

Chapter One

A chilly early morning breeze whispered off Flathead Lake, still icy in spots despite the calendar claiming it was springtime. Sam Gaskill cursed his stupidity for not buying a pair of gloves the minute he'd arrived in Glacier Creek. But the locals had all been walking around in shirt-sleeves the day before, citing the "balmy" Montana weather. And Sam couldn't afford to look weak. Not when he had so much to prove.

The lingering layer of snow crunched beneath his boots as he walked around the truck and opened the trailer door. Tabitha glanced over her shoulder, her big brown eyes seeming to plead with him.

"Yeah, I know, honey, we're not in Texas anymore." Sam blew on his hands and pulled his leather jacket more tightly around his neck. "But if you believe the weatherman, the snow should be gone in a day or two."

The mare stomped her foot with a snort. Sam smiled to himself as he reached for the lead rope and attached it to her halter. "Yeah, I don't put much stock in the reliability of weather forecasters either." He ran his hand over the palomino's silky flank in order to sooth her. "But you're gonna like it here, girl. The pastures all border the lake. And the barn looks warm and comfortable."

Based upon his initial quick inspection of the ranch, the state-of-the-art flagstone barn did look inviting—toasty and warm for both horses as well as humans. Despite the early morning hour, the twenty-stall stable was already bustling with activity. Sam could hear the sounds of the horses grunting and nickering as their breakfast was being shoveled from a wheelbarrow into waiting feed buckets. A radio belted out a song in Spanish while a groom cheerfully whistled along with the tune. Sam breathed a sigh of relief, feeling better about his decision. If the

condition of the facilities and the other horses were anything to go by, Tabitha would be well cared for at Whispering Breeze Ranch.

He unclipped the harness that secured her within the trailer stall. With a soft cluck and a gentle shove on her shoulder, Sam guided the horse backwards down the ramp. Her hooves were loud in the stable yard when they made contact with the metal. Once they'd reached the gravel drive, the good-natured mare lifted her nose in the air as if to assess her surroundings, her blonde mane lifting slightly with the breeze. She jerked her head suddenly at the sound of a low whistle.

“Well, I'll be damned. She sure is a beauty. Even prettier than her pictures.” Clapping his hands together, Wayne Keenan, the rugged, middle-aged owner of Whispering Breeze, strode from the barn. “I still can't believe my luck at having the only foal of the great Honey Bun and Honeysuckle boarding here. And she looks just like her mama.” He pulled off a work glove and reverently stroked his fingers down the white blaze on Tabitha's face. The horse stood proudly, soaking in the attention. “You are a special girl, aren't you,” Keenan murmured softly. “Bred to be a champion.”

“She looks cold to me,” a young voice said.

Sam turned toward the sliding barn doors where a young boy stood just inside. The child was dressed nearly identical to Keenan, wearing cowboy boots, jeans—baggy on his short, skinny legs—a shearling jacket, and a dark wool Sturgis Stetson that dipped low on his forehead. A black and white Boston terrier wiggled in his arms, yapping excitedly when Sam made eye-contact with it.

“You being the expert on animals that you are, Tyson, you're probably right.” Keenan winked good-naturedly as he took the lead rope from Sam. “This pretty little filly can't be used

to the cool mountain air. I'll take her inside and get her some breakfast, Captain, while you settle up with the hauler."

Reluctantly, Sam let the rope slide through his fingers. He was doing what was best for the horse—honoring his late wife's dream. Still, he wondered if he was simply refusing to let go of the past.

Sam was starting over in a place far away from the plains of Texas and the mountains of Afghanistan. Hell, Montana might as well have been another planet. He didn't know a soul in Glacier Creek, and he liked it that way. After eleven months, he wouldn't be encountering pity in the eyes of everyone he met. He could take a breath of the cool mountain air and not taste guilt. But dragging the mare so far from home seemed both cruel and ridiculous. Yet leaving her behind had been unthinkable.

"Hey, Mister." The little boy interrupted his thoughts. "Does your horse like peppermints?"

The trouble with living in a place where no one knows your story—or your deepest secrets—was that people kept getting the facts mixed up. Tabitha was not Sam's horse. She was, and always would be, Becky's. The mare had been Sam's gift to his wife weeks before his second deployment to the Middle East. In four years of marriage, he hadn't been able to give Becky a child. Instead, he'd given her a young horse to keep her company during his absence. Now the mare was all Sam had left of his wife.

