Chapter One

JT Whitloch sensed the woman the moment he set foot inside the auction stables. Through the scent of anxiety-ridden horses and a mass of humanity floated the fragrance of delicacy and wealth. A wave of disappointment dropped over him. He’d been twenty-three years old when he’d walked away from that life two years ago. He thought he’d suppressed his urges for women—at least that kind of woman. The desire pumping through him was a quick reminder—he’d failed.

The brim of the woman’s cowgirl hat cast a shadow over her I’m-a-celebrity sunglasses. Two words popped into his mind—elegant and stunning—as elegant and stunning as the Arabian stallion they both eyed.

Behind her glamorous exterior he sensed something else—cool strength and determination. She may be used to winning but if she planned to bid on the stallion, she’d learn she was no match for Rose Whitloch, JT’s stepmother. What Rose wanted, Rose got, and she wanted to add this horse to her Crystal Creek ranch stable.

The stud’s whinny rang in JT’s ears. It was a refined timbre practiced to receive immediate attention. And it demanded freedom.

That was what JT wanted—freedom from these urges pouring through him and freedom from the past.

The past didn’t let go.

His phone rang. Normally he would’ve checked his phone’s screen before answering but his mind was thick with thoughts of the stallion Rose wanted. He wouldn’t admit that images of the beautiful woman mixed with those thoughts. Sliding his thumb over the screen was something he didn’t think about. Halfway through the caller’s first syllable, he cursed himself for not checking the phone’s screen before answering.

“You *do* answer your phone,” came the clipped voice that reminded JT of the night that changed his life, the voice of his childhood friend Artur von Klasson, heir apparent to the von Klasson estate. The voice that dragged him back to the past he longed to forget.

“Artur, what’s up?” JT had an idea. His good mood evaporated. Though he’d abandoned his past life, when he least expected it, the past would rear its ugly head. He released the breath caught in his lungs hoping he sounded casual.

“What’s always up. I’ve called to see if you’ve changed your mind about a reunion tour. Denver would be a great place to make that announcement.”

“The decision I made two years ago stands. I’ve quit the music scene. I’m not going back.”

“Last we spoke, you said you might consider it.”

JT gave a rough exhale. The last time they spoke was New Year’s Eve when he’d tipped a few too many. “I did, and walking away from the group was the right decision. Besides, I hear rave reviews about your new lead singer.”

“Yes, about the singer…”

“Don’t tell me another one quit.”

“He didn’t quit, but let’s not discuss this over the phone. When I’m in town, let’s get together. Come to the after-party following the concert.”

“Parties aren’t a good place to talk.”

“This one will be different.”

“I don’t see how. When was the last time you conducted an intelligent conversation at a party?”

“All my conversations are intelligent.” Artur’s tone turned defensive.

“That’s debatable. By the way, your Uncle Gunnar emailed me. He wants to me fly back to Europe to discuss business.”

There was a long hesitation before Artur asked, “What sort of business?”

“He didn’t say. I’m not spending fourteen hours on a plane if I don’t know what he wants. We’ve never conducted any business together. He’s Minister of the Department of Justice. I work on a ranch. We have nothing in common.”

There was no mistaking Artur’s loud exhale even though JT could tell Artur held the phone away from his mouth.

“Come to the party. I may have an answer for you.” Artur hung up.

Something undesirable plunged through JT’s head. Artur had called him. Artur’s uncle had emailed him.

Why?

The stallion’s whinny brought his attention back to the pen. The woman stood near the rail. She seemed intent on accomplishing her goal of owning the horse. JT almost felt sorry for her.

“Caught you looking at the stallion over there,” an old timer said to JT. He scuffed a boot over the concrete.

“He’s a beaut,” JT said. “Did you trailer him?”

“Not me.” The cowboy stuffed chew between his teeth and gums. “One of those Hollywood types hired some California team that works for the west coast highfalutins.”

“Why’s he selling him?”

“Hear he’s filing bankruptcy. Has to liquidate everything—the houses, the cars, his kids’ horses.”

JT arched his brow. “Your source has a lot of information.”

The old timer lifted a shoulder. “I hear things.”

