

# HORSE COUNTRY

BOOK 4

No Place Like Home



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# 1

## Trailblazing

Carolina Aguasvivas might have known every corner of Paradise Ranch better than the back of her hand, but the mountain trails around the property were a surprise every day.

Even though she never knew what to expect, she still felt at home in the wild. After all, it was where she'd grown up.

In early June, the trees and bushes burst with newness. The fresh green leaves showed nibbles from hungry deer, and the eagles glided over the canopies of the woods, searching for unsuspecting prey. The air smelled of rich earth, dew, and wildflowers.

Carolina watched for the unmistakable crimson shock of poppies that covered the burned patches of the forest like the

prettiest kind of bandage. The world—at least this corner of it—had healed from the recent fires with a bloom.

She was lost in her awe of nature when Chelsie called from behind, “Watch out!”

Not a second too soon, Carolina snapped out of her thoughts and ducked so a tree branch wouldn’t hit her in the face.

“Yikes,” she exclaimed, holding on to the horn of the saddle to steady herself in case Shadow, the gray Arabian she was riding, got spooked by her outburst.

But Shadow stopped patiently, cool like Abuelita Ceci’s strawberry and mint aguas frescas, Carolina’s favorite summer-time drink.

After pretending to wipe sweat off her forehead, she turned and waved over her shoulder. “Thank you, Chels!”

“You’re welcome!” Chelsie replied, laughter in her voice.

“That was close!” said Abuela Ceci. She was riding Marigold, a sure-footed and calm mustang.

“You’re supposed to be scoping the terrain, Caro,” Chelsie said, still laughing. She was the caboose of their little train. “Stay in the present!”

Shadow nickered. It sounded like he was teasing Caro too.  
Typical Shadow!

“Stop it, you! This branch wasn’t here yesterday!” she said, leaning forward and patting his neck. “You should’ve warned me, boy.”

Carolina hadn’t expected that seemingly overnight the tree branches would make an arch over the narrow deer path that led to Sleeping Princess Rock. The formation in the shape of a sleeping girl was a popular destination with tourists who traveled to this area of Idaho every year, especially during the summer and the fall.

She had been to the famous landmark once, but she’d been so young, her dad had held the reins of her horse on the long ride up the mountain. Abuela Ceci and Chelsie had never been. The trek wasn’t for beginners, so they needed to build up to it. Putting into practice one of the Five Bs—Be focused—the trio was focused on reaching the top by the end of the summer. For that, they’d break it up into small goals. Today they wanted to cross the brook.

From the first day, Carolina had chosen Shadow for their

trail ride. Now, every morning, he eagerly waited for Carolina to tack him up. He was an excellent partner.

At first, they had taken the same route, but slowly, they'd ventured into new ones. Their horses, Shadow, Velvet, and Marigold, were more confident than they had been just a few days ago. Used to their endless chatter and Boo's occasional burst of barking when a squirrel or a bird crossed their path, the horses trudged determinedly even when the terrain was steep or surrounded by prickly bushes.

But at this pace, they'd be lucky just to make it to the babbling brook—that is, if they didn't want to be late for the next Unbridled Dreams student's first class. The barn's next sponsored student was ready to start the summer session, and the first day of lessons was always Carolina's favorite. They were all special, but Brielle might be their last scholarship student! Their current donor was only signed on to sponsor this last twelve-week program. If they didn't find a way to keep funding the lessons, then that'd be the end of Caro and Chelsie's dream to make the healing power of horses available to more people.

If this was the indeed the end of the road, had all the work and effort this last year been for nothing?

The thought made Carolina's mood turn gray like a storm cloud and her forehead bead with sweat. She wasn't the only one sweating though.

Although the temperature wasn't even in the high eighties yet—it took a while to warm up, even in the summer—Shadow and the other horses could do with a cool drink. The trail wasn't steep or difficult, but he was the one doing most of the work carrying her.

He snorted as if he could hear her thoughts. And considering how attuned the two had become in the last few months, that might have been almost true.

"You're right, Shadow," Carolina conceded, "I should've paid more attention." She gave her horse a pat.

*Her horse* was a figure of speech.

*The horse she was riding* was more accurate.