"Yeah, she likes mints." Sam didn't bother correcting the boy. It didn't matter whose horse Tabitha was anymore. For all intents and purposes, she belonged to Wayne Keenan now. Sam was entrusting the renowned rancher with the care and training of his most precious possession. *His heartbreaking albatross.* "See that you don't spoil her breakfast, though."

The pint-sized cowboy continued to stare at him from beneath the brim of his hat until the dog scrambled out of his arms and began circling Sam's feet.

"Oreo doesn't like strangers," the boy declared. Right on cue, Oreo began growling and lunging at Sam's boot.

Reaching down, Sam grabbed the fifteen pounds of fur by the scruff of the neck and lifted the dog up so that they were nose to nose. Oreo's big licorice eyes grew even rounder as he squirmed beneath Sam's grip. Disciplining dogs wasn't any different from disciplining soldiers—or smokejumpers as he was now paid to do. It was all in the look and the tone of his voice. Sam had mastered both at a very young age. Growing up with a general for a father, he'd had to.

Sam glared at Oreo for a long moment until the terrier settled down with a whimper. "Behave," was all Sam said before handing the wee beastie off to its owner. Wrapping his arms around the dog, the boy turned on his heel and darted into the safety of the barn.

Great, now I'm scaring kids.

Sam shoved his fingers through his hair, longer today than it had been since he'd entered ROTC in college fourteen years earlier. Between his two sisters, he had five nieces and nephews, the younger two were likely close to the age of the boy who'd just high-tailed it away from him. Sam used to be good with kids; the favorite uncle. But that was before war and death had changed him.

He didn't have time to worry about a child he'd likely rarely see, however. Once Tabitha was settled, Sam could focus on his new job overseeing the Forest Service Station that served as a base to teams of smokejumpers and a search and rescue patrol. He'd be so busy keeping the fifty-some employees of the base in line that he wouldn't have time to check on the mare too

often. That's why he'd selected Whispering Breeze for Tabitha. Keenan had agreed to train her to compete in the American Quarter Horse Championship, Becky's dream for the horse. After that, Tabitha could happily live out her life with new owners as a brood mare. And Sam could move on. If that was even possible.

The driver of the horse trailer carried a hand-tooled western saddle off the truck and placed it on top of the tack trunk he'd already unloaded. Sam pulled a check out of his wallet and handed it to the hauler. "Thanks for getting her here safely, Jimbo."

Jimbo adjusted his baseball cap on his head. "Your father-in-law thinks I took that horse to the glue factory months ago."

Sam felt his jaw grow tight. "It wasn't the horse's fault." He left the words about it being his own fault unsaid because he was pretty sure Jimbo knew that part. Hell, everyone in Belton, Texas, probably thought the same thing. Shaking off the memory, he clapped Jimbo on the shoulder and walked him to the driver's side of the truck. "I appreciate you keeping her for me."

"I did it for Becky." Jimbo's loyalty was clearly with his late cousin who'd made the crazy decision to marry Sam when everyone else had told her not to. "You ever comin' back to Texas?"

Glancing up at the range of mountains looming behind the lake, their caps still covered in snow, Sam cleared the boulder from his throat. "Not much to come back to now."

Jimbo nodded mutely before climbing behind the wheel. His wife's cousin was no doubt relieved to see the last of Sam. "She never did like the idea of you hurling yourself out of perfectly good airplanes. Not that it matters much now. Still, you take care of yourself, Gaskill."

Sam shoved his cold hands into the pockets of his jeans as he watched Jimbo maneuver the horse trailer back onto the long drive leading to the highway. The guy was right: It didn't matter much what happened to Sam now. And if 'hurling himself out of perfectly good airplanes chased away some of the numbness he felt, that's what he'd do. The fact that there'd be fire involved only made the jumps more challenging. And Sam needed something to challenge him—to thrill him—again.

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“Truman! No!” Laurel Keenan swatted at the kid goat trying to graze along the counter of her galley kitchen. She shoved Tyson's lunch into his backpack before her son's pet could destroy that, too. Grabbing Truman by his collar, she dragged him through the loft apartment she and Tyson shared.