The woman’s elegant presence pressed against JT. It was a soft stroke across his cheek and scooped air out of chest. He looked past the old timer to the woman who paced around the stallion’s pen. With her was a tall man wearing a worn hat and a cracked leather duster. JT hadn’t noticed him before. Who was he? A friend? A bodyguard? The man watched her.

The old timer glanced over his shoulder. He took a second, longer look.

JT’s irritation pressed against the back of his throat. He didn’t know the woman, but he didn’t like the idea of someone gawking at her.

“Sorry, miss, didn’t mean to stand in your way,” the old timer said.

“It’s I who should apologize.” The woman’s voice was sultry and dulcet like honey flowing over warm biscuits. “Please continue your conversation. I’ll only be a moment.”

“Look to your heart’s content, miss.” The old timer clutched his battered hat to his chest and backed away. “They’ll be serving breakfast in the canteen. Be sure to catch yourself a bite of pancakes. Lots of locals in there can answer any question you may have.” His gaze shifted from the woman to JT. “’Later,” he said and stepped into the moving throng.

“I take it you’re looking for a stud.” JT propped a boot on the rail and watched the woman.

The horse quit pacing. He flicked his gaze from JT to the woman.

“I’m not sure what I’m looking for. I like horses. I’d like to buy a few for…my place. I received information that this auction had higher standards than most.” The woman moved closer to the pen.

“It has a good reputation.” JT caught a whiff of the woman’s scent. Sweet and spicy and natural.

And familiar. It was a scent he’d always associated with women from that class.

Being with women, being stirred by their scents, seemed like a lifetime ago. He gave a silent smirk. He was twenty-five years old, and he was thinking like an old man.

The woman’s companion cracked a slight smile. He was alert, but relaxed.

The horse stepped toward the rail, stopped and dipped his head.

The woman stretched an open palm to the stallion. He sniffed it and rubbed his nose against the buttery soft leather of her glove.

“There’s a match made in heaven.” JT gave a short laugh.

The woman laughed, too. Like bells. Clear sounding and calming and touching an unknown place behind JT’s heart.

“I can’t imagine why,” she said. “I’ve only recently become interested in horses. I don’t know much about them.”

“Horses can sense things about people.” JT watched entranced at the bond forming between the horse and the woman. He extended his hand to her. “I’m Jacob Whitloch. Friends call me JT.”

The woman’s gaze shot up to meet his. He couldn’t see her eyes, but he knew what reflected in them—recognition. There were still some people who recognized him, though he was no longer celebrity-polished, and remembered the name JT Whitloch.

The horse gave a sharp neigh and took one step back.

The woman exhaled, like a gasp, that JT wouldn’t have noticed had it not been for the shift of the leather duster skimming over her shoulders.

“I hope we can be friends. I’m Gretchen Moore.” She wrapped her hand around his.

It was warm and sent a vibration up his arm and into his chest, something he wished wouldn’t stop.

Gretchen Moore. The name wasn’t familiar. If they’d met, she may have had a different name. Like a maiden name. Did a wedding ring sit on the ring finger of her left hand? A ring that would rival the Hope Diamond?

She released first, her eyes shifting to the side and down.

JT’s hand dropped to his side with not a little reluctance. “If you want him.” JT nodded to the horse. “I’ll wish you luck now.”

“Will you bid against me?”

“I and others. The horse set from the country club’s here.” He nodded toward a woman, her dark hair wound tightly in a bun at the crown of her head. “I’ve also noticed several ranchers with deep pockets pass by a few times.”

“How deep are your pockets, Mr. Whitloch?”

“Call me JT. As for my pockets, they don’t even carry lint. I’m here to expand my stepmother’s brood.”

“We’ll bid against each other.” White teeth glistened in her smile. “It was nice meeting you, JT. I look forward to our bidding war. I hope you’ll still want to include me as one of your friends when we’ve finished.”

Her confidence made him smile. “If you’ll make the same promise.”

The arch of her brows made his smile broaden.

“Before the war starts,” JT said, “be sure to stop by the canteen and meet some of your competitors. It’s a friendly group with no hard feelings between the winners and the losers. They share information.”

