar thing when he was young. It had only taken one person to teach him a different way of doing things. Things he learned working at a barn after he met his heart horse, Capitán.

Working with horses became more than a job for him. It was a vocation. He’d once told Carolina that Capitán had saved his life. And Carolina realized that working with horses had saved Tyler’s too.

Now he was leaving for college.

“We’re all going to miss him,” Carolina said.

Bella snorted. Tyler had been her favorite person.

Papi smiled and nodded. “Yes, but I’m happy for him too.” He put his index finger up. “And for us. We’re going to

have a lot of fun this year with all the changes coming. Just you wait.”

Papi took off his San Diego Padres baseball cap. Once upon a time, the hat had been blue. Now after all these years, the sun had bleached it to a light gray. Papi’s dark brown curly hair was the same shade and texture as Carolina’s. Hers fell all the way to her waist. His was short and had a few silver touches at the temples.

As the sun had bleached the hat, it had tanned his skin to dark brown. He spent all his days—and many nights—outdoors, at work.

“Fun?” she asked, faking shock. “You mean it’s not all work work work?”

“Winds of change are blowing. Can’t you feel them?” He threw his head back, eyes closed as if he could really feel a magical breeze. His mustache twitched as he smiled.

“Did the wind blow away the old sign too?”

He laughed. “Once Ms. Whitby approved the new name, the sign went straight into the bonfire.”

Papi had never complained that Mr. Parry was such a distant boss, but now he seemed absolutely giddy that the new one was much more involved.

“What’s the new name?” Carolina asked, pulling on his sleeve.

He mimicked zipping his lips. “Patience!” he said, and ruffled her hair.

“I can’t wait!” she exclaimed. His excitement was contagious.

“Nothing better to speed the clock than getting to work, then,” he said, clapping his hands once. “Remember, Twinkletoes is still on a special diet. He and Bella should eat from these pails. Okay?” He rolled up his sleeves, revealing the fading blue tattoo of a cross on his forearm. Then he picked up the pails and moved them next to the stall the mini donkey and the miniature mare shared.

Carolina had done these chores before, but still, she took mental note of all his instructions.

“I see you have things under control, but if you need anything at all, call me. Or you can ask any of the guys. There are some new faces joining us, but the main core will remain the same.”