Despite being housed above the stable, the space was cozy and modern thanks to her mother's talent as an interior designer. High ceilings lined with cherry wood complemented the bleached wood floors and the white stucco walls. The large living/dining area featured an iron chandelier that her mom had scavenged from an old boarding house near Butte. Laurel's airy bedroom was at one end of the nine-hundred-foot-space while Tyson's western themed bunk room was at the other end. The apartment was originally intended to be a guest house for visiting riders who came to Whispering Breeze to have their horses trained by Laurel's mother. But life had a way of messing up even the simplest of plans and now it was home to both Laurel and her son.

“Tyson Campbell Johnson,” she called out as she hauled the goat, her son's backpack, and her own coat down the stairs leading into the barn. “How many times have I told you that you have to keep the door closed so this damn nosy goat will keep his butt out of the loft?”

The familiar scent of leather, liniment, horse, and hay greeted her, along with a suspicious silence. Too bad for her son, the chilly morning air did nothing to cool off her annoyance. Aside from finding a goat nibbling at her breakfast, Tyson's father had texted saying he needed to speak with Laurel as soon as she'd dropped their son off at kindergarten. Both needed to happen before a very important meeting with her boss in just over an hour.

Oreo let out a little yip at the sight of the goat, but everyone else in the barn stood reverently admiring a gorgeous palomino horse munching on hay in one of the stalls—a palomino that had not been in that stall when Laurel had done the barn's night check eight hours earlier. Laurel none-too-gently shoved the goat toward the open barn door. "Where did that horse come from?"

Her father fiddled with the piece of straw in his mouth. "Isn't she a beauty?"

Apprehension fueled Laurel's annoyance. At twenty-seven, she could read her dad pretty accurately, and her father's words and demeanor told her he was up to something. "Yes, she is, but that wasn't the question I asked, Dad. *Where did she come from?*"

"She came from Texas," Tyson piped up.

"At seven-thirty in the morning? Did she walk here, then?" It was possible Laurel had missed the sound of a hauler while she was in the shower, but surely her father would have mentioned that he was expecting a horse to board with them; especially one as fine as the doe-eyed mare enjoying breakfast while an audience of worshipful men watched her every move like high school boys at a strip show. Laurel pulled on her puffy jacket to ward off the shivers brought on by both the morning chill and her premonition of trouble.

They hadn't kept many extra horses since her mother's health began failing six years ago. Before then, the ranch had been home to many champion quarter horses her mother had trained

and Laurel had competed on. Today their stock consisted of hearty hacks her father used for guided mountain tours and seasonal trail rides.

“She belongs to him.” Tyson’s mouth took on the familiar mulish look he got when she told the four-year-old he couldn’t buy candy at the grocery store checkout. Her sweet-natured son was usually too friendly with strangers, so his uncharacteristic animosity instantly put Laurel on guard.

She turned in the direction Tyson pointed. Her breath caught in her lungs momentarily at the sight of the tall, well-built man exiting the tack room. Amber eyes locked with hers as he prowled toward the palomino, his boots deceptively silent on the stone floor for a man of his build.

His swagger identified him to Laurel instantly, however. Her cousin’s description of the new captain of Glacier Creek’s Forest Service Station was dead on: broad shoulders, wavy dark hair, perpetual five o’clock shadow, and an arrogant chin. Miranda had left out one crucial detail, though: The guy had a most exceptional ass. Laurel swallowed roughly when he walked past her to pat the horse on its withers.

The new station captain was definitely perpetuating the tough guy persona he’d ridden into town with a week ago. His light leather bomber jacket and well-worn Levis weren’t much of a defense against the crisp morning air in the flatlands. But if he wasn’t complaining, she’d just enjoy the view.

“Laurel, this is Captain Gaskill,” her father was saying. “An actual captain, as a matter of fact. He just left the Army. Those boys over at the forest service base won’t know how to act with a real soldier commanding them.”

She grimaced at her father's uncharacteristic tactlessness. Russ Edwards, the station's previous captain, died tragically seven months ago when his parachute clipped a tree during a fire jump. The smokejumpers—as well as most of the town—had taken Russ' death hard. Laurel's uncle, Hugh Ferguson, had stepped back into his old job of station captain while the Forest Service recruited a new commander for the base, but most of the young smokejumpers only knew Hugh as the bartender from their favorite watering hole, The Drop Zone.