El Cabeza Dura, like she called the spirited and stubborn gelding, didn't belong to her, or even to Paradise Ranch, but he was always her first choice for any activity from trail riding

to galloping in the pasture and lessons in the indoor arena. They both preferred riding in nature to rules and judges or even ribbons. They made a good team.

Carolina was about to ask Shadow to walk on, when she remembered the duties of being first in a caravan, even if it was a small one like theirs. Everyone in their group had a job.

Boo, Caro's white-and-black spotted dog, ran ahead. The trailblazer scoped the path and made sure everything was safe. But as the first rider in line, Carolina still had to look out for what the trail had in store for the horses and riders behind her. From Shadow's perspective, things looked very different than from the saddle, and vice versa. She could hardly see the ground and she needed to trust him to be sure-footed, and in turn, he had to trust her to lead them in the right direction.

She signaled to Shadow to stand still just by sitting deeper in her saddle. Once she was sure he wasn't going to move, she grabbed the branch to move it out of the way and let her grandma and Chelsie walk through without being smacked.

But then, a thorn pierced her hand.

"Ay!" she exclaimed, and fought the urge to let go. She didn't want the thorny branch to hit her face when it sprang back.



Chelsie looked up, alarmed, and wiped a strand of stubborn hair out of her eyes with a hand. A gloved hand.

Unlike Carolina, who usually rode wearing a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and cowgirl boots, Chelsie always wore her fancy practice outfits, including gloves to protect her just-manicured hands.

Horse girls came in every style, Heather, Chelsie's mom and the owner of the ranch, liked to say, and how right she was!

"Oh, mi amor, did you get poked?" Abuela Ceci asked, concerned.

Carolina was so glad her grandma was here with her!

Abuela Ceci, her dad's mom, had arrived by surprise last week.

The best surprise in the world!

For a split second, after the first hug and tears of happiness, Carolina wondered if it would be weird to get to know her grandma in person again. After all, they hadn't seen each other in over two years. This last year alone there had been so many changes.

When they had said their last goodbyes, Carolina had been in fourth grade and Paradise had been known as Orchard.

Now she was much taller and—she wanted to believe—wiser.

But Abuela Ceci was the same as always. Wonderful.

She noticed everything, not only about the terrain and the weather, but the animals, and things that Carolina hadn't known she had been keeping private.

Like now that she was trying to be brave and not cry over the thorn piercing through her hand. Abuela Ceci urged Marigold on until she was side by side with Shadow.

“Let me see,” she said, taking Carolina's hand in hers.

She didn't wear gloves either, but she always wore a helmet. Hers was black with an Unbridled Dreams sticker on it. Her hands were soft but worn too. Her robin's-egg-blue nail polish was already chipped on her thumb.

“It doesn't really hurt,” Carolina said. “See? It's not even bleeding. That much, at least.” She wiped her hand on her jeans and shrugged, but her hand throbbed, contradicting her words.

“You still need to wash it and put antiseptic on it as soon as we get back. It's a wild apple tree. Didn't you notice, sweetheart?”

Now that Carolina looked at the tree with attention, she realized that Abuela Ceci was right. Of course.

“I’ll be more careful next time,” Carolina said. “I just wasn’t expecting to find an apple tree in the middle of the trail.”

“Good point,” Abuela Ceci said. “Apples, like peaches and most fruit trees, or even those poppies we saw, aren’t native to this area. But remember that when the pioneers crossed the plains and headed to the west coast, they planted trees for those who’d come after them.”

“Like Johnny Appleseed,” Chelsie said.

They’d had breakfast this morning (pancakes, eggs, and bacon), but the mention of fruit made Caro’s mouth water and her tummy rumble.

She wasn’t the only one who was always ready for a snack.

Shadow had taken the opportunity to munch on some grass.

“Stop eating that, Shadow.” Carolina gently pulled on his reins and motioned for him to get going. “You’re going to get a tummy ache, and I’m telling you right now, I’m not cleaning up your mess.”

Shadow took one more bite before tossing his silver mane.

Chelsie laughed. “You say that now, but then you’re the one spending the night next to him to make sure his stomachache doesn’t turn into colic, right, Abuela?”