



Bluegrass Peril

By Virginia Smith

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CHAPTER ONE

Becky turned from a two-lane country road onto the paved driveway of the old converted farmhouse where she worked. She noted with satisfaction the freshly painted letters of the wooden sign in the front yard: *Out to Pasture, A Thoroughbred Retirement Farm*. That faded sign had bugged her in the two months since she came to work here, and she finally took matters into her own hands and repainted it a few days ago. It looked much better, nice, even. At the rear of the house she parked beside the boss's pickup, in front of the small barn where they stored supplies for their fifteen retired Thoroughbred champions.

She got out of the car and leaned against the open door to let her gaze sweep over the deep green Kentucky horse farm. Double rows of black plank fencing divided gently rolling swells of pasture. Heavy dew clung to the grass, sparkling in the sunlight on this crisp spring morning. She turned and looked across the road, where the mares with their foals were pastured. The babies hung close to their mothers today. Sometimes they ran and frolicked with one another, and Becky loved to watch their graceful movements as they stretched their limbs and tested their limits. They seemed to know they were a special breed among horses. Thoroughbreds. Born to run, to train as elite equine athletes, and perhaps even to win that coveted Kentucky prize, a blanket of roses.

Becky leaned into the car and snatched the bag of carrots from the passenger seat. A muted bark reached her ears, and she glanced toward the back door of the farmhouse that served as the retirement farm's office and founder Neal Haldeman's home. The wooden door stood open, indicating the boss was already out and about, as usual. But Neal's yellow Labrador

Retriever stood on hind legs inside the house, his front paws pressed against the glass storm door, barking. Odd. Neal always let Sam out first thing in the morning. Why was the dog still inside? Becky scanned the paddocks, but saw no sign of her boss. He must be in the barn. She slammed the car door and headed toward the house.

Galloping hoofs thundered behind her, accompanied by a loud whinny. She turned to see Alidor racing across the turf toward her. Her pulse picked up speed, pounding in rhythm with the sound of his hoofs. He arrived at the black plank fence, turned sideways and came to a quick stop.

Alidor frightened her. He was the biggest of the champions at the Pasture, and the meanest. No stallion was nice, according to Neal, but Alidor's fiery personality and aggressive behavior had scared even him when the horse first arrived. Becky stayed as far away from Alidor as she could, and he ignored her completely.

But not this morning. Alidor continued to whinny, his ears pinned almost flat to his head, his lips pulled back to show his teeth and gums. She had never heard that loud, high-pitched sound from any of the horses. Her stomach tightened at the urgency in the stallion's tone.

Surely Neal would hear and come to investigate. She glanced at the barn. Seeing no movement, she took a hesitant step toward the agitated horse.

“What's wrong, Alidor?”

Alidor tossed his head and pawed the ground with a front hoof. Becky took a few more steps. Maybe he smelled the carrots. Should she offer him one? Her heart thudded with fear. He had been known to bite, and was one of the stallions Neal would not let visitors feed.

Besides, he didn't look hungry, or like he was demanding a treat. He looked distressed.

Swallowing against a dry throat, Becky drew closer to the disturbed animal. She kept her voice low, the way Neal did when he talked to the stallions.

“It's okay, Alidor. Whatever it is, I'll find Neal and he'll take care of it.”

As she neared the fence, she could see the rear of the barn. The back door stood open.

“Neal?” she called in that direction. “Something's wrong with Alidor. Are you in there?”

Nothing.

In the next paddock, Rusty Racer ran to the nearest corner and took up Alidor's cry. And behind Alidor's paddock, Founder's Fortune also began to call out in a loud whinny. Ten feet in front of her Alidor tossed his head repeatedly, white showing all around the intense dark depths of his eye.

The skin on her neck prickled at the sound in stereo. She'd only worked at the Pasture for a few months, but she had never seen the horses act this way. Whatever was wrong with Alidor was getting to the others as well. And she didn't have a clue what to do. Where was Neal?

"Neal!" Her voice, sharp with worry, sliced through the cool morning air like a blade.

His cell phone. Yes, that's what she'd do, she'd call his cell phone. She ran toward the barn. That extension was closer than the phone in the office. Alidor trotted along the fence, keeping pace with her, whinnying as he ran.

Rounding the corner, she shot through the open barn door. Inside, she tripped over something and landed facedown on the dirt floor with a hard thud. The bag of carrots flew out of her hand.

"What in the world?" She rolled over to see what had tripped her.

And screamed.

Neal lay in the dust, a pool of dark liquid beneath his head.

Outside the barn, Alidor and the other horses fell silent.

For more info about Bluegrass Peril, visit www.virginiasmith.org