“And they eat pancakes. I can’t remember the last time I ate a pancake.”

Her comment didn’t surprise JT. Unlike the ranch women milling about, she’d probably never eaten a pancake.

“Thank you for the invitation.” Her smile was soft and a little sad.

JT touched the brim of his hat and moved down the alley to inspect more horses.

He passed by the auctioneer’s office and picked up a packet with information for the available horses and his bidding card. He had planned to study the information while eating breakfast, but friends invited him to join them at their booth.

“You caught the little lady’s eye.” George who owned a breeding farm on the south side of the county shoveled a forkful of pancakes into his mouth.

JT’s humor dimmed. Everyone at the auction would have noticed him talking to Gretchen. Everyone would be asking about her—a woman shrouded in a designer hat and dark glasses. Even a blind man would know she was beautiful.

“If I were a horse, maybe.”

“Yeah, saw her checking that Arabian stud,” George said.

“Most of the ranchers’re interested in that beautiful piece of horseflesh.” Pete, George’s foreman, slapped his thigh. “She’ll be bidding against you, JT.”

“May the best horseman or horsewoman win,” JT said.

Though the men plied JT with questions about the woman, JT’s answers were clipped. Instead, he questioned them about the other horses on the docket.

At ten o’clock, the diners moved like a tightly-bound bale of hay to the arena.

JT sat in the Whitlochs’ booth, removed from the other bidders. Sitting near the arena gave him a view of the presentations where he could watch the horses’ behavior. Because the horses he bought would work with other horses as well as humans, he needed horses who would adapt to the handler, endure the auctioneer’s cant and relate to the audience.

Gretchen sat in a booth on the opposite side of the arena. Without looking, JT knew the minute she entered the hall. She floated along the concrete path. Conversations stalled. Every head turned and watched.

Her companion carried the auction information and opened the gate for her. When they had settled in the booth, she asked him a question. He opened the packet and scanned the listings. He leaned toward her angling the list for her view. She nodded. Turning away, she watched the horses parade in and out of the arena.

Several horses were brought in to warm up the bidding. When the stallion entered the arena, the crowd’s silence ticked with concentration.

The auctioneer started the bidding and several auction cards lifted into the air. The auctioneer cited the bids, pointed to the bidders, his cant filling the arena. The cards raised and lowered. The stallion’s price rose with the cards.

Groans around JT told him the less wealthy ranchers were dropping out of the bidding war. JT had Rose’s instructions. She’d set her limit and wouldn’t pay more.

JT was reaching that limit now. The bidding had dwindled to JT and one other participant.

Gretchen Moore.

Without casting a sideways glance, he saw her auction card lift and lower. The auctioneer pointed to JT. He pressed his mouth into a tight line. He kept the card in his lap. Gretchen Moore wanted that horse. She had the wealth to carry the bidding far higher than the horse was worth.

The crowd was riveted to the bidding. This would be a tale the townsfolk would retell for years. By keeping the card in his lap, JT would put a stop to that tale.

Annoyance burned in the back of his throat. Gretchen Moore was beautiful and rich, and she had outbid him. Rather, she’d outbid Rose. He hadn’t expected to lose to a neophyte no matter what her net worth. Everyone stared at him waiting for his reaction. He wouldn’t give them that satisfaction.

The auctioneer cited the final bid but kept his eye on JT, a stare designed to prompt him to lift his card.

JT had reached Rose’s limit. The horse would belong to Gretchen Moore. For whatever reason, that horse meant more to her than it did to JT or would have to Rose. Rose’s current studs commanded fees far greater than this horse would warrant. It would be a good starter for Ms. Moore, if her interest in horses lasted that long.

The auctioneer’s gavel fell on the block. “Sold.” He pointed to Gretchen’s booth.

JT gave her a brief nod. She responded in kind. He looked away, though his gaze protested. He longed to soak in the beauty that was Gretchen Moore. But looking at her would only stir up the rumors. Let the crowd see that his relationship with Ms. Moore was strictly business.

He glanced in her direction one last time. Her booth was empty leaving no evidence that she and her companion had ever occupied those wooden seats. His relationship with Ms. Moore had ended.

An odd sensation moved through his chest.