Needless to say, discipline and morale had been lacking during the off-season. Two of Laurel's cousins worked at the station, so she knew the crews all deeply resented the Forest Service hiring someone from the outside. From what she'd heard, the Army captain had his work cut out for him. Laurel almost felt sorry for him.

“And this here—” her father gestured to the mare “—is Tupelo Honey, the foal of Honey Bun and Honeysuckle. She goes by Tabitha in the barn. The captain is going to keep her at the ranch while he's in Glacier View. Aren't we lucky?”

Laurel didn't see anything lucky about the arrangement. Her spidey-sense was still telling her that there was more to the story.

She let her gaze wander back to the sexy ex-soldier. “So, you ride, Captain?”

Sam Gaskill's chin never moved while his arresting eyes slowly checked out Laurel from head to toe. Pulling her coat more tightly around her, she tried not to let the sensation of being given the once over by a lion scouting out his prey unnerve her. Instead she squared her chin and met the captain's assessing gaze head on. *So much for feeling sorry for the guy.*

His lips barely moved. “I don't.”

“Yet, you own a champion-bred quarter horse?”

“She belonged to my wife.” This time his mouth grew harder, if that was even possible.

“Oh well, there’s your first mistake. You should have bought her some jewelry or a car so when you split it up you wouldn’t be stuck with something so difficult to pawn.”

He stiffened at her flippant remark and her father let out a beleaguered groan.

“My *late* wife.” The three words crackled through the frosty air and Laurel felt each one like a slap to the face.

She didn’t bother looking at her dad, who was likely wearing that pained look he always did when she spoke without thinking. Would she never learn? Her mother claimed that Laurel had been born without that essential filter that ran from her brain to her mouth. Needless to say, impulsiveness had been Laurel’s downfall on more than one occasion.

Her cheeks were hot and her palms sweaty as she pushed the words out of her mouth.

“Forgive me. That was beyond rude.”

A charged silence hovered within the barn as the oblivious mare continued to chew on hay. Laurel forced herself to meet the captain’s eyes. She was surprised to see the pain that was reflected there before he quickly extinguished it. Her stomach quivered in embarrassment.

“I’ve got to get to work,” he said stoically before running a hand along the mare’s sleek back. The intimate gesture brought out an unexpected flush to more than just Laurel’s face.

“Take good care of her. Let me know if you need anything else for her training.” His footsteps sounded much more commanding in retreat, and it wasn’t until Laurel heard the hum of his vehicle making its way along the drive that his last words registered.

“Training? What kind of training was he talking about, Dad?”

Her father shot her a disapproving look, likely left over from when she’d put her foot in her mouth moments earlier. But Laurel refused to let it deter her.

“You did tell the guy that Mom hasn’t trained a horse in years, didn’t you? He knows that she’s in a wheelchair and doesn’t ride anymore, right, Dad?”

Her father shoved his hat back on his head and squeezed at his temple. “I’m not some snake oil salesman, Laurel. Of course I told him all that.”

Laurel slapped her hands on her denim-clad thighs in exasperation. “Then why did you tell him we were going to train his horse?”

“Because we are!” His bellowed words echoed off the stone walls, startling the mare and sending the grooms scurrying back to work. Tyson looked on wide-eyed while Oreo let out a whimper.

Laurel felt as though the barn was spinning. “Who do you mean when you say ‘we’?” Although, she had a sinking feeling that she already knew the answer to her question.

“You!” Her father pulled his hat off his head and dragged his long fingers through his shaggy silver hair. “I mean you, Laurel.”

Staggering back a step, she nearly tripped over Tyson’s backpack. “You can’t be serious? I don’t know the first thing about training a horse. That’s Mom’s talent. I just ride them. What possibly made you think I could—*or would*—do it?”

“For crying out loud, Laurel, the man’s wife is dead.” His voice trailed off as he stared past the barn door toward the house across the gravel drive where her mother likely waited to share breakfast with him. The barn was tense and quiet for a moment before her father swallowed fiercely, his fingers tightening on the brim of his hat. “She’d raised the horse from a foal and it was her dream to see it compete at the highest level.”

The captain’s wife had been a horsewoman like her mother then. That familiar fear that always gripped her when she thought of her mother dying added to the anxiety that already had

Laurel on edge. Josephine Keenan had always been larger than life. Not only was she a popular designer for many of the stars who had vacation homes in the region, but her mother had served as the town's elected mayor for eight years. She was a vibrant fixture in Glacier Creek until fate had intervened. Her mom's Multiple Sclerosis was stable, her prognosis cautiously optimistic, but Laurel knew how quickly circumstances—and life—could change. From the looks of it, so did her father.

“Tyson,” she pushed out around the tightening in her chest. “Take Oreo up to the house and say good morning to your grandma. I'll be up in a minute to drive you to school.” She reached down and handed her son his backpack. Tyson eyed his grandfather before wisely slipping out of the barn. Truman fell into step behind him.

“Is there something you're not telling me, Dad,” she asked as soon as Tyson and his menagerie had cleared the door. “Something about Mom?”

Her father swore under his breath. “No, of course not.”

“Then why would you commit me to training a man's horse?”

“The captain's wife already trained the damn horse, Laurel. You're welcome to watch the videos.” He reached out and patted the horse's neck. “She just needs some fine tuning so he can sell the animal. Two, maybe three months at the max.”

“Two to three months?” Laurel gasped. “Dad, even if I thought I knew how to ‘tune up’ a horse to the caliber this one needs to be, where am I going to find the time? I work full-time. I help out here at the ranch, and I'm studying for my CPA, remember?”

Her father finally turned so that his brown eyes met hers head-on. Her breath caught at the vulnerability she saw in them. “I already hired an extra hand to help out on the trail rides and the overnights so that you'd have more time to study. He starts next week.”

His words surprised her. Up until now, he'd been dismissive regarding her ability to become an accountant. Laurel was the first to agree the career didn't naturally fit with her personality, but she was quick with numbers and the work provided an adequate challenge for her impulsive brain. Not only that, but she had a son to support—without her parents' help. Unfortunately, her father's opinion led to a great deal of self doubt on her own part. His willingness to help her out now, in spite of the motivation behind that support, wasn't something she could easily dismiss.

“The days are getting longer,” he continued. “I thought that maybe you could work with the horse in the evenings. Your mom could come out and watch while it's still warm from the sun. It could be just like old times; her coaching you from the rail.” His voice broke slightly and Laurel felt it reverberate deep within her chest cavity. “I don't think the captain is expecting miracles, honey. But I know both he and your mother would get something from it. The man was deployed in a war zone three times. He deserves our respect and whatever help we can give. And your mom. . .well, she deserves something to look forward to every day.”

Laurel didn't know how to respond to her father. The morning had been a tsunami of anxious emotions already and she wasn't sure how she felt about anything. She opened her mouth to say what, she had no idea, when Tyson came charging back into the barn.

“Mom, the big hand is on the twelve and the little hand is on the eight. We need to get to school. Miss Ivy said she'd let me turn on the computers and iPads today!”

Her father cleared his throat before putting his hat back on his head. “Well then, we'd better get you loaded up into your car seat. We don't want Miss Ivy giving your special job to anyone else.” He gave Laurel's arm a squeeze as he passed her. “Just think about it, Laurel. For once, give the situation time to settle before you react.”

He followed Tyson out of the barn, leaving her alone with the mare and enough guilt to swallow her whole. The horse eyed Laurel warily as she approached.

“You are a looker, I’ll give you that,” she said softly while the mare continued to crunch on her hay. Laurel pulled a mint out of her coat pocket and let it rest in her flat palm. The palomino hesitated coyly before sniffing Laurel’s fingers and finally taking the mint with a lick of her hand. Releasing a resigned sigh, Laurel patted the horse’s nose. “We’ll just take it one day at a time and see what happens.”

The horn on her beat-up Land Cruiser sounded as she gave the mare a final pat. “Gotta go. Tyson loves school and it makes him impatient in the mornings. Boys can be such a pain.” The horse snorted. “Your guy, too, huh?” Laurel said, sarcastically. “Hmm, I never would have guessed.” With a quick check to see if the stall door was secure, Laurel headed out of the barn to get on with her already crazy day.